

WALTER POHL, RUTGER KRAMER (Eds.), *Empires and Communities in the Post-Roman and Islamic World*. Oxford Studies in Early Empires. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021. 464 pages, 2 illustrations and 5 maps, hardcover, ISBN 978-0190067946.

At a time when the populist right and identity politics have gained enormous influence in American and European politics, books such as Walter Pohl and Rutger Kramer's *Empires and Communities in the Post-Roman and Islamic World*, which question our modern notions of ethnicity, identity and community, are not only welcome but also timely. Indeed, Pohl and Kramer's introduction acknowledges this – albeit somewhat obliquely – with a discussion of politically charged terms such as 'race', 'tribe', 'Stamm', or 'nation', amongst others, and how these words are not only controversial today but moreover, if used incautiously, can also colour our interpretation of the past. This book's explicit goal is to challenge our modern notions of these concepts and narratives (as well as their applicability to historical subjects) and to promote interdisciplinary and international scholarship. Its novel approach lies in its broad Eurasian scope and its unprecedented comparison between the collapses of the Roman Empire in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and the Abbasid Caliphate in the 9<sup>th</sup>.

The book opens with a trio of articles by Walter Pohl and Hugh Kennedy, specialists on the identities of 'barbarian' peoples (in the Romans' eyes) and the Abbasid Caliphate respectively, which form the crux of the whole work. The first essay by Kennedy, 'The Emergence of New Politics in the Breakup of the Abbasid Caliphate', begins by noting the obvious – that unlike the Roman Empire, there were no large migrations in the early medieval Middle East and, consequently, that the new polities that succeeded to the Abbasid Caliphate were (excepting Armenia) not based on ethnic identity. While more antiquated historiography has tended to trace the 'failure' of nation-building in the modern Middle East to a growing reliance on 'tribal or sectarian' divisions in this period, this article attempts to counter this narrative, instead emphasizing both the multiplicity of identities that people in this region could choose from and, moreover, the universal and important nature of 'tribal identities'.<sup>1</sup> Its counterpart by Pohl, 'The Emergence of New Politics in the Breakup of the Western Roman Empire', begins with the inverse: there were, of course, mass migrations around the fall of the Roman Empire, and the new polities that developed were based largely on ethnicity.

Indeed, this narrative is so well established that it has become universalizing and normative – consequently, Pohl's essay is devoted to breaking down the 'natural' reliance on ethnicity and the category of *gentes* (peoples) and thereby 'defamiliarizing the history of "the West"'.<sup>2</sup>

The third essay is cowritten by both and takes a comparative perspective, integrating the findings from the previous two articles: it stresses similarities such as increasing 'warlordism', growing reliance on soldiers with limited loyalty, collaboration between these soldiers and regional non-military elites, a 'scriptural' and literate culture, and successor states' emphasis on casting off the old imperial hegemonic identity/ideology. The authors reject the concept of 'Islamic otherness' while recognizing that there were still significant divergences during the course of the breakup of these two empires: a Persian versus a Roman political inheritance; a Roman/Christian insistence on otherness and *gentes* versus an Islamic/Arabic emphasis on inclusion in a holy community; the unique nature of the law codes of the 'barbarians', which have no Middle Eastern equivalent.

Finally, these three articles are countered by a response from Peter Webb entitled 'Fragmentation and Integration: A Response to the Contributions by Walter Pohl and Hugh Kennedy'. Webb, drawing inspiration from the work of Roland Barthes, questions whether we can make meaningful comparisons between these two empires. Instead, he draws attention to the 'multivalence' of identities in the early medieval Middle East – ethnic, tribal, religious, geographical, toponymical – to make a pointed critique: the very act of questioning which empire harnessed ethnic identity more effectively forces the historian to assume that this was a resource similarly available to both empires, when in fact this may not have been the case.<sup>3</sup> In sum, Webb concludes that the Roman and Abbasid empires were sufficiently different from each other in nature that they must fragment differently: Pohl and Kennedy's approach risks painting a comparison with too thick a paint brush, which can erase regional variety and real difference on the ground.

The next two articles offer more sweeping comparisons. John Haldon's contribution, 'Historicizing Resilience: the

<sup>1</sup> p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> p. 80.

Paradox of the Medieval East Roman State: Collapse, Adaptation, and Survival', is based on his 2016 monograph.<sup>4</sup> Contrasting the Byzantine's unlikely survival in the wake of the Islamic conquests with the fall of the Western Roman Empire, Haldon draws inspiration from C. S. Holling's ecological concept of the 'adaptive cycle' – growth, rigidity, release, restructuring – to argue that an elite political reorientation in Anatolia, coupled with a newfound imperial ideology and ecological, physical, and settlement changes in the provinces remaining to the empire, enabled the Byzantine survival. This reviewer did take issue with some of Haldon's interpretation of archaeological research: he argued that several trends in the 7<sup>th</sup> century (such as smaller settlements moved to fortified positions, the reuse of older buildings, and a simplification of agriculture) was evidence of 'decline'. Recent archaeological research has argued that this notion of decline and fall is in some ways antiquated and, instead, should be seen as dynamic adaptation or transformation to changing, post-imperial circumstances.<sup>5</sup> More fundamentally, I think this volume might have benefited from a more explicit discussion of what 'decline/fall' means and how our own modern notions influence our historiographical discussions of it. On this topic, see, for example, the work of Courtney Booker,<sup>6</sup> which discusses how concepts of decline, often influenced by medical jargon, are often anachronistic or even teleological. Likewise, see Veronika Egetenmeyr's 2022 study of Sidonius Apollinaris,<sup>7</sup> which demonstrates that framing the problems in this book around the theme of collapse often obscures how this change, often far less calamitous than assumed, was experienced on the ground.

