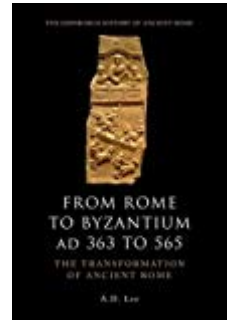


Alan Douglas Lee. *From Rome to Byzantium AD 363 to 565: The Transformation of Ancient Rome.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012. 320 pp. \$49.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-7486-2791-2.



Reviewed by Joseph Frechette

Published on H-War (November, 2014)

Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

A. D. Lee's new volume in the Edinburgh History of Ancient Rome series, of which it is the concluding volume, provides a straightforward overview of the period, the relevant sources, and current scholarly debates. It is suitable for lay readers as well as more advanced scholars in need of quick refresher. Although there are other good syntheses available, the volume and velocity of recent scholarship on late antiquity more than justifies this work.[1] In addition, readers of H-War will appreciate the book's emphasis on analytical narrative, illuminated by the insights of the author of a useful recent study of late antique warfare.[2]

Lee has organized his work into four main parts, three of which are chronologically defined: the later fourth century (363-395 AD), the "long fifth century" (395-527 AD), and the age of Justinian (527-565 AD), with a penultimate interlude dealing with the long-term issues of the economy and urbanism. He usefully precedes all of this with a table-setting chapter on the "Constantinian inheritance" which briefly summarizes the state

of the empire running from the reign of Constantine through the failure of his dynasty with the death of Julian, and touching not only on the government and military, but culture and religion as well. This includes the increasing strength of the barbarians beyond the Danube and Rhine, a synopsis of relations with Sasanian Persia, and Julian's disastrous eastern campaign.

Having thus set the stage, the three chapters of part 1 discuss military and political developments, the ongoing process of Christianization, and the two most singular cities of the age, Rome and Constantinople. Although necessarily brief, readers interested in military history will get a good account of the challenges Valentinian I, Valens, Gratian, and Theodosius I faced both on the various frontiers and from the usurpers Procopius, Magnus Maximus, and Arbogast and Eugenius. Adrianople and its aftermath are the obvious dramatic highlights of the period, but Lee also touches upon the conflicts with Persia that led to

the partition of Armenia in 387 AD and Valentinian's campaigns in the west.

Part 2, consisting of five chapters, covers the nature of the imperial courts in the fifth century and the prominent roles played by the *magistri militum*, the increasing importance of the various barbarian tribes settling within the empire, the evolution of Christianity's role in Roman affairs, the reigns of Anastasius and Justin, and the various barbarian successor states in the west. Lee traces a number of themes of interest to the H-War audience, including the shift to palace-bound emperors and the correspondingly greater influence of the generalissimos, the attempts of the still vigorous eastern empire to assist the west as it lost control of some of its wealthiest to the barbarian kingdoms coalescing on what had been Roman territory, the resumption of war with Persia during the reign of Anastasius, and the often violent contexts in which Romans and barbarians encountered one another.

In stressing this last point, Lee sides with recent scholars such as Peter Heather and Bryan Ward-Perkins who emphasize the disruption of the period.[3] This is in contrast to the notion of accommodation, transformation, and continuity brought on by the supposed Roman willingness to settle the tribes within the empire, with its supposed "fall" being due merely to "an imaginative experiment that got a little out of hand." [4] In a related vein, Lee would nuance Walter Goffart's theory that the western barbarians did not dispossess Roman landowners, but settled for a portion of an areas tax receipts. Lee reasonably suggests that the context of any particular barbarian settlement mattered. The Visigoths settled in Gaul when the western empire was still vigorous, the Vandals took North Africa by outright conquest, and the Ostrogoths were concerned to alleviate the concerns of Italian landowners.

The discussions of civic life and the economy in part 3 are both informative on a number of counts. Military historians will find Lee's discus-

sion useful, in both instances, of the degree to which "decline" might be detected and when and where it might be said to occur, and the degree to which the military supply system of the *annona* facilitated interregional trade.

Part 4's three chapters on the political and military affairs of Justinian's reign, religious issues, and the "end of antiquity" cover a lot of complex ground. Readers of H-War will obviously appreciate Lee's discussion of Justinian's wars with Persia and the western barbarians. Other salient points include the importance of military force as the ultimate guarantor of the regime in the face of domestic insurrection such as the Nika riot, and innovations in administration and logistics such as the *quaestor exercitus*.

On the issue of the motivations for Justinian's wars in the west this reviewer would quibble somewhat with Lee's account. Lee's presents his discussion of Justinian's reconquest of Africa and Italy as part of an attempt to burnish the regime's image by demonstration of the traditional Roman virtue of military power. Whether the motive was an immediate need for military prestige in the aftermath of the Nika riot or the result of a preexisting grand program, the impetus was essentially predicated by the domestic needs of the regime. Although Lee suggests that the empire was subject to various systemic pressures, noting that the necessities of the eastern frontier and elsewhere affected the ability to wage war in the west, he presents the western expeditions as initiatives taken at the discretion of the imperial metropole. It might be fairly argued that events completely outside of Roman control helped create an environment that not only provided an excuse for intervention in the west, but were felt to practically demand a response since in both the Vandal and Ostrogothic kingdoms, friendly regimes had succumbed to palace coups and been replaced by less amenable regimes. That is, there may well have been pericentric elements at play in Justinian's

decision to go to war, but this is a point upon which reasonable people may differ.[5]

The only other criticism one might note is not on any particular point of Lee's narrative, but the choice of 565 AD as the terminal point for both the present work and the series of which it is a part. Lee does include a brief resume of developments down to 636 AD, including the last great war with Persia and the initial Muslim victories that would deprive the empire of its eastern provinces. Given that Lee himself notes that it was these events "which have the strongest claim to signal the end of antiquity" (p. 298), it might have been desirable to include more fulsome accounts of the seven decades which led to them. However, this might have expanded the work, which already has the largest chronological scope of any volume in its series, beyond what the editors considered practical.

Overall, this handy volume would make a very useful companion for any course on the period, or to simply have on one's shelf for ready reference.

Notes

[1]. For example, 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. 395-700* (London: Routledge, 2011); Stephen Mitchell, *A History of the Later Roman Empire, AD 284-641: The Transformation of the Ancient World* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007); Chris Wickham, *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages, 400-1000* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010); and Peter Sarris, *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam, 500-700* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[2]. A. D. Lee, *War in Late Antiquity: A Social History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007).

[3]. Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Peter Heather, *The Fall of*

the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Jeanne Rutenberg and Arthur M. Eckstein, "The Return of the Fall of Rome," *The International History Review* 29 (2007): 109-122.

[4]. Walter Goffart, *Barbarians and Romans: The Techniques of Accommodation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 35. For a useful summary of much of the historiography see Guy Halsall, "Movers and Shakers: The Barbarians and the Fall of Rome," *Early Medieval Europe* 8 (1999): 131-145.

[5]. Michael Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 21, 25-26.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

Citation: Joseph Frechette. Review of Lee, Alan Douglas. *From Rome to Byzantium AD 363 to 565: The Transformation of Ancient Rome*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. November, 2014.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=42131>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.