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Michael Kulikowski’s *The Tragedy of Empire* is a sequel to his earlier volume, *The Triumph of Empire* (2016), and together they offer a splendid history of the Roman Empire. *The Tragedy of Empire* is a classic narrative history with chapters largely centered around later Roman emperors from Constantine and Constantius II (330s CE)—although the story really begins with the Emperor Julian (d. 363 CE)—until the final parting of the ways between East and West in the reign of Justinian (d. 565 CE). *The Tragedy of Empire* is intended for a broad audience, which its fast-paced writing beautifully accomplishes. I will focus on the book’s themes, concepts, and arguments rather than summarizing its chapters.

The strength of Kulikowski’s book is his ability to write history for at least three audiences. First, Kulikowski has a firm grasp on the narrative history and his biographical-type focus on individual emperors or other elites offers suspenseful cliff-hangers to chapters, leaving the reader excited for what comes next, even if they may know what happened. The book also has useful reappraisals of standard accounts, with Theodosius “the Great” (d. 395 CE) cut down to size as a mediocre ruler and general who benefited from positive public relations campaigns from the winning ecclesiastical side after his death. Second, Kulikowski is a master of explaining the intricate administrative and military structures of the later Roman Empire for those seeking specifics on how the empire functioned (or did not) across several centuries. And, third, Kulikowski fills the text with his scholarly views on certain topics (his summary of Huns and their ethnicity is deftly handled on pp. 75-78) and summarizes intricate scholarly arguments on various points that specialists can cite. As just one example, we learn about the incorrectly recreated itinerary for Theodosius I in 384 CE based on a copyist’s mistake that still appears in specialist reference works.

His three threads together tell a story of how the political unity of the western Roman Empire ended with elites in the west tearing it apart due to factional and regional rivalries. At the same time, he narrates how the Eastern Roman Empire
was able to harness its political economy while bringing its regional elites together to create a coherent state. The debate over why Rome fell in the west is, of course, practically timeless, as Ian Wood laid out in his magisterial 2013 book, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages*. Kulikowski’s book places the emphasis on internal (or Romanist) causes. What makes the book more useful than many others with this explanation, however, is his reasoning of how this all happened in an engrossing, narrative form. This is human drama from c. 350-550 CE at its finest.

This imperial-centered approach can become difficult to follow toward the second half of the book for the nonspecialist reader but is worth pursuing because it strengthens Kulikowski’s argument that the factional politics of the Eastern Roman Empire became ever more strongly tied to the throne, rather than regionalized. The combined chapter on Zeno and Anastasius (r. [separately] 474-518 CE) is focused on court intrigue and politics, including a series of coups and counter-coups. The list of names and events can be dizzying, as they were in reality. Here Kulikowski might have spent some time instead unpacking a key question that is implicit: How did an emperor (first as a military commander, like Zeno, and then as an administrator, like Anastasius) regain “real” power after more than seventy-five years of “figurehead” emperors? The court intrigue Kulikowski so wonderfully reconstructs is the outcome of a structural debate that lies beneath the surface.

Likewise, the “weakness” of less successful emperors can become a self-fulfilling prophecy when viewed from a biographical perspective. If Theodosius is more aptly titled “The Not-So-Great” based on Kulikowski’s cogent analysis, then Gratian could benefit from similar analysis. Finally, Kulikowki rightly places Aëtius in the same category as Theoderic, Gaiseric, and Attila, as warlords of the mid-fifth century, but labels him as someone with no loyalty to Rome (p. 206). This, of course, begs the question: What did it mean to have loyalty to Rome at this point? Given Kulikowski’s skills at describing identity and ethnicity—and its deeply complex debates—he could have used the time to unpack this question.

I only bring up these questions because Kulikowski’s book is a wonderful example of how to write a narrative history for all types of audiences. I simply wanted him to continue his earlier analysis. Parts of this book (or the whole book) could be assigned to undergraduate students (I have already done so) as a wonderful example of how to write evocative late Roman history. This book could pair well with Peter Heather’s *Fall of the Roman Empire* (2005) that has the Huns as the key element of the fall of Rome. It also makes a perfect accompaniment for books that focus on religious questions, such as Peter Brown’s *Rise of Western Christendom* (3rd ed., 2013). For readers who want to learn about the military and administrative aspects of the end of Rome through a lively story, this book is a wonderful entry into the field.
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