Frechette on Haldon, 'The Empire That Would Not Die: The Paradox of Eastern Roman Survival, 640-740'

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Students of the military, political, and social history of late antiquity and early Byzantium will all undoubtedly welcome the latest by John Haldon. An expansion of the four Carl Newell Jackson lectures he gave at Harvard in 2014, this book takes on the obvious, but problematic, question of how exactly the eastern Roman Empire weathered the crises brought on by Arab expansion in the seventh and eighth centuries. Traditional military historians may be disappointed by his eschewing operational military history for broader structural explanations. Likewise, his erudite style and approach, with talk of a “cognitive anthropological analysis of texts and cultural production” and the “ideational framework” of the empire’s political theology, may be disconcerting to lay readers and less advanced undergraduates (pp. 15, 122). Readers who persevere, however, will be repaid.

The problem for historians has always been how to account for Roman/Byzantine survival in the face of the loss of its wealthiest and most populous provinces with attendant fiscal collapse, population movement, and shrinkage. It is hard to overestimate the dislocation caused by the loss of roughly 80 percent of the empire’s revenue and a century of hard fighting that led not to restoration but to mere survival. Haldon seeks to elucidate the elements of adaptability and resilience that account for why an empire that should have collapsed did not. After laying out a brief synopsis of the period in chapter 1, he appeals to five overlapping areas of investigation: any ideological advantages the Romans may have had, the roles of the mass and elite, geographic and geopolitical considerations, climatic factors, and organizational factors to be investigated over the following six chapters. In the end, he argues that these internal and structural factors account for Roman survival, even leaving aside the “lucky breaks” of the internal conflicts of the caliphate.

Ideological concerns are the focus of chapters 2 and 3. As the least concrete factors under consideration, and, given the nuance of Haldon’s discussion, it is probably fair to say this may be the least accessible section for the uninitiated. Chapter 2 deals with the issues of how the Romans made sense of events given their belief system and “moral universe.” Here Haldon notes that Romans viewed the collapse of their power through an eschatological framework. Divine support was necessary for success and divine punishment of sin, heresy, and unbelief accounted for defeat, necessitating a political concern with the uniformity of belief, whether orthodox or monothelite, as an element of imperial security. With the emperor as the mediating power between heaven and earth, “even warfare and imperial expeditions take on a liturgical aspect,” as the “whole ideological
apparatus became sacralized” (p. 97). Likewise, the consonance of Christianity and the empire was taken for granted, generally limiting dissent. To be sure, Haldon notes that “this shared moral universe was somewhat patchy” (p. 103). Conflicts with the popes and prominent ecclesiastics such as Sophronius of Jerusalem and Maximinus the Confessor opposed to imperial monothelitism certainly did not help the cause of internal unity, while, in the areas occupied by the caliphate, it was also now possible to imagine Christian communities independent of the Roman Empire, making reconciliation more difficult. Nevertheless, despite local variations, he argues that Christian imperial unity was reinforced by such factors as the empire-wide cult of the saints and martyrs, the connective roles played by such groups as monks and clergy, and relatively effective suppression of opposition to the reigning imperial Christology of any particular moment until the final anathematization of monothelitism in 680-81.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the issues of Roman identity and imperial orthodoxy as its sine qua non. In a wide-ranging chapter, Haldon examines what he sees as the increasingly hegemonic Christian Roman symbolic universe, which assumed that a God-given emperor provided a focus for identity and community throughout society, with no thinkable alternative. He notes the increasingly convergent Roman and canon law as underpinning the imperial worldview, with the law as a means of reinforcing Christian identity and imposing norms and allowing imperial intervention through local magistrates into the lowest levels of social relations in what was an increasingly sacralized politeia. Whether this Christian identity can help account for the stubborn resistance once the Muslim armies crossed into Asia Minor is more problematic. Haldon notes that the increasing estrangement between Christians in current and former imperial territory helped a frontier evolve, that the view of the invaders as heretics and barbarians turned the Arabs into the “other” that threatened Christendom and Rome, and that incursions into the Anatolian heartland were generally temporary and quickly reversed. He is, however, too careful a historian to ignore practical factors, noting that the cities of Anatolia were more easily defended and reconquered.

Chapter 4 focuses on social and political elites and the ways in which their interests overlapped with those of the empire. Haldon suggests that as imperial territory and provincial urbanism declined, new dynamics among the elites provided additional measures of resilience to the empire. The provincial elites’ dependence on the imperial government for confirmation of their status and the government’s dependence on them for local power wedded them ever more closely. In addition, Haldon argues that, as the field armies were billeted in the Anatolian countryside, with officer corps increasinly recruited locally, soldiers came to have greater social prominence and identified more with local concerns. Thus, he suggests that soldiers and provincial clergy had both local connections and a shared commitment to the imperial idea, becoming the instrument of local control as representatives of the “legitimate” authority in Constantinople.

