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Review of Nadine Viermann: *Herakleios, der schwitzende Kaiser. Die oströmische Monarchie in der ausgehenden Spätantike*

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2021 has been an important year for the studies on the reign of emperor Heraclius (610–641 CE) thanks to many new contributions that have improved our knowledge about this crucial period for the transition from Late Antiquity to Middle Age.[1] Among them, Nadine Viermann has presented a new study about Late Roman monarchical institutions and the transformations during the reign of Heraclius. After more than two centuries of sedentary monarchy, in which the emperors related themselves to the urban environment of Constantinople, Heraclius was the first emperor to leave the capital to personally lead Roman soldiers in battle.

The book presents seven chapters and investigates the reasons for this paradigm shift, the ways contemporaries coped with the sudden change in imperial behaviour, and addresses the consequences of Heraclius' policies for the further development of the Late Roman

1 Among these studies cf. Howard-Johnston J., *The Last Great War of Antiquity*, Oxford, 2021, a comprehensive summary of the last war between Romans and Sasanians between 602 and 630, and Raum Th., *Szenen eines Überlebenskampfes: Akteure und Handslungsspielräume im Imperium Romanum, 610–630*, Stuttgart, 2021, focused on the role of the military commanders during the reign of Heraclius.

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monarchy. As Viermann herself stresses in the first chapter, the book aims to investigate the structural mechanisms of political decision-making and the impact of political communication. In particular, the analysis focuses on the relationship between the emperor, the capital, and what the author calls the "military sector", constituted by all the figures involved in the army.

Chapter 2 describes the mechanisms of the 5th and 6th-century Eastern Roman monarchy. Against the common opinion which claimed that in this period the military sector was gradually marginalised, Viermann argues that the military group continued to influence the imperial policy. At the same time, the sedentary emperors used several strategies to limit the threat represented by high military officials. Within Constantinople, the emperors structured their self-representation by an increasing sacralisation of their office and by the development of an ideology of victory.

Chapter 3 investigates the dynamics of the imperial succession in the early 7th century by examining the events of Phocas' and Heraclius' accessions in 602 and 610. From this analysis, it is apparent that military pressure could affect the urban environment in both cases, favouring the popular uprising which culminated in the coronations of Phocas and Heraclius. In contrast with the common opinion that Phocas led a coup, Viermann's careful analysis of the sources reveals that Phocas' revolt was not the trigger that led to Maurice's overthrown. On the contrary, Maurice's attempt to abandon Constantinople was seen as a loss of legitimacy for Maurice and provoked the disaffection of the components of Constantinopolitan society, which then preferred to offer the throne to Phocas. Therefore, the dynamics of the "sedentary monarchy" and the strong relationship between the emperor and the urban environment were fundamental aspects of the emperor's legitimacy and imperial successions. In contrast, the dynamics of Heraclius' accession in 610 were clearly different, in that this was a real coup with the clear purpose of overthrowing Phocas.

The analysis of the coronation rituals corroborates this. The main Constantinopolitan interest groups were involved in integrating Heraclius and Phocas into the city as new emperors and controlling internal strives. The last part of the chapter focuses on the communicative forms with which Heraclius legitimised his coup, i.e., by depicting and treating Phocas as a tyrant and a usurper. Heraclius used the denigration of his predecessor as a pivotal aspect of his self-representation so that this theme became deeply integrated into the collective memory that shaped historiography until today.

Chapter 4 looks at Heraclius' major transformation of the monarchical institution, i.e., the remilitarisation of the

imperial office. While Phocas continued the tradition of the sedentary emperors, Heraclius began personally leading the Roman troops in battle. As a supreme commander, Heraclius aimed at strengthening imperial authority over the military sector to prevent new usurpations. At the same time, Heraclius' long absence from Constantinople could involve many risks for the tenure of his power. To avoid such a situation, the emperor attempted to strengthen his authority by creating an imperial dynasty. Viermann focuses her analysis on how Heraclius did that, i.e., by crowning his son Heraclius Constantine as his co-ruler and marrying his niece, Martina. Despite his young age, Heraclius Constantine could substitute for his father as the ceremonial centre of the imperial palace and reinforce the relationship between the imperial figure and the capital.

Chapter 5 looks at how the remilitarisation of the imperial position was elaborated and accepted within the Eastern Roman Empire. The investigation focuses on George of Pisidia's panegyric poems, in which the author traces a process of creation of the imperial figure as military commander to justify his absence from the urban environment. In his poems, George portrays Heraclius as a commander with a strong religious tone: by adopting terms reminiscent of hagiography, the poet shaped the emperor's military command according to the practice of the Holy Men. Within this framework, George describes the war with the Persians as a religious conflict and Heraclius as the champion of Christianity. On the occasion of the Avar siege of Constantinople in 626, George established two alternative figures to fulfil the emperor's absence from the capital, the patriarch Sergius and the Virgin Mary, presented as the guardian of the city. With this narrative construction, George aims to transform the memory of the siege into a moment of civic pride, which strengthens the political and clerical hierarchies of Constantinople. After his victory over the Persians in 628, Heraclius is presented as a cosmic saviour and his triumph as the core to a new and better future. The chapter examines the 7th-century apocalyptic tradition, which constitutes a peculiar source to understand how Heraclius' victory was interpreted outside Constantinople.

Chapter 6 focuses on investigating the dynamics of the last decade of Heraclius' reign by turning attention to three crucial ritual events. The first is Heraclius' return to Constantinople after the victory over the Persians. By mixing religious celebrations with the traditional elements of the Roman triumph, Heraclius elaborates communicative strategies to be fully reintegrated into the urban environment after years of absence. The second event is the *Restitutio Crucis:* this celebration constituted a peculiar innovation in Late Roman monarchy since an emperor visited the

city of Jerusalem for the first and only time.

