The Roman Empire at Bay: A.D. 180-395 (review)

T.G. Elliott

Mouseion: Journal of the Classical Association of Canada, Volume 7, Number 1, 2007, LI—Series III, pp. 58-64 (Review)

Published by University of Toronto Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/mou.0.0007*

from 115 to 117, culminating in the destruction of the Alexandrian Jewish community. Secondly, I question whether for the Jews, even within the context of the events of AD 43, Claudius' settlement can be termed a resolution. After all, the inferior socio-economic status of the Jews was by no means alleviated and, therefore, the settlement could scarcely be perceived as a compromise from the Jewish point of view.[7]

A final consideration: Blouin's use of the term *catharsis* is, in my view, problematical. She seems to be applying it to the experiences of the participants in the drama, the Jews and Greeks of Alexandria. This is most certainly not the conventional interpretation of the term *catharsis* in a dramatic context, which is applied to the viewer of the drama and not to the actors in it.

However, notwithstanding some reservations which I have with Blouin's argument, I must emphasize that I regard her book as an important contribution to scholarship. Her thesis is well presented, respectful of the sources, innovative and certainly likely to provoke lively debate. My only regret is that an *index nominum et locorum* was not included.

LIONEL SANDERS
DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS, MODERN LANGUAGES
AND LINGUISTICS
CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY
1455 DE MAISONNEUVE BLVD. W.
MONTRÉAL, QC H3G 1M8

DAVID S. POTTER. *The Roman Empire at Bay: A.D. 180-395.* London/New York: Routledge, 2004. Pp. xxii + 762. ISBN 0-415-10058-5.

This big book is the "Late Empire" volume, the seventh of the eight-volume *Routledge History of the Ancient World*. It begins with Commodus (as Gibbon did) and ends with Theodosius the Great. Potter begins by saying that "at the height of its power the Roman Empire was an *ad hoc* collection of acquisitions that … were governed in ways that suited them. The geographical diversity was mirrored in its administrative diversity."

The early decentralization of the empire "strengthened the hands of emperors who were able to negotiate between different interest groups,

[7] Tcherikover, *CPJ* 1.73

avoiding … excessive dependence on any one class." The consequence of inadequacy at the top was that effective control of the state would fall into the hands … of the palace staff." This concentrated authority in the third century in the hands of deeply conservative equestrian officials, from whom, presumably, no understanding of the capabilities of the empire's rivals and no decent strategic plan was to be expected (xi–xiii).

The text proper begins with a chapter on "Culture, Ecology and Power," followed by an admirably lucid sketch on "Government," before getting on to Commodus (85). The career of Septimius is followed by "The Army in Politics; Lawyers in Government" and "Intellectual Trends in the Early Third Century," before Ch. 6, "The Failure of the Severan Empire." Here, after a sketch on Zoroastrianism, Potter says (225) that "the failure [of Dio and Herodian] to understand the dynamic behind Sasanian policy toward their empire was perhaps every bit as serious as the failure of the army to meet those of Ardashir and Sapor with a modern tactical doctrine" and points out (226) that "the administrative apparatus of the army was not well suited to handling sudden threats." On 228 Potter remarks on the difficulty faced by an emperor who needed to develop a strategy—namely, that there were no large-scale maps available to him. Potter thinks this decisive against the view that the Romans had any decent grand strategy, but I am not so sure that that would follow from a lack of maps. Potter (232) thinks that by 241 the "power set" in Rome was a group of equestrian officers, most, if not all, from the eastern provinces, with experience in the *ratio privata.* Of Philip's government Potter says (239) "Greater efficiency does not necessarily mean better government. The inherent inefficiency of Antonine government allowed plenty of space for local initiative." Potter does not regard Decius' edict as having been intended primarily to persecute Christians. When he has dealt with the troubles of Gallienus he says (261–262) "local institutions in the third century retained the vitality to shape a vigorous destiny for themselves, responding to Rome, but not reduced to such dependency upon it that they could not function in the absence of imperial power," and that "centralizing tendencies … had yet to choke the life out of those institutions." Generally speaking, this chapter emphasizes the growing centralization of government convincingly; the downfall of the "local institutions" is deferred.

