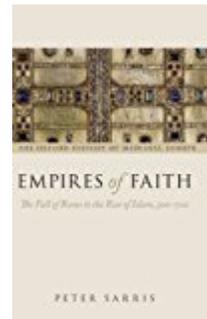




Peter Sarris. *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam, 500-700*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. xi + 428 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-926126-0.



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## Rome and Its Successors

Peter Sarris's *Empires of Faith* fits neatly with a number of recent publications that attempt to synthesize the vast specialist literature of the early Middle Ages and late antiquity into a useful narrative.[1] Despite their recent proliferation and typically high quality, these works evince both the intellectual ferment of the field and the need for such syntheses through their various perspectives and emphases. It is sometimes a challenge for scholars as well as lay readers to make intellectual sense of the period's complicated events and historical processes that are often only dimly illuminated in written sources and the archaeological record. In this case, Sarris's approach combines a thorough command of the source material and modern scholarship with what some might view as a traditional focus on political, military, and economic history. Indeed, at one point he acknowledges as much, but defends his approach by noting that "the consequences of these often finely balanced struggles were to be so far-reaching, their ramifications being ones with which we still live" (p. 302). This is a point that has sometimes been elided in studies emphasizing the religious and cultural ferment of the period, and is representative of the recent "return of the fall of Rome," best represented by Peter

Heather (*The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* [2006]) and Bryan Ward-Perkins (*The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* [2005]).[2] Indeed, the subtitle gives a fair indication of where Sarris stands on the question of what happened in AD 476 despite his assertion that his ostensible starting and end points of AD 500-700 "are not in themselves significant" (p. 1).

This is not to say that this book is some sort of traditionalist throwback. Sarris is keenly aware of the current scholarship and various points of debate. He divides his bibliography usefully by chapter, with each section preceded by a short summary of the current bones of historiographic contention. This allows individual chapters to be used separately if necessary or desirable. Not all modern scholarly texts are so thoughtfully designed. The book also has the virtue of permitting the introduction to be mercifully brief. In barely a paragraph, he outlines his argument that the period's crucial developments were the demise of Roman power in the West and the involvement of socio-cultural aspects in the emergence of a new martial elite. Meanwhile the late antique Eastern empire

evolved into the medieval Byzantine polity under the external pressures of Sassanid Persia and the emergent Islamic caliphate, as well as internal pressures of religious, economic, social, and administrative changes.

Without further ado, Sarris then proceeds to illuminate these points organically through the flow of a well-constructed narrative of developments ranging across the sweep of the Eurasian landmass and Mediterranean from Northumbria to Arabia, rather than a point by point academic argument. He carries events in the East through the establishment of the Islamic caliphate and retrenchment of Byzantium, and in the West, through the demise of the Gothic and Vandal kingdoms, and the development of the Langobard, Merovingian, and Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. This analysis begins with a useful description of Roman imperial history, particularly from the third century onward, in his first chapter, followed by a discussion of the economic and social changes that the western provinces endured in the fifth century in chapter 2. Likewise, later chapters include substantial discussions of the fifth century as necessary for context. Although this is somewhat at odds with his titular temporal period, the result makes for a volume that would be useful equally as a textbook for the second half of a seminar on late antiquity as for the early Middle Ages. The remaining chapters generally provide a narrative of political and military events, alternating between the East and West, acting as a narrative skeleton for examinations of economic and social change. The only marked exception to this pattern is the short chapter 6, "Religion and Society in the Age of Gregory the Great," which is concerned with the political and social ramifications of Christianization in the sixth century.

Throughout the work, there is a general theme of increased militarization of society in response to the more dangerous world in which the inhabitants of what had been the Roman Empire found themselves. The corollary to this is the increasingly difficult and subordinate position of those subject to such martial authorities and the absolute and often catastrophic decline in economic activity that occurred in the period of barbarian influx. On this point, Sarris agrees with Ward-Perkins. One cannot read this book and come away with a sanguine view of a process of mere "transformation." This was a frightening and stressful process for all involved, and this fact should not be minimized.

If the anguish of the barbarian incursions were real enough, Sarris is clear that the peaceful workings of these societies had their own costs and terrors that went hand

in hand with the consolidation of aristocratic power and martial lordship. To this end, he devotes significant attention to the tensions inherent in the relationships between sometimes over-mighty landowners with kings and emperors on the one hand and their peasants on the other. Some of his attitude may be gauged by his comment that a period of peace allowed the sixth-century Frankish nobility to "concentrate on the real business of social domination and economic entrenchment at the grass roots of Frankish society" (p. 340). With regard to the empire, Sarris follows the path that he blazed in his *Economy and Society in the Age of Justinian* (2006). He argues that late Roman aristocrats were increasing their holdings and power not only at the expense of the lower orders, but ultimately also at the expense of the imperial government and its ability to marshal the resources necessary to preserve its hold on the provinces. In no case was the lot of the peasantry, which might be oppressed equally by Roman, barbarian, or ecclesiastical landlords, to be envied.

In essence, Sarris accepts J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz's description, in his *The Decline and Fall of the Roman City* (2001), of the devolution of civic institutions into "government by the notables," rather than the traditional curial class with the consequence that the imperial administration was ever more reliant on the cooperation of the senatorial elite and less able to curb their abuses (p. 130). For the sake of completeness, one might have also wished for some mention of Kenneth G. Holum's argument for the continued vitality of late antique civic institutions despite this shift, but this is a minor point and the comparative health of civic life and the strength of imperial control are not necessarily directly related.[3]

If there is a gap here, it is that the cultural aspects of the period are treated only insofar as they relate to larger political and social processes, but that would be to complain that Sarris should have written a different book. More prosaically, the price point of the hardback and the use of undoubtedly more correct, but less familiar, nomenclature (e.g., Baduila versus Totila) may give some pause before assigning this book as an undergraduate text. More careful copyediting on the part of Oxford University Press might have caught the fact that on page 113 the text should read "Hilderic" as opposed to "Huneric," an error perpetuated in the index. However, no book can be entirely comprehensive in coverage or perfect in execution. Sarris deserves great credit for pulling together an enormous mass of specialist literature into a coherent whole that succeeds on its own terms. If a less expensive paperback is not forthcoming,

it would be a shame. The book will be a useful addition to reference shelves and university libraries.

#### Notes

[1]. For example, see Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200-1000* (Malden: Blackwell, 2003); Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity: A.D. 395-600* (London: Routledge, 2011); Peter Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Stephen Mitchell, *A History of the Later Roman Empire, AD 284-641: The Transformation of the Ancient World* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007); Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End*

*of Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages, 400-1000* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010).

[2]. Jeanne Rutenberg and Arthur M. Eckstein, "The Return of the Fall of Rome," *The International History Review* 29 (2007): 109-122.

[3]. Kenneth G. Holum, "The Classical City in the Sixth Century: Survival and Transformation," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, ed. Michael Maas (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 87-112.

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