

## BOOK REVIEW

*Social Conflict in the Age of Justinian: Its Nature, Management, and Mediation.* By PETER N. BELL. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xvii + 393. Hardcover, \$150.00. ISBN 978-0-19-956733-1.

Peter Bell aptly describes his view of the eastern Roman empire in the sixth century CE as “a ‘cat’s cradle’ of forces” (345), attracting and repelling, all of them held in balance precariously—yet, Bell insists, on the whole successfully—through the diligent efforts of emperors to consolidate, conserve, and project legitimate authority. Drawing upon the author’s experiences as a teacher in Ghana and as a British civil servant with postings in Lebanon and Northern Ireland, his approach affirms forthrightly the reality of the transhistorical human subject and marshals the social sciences in an effort to substantiate the impression that disputes as remote and as contingent as, for example, that between Chalcedonians and Miaphysites in the sixth century, on one hand, and between Unionists and Nationalists in the twentieth, on another, are motivated and explained by comparable social and political imperatives, inter- and intra-group dynamics, and calculations of relative interest and advantage.

Bell’s discussion is organized in four parts, divided into eight chapters with numerous subsections. Part I (chaps. 1–2, 1–48) provides a methodological introduction that, regrettably, gets the book off to a rather slow start; a reader may wonder whether concepts such as “power,” “status,” and “class,” and subsequently “group identity” and “ideology,” require quite as much elaboration as they receive, given the entirely plausible and straightforward conclusions Bell draws on the basis of them further along. Part IV, “Conclusions” (chap. 8, 337–352), is indeed a cogent and rewarding summary of the book’s contributions, and in Part II, “Three Major Conflicts” (chaps. 3–4, 49–210), the analytical framework Bell is building comes into focus: “a model of the late empire in terms of a set of conflicting forces: ‘vertical,’ in terms of inter-class conflict; ‘horizontal,’ in terms of centrifugal and centripetal pressures, with the successful management of both amongst the chief concerns of the imperial government” (155–156).

The vertical axis of this arrangement was well-recognized in late antiquity as a binary opposition between “the powerful” and “the poor” (93; cf. 108, 346–

349). Structural changes in the period, notably the development and growth of an imperial “service aristocracy” and an interrelated attenuation of curial government in localities, altered relationships between mass and elite in ways that, Bell argues, intensified conflict in both the cities and the countryside. These developments contributed to the increasing prominence and influence, along the horizontal axis, of forms of association that cut across these divisions and, for the most part, displaced and diffused socio-economic pressures that otherwise threatened to get out of hand.

Correspondingly, the three “major” conflicts explored in Part II are allocated between two chapters representing these axes: “3. Social Conflict in Countryside and Town” and “4. Two Empire-Wide Conflicts: The Factions and the Christians.” The former concentrates upon the agricultural basis of the economy and emperors’ efforts to resist the consolidation of local control by increasingly powerful landowners at the expense of both the poorer classes and the fisc. Justinianic reform legislation in the 530s attempted to reassert central supervision over local notables and to rein in the central administration in ways that antagonized these significantly overlapping groups and distinguished Justinian’s reign from the more accommodative regimes of Anastasius and Justin II.

Chapter four examines commonalities between the circus and theatre factions, increasingly prominent from the fifth century, and the ecclesiastical blocs that formed around the Miaphysite schism. “By the sixth century, both sets of groups, the churches and the factions, enjoyed partisans whose membership cut across social classes, status groups, and ethnic communities. Both were well organized across the whole empire” (134). Churches and hippodromes alike provided public spaces for the articulation of popular sentiment; while their habitués could be mobilized as “foot soldiers” and incited to violence, Bell emphasizes the socially integrative and stabilizing role played by the two organizations in providing a focus of identity for marginalized groups and supplanting traditional civic institutions whose association with Paganism (*sic*: 217 n. 16) had rendered them suspect.

Part III, “Ideological Conflicts—Their Mediation and Management” (chaps. 5–7, 211–336), constructs a Justinianic regime that one is tempted to describe, in the spirit of Bell’s own allusions to contemporary politics, as in “permanent campaign mode.” Whether in compensating for his undistinguished origins, reacting to the Nika rioting that almost cost him his throne, or coping with a succession of military setbacks and natural disasters from the 540s onward, Justinian was ever at pains to shore up his legitimacy and to monopolize

sources of social and political authority. Cultural products that resisted assimilation within an emerging, socially cohesive “Byzantine” normative consensus (38)—notably, the classical *paideia* that provided the foundation for the self-identification of the cosmopolitan elites of the late empire—could be stigmatized as “Hellenic” and subjected to state repression. In contrast, Justinian’s persistent, if unsuccessful, efforts to reconcile the Miaphysites demonstrate the extent to which social and political integration remained an overarching goal. A wonderfully evocative portrait of Hagia Sophia, in chapter seven, effectively encapsulates many of the themes of the book.

Bell’s evenhandedness and patient accumulation of detail may frustrate readers aiming after a magisterial assessment of Justinian comparable to A. H. M. Jones’ “balance sheet of the reign” or an arresting portrait like Tony Honoré’s extended comparison of that emperor with Joseph Stalin.<sup>1</sup> One regrets that it was not possible for Bell to engage fully with Garrett Fagan’s recent work on the social psychology of the Roman arena (140 n. 82) or to acknowledge, for example, Kyle Harper on late antique slavery or Peter Brown’s latest treatment of wealth and poverty in the period.<sup>2</sup> In comparison with the reign of Anastasius, who faced many comparable challenges, the particularity of Justinian’s remains debatable.<sup>3</sup>

To the extent that it nevertheless constitutes a distinctive “age,” due not least to the intensity and variety of its cultural productions, perhaps this is attributable less to the durability of Justinian’s proto-Byzantine ideological program than because alternative visions of what it meant to be “Roman” remained contestable and, to employ Bell’s recurring phrase, worth “playing for.”

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<sup>1</sup> A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284-602: A Social, Economic, and Administrative Survey*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1964), 298-302; Tony Honoré, *Tribonian* (Oxford, 1978), 28-30.

<sup>2</sup> Garrett G. Fagan, *The Lure of the Arena: Social Psychology and the Crowd at the Roman Games* (Cambridge, 2011); Kyle Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275-425* (Cambridge, 2011); Peter Brown, *Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth, the Fall of Rome, and the Making of Christianity in the West, 350-550 AD* (Princeton, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> See now Geoffrey Greatrex, “Perceptions of Procopius in recent scholarship,” *Histos* 8 (2014) 76-121, esp. 82-90.