Ch. 7 "The Emergence of a New Order" begins with Gallienus' troubles and his murder, goes on to Claudius Gothicus and Aurelian—including an extensive discussion of Aurelian's reform of the coinage—and concludes with the formation of the Tetrarchy. Potter remarks that "the ideology of restoration was a concomitant of the practice of centralization that was coming to the fore in these years" and "There is a

sense in which Diocletian may have been losing sight of what was possible in place of what was ideal."

Diocletian's efforts to reshape recent Roman history prompt Potter to discussion of "Alternative Narratives" in ch. 8, on Manicheans, Christians and the Neo-Platonists.

The section on Christians begins by accepting K. Hopkins' estimate of their numbers at about six millions in A.D. 300, goes on to discuss their growing respectability and proceeds to Eusebius' ecclesiastical history, a Christian narrative which, according to Potter, "reflects the extent to which history as defined by the imperial government often strives in vain to establish its preeminence over alternatives that were often far closer to home for its subjects. The imperial government might (and did) establish the vocabulary with which power was described, but it could not determine how the language of power would be used." This concern with narrative is continued on 323, where Potter says that "Efforts to create a generalized history of persecution were in potential conflict with the traditions of each community which set up the rules for the veneration of martyrs." The chapter concludes, "As we return to the imperial government, we shall see how the narrative of Roman history that was constructed by Diocletian to lend authority to the new regime was undermined and replaced by a new one that would exalt a new ruler: the emperor Constantine."

The next chapter begins with Diocletian's census measures of 296–7, which were designed to make taxation fair throughout the empire, the Edict on Maximum Prices of 303 and the Persecution Edict of the same year. All were examples of a general effort at reform. Potter regards Diocletians's language as reflecting "perhaps the most important significant change from the style of government current at the end of the second century and throughout the third. Then each community was encouraged to create a narrative of its own affairs that could be tied, where relevant, to the grand narrative of imperial history, but still remain fundamentally independent. In the language of Diocletian's edicts all provincials are thought to share the same interests as the imperial government." Potter then deals with various "propaganda versions of events resulting in the collapse of the Tetrarchy." In fact this collapsed when Diocletian began altering his own earlier arrangements and the new senior Augustus, Constantius, decided not to accept the changes. He did not realize what seems so clear to modern historians—namely, that he had no rights in determining the successor to himself.

Constantine showed himself to be an astute politician. No one has denied that. It is not necessary to suppose that Constantius' religion was other than Christianity, as Eusebius so firmly presents it, or to believe that it was he, rather than individual governors, who tore down some

churches in his realm mentioned by Lactantius. We do not need to reject statements that Constantine was raised as a Christian just because of the oratorical flight of the panegyrist who says that Constantine saw something in the Temple of Apollo at Grand. Neither do we need to invent "Lactantius' story of the conversion" (359) (there is no such thing) just in order to make ourselves comfortable with Eusebius' canard about "the conversion of Constantine." This will cause us to imagine, as Potter does (401), development in Constantine's Christianity where none exists, and to rely excessively on politics as a motivating force in his career. It is better to accept Constantine's explanation of his career, and to account for pagan elements in his behaviour (e.g., the pre-317 coinage) as the result of a defect of power.

At the end of ch. 10 Potter deals with the question of the impact of centralization on the cities of the empire. Here, like Peter Heather before him (*CAH*[2] XIII, ch. 6), he is cautious, attributing much of the change to the effects of Aurelian's coinage reform, and expressing uncertainty as to the effects of changes in the style of coinage by Diocletian (and Constantine). Potter sets against the exemptions from the *munera* the new taxes (397) on those so exempted, and says (400) "The real question may, perhaps, be this: Did the way the imperial government did business with its subjects change in any significant way in the fourth century? Here the answer may be yes, for the closer the governor came to the governed, the more personal the relationship became," with the emperor less and less in charge of the government.

