The Roman Empire at Bay, AD 180–395 by David S. Potter

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Reviewed by
Richard Lim
Smith College
rlim@email.smith.edu

Gracing the cover of this erudite ook is an image of the Roman emperor Valerian (*ca* 200–*ca* 260) submitting to his captor, the Sassanian King-of-kings Sapor I. Carved into the living rock, this massive relief from Naqsh-i-Rustam in Iran stands as an apt illustration for a book that sets out to examine the critical two centuries during which the Roman world came to be transformed into a notionally postclassical society. Professor Potter asks virtually the same question as that which motivated Edward Gibbon to write his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* more than two centuries ago, albeit without the latter's investment in the paradigm of 'decline and fall': Why did the Roman imperial state come to be weaker, being less capable of exerting influence abroad and commanding the loyalty of its citizens at home, in AD 395 than it had been 200 years previously?

Just as with Gibbon's magisterial work, *The Roman Empire at Bay* interweaves discussions of political and military events with a broader survey of developments in the social, cultural, and religious spheres. As the status of the Roman imperial state still constitutes the major topic under consideration, the book gives the most weight to a narrative based on *l'histoire des événements* as well as to the underpinning structures of Roman imperial administration, economy, and military organization.

The material is set out chronologically, with the main chapters in each of the five parts focusing on the major political events and changes in the organization of the Roman imperial state as traced through successive imperial reigns. These chapters serve as a general framework into which the author inserts a series of well-seen remarks regarding the religious, cultural, and intellectual currents of the time.

Part 1 (chapters 1–2) provides an overall survey of the Roman Empire's social and political order, its physical and human ecologies, and the beliefs and religious traditions of its peoples. Part 2 (chapters 3–5) lays out the phenomena traditionally referred to as the Crisis of the Third Century, the analysis of which has long served as the gateway to the understanding of the many transformations that took place in late antiquity. Chapter 3 samples important intellectual trends of the early third century: Philostratus' *Lives of Philosophers and Sophists* and his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* illustrate the appropriation of the classical literary heritage by sophists and grammarians who creatively invoked the past for their contemporary audiences even as they underscored their own self-appointed roles as cultural intermediaries. The second section of the same chapter highlights the importance of Platonist philosophy and its impact on Christian intellectuals such as Origen of Alexandria and—somewhat surprisingly—Hippolytus of Rome. Readers with an especial interest in cultural and intellectual history will find these discussions full of insight but may also rue the absence of any treatment of the period's distinctive Aristotelianizing and Stoicizing philosophical trends and, more generally, the phenomenon of cultural eclecticism of which they were a part.

Part 3 (chapters 6–7) examines the third century proper and commences with the Severan emperors' efforts at stabilization and reform and with the gradual emergence of a much more centralized Roman state under Diocletian, whose wide-ranging reforms contributed to the creation of the later Roman Empire. A central theme in this section is Rome's relations with neighboring Sassanian Persia which emerged as its most challenging rival in the east from the third century to the rise of Islam in the seventh. Part 4 (chapters 8–11) focuses on the changes that took place during the reign of Constantine I and his heirs, including the emperor's political reforms and the impact he had on the institution of Christianity, of which he became an important patron and to which he famously converted in 312. A particularly welcome contribution is to be found in chapter 8, 'Alternative Narratives: Manichaeans, Christians and Neoplatonists', which outlines how religious and philosophical figures such as Mani, Eusebius of Caesarea, Lactantius, Plotinus, Porphyry, and Iamblichus constructed their own places in the world through the lenses of their distinctive cosmologies. The author thus seeks to integrate

a variety of religious and cultural perspectives into the underlying historical narrative through reminding his readers that plural philosophical and religious senses of self and group existed and how such all-encompassing world-views might at times have served as alternative sources of identities for certain inhabitants of the Roman Empire.

In his earlier study of the mid-third century *Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle*, a work of political prophecy that exemplifies a particular local reception of the events that constituted the Third Century Crisis, Potter [1990] demonstrates a fine appreciation of the importance of giving voice to such local narratives, particularly as they stand in some tension with the normative imperial representations of life and social order that historians often rely on to construct their own historical narratives. In the current book, the author's discussion of 'alternative narratives' serves to underpin his broader proposition that the progressive decline in Roman state power was, at least in part, attributable to the ascendancy of competing (religious) constructions of reality that caused individuals and groups to regard themselves less as Roman citizens or subjects than as members of distinctive religious ethnicities. This point is very much in accord with the current scholarly emphasis on the varieties of religious and cultural identities in the Roman world and their importance to how social and other forms of relationships were structured in late antiquity [see Lieu 2004].

