

Michael Kulikowski, *Imperial Triumph: The Roman World from Hadrian to Constantine* (London: Profile Books, 2016), 386 pp., ISBN: 9781846683701, £25

Michael Kulikowski is a Professor of Ancient History and Classics at Pennsylvania State University, and his *Imperial Triumph: The Roman World from Hadrian to Constantine*,¹ published by Profile in 2016, continues the tradition of Roman histories produced by ancient historians for a common readership. Other recent examples, like Mary Beard's *SPQR*,² were enormous popular successes, and attest to the fascination the general public continues to hold for the work of historians working on ancient Rome. I do not for a moment wish to denigrate the place of narrative histories such as these – narrative history is central to the work of Roman archaeologists such as myself – nevertheless, the nature of the written word is to encapsulate a particular perspective, even while acknowledging others, and so to freeze in time a certain point of view, thereby granting it the authority of writ. Books written for the history *genre* cannot avoid this, to some degree or another, but there are grades of certainty the historian may adopt in her capacity as a communicator via the written word. If such exercises become tedious for general readers, it cannot excuse the promulgation of a general sense of certainty where certainty is unwarranted. It is in this that Kulikowski's book comes unstuck, for it mismanages the relationship between writerly clarity and historical certainty.

For popular readers, this book suffices as a comprehensive and lucidly written introduction to the period spanning the late second to mid fourth centuries AD. In framing his narrative between the reign of Hadrian (117-136 AD) and that of Constantine (306-337 AD) Kulikowski breaks the common convention of treating Roman history by centuries, and in doing so introduces a sense of continuity between the 'high' empire of the second century and the 'late

¹ Michael Kulikowski, *Imperial Triumph: The Roman World from Hadrian to Constantine* (London: Profile Books, 2016).

² Mary Beard, *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* (London: Profile Books, 2015).

antique' empire of Constantine and his successors. This is a helpful strategy, and neatly introduces a less familiar period of Roman history to a popular readership.

The book is straightforwardly organised into chapters concerned with sequential narrative: we begin with the accession of Hadrian and end with the death of Constantine, accompanied finally by a short excursus on his children and their deeds. Thematically, Kulikowski develops a gradual sense of pathos as war and imperial infighting engulfs first the successors to Hadrian, then the Severans, and finally the luckless emperors of the mid third century. The tetrarchy is presented as a failed experiment, and the accession of Constantine as a triumphal, though tragic growth of equestrian bureaucratic power. Indeed this process, which Kulikowski frames as the result of an ever expanding need for the state to control and administer its citizens, is central to his narrative. 'That Constantine created a new Roman empire has never been in doubt', he says³.

This is presented with great clarity and force, but comes at the expense of uncertainty. For archaeologists, the details of life are often ambiguous, and frequently they are swept up in a narrative that affords little time for their consideration. For example, Kulikowski writes that the Egyptians, around the time of Hadrian, lived either in Greek cities or in 'native' villages, by which he presumably means small settlements of a culturally Egyptian character.⁴ Such a characterisation elides a whole archaeological literature devoted to Romano-Egyptian urbanism, and the complex relationship between classical forms of urban expression and 'native' Egyptian ones which archaeology shows was typical even of smaller villages during the whole Roman period.⁵

³ Kulikowski, p. 247.

⁴ Kulikowski, p. 29.

⁵ See, for example, Bagnall et al., *An Oasis City* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), and Donald Bailey, *Excavations at El-Ashmunein IV: Hermopolis Magna: Buildings of the Roman Period* (London, British Museum Press, 1991).

Perhaps such broad generalisations are inevitable in sweeping historical accounts, but in the eyes of a Roman archaeologist they betray a lack of awareness, a certain blindness, to the lives of the people who actually lived during the events under narration, and for myself at any rate this detracts from the power such story might otherwise attain. The ‘great man’ view of history is thus the prism through which Kulikowski ultimately presents his history, and as in many works of popular historical narrative this has the effect of eliding the cultural and social nuance at the heart of the lives of ordinary people. In closing, narrative histories such as Kulikowski’s present a conundrum of sorts for Roman archaeologists. On the one hand, Romanists are reliant to a great degree on the work of ancient historians, including those who produce ‘popular’ works of narrative history, because the objects (often literally) of our study are involved with and are often implicated in events and persons which are only known through narratives or other written evidence produced by ancient people. But the benefits of pre-made narrative history are both a blessing and a curse for Romanists. Archaeological work can itself sometimes problematize the historical consensus, as shown by recent work on ancient Roman economies which has been motivated by comparatively fresh archaeological research. This has brought into question the long held assumptions about Roman economic life whose main exponent was Moses Finley⁶. Finley’s consensus held that, for example, technological innovation was stagnant or lacking during the Roman Empire because the relevant incentive structures were likewise absent. If you can easily inject slave labour into the equation, why waste capital on R&D? Archaeological evidence has shown that in a variety of dimensions, including (crucially) agriculture, the Roman period witnessed the application of labour-saving technology on a potentially massive scale, implying the presence of institutions (whether government or private) willing and able to inject significant capital into what we today would call research and development.⁷ The tidy narrative – that of a stagnant Roman economy supported by endless slave labour – has been cast into doubt

⁶ Moses Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

⁷ For a useful introduction, see Andrew Wilson, ‘Machines, power and the ancient economy’, *Journal of Roman Studies* 92 (2002), 1-32.

thanks to archaeology. The play between the discipline of ancient history and archaeology is therefore continuous and inescapable. If our Roman heritage is to be understood as fully as it might be, both disciplines will continue to prove essential to the endeavour. Kulikowski's history, while well-constructed and useful for its presentation of a neglected (third century) period of Roman history, leans heavily on the actions of the great men who governed the empire, and in doing so communicates less of the complexity of Roman life than it otherwise could have.

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