At the beginning of ch. 11 "Restructuring Christianity in an Imperial Context," Potter expresses his view that Constantine's religion evolved between 312 and 325 and between 325 and 337. I think that anyone who reads the texts written by Constantine will become extremely sceptical about such a conclusion. Heinz Kraft was willing to draw it, and he did not.

Potter's discussion of the Donatists is influenced by the fact that he seems to regard Caecilian as a murderer (405). He says there that the strife between the two factions "would become as much a split between two styles of church historiography, the apologetic and the martyrological, as it would be a split over the propriety of the conduct of Mensurius and Caecilian.

Potter's account of the Arian controversy (417) suffers from a faulty chronology regarding Constantine's sending of Ossius to Alexandria. Potter thinks that Eusebius of Caesarea was "the first actor to take center stage" at Nicaea," whose creed he attributes to Constantine—as if Athanasius would have made such a fuss over an imperial document.

In discussing Constantine's legislation Potter says (424) that "the most obvious case where Constantine was influenced by Christian doc-

trine is his declaration that episcopal courts could hear civil cases, even those involving non-Christians." What Christian doctrine influenced this? As regards Eusebius' assertion about Constantine's general ban on pagan sacrifice (431–435), Potter is suitably cautious, and concludes with the statement "His empire was neither polytheist nor Christian. It was both." This may shock some readers, but is it not preferable to so many pronouncements about Christianity being "the official religion of the empire"? In the concluding section of the chapter, "The Vision of Constantine," Potter says that Constantine's conversion "cannot be seen as an effort to subvert his rivals," nor to insinuate imperial control at the local level. He concludes that "It was Constantine's purpose to make the Christian reading a valid one in public, and that was, perhaps, the most significant effect of his reign."

With such modest aims, one wonders why Constantine would have bothered to be converted at all. What I miss most in Potter's Constantine is the devout man that the emperor so obviously was.

Ch. 12 "Church and State 337–355" starts with Constantine's projected expedition against Persia and a discussion of the tactics, recruitment, equipment and organization of his army. At 459–460 Potter explains Constantine's testamentary dispositions and goes on to the massacre in the imperial family after Constantine's death. Potter has no axe to grind against Constantius II, whose strategy in the East he regards as the best that was available to him, but his account is affected by excessive reliance on Ammianus the apologist and Athanasius the mischief-maker. Constantius, accordingly, comes through very badly, but this is the norm for histories of the fourth century.

Ch. 13 "The Struggle for Control 355–366" contains Constantius II's last struggles to obtain unity in the Church, and here Potter is on firmer ground, for there seems to be no denying that these efforts got Constantius into real trouble by 359. I would attribute that to his frustration in trying to deal with the very slippery Athanasius rather than to any heretical inclinations. Potter proceeds to "the growth of extraurban asceticism" as an introduction to Julian the Apostate. Reliance on Ammianus does not disturb his focus on Julian's ambitions in Gaul, which he regards as leading to the proclamation as Augustus in Paris in the winter of 360. (At 504 there is perhaps a misprint of "Rhone" for "Rhine.") He also sees Constantius II's difficulties very clearly. When he comes to Julian's Persian expedition, there is none of the usual guff about how the Roman army might have escaped if only its prodigious leader had not been deprived of his promising young life at just the critical moment, etc., etc. Potter blames Julian for the disaster and gives us a straightforward account of it.

