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Peter Heather's new book examines four separate instances in which the western Roman Empire might plausibly claim to have been restored, the Ostrogothic kingdom of Theoderic, Justinian's reconquest, the Carolingian empire, and finally the apogee of the medieval papacy. Neatly divided into four sections of two chapters apiece, Heather examines each case in sequence. Billed as a sequel to his volume on the fall of Rome, the earlier chapters explore and build on some themes of Heather's earlier works, but there is much here that is new as well.[1] Despite some disagreements and criticisms noted below, this reviewer found it an immensely enjoyable and informative book.

The first two chapters cover Theoderic's rise to preeminence among the Gothic tribes in the Balkans, his various conflicts with the emperor Zeno, and the conquest of Italy, followed by his creation of the Ostrogothic kingdom, its rise to hegemony over the western successor states, and its attenuation after his death. Heather's discussion of the Ostrogoths as a people on the move, including his analogy of the Boer wagon trains in the great trek north, (p. 28) whose group identity may have been a recent occurrence, but was no less solid for all that, and who eventually received grants of land in Italy will be familiar to readers of Heather's earlier works.[2] Likewise, Heather recapitulates his disagreements with Patrick Amory (p. 421n47; p. 425n20), who sees Gothic identity as for more transient, and Walter Goffart (p. 419n15) who argues against large-scale transfers of land to Gothic proprietors.[3] These are major historiographic disagreements for which there may never be a solution satisfactory to all parties, but Heather argues his case with verve and he deserves credit for distilling them for a popular audience.

Heather's contends that Theoderic's kingdom, particularly after AD 511 represented a substantial reconstitution of the old western empire that stopped just short of outright assumption of the western throne.[4] If he does not go quite so far as Jonathan Arnold, who, in his recent study, sees less of a break in institutions and Italian self-per-
ceptions, Heather does paint an optimistic picture of Theoderic's achievement which he rightly argues should not be clouded by the fact that we know it eventually came to nothing after his death.[5] The description of Ostrogothic expansionism once ensconced in Italy is fairly hard-nosed. Heather stresses that Theoderic's correspondence with foreign rulers, as preserved in Cassiodorus' *Variae*, shows only a pacific façade. This was belied by the temporary incorporation of the Visigothic kingdom following their defeat by Clovis in AD 507, as well as the clear subordination of the Vandals and Burgundians.

The following two chapters deal with Justinian's conquest of the Vandal and Ostrogothic kingdoms. The theme which Heather follows here is twofold. First, he argues that Justinian was not a visionary grand strategist harboring a plan of western reconquest, waiting to put it into action upon his accession to the throne, but rather a gambling opportunist. Second, and following from this first premise, Heather describes the initiation of the Vandal and Ostrogothic expeditions as highly contingent affairs, dependent on a confluence of events coming together at just the right times to provide Justinian the opportunities to move west. In Heather's view, the means and part of the motive were provided by the military superiority the east Romans maintained through their development of heavy mounted archers.[6] However, he places the main impulse for aggression squarely upon Justinian's domestic need to claim any sort of success in the aftermath of a less than successful Persian war brought on by the emperor's own provocations, and the disaster of the Nika Revolt. That is, "the last desperate gamble of a bankrupt regime" (p. 143).

For students of Procopius, and his role as a source for Justinian's regime, Heather argues somewhat iconoclastically against taking the *Secret History* too seriously. Accepting that it is high-quality political satire to which the appropriate response is to laugh, represents something of a third way between the reigning studies of Averil Cameron and Anthony Kaldellis, and a return to the view of A. H. M. Jones, who once claimed that "this venomous pamphlet does not deserve the respect which is often accorded to it."[7] Not all readers will be convinced by this, but it is perhaps worth adding that Heather's assessment is not far off from the appraisal of the tenth-century Byzantine encyclopedia, the *Suda*, which dismissed the *Secret History* as containing the "faults and comedy" of Justinian's regime.[8]

In purely geopolitical terms, Heather is relatively optimistic regarding the value of Justinian's western adventures. He makes the reasonable case that the empire's later vulnerability was not the direct result of Justinianic overstretch. The loss of its richest provinces to the first throws of Islamic expansion in the seventh century are more directly attributable to the fact that the fifty-five-year period AD 573-628 saw forty-three years of, at times, existential conflict with Sasanian Persia than to Justinian's western adventurism nearly a century earlier.

While the discussion of Theoderic leads relatively organically to the coverage of Justinian, the following section on the Carolingians is a bit more of a leap forward in time, and might have been a bit disconcerting. However, Heather neatly lays the groundwork with a discussion of the Merovingians which is presaged by Clovis's appearance as a competitor of Theoderic in part 1. Thus, there is a continuous narrative thread as well as much useful context.

