

## Citation style

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Stephen Mitchell/Geoffrey Greatrex: *A History of the Later Roman Empire, AD 284–700*. Third Edition. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell 2023 (Blackwell History of the Ancient World). XXIII, 598 p., 43 ill., 13 maps, 8 diagrams. £ 40.50/\$ 49.95. ISBN: 978-1-119-76855-5.

Reviewing the third edition of a volume is a somewhat different task from writing the usual type of academic book review. Publication of a third edition is a sure indication that the work in question has established its reputation and value as an authoritative resource and point of reference for students of the subject, and that is undoubtedly the case in this instance. The previous editions of Stephen Mitchell's history of the later Roman empire have been appreciated for their judicious combination of narrative and thematic chapters, for their balanced presentation of relevant ancient evidence and modern debates, and for their measured expression of the author's views on central issues. While that track record does not preclude comment on the content of this new edition, especially any new elements, readers of this review are likely to be interested above all in knowing what has changed from the second edition, and since this is a volume deployed particularly in the context of teaching, it may be helpful to provide some indication of the extent to which there have been any significant changes to the format and organisation of the text. These aspects will, then, be the focus of the first half of this review.

The first edition<sup>1</sup> of this volume was published just over sixteen years ago, in 2007, with a revised second edition<sup>2</sup> appearing in 2015. The first edition was 469 pages in length (including 23 illustrations, seven maps and seven diagrams), which the second edition expanded to 544 pages (with 33 illustrations, ten maps and seven diagrams). This new third edition raises those totals to 598 pages, 43 illustrations, thirteen maps and eight diagrams, and since the page dimensions are slightly larger than in the second edition, the word count will have increased even further than is implied by the additional fifty pages or so. Some of the extra text is accounted for by new paragraphs and individual sentences here and there throughout the volume, as well as

1 S. Mitchell: *A History of the Later Roman Empire, AD 284–641. The Transformation of the Ancient World*. Malden, MA/Oxford/Carlton 2007 (Blackwell History of the Ancient World).

2 S. Mitchell: *A History of the Later Roman Empire, AD 284–641*. 2nd edition. Malden, MA/Oxford/Chichester 2015 (Blackwell History of the Ancient World).

the updating of chapter endnotes and bibliography (pp. 532–556) to take account of scholarship which has appeared in the last decade. But as with the second edition, which in addition to these sorts of revisions, also added a completely new closing chapter assessing the most important factors accounting for (in the words of the chapter title) “The Fall of the Roman Empire” (pp. 499–531), so too the third edition has expanded to accommodate two new chapters which extend the chronological coverage of the volume from its original terminal date of 641 to the end of the seventh century. These new chapters (which have been inserted before the closing chapter added to the second edition) are (as stated in the preface, pp. XXII–XXIII) primarily the work of Geoffrey Greatrex, whose name now appears as co-author alongside that of Mitchell and whose influence can also be detected in revisions to the other chapters.

In terms of format and organisation, the titles and numeration of the thirteen chapters of the second edition remain unchanged, except for the final two chapters. Chapter 12, previously “The Final Reckoning of the Eastern Empire”, has been shortened somewhat and retitled “The Last Great War of Antiquity” (pp. 426–445), while Chapter 13 (“The Decline of the Roman Empire”), is now Chapter 15, following the insertion of the two new chapters – Chapter 13 (“Arabia, Islam, and the Eclipse of the Old Order”, pp. 446–469) and Chapter 14 (“The Survival of the Eastern Empire”, pp. 470–498). The Contents pages (VII–X) now helpfully include the section titles within each chapter, providing at a glance a clearer sense of chapter content. This change has in turn allowed a more consistent approach to the opening of each chapter. In the previous editions, this involved a horizontal timeline from 250 to 650, below which appeared the details of key dates relevant to the content of that chapter – except that some of the thematic chapters did not lend themselves so readily to the highlighting of key dates, and instead a list of section headings appeared. Since that function is now performed by the Contents pages, every chapter begins with details of key dates which appear in that chapter, even if that results in the slight oddity of Chapter 10 (“Society and Economy in the Mediterranean and the Near East”, pp. 343–391) listing geographical regions alongside broadly similar centuries-long spans of time.

