

BOOK REVIEW

Honorius: The Fight for the Roman West AD 395-423. By CHRIS DOYLE. Roman Imperial Biographies. London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2019. Pp. xxiv + 205. Hardback, \$140. ISBN 978-1-138-19088-7.

In the latest addition to the *Roman Imperial Biographies* series,¹ Doyle reassesses the often-maligned child emperor, Honorius. His over-arching thesis is that the thirty-year reign of Honorius, despite disasters and loss of territory, is one characterized by tenacious perseverance in the face of extreme difficulties as well as resolute leadership during a period rife with division and corruption throughout Rome's political, administrative and religious institutions.

Doyle begins with a summary of the literary, epigraphic and numismatic corpora for Honorian Rome, followed by an assessment of modern scholarship. Doyle makes the case for "an academic form of *damnatio memoriae*" (4) wherein Honorius came to be "referred to as one of Rome's worst rulers" (5). Doyle argues that such disapprovals are of modern design, as criticism is negligible among ancient authors.

Chapter 2 surveys fourth century religious developments. Doyle presents evidence here in a manner akin to a sourcebook—long block quotes separated by scant comment or introduction. Regrettably, this approach persists throughout the work. By contrast, notable strengths of the chapter are his treatment of the increasing cruelty and punishments for increasingly lesser crimes under Christian emperors, concise presentation of both the state of "barbarization" in the 4th century and the familial elements of the Theodosian dynasty.

Chapters 3 and 4 trace through Theodosius' reign, centering on Imperial administration. Doyle argues that Theodosian security protocols that were intended to preserve his dynasty were more harmful than helpful for Honorius and Arcadius. He argues that their sheltered and quarantined upbringing left them

¹ The series contains twenty-two volumes, many now in their second edition. Aside from a lack of Titus, Antoninus Pius, and Commodus the series is complete from Julius Caesar to Septimius Severus. Less representation exists among later emperors in the series: Aurelian, Diocletian, Galerius, Constantine, Theodosius and Justinian.

“woefully unready to deal with the internal struggles that lay ahead” (52). Thus, the theme of poor preparedness is developed throughout the work.

Chapter 5 provides a fresh (and long overdue in English) assessment of Gildo’s revolt. Doyle engages with long-standing debate regarding how the Gildonic War unfolded. Doyle argues that tackling Gildo, thus preserving North African grain and taxes, was the right decision even if its result was lost opportunity against Alaric. Doyle’s chief reason is that north African victory provided immense propaganda. Doyle stresses that Honorius seized every opportunity, from triumph and sculpture to Imperial laws and coinage, to broadcast north African achievement. Moreover, he interprets the inability to assess Gildo’s whereabouts post-defeat as testament to provincial disloyalty to the Imperial core, offering much to ongoing discussions of provincial identity and Imperial ‘reach’ of the late Empire.

In Chapter 6, Doyle argues that rumor of Stilicho’s collusion with Alaric shifted senatorial preference to Honorius. Emphasizing Stilicho’s machinations goes far in reassessment of Honorian guilt, culpability and passivity, culminating in Honorius’ killing of Stilicho. Doyle’s efforts to refashion Honorius as such are successful largely due to his analysis of Honorian numismatic typology, out of which it becomes clear that the Imperial coinage was “[o]ne place where Honorius’ authority could not be diminished” (119) and where its propagation flourished. A toughened-up child emperor thus emerges.

Doyle does not present Honorius as without reproach. This is made clear in Chapter 7, which surveys the state of the West by 407—the Rhine frontier had buckled, barbarian tribes were thrashing Gaul and the Romano-Britain army had revolted. He does uphold consensus in that Honorius’ civilian and slave enlistments fueled British insurrection, that familial and court intrigue resulted in myopia regarding the northern frontier and that a soft-handed approach towards Priscus Attalus intensified matters with Alaric. Notwithstanding, Doyle bucks consensus regarding the Zosimus debate of Roman Britain,² relegating it to brief comment. This is regrettable. The loss of Britain is significant and that it occurred under Honorius’ watch warrants scholarly engagement.