In Heather's estimation, if Charlemagne's conquest of the Lombards in AD 774 was the decisive moment on his road from Frankish kingship to imperial authority, the impetus was based on purely dynastic considerations. As with Justinian's western adventure, this was prompted primarily by the need to secure the regime from internal threats. In this case it was Charlemagne's need to eliminate the children of his brother Carloman who had taken refuge in the Lombard court.
Once Charlemagne ruled over multiple kingdoms, recognition by Pope Leo, in exchange for restoration to the papal throne, added a gloss of legitimacy to what was already true in practice. Ultimately, Heather presents the expansionism of the Merovingians, Carolingians, and their Ottonian successors as something of an existential necessity for their regimes. As opportunities for relatively easy enrichment in foreign wars dried up, the kings’ and emperors’ military magnates viewed domestic intrigue as a better bet, eroding the stability of regimes which were already very much at the mercy of the vagaries of royal succession.

For students of imperialism, if there is a disappointment in the first three parts of this book, it is that Heather, with the partial exception of his description of the anarchic international conditions of the fifth century, tends to present the imperialist adventures of Theoderic, Justinian, and Charlemagne as primarily driven by predatory impulses internal to their polities. The Ostrogoths’ movements, first into the eastern empire and then to Italy are presented essentially as a quest for cash, land, and royal credentials that paid off in spades. Justinian needed the legitimacy that came with foreign victory. The northern kings and emperors depended on foreign adventurism to pay off their henchman and to hunt down inconvenient relations. It is something of a missed opportunity given that Heather, who describes so vividly an international environment in which there were usually multiple, equally predatory, contending parties, and who was so sensitive to the importance of exogenous shock in his discussion of the fall of the western empire,[9] does not really delve into the systemic and pericentric impulses to expansion that were certainly also at play here.[10]

Heather is also quite clear that he thinks all of these kings and emperors were tough customers, but sometimes his exuberance for a modern analogies gets the better of him. He refers to Theoderic as “totalitarian” (p. 65), and singles Justinian out as “an autocratic bastard of the worst kind” with the ambition to be a Hitler, Stalin, or Pot (p. 203). Depending on their stomach for anachronism, readers will be more or less comfortable with these comparisons, although we should bear in mind Orwell’s distinction between the real totalitarianisms of his own day and “the stony cruelty of antiquity” [11] Undoubtedly all late antique and medieval rulers had blood on their hands. While Justinian may have been exceptional in this regard, it might be noted, that the international system of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages was no place for shrinking violets. [12]

If Heather’s focus on the traditional imperialisms of the first three regimes places great weight on their internal attributes, this is definitely not the case in his study of the medieval papacy and the processes leading to its apogee under Innocent III. Rather, many of the preconditions and much of the impetus for “papal lift-off” originated north of the Alps. The Carolingian Renaissance laid the foundation by creating an international environment in which the members of the western clergy were on substantially the same doctrinal page while Charlemagne endowed the papacy with substantial financial resources. Meanwhile Carolingian churchmen and their successors promoted the notion of exceptional papal rights and authority based on the Donation of Constantine for their own purposes, which in turn led to a flood of correspondence into Rome and responding decretals and the resultant codification of papal-dominated western canon law. These innovations and reforms were cemented by a series of reforming popes, many of German origin, and the slow development of papal bureaucracy.

Heather further differentiates the papacy from the preceding empires of conquest, seeking the root of its domination in the realm of ideology. He argues his case with gusto and wit, but his comparison of the seemingly consensual compli-
ance with the church’s ideological domination with the indoctrinated youth of the Soviet Union, and ecclesiastical networks of control with the secret police of the old Eastern Bloc (pp. 413-414) is somewhat jarring. Likewise, whether or not one accepts that the medieval papacy was an “empire” in the sense that it was a metropole exerting political control over the external and internal policy of a subordinate periphery, Heather’s statement that this new Roman empire “has so far lasted approximately twice as long as its predecessor” implies that it continues to be so (p. 414).[13] Given that, even in Heather’s estimation, the papacy endured for roughly a millennium before its imperial lift-off, it might be fairly wondered if, and when, it might have ceased to be an imperial institution in the modern era.

Although a minor criticism, it was surprising to find a number of instances in which the reader is referred to “page 000” for more information (p. 420n31, p. 421n42, p. 422n11; p. 429n20, p. 434n30, p. 437n39) and in one case to a “plate 00” that does not appear to have been included in the finished book (p. 224). Hopefully these errata will be ironed out in subsequent editions.

Finally, one should note that Heather wears his erudition lightly. This will come as no surprise to readers of his other works. His prose is conversational and sprinkled with pop cultural references that include such things as the Star Wars films (“no member of the Merovingian dynasty ever quite managed the jump to imperial light speed, p. 213”) and The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy (“making Roman landowners feel better about life, the universe, and everything,” p. 68). Of course this might not be every reader’s cup of tea, and such levity does sometimes clash with the seriousness of Heather’s subject matter. However, there is a good chance that even readers sometimes unsympathetic to some of Heather’s conclusions will find themselves smiling in spite of themselves. Rather than the grim, almost polemic, cut-and-thrust of many academic publications, Heather’s style is never disagreeable, often witty, and always engaging.

Notes

[2]. For example, Heather, Empires and Barbarians, 142-148; 238-244.


[7]. Averil Cameron, Procopius and the Sixth Century (New York: Routledge, 1985); Anthony Kaldellis, Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity (Philad-

[8]. *Suda*, pi 2479.

[9]. Heather, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, esp. 450-459.


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