

BOOK REVIEW

Rome Victorious. The Irresistible Rise of the Roman Empire. By DEXTER HOYOS.
London, UK and New York, NY: I.B Taurus, 2019. Pp. 256. Hardcover, PRICE?
ISBN: 978-1-78076-274-6.

How do you pack all but the last three hundred years of Roman history into a slim volume of 200 pages, plus notes, indices and appendices, not to mention fitting in the violent modern controversies that rage over Rome's motives and methods? It is not easy navigating between the Scylla of "Rome the glorious civilizer" and the Charybdis of "Rome, the aggressive, rapacious, exploitative power that inflicted slaughter over three continents." Professor Hoyos manages to do it with style and balanced judgment. He can make incredibly complex subjects clear for the non-initiated, e.g. the Roman voting system, in two and a half pages (14-15). Brevity is the soul of this book. He can acknowledge a controversy that has tied up scholarly controversy for over a half century, like the cause of the First Punic War (19), and, though an acknowledged specialist on Hannibal, limit himself to two pages on it (21-22), judiciously avoiding modern myths, like sowing salt into the soil of Carthage (31).

In only six chapters, Hoyos traces Rome's hegemony over Italy and explores Rome's rise to power to 264 BC, its expansion across the Mediterranean to Caesar's death, the development of the provincial system and its implications for both Rome and her subjects. He delves into the more negative consequences of empire, including how conquest sharpened the internal conflicts of the late Republic that caused its fall.

The coming of Augustus brought autocratic rule disguised as a Republic. Hoyos examines how the Empire fared under the emperors from Augustus to Caracalla. Chapters 7 through 10 cover wider themes. Chapter 7 focuses on how citizenship was used to secure and spread Roman influence throughout the empire. Chapter 8 analyzes Roman governing and misgoverning. Chapter 9 looks at perceptions of the Romans and their empire by others. Chapter 10 shows how local populations offered resistance to being occupied. I can't help but think of a peasant woman near Campobasso who once proudly announced to me: "Siamo

Sanniti” (“We are Samnites”). There is still pride in local identification in Italy, and still resentment over Roman interference. The last chapter shows that Roman culture *did* spread, and the empire became multi-cultural, indeed. Roman culture blended with local cultures. Latin and Greek became the *lingua franca* of the empire. While Hoyos discards the view that the imperial government deliberately Romanized the western provinces, North Africa and the Balkans, he argues that, by processing people through the army, having them live in cities, using baths and gymnasia and getting rewards for cooperating, like citizenship and Roman names, people became acculturated. The spread of the emperor cult, the building of theaters, baths and gymnasia, gladiatorial shows and synthesizing local gods with Roman deities all brought people into Roman cultural traditions.

Hoyos ends his story in 212, arguing the term “empire” cannot be used once Caracalla enfranchised the freeborn. Rome effectively ceased to rule subject peoples (199). The last chapter is a masterful summary that avoids the bad analogies that plague so much writing on ancient Rome. Hoyos knows full well that there is no unified view of the Roman Empire and that opinions on Roman imperialism continue to divide modern scholars.

The “all-beneficent” view going back to Pliny will not hold. Too much evidence, both literary and documentary, has been found to contradict it. Hoyos deftly points out that even the Romans did not fall for their own propaganda. They were aware that imperialism entailed not just flaws, but crimes. Similarly, the portrait of the entire empire as a system of robbery and rape, which owes much to St. Augustine, must be discarded. Comparisons of Roman imperialism with that of the 19th century are false analogies, since geography imposed strategic needs and choices on the Romans that were altogether different than modern Europe’s.

Since the system was set up to defend propertied elites, its functionaries often mistreated and exploited the empire’s peoples, and the Romans failed to eradicate endemic corruption. Yet without intending it, Roman imperialism built up an integrated, large-scale geopolitical system. It generally maintained peace and encouraged its subjects to build useful infrastructure. They set up a refined legal system open to all, even if they did not always take effective steps to curb its own oppressive officials. Love them or hate them, the Romans established a dominion which, for the only time in history, brought Europe, Asia and Africa together and turned the Mediterranean into a free trade area under a single political system. Roman subjects were free to practice trade, farming and manufacturing and other pacific pursuits on a scale previously rare in the Mediterranean world.

How one experienced the empire was surely affected by whether one was at the top or bottom of society, but the conditions of large-scale peace and overall prosperity made an enduring impact on its peoples. Hoyos stays dispassionate while asking the right questions: What was so unique about the Roman Empire that made it last so long? However you view it, Rome's achievement became a paradigm in the West, and its fall was remembered and regretted.

If one must quibble over something, "Irresistible" in the title is more appropriate to a love affair than an empire, but even if your bookshelves are groaning with tomes on the Roman Empire and you are wary of adding another but want one judicious treatment, whether for undergraduates or non-specialists, this book is an insightful and informative contribution to the field.

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