Within individual chapters, section headings have occasionally been added to provide clearer signposting. So, e. g., the ten pages on “Military Security” in Chapter 5 (“The Roman State”, pp. 160–197) have now been divided into

two shorter sections on “Military Security” and “Taxes and the Army” (pp. 170–174 and pp. 174–178),<sup>3</sup> while the twenty page section on “Religious Identities” in Chapter 8 (“Conversion to Christianity and the Politics of Religious Identity”, pp. 265–312) is now easier to navigate through the addition of two new section headings (“The ‘Arian’ Dispute”, pp. 292–299, and “The Council of Chalcedon and the Emergence of Miaphysitism”, pp. 299–305). In these instances, the text is essentially unchanged (apart from the important emendation of the traditional term Monophysite to the more theologically accurate Miaphysite), but elsewhere new section headings accompany new text.

This is perhaps most evident in Chapter 2 (“The Nature of the Evidence”, pp. 18–56), where new sections on “Chronicles” (pp. 21–22) and “Eastern Sources” (pp. 22–23) have been added, the former particularly reflecting the recent work of Richard Burgess and Michael Kulikowski on that genre<sup>4</sup> and the latter the upsurge of research on Syriac and Armenian sources. Other sections in this chapter have been expanded to varying degrees, whether it be the addition of sentences about the *Collectio Avellana* and about papal decretals to the section on “Letter Collections” (p. 43), or the inclusion of a new paragraph about documentary papyri at the end of the section on “Inscriptions” (now retitled “Inscriptions and Papyri”, pp. 43–45).<sup>5</sup> A welcome paragraph on military treatises has also been added, although it sits a little

- 3 In this context, note the recent study (which will have appeared too late for inclusion) by A. Kaldellis/M. Kruse: *The Field Armies of the Eastern Roman Empire, 361–630*. Cambridge et al. 2023 (reviewed by C. Whately in: *Plekos* 26, 2024, pp. 77–85, URL: [https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2024/r-kaldellis\\_kruse.pdf](https://www.plekos.uni-muenchen.de/2024/r-kaldellis_kruse.pdf)), which is likely to prompt some reconsideration of established views about military organisation in the eastern empire. Also of relevance to military history (as well as other important themes), this time in the context of sixth-century north Africa, is the even more recent study by A. Merrills: *War, Rebellion and Epic in Byzantine North Africa. A Historical Study of Corippus’ Iohannis*. Cambridge/New York 2023.
- 4 R. W. Burgess/M. Kulikowski: *Mosaics of Time. The Latin Chronicle Traditions from the First Century BC to the Sixth Century AD. Vol 1: A Historical Introduction to the Chronicle Genre from its Origins to the High Middle Ages*. Turnhout 2013 (*Studies in the Early Middle Ages* 33).
- 5 With regard to letter collections, note the valuable reference work by C. Sogno/B. K. Störin/E. J. Watts (eds): *Late Antique Letter Collections. A Critical Introduction and Reference Guide*. Oakland 2017, while for inscriptions, there is the recent innovative study of Constantinian epigraphy by R. Usherwood: *Political Memory and the Constantinian Dynasty. Fashioning Disgrace*. Cham/Switzerland 2022 (*New Approaches to Byzantine History and Culture*).

awkwardly at the end of the section on “The Secular Historians” (pp. 26–36);<sup>6</sup> it is also worth noting that the *De Re Strategika* of Syrianus Magister is not “generally dated to the sixth century” (p. 36), at least according to the most authoritative recent discussion, which argues for the greater plausibility of a middle Byzantine date.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, in Chapter 8, a new section on “Monks and Holy Men” has been inserted at pp. 285–287, making good a surprising (though telling) omission from earlier editions.