In contrast with the common opinion, which claimed that Heraclius aimed to present himself as a new David, Viermann argues that the sources do not highlight this aspect. The only text which underlines the correlation between Heraclius and David is a homily by Theodore Syncellus written immediately after the siege of Constantinople in 626.[2] Here, the comparison with David is helpful for the author to praise the emperor's victories. On the contrary, Viermann gives attention to the analogy between Heraclius and Constantine: as a matter of fact, George of Pisidia's poem on the *Restitutio Crucis* presents Constantine as Heraclius' model. In addition, the choice of Constantine as the name of his son and the relevance of the legends of the Cross seems to confirm this Heraclius' imitation of Constantine to renovate the figure of the emperor as a Christian ruler.

The comparison with Constantine is also present in Heraclius' religious policy, which aimed to reconcile the Christian communities by promoting the new theological formula of monoenergism. The aim of this religious politics was the reunification of several Christian communities under one doctrine. Hence, Heraclius intended to present himself not only as a victorious commander but also as a king and a high priest like the sovereigns of the Old Testament.

The last subchapter looks at the consequences of Heraclius' defeat against the Arabs at Yarmouk River in 636: after this debacle, a conspiracy against Heraclius was hatched in Constantinople. As the conspiracy was revealed and the responsible people punished, the emperor felt the necessity to claim his position in the capital back by constructing a boat bridge over the Bosporus. Viermann by examining a passage from Nicephorus, (Nic., *Brev.,* 24), demonstrates the historicity of this episode. Heraclius' position was also reinforced by the coronation of his son Heraclonas as his second co-ruler and the issue of an edict, the *Ekthesis,* to impose the new theological formula of monothelism over his subjects.

Chapter 7 concludes the analysis of the transformations of Eastern Roman monarchy by examining the consequences of Heraclius' measures after his death in 641. Again, the history of Heraclius' successors presents the same dynamics that the author has described in Chapter 2, i.e., the relevance of the military sector in influencing the imperial succession. Despite the several political crises of the empire in the 7th century, rulers never forgot Heraclius' innovations, in particular, the idea of the emperor as a front-line

2 Cf. Theod. Sync., *De obsid.,* 52, in Sternbach L. (ed.), *Homilia de obsidione Avarica Constantinopolis,* in *Analecta Avarica,* Krakau, 1900, pp. 298–342. There are also hints in Georg. Pisid., *Hex.,* I, 1–56, in *PG,* 42, cols. 1426–1430.

general, which, together with the strong influence of Christianity, led to the transformation of the Eastern Roman monarchy into a "Byzantine" one.

Although I substantially agree with a significant part of Viermann's conclusions, some of her opinions are probably uncertain. In examining Heraclius' religious politics, Viermann argues that the emperor attempted to convert the Persian general Šahrwarāz and his family (p. 299). This assumption is based on an interpretation of a passage from Nicephorus' *Breviarium* by Cyril Mango (Nic., *Brev.,* 17). But Nicephorus' text only remarks on the sending of Šahrwarāz's sons, Nicetas and Nike, to Heraclius as hostages and Nicetas' promotion as a patrician. Nicephorus is also vague in offering a reliable chronology of the sending of Nicetas to the Roman court, while it does not offer further information about a possible conversion of Šahrwarāz and his family. In addition, sources originating from the Sasanian Empire do not present any conversion of Šahrwarāz but attest contrasts between the Persian general and the Christian communities of Persia.[3] Thus, we must discard Mango's opinion and, subsequently, we must revise the relevance of this episode to understand Heraclius' religious politics.

Another doubtful point regards Heraclius' arrival in Constantinople through a boat bridge on Bosporus. According to Nicephorus, the only source which reports this episode, Heraclius ordered the construction of the boat bridge because of his fear of crossing the sea. In contrast with those who claimed that Heraclius suffered from hydrophobia, Viermann argues that Nicephorus is reporting a "parody of a triumph", and Heraclius' hydrophobia is intended as a form of irony to criticise the emperor (p. 314–316). In my opinion, Viermann's evidence in support of this thesis is unfounded: firstly, the alleged parallels between Nicephorus' passage and criticisms to the imperial figures in Procopius' and John of Ephesus' works are inconsistent: in the latter two authors, the use of irony accompanies open criticisms of the emperors Justinian and Justin II. Secondly, she does not consider the literary features of Nicephorus' work and the discussion about the sources that Nicephorus might have used. Nicephorus seems to have consulted sources favorable to Heraclius, and his narrative also presents a positive view of the emperor's reign. Thus, Viermann's idea about the presence of criticisms to Heraclius behind such a passage is exaggerated and, maybe, further investigation on Nicephorus' text and its literary features could give a better interpretation of this passage.

3 Cf., for example, the evidence provided by a 10th-century Arabic text reporting the history of the Christian communities of Persia, also known as the *Chronicle of Se'ert,* p. 566, ed. Scher.

Nonetheless, Viermann's book constitutes an essential contribution to understanding the transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages in the Eastern Mediterranean area. Despite the significant number of studies on the subject, Viermann's analysis demonstrates her deep knowledge of the sources and the scholarly literature about the subject; simultaneously, she offers a new perspective for the study of Late Antique political history. The book also provides new analytical tools to reassess not only the political dynamics of Heraclius' reign but also those of his immediate predecessors and successors – for example, Maurice and the 7th-century emperors- hitherto neglected by modern scholarship.

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