Next, Leslie Brubaker and Chris Wickham's contribution, 'Processions, Power, and Community Identity: East and West', offers a sweeping overview of the social and political functions of urban processions in the Byzantine, Frankish, and Fatimid empires. They emphasize that processions in each area expressed power (internal in Rome and Constantinople, external in Francia and Egypt) and collective identity. This was a welcome collaboration, given Wickham's expertise in global history<sup>8</sup> as well as Brubaker's emphasis on perception, representation, and urban life.<sup>9</sup>

The last two sections are clustered essays focusing on particular regions; the first contains two essays on the Franks. In 'Diversity and Convergence: The Accommodation of Ethnic and Legal Pluralism in the Carolingian Empire', Stefan Esders and Helmut Reimitz (building on Reimitz's 2015 monograph)<sup>10</sup> observe a paradox: Frankish rulers' use of 'an imagined Frankish identity' had the unintended consequence of simultaneously strengthening the ethnic identity of 'Others' who were searching for 'a voice of their own'.<sup>11</sup> Nowhere is this represented better than in the early medieval proliferation of barbarian law codes, which hint at regional elite groups seeking to reaffirm their rights and privileges in the context of a new imperial order and consequent restructuring. This essay is part of a larger trend of investigating dissident voices in Carolingian historiography, begun not least of all with Rosamund McKitterick's 2006 work, *Perceptions of the Past in the Early Middle Ages*.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, Rutger Kramer's essay, 'Franks, Romans, and Countrymen: Imperial Interests, Local Identities, and the Carolingian Conquest of Aquitaine', concentrates on the unique situation of Aquitaine within the larger Frankish polity. He focuses on a social group, the '*aprisiones*' (disgruntled political elites granted land from the king's personal holdings to placate them) as well as two texts, the *Historia vel Gesta Francorum* (*The History or Deeds of the Franks*) and the *Capitulare Aquitanicum* (*The Capitulary of Aquitaine*). These two texts, Kramer contends, were propaganda aimed at an elite audience to convince them of the righteousness (and benefits) of Carolingian rule which, when coupled with the example of the *aprisiones*, provided a compelling case for local elites to buy into the new regime.

The final section contained three articles on identity in the medieval Middle East. 'Death of a Patriarch: The Murder of Yūḥannā ibn Jamī (d. 966) and the Question of 'Melkite' Identity in Early Islamic Palestine' by Daniel Reynolds deals with the narrative surrounding the violent murder of a patriarch in 966. He concludes that, contrary to traditional analyses which see Melkites (Byzantine Christians living in Jerusalem shortly after the Islamic conquest) as an oppressed minority, a close reading of Yahya ibn Said's record of this event reveals a dynamic community adapting to new situations. Moreover, the narrative itself was composed to emphasize Melkite loyalty to the Caliph in the early 11<sup>th</sup> century. Peter Webb's second contribution, 'From the Sublime to the Ridiculous: Yemeni Arab Identity in Abbasid Iraq',

<sup>4</sup> HALDON 2016.

<sup>5</sup> OOSTHUIZEN 2019.

<sup>6</sup> BOOKER 2009.

<sup>7</sup> EGETENMEYR 2022.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, his magisterial 2005 *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800*: WICKHAM 2005.

<sup>9</sup> BRUBAKER 2020.

<sup>10</sup> REIMITZ 2015.

<sup>11</sup> p. 11.


<sup>12</sup> MCKITTERICK 2006.

builds on his earlier criticisms of the treatment of Abbasid ethnicity: analysing contemporary poetry, he contends that this genre contains more profound discussions on community and identity than previously realized. For example, indigenous peoples attempted to integrate themselves into the larger Arabic community in order to participate in the new regime: the Yemeni in particular placed importance on genealogy to 'prove' their shared ancestry with Muhammad and his companions. Lastly, Petra M. Sijpesteijn's contribution, 'Loyal and Knowledgeable Supporters: Integrating Egyptian Elites in Early Islamic Egypt', begins with an observation that, generally, imperial conquests do not replace the local populations but instead lop off only the top stratum of aristocrats and integrate the lower – likewise, the Arab conquests too did not result in 'large-scale displacement' but in aristocratic reorganization.<sup>13</sup> Elite Egyptian identity, as a result, underwent enormous transformation during the centuries after the Arab conquests, especially this 'middle stratum' of bureaucrats and minor nobles, as they competed with each other for positions and to integrate themselves into the new political order.

Notably absent in this volume are contributions about other, non-Frankish, post-Roman states: the Goths, for example, could make for an interesting counterpoint to the Franks, especially given their Arian (i.e. heretical) beliefs. Pohl and Kramer acknowledge the Goths (and several other post-Roman/Abbasid polities) as explicitly heterodox, but a deeper discussion of religious/heretical identity during this period, and indeed the interplay between religion and ethnic identity, would have been most welcome: see, for example, Patrick Amory's 1997 *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy, 489–554*, which does exactly this, discussing Arian identity and its relation to 'Gothic-ness' more explicitly.<sup>14</sup> More than that, I do feel that the perspective of the book would have been enriched by giving more emphasis to the voices of Arabic scholars as well. In sum, however, my complaints with this volume are fairly minor: the book's goal is laudable, and even if the answers are necessarily sometimes incomplete, the questions it asks are novel and worthwhile. This book is a welcome addition to comparative or global history as well as studies of ethnicity and identity and is sure to promote further comparative research.

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<sup>13</sup> pp. 357–358.

<sup>14</sup> AMORY 1997.