Part 5 (chapters 12–14), intriguingly entitled 'Losing Control', offers the chief reasons why the author regards the late Roman state as one that effectively became so weak that it was no longer able to decide its own fate nor define what it meant to be 'Roman'. Using this particular criterion for evaluating the vitality of the Roman state helpfully introduces into the debate the issue of 'cultural identity', now a reigning paradigm in scholarly conversations regarding the nature of Roman imperial society.

The final chapter, 'The End of Hegemony, 367–95', treats conventional topics such as the impact of the battles of Adrianople and Frigidus, the roles played by emperors and imperial courts, and relations between emperors and bishops leading up to the death of Theodosius I.

The argument advanced in this book for the progressive decline of Roman state power is ultimately not unlike that which Gibbon

made in his *magnum opus*, minus the subtext of Enlightenment anti-
clericalism. Two factors are highlighted here as the most critical
contributory causes of Roman decline: the loss of control over the
meaning of what 'being Roman' entailed, and the increasing domi-
nance of the Roman state by 'groups with special interests that did
not necessarily benefit society as a whole' [581]. Yet another consid-
eration is a growing disjuncture between an increasingly centralized
state and 'realities of diversity' that existed on the ground, a feature
that 'would mold the evolution of the Roman state through the next
[fourth] century' [298].

For its serious efforts to bring in religious and cultural topics,
The Roman Empire at Bay remains fundamentally a traditional his-
torical account that takes on the Roman imperial state as its central
topic for investigation. While it effectively relates this core aspect
of the book to other historiographical objects, the marriage of tra-
ditional political history and the history of events with the newer
modalities of cultural history and rhetorical analysis still remains an
unequal one. The choice of AD 395 as the terminus for the book well
illustrates this point. The death of Theodosius I has served many
fine works as a reasonable ending point for their narratives and yet
many of the social and cultural trends discussed in the current book
continued to play out through the following century and beyond. For
instance, the suggestion that the rise of 'alternative narratives' served
to disrupt the unifying sense of Roman cultural identity needs to be
substantiated more fully through an examination of the evolution of
Christian religious controversies in the fifth century (and indeed be-
yond), during which a rhetoric of righteous religious violence came
to be deployed in a manner that challenged the Roman state's long-
held monopoly over the exercise of legitimate violence [see Gaddis
2005]. That the story of how religious ethnicities came to the fore in
the course of conflict and rivalry is not more fully traced, in a book
that hints at how alternative identities undermined Roman imperial
coherence, subtracts from its overall explanatory power.

Still, this is a highly intelligent and well-presented account and
the nuanced and sophisticated discussion in its pages do its accom-
plished author credit. Of particular value to specialist readers are
Potter's thoughtful disquisitions on the operations of historical mem-
ory and historiography. Throughout the book, the author helps his
readers navigate the intricate scholarly debates over the nature of the

(mainly literary) evidence [see Potter 1999]. Here one finds useful
discussions on the practice of *damnatio memoriae*, a well-practiced
imperial art, whereby opponents and rivals were not just defeated
but also written out of history itself. Using the post-Constantinian
rewritings of the history of the Tetrarchy, for example, Potter is able
to demonstrate that historical revisionism was part of the normative
operations of cultural memory in any imperial regime.

At the same time, the skillfully constructed narrative and the
highly engaging vignettes and examples that have been chosen to
accompany it ease novice readers into a vast subject without ever
losing their attention. Potter also does not patronize them with
seductive generalizations but brings them fully into the enterprise by
providing substantial quotations that they can analyze themselves.

As the Roman Empire and its fate has increasingly become a
foil for expressing contemporary concerns regarding the state of our
world both in popular culture and in academe, *The Roman Empire at
Bay* speaks to the wisdom of seeing a state's power as more than its
military and economical might. Any imperial state can be successful
in the long term only if it is able also to offer a compelling 'cultural
identity' that commands not just the loyalty of its inhabitants but
also a sense of common enterprise on their part. For assessing the
state of health of any imperial society, the traditional political and
military narrative is no longer adequate to the task. What is required
is a nuanced and varied interdisciplinary approach that takes on all
relevant factors, from the seemingly mundane to those that appear
hauntingly 'spiritual'. This impressive book has sought to accomplish
just that and its broad scope belies the seemingly straightforward
visual image on its cover. The defeat and submission of Valerian to
the Sassanian King-of-kings, or any given military reversal for that
matter, is less the main explanation of historical change but rather
the starting point for posing a searching range of questions such as
one finds in this book.

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