At a finer grained level, it is worth being aware that there are occasional revisions to individual sentences within blocks of otherwise unchanged text. So, e.g., the opening paragraph of Chapter 7 (“From Pagan to Christian”, pp. 232–264) provides a less dogmatic, more nuanced statement about the pace and scope of conversion to Christianity in the late Roman world, together with a new sentence acknowledging the problematic nature of the term “pagan” (pp. 243–244). In a similar vein later in the same chapter, the strident language of “forc[ing] [religious] conformity” and of “religious warfare” has been tempered to that of “encourag[ing] conformity” and of “religious conflict” (p. 245). And at the end of Chapter 9 (“The Political Economy of the Later Roman Empire”, pp. 313–342), the assessment of the state of the city of Antioch in the sixth century following the impact of earthquakes, plague and the Persian sack of 540 has shifted from the second edition’s diagnosis of “irreversible decline” to the more measured observations of the third edition (based on recent scholarship) that “despite all these blows, the city survived into the seventh century” and “the strong local identity of the local elite in particular helped to ensure continuity in spite of repeated disasters” (p. 337). In view of these sorts of more subtle but nonetheless significant revisions, those who have for some time been using the second edition for teaching may particularly want to double check the third edition for any changes of this sort if directing students to specific passages.

Turning more directly to matters of substance, the most obvious feature of this new edition which warrants comment is the extension of the volume’s terminal date to the end of the seventh century through the addition of two

6 With regard to secular historians, note the recent study by J. A. Stover/G. Woudhuysen: *The Lost History of Sextus Aurelius Victor*. Edinburgh 2023 (Edinburgh Studies in Later Latin Literature), which is much more wide-ranging and important than its title might suggest.

7 P. Rance: *The Date of the Military Compendium of Syrianus Magister (Formerly the Sixth-Century Anonymus Byzantinus)*. In: *ByzZ* 100, 2007, pp. 701–737.

new chapters. The first of these, Chapter 13, has absorbed the final section of the old Chapter 12 on “The Coming of Islam” and prefaced these pages with a more detailed context, through sections covering “The Arabian Peninsula in Late Antiquity” and “Apocalyptic Expectations”, and then followed them with sections on “Muhammad’s Teaching and Followers” (with subsections on “The First Arab Conquests” and “The Fall of an Empire” [viz. Sasanian Persia]) and “Why Did the Arabs Prevail?” Chapter 14 covers the empire’s history in the decades following the death of Heraclius in 641, with sections on: “The Roman Reaction” (comprising subsections on “The Year of Four Emperors”, “Politics and Theology”, “The Reign of Constans II: Stabilizing the Empire (641–55)” and “Changes in the Roman Army”); “The New Masters and the Conquered Lands”; “The Roman Empire on the Defensive” (comprising subsections on “Withdrawal to the West” and “The Stabilization of the Eastern Frontier”); and “Conclusion: The Dawn of a New Age?” (which includes a subsection on “The Evolution of the Roman State”).

The decision to add these new chapters is explained in Chapter 1 (“An Introduction to Late Roman History”, pp. 1–17) partly in terms of the way in which Islam was “rooted in the Late Antique context” and certain trends – “an emphatic adherence to monotheism, the fusion of politics and religion at state level, and widespread millenarian expectations” (p. 8) – were common to regions within and beyond the empire in this period, but also in terms of the inherent interest of these dramatic changes in the context of analogous upheavals in the modern world over recent decades – the collapse of the Soviet empire, the rise of radical forms of Islam, and the reconfigurations of relations with the United States as the remaining imperial power (p. 10). It is also explained, at a later point, in terms of the Arab conquests effectively being a fifty-year process which only became definitive by the end of the seventh century (p. 464). Chapter 12 certainly offers a clear account of the complex and often obscure processes by which Islam emerged in the Arabian peninsula and then energised Arab forces in their confrontations with the Roman and Sasanian empires. This account is given added depth and relevance by helpful comparisons (and contrasts) with the Roman empire’s interactions with other frontier groups, and the concluding section on the reasons for Arab successes provides an admirably succinct and balanced assessment.