Following up on some of the issues raised in chapters 3 and 4, in chapter 5 Haldon discusses regional variations and areas of resistance to imperial control. Here he notes that provincial elites were loyal only so long as the empire was able to protect their interests and to impose sanctions. Anatolia, for example, was in effective striking distance of Constantinople, while more distant provinces, such as Africa, Italy, and Armenia, were more variable in their loyalties.

The physical and environmental world is the topic of chapter 6. Here Haldon examines the related issues of climate, landscape, and agricultural production. Tracing the climatic, archaeological, and
palynological evidence, he notes that the cooler and wetter conditions that prevailed in Anatolia coincided with an overall decline and simplification in agricultural activity with declines in viticulture and oleiculture and a presumably declining population. On the other hand, cereals and stock-raising appear to have increased in importance with total production perhaps even increasing relative to the reduced population, resulting ultimately in a simpler and “safer” economy. Thus, as the old field armies were billeted across the Anatolian countryside, relatively convenient sources of supply appear to have been at hand.

Turning from the fortunate happenstance of the environmental to the anthropogenic, in chapter 7 Haldon examines the east Roman organizational arrangements that facilitated resistance and resilience. He reviews the numismatic evidence for fiscal responses to the contraction in the Roman budget. Noting a decline in emissions and the weight of bronze folles, he suggests that such manipulation represented an effective response to the crisis. Likewise, he discusses the expanded roles of the kommerkiarioi from simple customs duties to handling the grain supply for both the capital and the armies. Finally, he reviews the collapse and reconstitution of the armed forces and the arrangements for billeting the field armies in territorial military commands capable of supporting them. Taken together, Haldon argues that the east Roman government had the insight and ability to institute sophisticated higher-level fiscal, logistical, and organizational responses to its difficulties.

If one were to quibble with certain aspects of Haldon’s presentation, it might be to note that, in his attempt to account for and incorporate so much detail, he occasionally runs the risk of contradicting one aspect of his work with another. For instance, in exploring how an alternative to imperial orthodoxy is unthinkable in chapter 3, it might have been worth detailing why Islam itself or the continued existence of Christian communities within the caliphate were not thinkable alternatives.

On a more practical level, lay readers and undergraduates, on one hand, will be well served by a glossary of technical terms but, on the other hand, may be left adrift by occasional lapses in bibliographic notations. Of particular note for readers of H-War, in chapter 7 Haldon argues against both the notion that the theme system originated in this period rather than in the ninth century and the notion that the troops were farmer-soldiers. Unfortunately for the uninitiated, despite noting that “a great deal of research” has been invested in the question of the themes, his notes are fairly terse on the topic (p. 268). One might have hoped for citation of not only scholarship that differs but also more of Haldon’s own work on the topic.[1]

In a related vein, one must take issue with the decision, presumably, of Harvard University Press to use endnotes with extremely truncated references consisting of only the authors’ last name and the date of publication. The result is that the reader must constantly additionally refer to the bibliography as well as the endnotes. A minor inconvenience perhaps but magnified by the absence of several items from the bibliography, which may be troublesome for certain readers.[2]

Still and all, there is great utility in Haldon’s synthesis of such a great body of material. He has brought together at least some of the possible ideological and structural “Goldilocks parameters” that go beyond simple lists of battles and leaders and allowed the survival of the east Roman imperium. Even scholars who disagree with some of his conclusions will thank him for providing a solid basis for future discussion.
Notes


[2]. My idiosyncratic reading revealed several such omissions: “Bell 2006” (p. 302n19); “Diamond 2005” (p. 302n16); “Johnson 2007” (p. 302n21); “Middleton 2012” (p. 302n21); “Lewin 1999” (p. 302n21); “Byrne 1998” (p. 302n21); “Turchin 2003” (p. 302n25); “Kaegi 1995” (p. 306n22); “Kaegi” undated (p. 310n63); “Kennedy 1986” (p. 310nn64-65); “Krueger 2005” (p. 318n87); “Martin 1937” (p. 318n88); “Ehrhard 1937” (p. 318n88); “Tannous 2014” (pp. 307n30, 308n41, 310n61, 321n140); “Dimitroukas 1997” (pp. 321n151, 326n64); and “Wickham 1984” (p. 338n11). Likewise, “Dagron 1992” (p. 320n123) appears to be listed in the bibliography as “Dagron, G. ‘L’ombre d’une doute: L’hagiographie en question, VIe-Xle Siècle,’ Dumbarton Oaks Papers 46:59-68,” but the lack of a date leaves it unclear. Finally, “Stolte 2003-4” (p. 323nn10) appears to be listed in the bibliography with a different date as “Stolte, B. H. 2005. ‘Is Byzantine Law Roman Law?’ Acta Byzantina Fennica 2 (N.S. Helsinki).”


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