Chapter 8 focusses on Honorius’ relationship with the Church. It is with church affairs that Doyle goes to great lengths to portray Honorius as a resilient, capable and industrious emperor. He argues that the impetus for the surge of imperial

² This debate centers on a line in Zosimus (6.8.10) that, for many, is evidence of Honorius’ desertion of Britain.

focus upon socio-religious matters and legal pronouncements was that the “unsoldierly” Honorius sought to demonstrate leadership where he could: through legislation. Many problems with which Honorius engaged as such are considered here. Doyle demonstrates just how prolific and inventive Honorius *could be* in meeting challenges, often with much success. However, they also underscore a deeply imbalanced, if not misguided, approach to the world’s problems—one that places primacy on dogmatic squabbles at the expense of frontier security and institutional decay.

In the final chapter, Doyle tackles with the aftermath of the Visigothic sack of Rome, the status of Rome’s *foederati* and the overall legacy of Honorius. Doyle argues that the oft-perceived weakness of Honorius is inaccurate. In all, what comes through in Doyle’s *Honorius* is that the troubles of his reign are not the result of a failed emperor but instead are best-case scenarios orchestrated by an ill-prepared yet otherwise adept emperor. For instance, conventional treatments center on the toxicity of his foster-guardians, Stilicho and Serena—a product of Theodosius’ absence in death. Doyle, however, lays stress on pre-existing deficiencies due to Theodosius’ absence *in life*, which saw his sons sheltered, ill-tutored and divorced from the realities of administration of the Empire. This intriguing and fresh perspective is also useful for a better understanding of the Imperial court and institutional administration of the late Empire.

The work is not without problems. Most significantly, it is well into Chapter 5 that Doyle shifts from Theodosius to Honorius. Even then, significant attention is placed on Stilicho. While it is essential to reflect on Theodosius and Stilicho, the degree to which Doyle undertakes this ultimately hurts his case for a strong and capable Honorius: even Doyle’s fresh assessment, which aims to pull Honorius out from the shadows of Theodosius and Stilicho, still subordinates Honorius and sees his role diminished and dwarfed by the two men.

Consistency is also a problem. Some Latin terms see an immediate and parenthetical translation, others are only in a Glossary, others still see no translation. Furthermore, it is puzzling why Doyle opts to use the Latin at certain times, such as when he reports that “a huge ancient Egyptian pink granite obelisk ... was placed in the central wall (*spina*) of the Hippodrome” (64). Second, Doyle indicates to what modern regions some ancient place names correspond (e.g., Pannonia) but not others (e.g., Illyria). Third, modern scholars are introduced at times with full names, other times only by surname.

Additionally, Doyle does not shy away from inventive and empty conjecture. Examples from *just one* chapter will suffice. He claims Theodosius and Galla named their daughter Placidia to provide comfort in their lives (74); that Honorius wondered if he would ever see his father alive again when he left for (what would be) the final time (78); that Honorius was crying during a sermon of Ambrose's that *also* left an indelible impression upon him (81). There are instances where Doyle confuses the sources. For instance, he states that *CTh.* 7.13.16 offers three solidi to freeborn recruits as a *viaticum* (travel expense). Upon inspection, one finds that it offers two solidi as *pulveraticum* ("drinking-money" for hard labor) to slaves who conscript, with no mention of freeborn. The work has minimal typos, as the reviewer only noticed four.

Notwithstanding, Doyle's *Honorius* is an excellent Imperial biography. He offers a profound and thought-provoking treatment of one of Rome's most misunderstood emperors who stood watch during a critical time in its history. Doyle's *Honorius* offers appeal to a broad audience and rightly deserves wide readership among scholars and students of Late Antiquity.

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