In ch 12 "The End of Hegemony" Potter takes the Battle of Hadrianople as a big Roman disaster in which two-thirds of the cream of the eastern field army were killed. On a careful reading of Ammianus, I think, the total number of Roman troops fighting was about 15,000–18,000, so that Ammianus has inflated the importance of the battle. The entire chapter is written without taking into account the apologetic purpose of Ammianus, who very much wanted to make the administration of Valentinian and Valens look bad. It is to be expected that any historian who believes Ammianus will be happy to make hay out of Count Romanus, but it is worth noting that Romanus is the only such example that Ammianus could turn up out of Valentinian's reign, and that Romanus and his confederates came to bad ends. Ammianus' stuff on treason trials may be written off as sympathizing with the conspirators. Potter rightly does not believe assertions that Valens was an Arian. The concluding point, on 574, is that "the courts of Gratian, Valentinian II and Theodosius often seem to have little to do with each other. The emperor, behind the façade of imperial power, appears to have had less and less actual control of affairs."

The Conclusion—"Change in the Roman Empire"—addresses "the centrality of narrative to the definition of power" and "the centralization of power around the office of the emperor" and says that another secret of empire revealed when Marcus died was that it was possible to reduce the emperor to a figurehead. Potter goes on to compare Septimius as a terrorist with Constantius II, and gives his opinion that Valentinian and Valens "were very much creatures of their senior officials, as were Gratian and Valeninian II." Easy victories over the Persians "disguised the fact that the army was reliant upon outmoded doctrines" and "the inabilities of Severus Alexander's staff to understand that there was something qualitatively different about the armies of Ardashir may perhaps be explained by their participation in a culture where the present was measured in terms of the past"; "The Roman state remained open to outsiders, something that was always its greatest source of strength."

The empire of the fourth century, with churches in its cities, was not the empire that Marcus had left. It had lost its ability to project force as it had once done, and suffered from the failure of its rulers to recognize the changes that affected it. They had been led to overreach themselves, with catastrophic results. Between 180 and 395 the empire had passed from a hegemonic power to a regional one, without ceasing to be a power.

This book is well written, although Potter has a disconcerting habit of writing "there can be little doubt but that" when he means "there can be little doubt that." The sheer volume of material that is dealt with

makes it a useful research tool. The illustrations (mostly coins) liven the book a little, and Potter handles numismatic questions confidently. I was sometimes disconcerted by the stress on his theme about narrative. It is easy, in retirement, to grumble about this or that, but the fact remains that I would have found the book very handy thirty years ago and for a long time thereafter. I suppose that it is not a book that one can require undergraduates to read nowadays, but it ought to be on any reading list for a course on the Roman empire.

T.G. ELLIOTT
DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS
ERINDALE COLLEGE
MISSISSAUGA, ON L5L 1C6

MARY R. LEFKOWITZ and MAUREEN B. FANT. *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Source Book in Translation*, third edition. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005. Pp. xxvii + 420, 22 ills. US $59.95 (hb), $22.95 (pb). ISBN 0-8018-8309-5 (hb); 0-8018-8310-1 (pb).

Writing a source book is no easy task. Authors have to make important choices about their subject matter in terms of how to translate, what material to include or discard, and the manner in which to organize the texts in question. These choices are often the source of many quibbles in book reviews such as this. Back in 1982, with the first edition of *Women's Life in Greece and Rome*, Lefkowitz and Fant faced a formidable hurdle: how would the critics and the academic community react to the addition of the woman's voice into classical scholarship? Some twenty-five years have passed. This commendable and successful work continues to generate plenty of discussion both in and out of the classroom and has clearly been a force behind the application of new methodologies in the area of women in antiquity. What then does the new edition of *Women's Life in Greece and Rome* bring to the table? Is the time ripe for a new way of tackling the evidence presented in this work?

The goals of the new edition are essentially the same as the previous two. The authors gear this source book towards a non-specialist audience which has little or no knowledge of Greek or Latin. They do not include texts that (1) are more readily accessed in other major works, (2) require reading in their entirety, or (3) are just too fragmentary for immediate comprehension. The 526 entries include an assortment of literary genres compiled within a broad chronological (seventh century