Chapter 13, which focuses on the second half of the seventh century, charts the evolution of Arab government in newly conquered lands, the responses of Roman imperial government to its drastically changed circumstances, and the reasons why Arab rule had stabilised by c. 700, despite a range of challenges, and why the Roman imperial government had managed to avoid the complete implosion that Sasanian Persia experienced. Once again, the discussion brings clarity to complex developments, aided by useful reference back to earlier aspects of the late Roman period, such as the comparison of measures taken by Heraclius' successors with those of Diocletian in the face of similarly testing times (p. 471). Such comments instil a strong sense of cohesion.

However, while offering an explanation for the survival of the empire into the eighth century, the discussion of these developments, with its understandable emphasis on the much diminished power of the empire by c. 700, remains consistent overall with the broader perspective of the previous editions, which favoured a view of the late Roman period which emphasised decline and fall, rather than continuity and transformation, thereby pushing back against the scholarship of the period associated most obviously with the work and inspiration of Peter Brown. That emphasis on decline and fall is re-asserted in this third edition in various ways, such as its dedication to the memory of the late Wolf Liebeschuetz, a defender of the vocabulary of decline and fall (despite his admiration for Brown),<sup>8</sup> but most obviously through the unchanged title of the final chapter – “The Fall of the Roman Empire”. Much of the content of that chapter is also unchanged from that of the second edition, with the sections on “Taxation and Diminishing State Revenue” (pp. 503–507) and “The Loss of Military Capacity” (pp. 507–511) carried over almost verbatim, as also the section on “Demographic Regression and Plague in Late Antiquity” (pp. 513–524), apart from some revision of the text at p. 514 to take account of recent research on DNA evidence from plague victims.

Prior to this section, however, there is a (short) new section on “Environmental Change in Late Antiquity” (pp. 511–513), which flags up recent re-

8 For a warm appreciation of Liebeschuetz' scholarship, see now G. Clark: Wolf Liebeschuetz. John Hugo Wolfgang Gideon Liebeschuetz, 22 June 1927–12 July 2022, elected Fellow of the British Academy 1991. In: *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy* 21, 2023, pp. 467–492, URL: <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/documents/5054/Memoirs-21-17-Liebeschuetz.pdf>.

search on the impact of climatic change and its relevance to the spread of disease, as reflected in Kyle Harper's 2017 study on this subject.<sup>9</sup> The section offers a brief but lucid overview of this research and then outlines a number of reasons for exercising caution about its conclusions, pending further investigations. This is an invaluable addition to the chapter. As for the other sections of this final chapter, there has been some updating of bibliography in the endnotes, especially the recent flurry of publications relating to the plague, though I missed any reference to William Harris' 2016 study of Roman power, despite his offering a similarly pessimistic evaluation of the empire's military capacity in this period.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, despite it being praised earlier in the volume as "the best recent survey of the late Roman army" (p. 193, n. 21), Michael Whitby's 1995 paper surprisingly receives no mention here.<sup>11</sup> Since it offers a more upbeat assessment of Roman military capacity in the sixth and seventh centuries, it would have been interesting to see some engagement with his arguments.

Overall, then, this new edition maintains the many merits of its previous incarnations, while strengthening them, above all, through bibliographical updating and related adjustments to the text, and through the addition of two new chapters which provide a clearer and more detailed understanding of the reasons for and impact of the Arab conquests in the seventh century. It will be welcomed by those already familiar with the earlier editions, while those approaching the period for the first time will find in it an up-to-date and surefooted guide to the complexities of this fascinating period which is of such fundamental importance to the historical evolution of Europe and the Middle East and whose echoes still reverberate today.

9 K. Harper: *The Fate of Rome. Climate, Disease, and the End of the Roman Empire*. Princeton, NJ/Oxford 2017 (*The Princeton History of the Ancient World* 2).

10 W. V. Harris: *Roman Power. A Thousand Years of Empire*. Cambridge 2016.

11 M. Whitby: *Recruitment in Roman Armies from Justinian to Heraclius (ca. 565–615)*. In: Averil Cameron (ed.): *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*. Vol. 3: *States, Resources and Armies*. Princeton, NJ 1995 (*Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* 1.3), pp. 61–124.

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Empfohlene Zitierweise

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