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**John Haldon, *The Empire That Would Not Die: The Paradox of Eastern Roman Survival, 640-740*. 2011. Cambridge University Press. £28.76. Hardback. ISBN 9780674088771.**

How was the mighty Roman Empire humbled by the Islamic onslaught of the 7<sup>th</sup> century? That is a question we frequently ask when studying the early Roman-Islamic wars. In this book, Haldon follows up the question with another: how – once the Empire had been humbled – did it survive the worst of the Islamic storm? Several interpretations on the subject have already been offered, although in my opinion, they are either not forcefully argued or are not sufficiently fleshed out. Whittow contends that the Empire endured mainly because Constantinople was too far away from the initial Arab onslaught, and because of the capital's formidable land walls.<sup>1</sup> Kaegi considers the key factors to have been the resources squandered by the Muslim on the 674-678 siege of Constantinople and their two civil wars, the harsh Anatolian climate, the logistical difficulty of mounting long-distance raids into the interior, the bitter rivalry among Arab leaders, and the resistance of the more ethnically and religiously homogeneous people in Anatolia.<sup>2</sup> Treadgold suggests that Islamic momentum was greatly slowed by the establishment of the thematic system.<sup>3</sup> Haldon's interpretation incorporates some of these ideas, but also original ones. He considers the key survival factors to have been five-fold. First, he convincingly argues that the state and the Church identified the Roman Empire with Christianity, and vice-versa. The twin organizations therefore worked hard to stamp out any signs of dissent from Chalcedonian Christianity, at least in Constantinople and Anatolia. Of course, they were assisted by the fact that the bulk of the Anatolian population (unlike that of Syria and Palestine) was already Chalcedonian Christian before the Arab wars began. The implication is that ordinary secular people cannot fail to have been aware of their common faith, and that it served as unifying bond in the face of the Muslims' relentless hostility. This is perfectly plausible. Moreover, the argument is buttressed by a wide assortment of textual sources (notably the canons of the Quinisext, the *vitae* of saints, the *Ecloga*, and the correspondence of

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<sup>1</sup> In stark contrast to Sassanid Ctesiphon, which stood little more than 100 km. outside Arabia (Whittow 1996, 98-103).

<sup>2</sup> Kaegi, 2009, p.367.

<sup>3</sup> Treadgold 1995, 21, 22-25, 27, 1997, 314-318.

clergymen) which for the most part are handled with appropriate caution. What is not made clear is whether the people were aware of their common Roman heritage, though the secular elite certainly were.

If emperors kept a tight grip on their subjects' religious lives, did they exert the same degree of influence on the ruling class? Haldon argues in the affirmative. In Chapter 4, he explains that from the reign of Justinian onwards emperors took serious steps to tighten their influence over the empire's political elite. This ambition was surely expedited by Constantinople's extraordinary defensive power. What Haldon is suggesting, I think, is that Constantinople had become the Empire's centre of gravity by the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, the Arabs expended enormous resources on the sieges of the 674-678 and 717-718 in vain attempts to short-circuit resistance in the provinces. The problem is that not enough space is devoted to proving that the extension of the emperor's influence involved provincial elites; it is difficult to see how a close bond merely between the Constantinopolitan elite and the emperor could have been a major factor in the Empire's survival.<sup>4</sup> On the matter of strategic geography, Haldon draws attention to the relatively short distance of Anatolia from Constantinople. The central government was in a position to deliver assistance (in the form of money and troops) more readily to Anatolia. This helps explain why the province survived the 640-740 period. By contrast, Roman authority disappeared in Africa, and in central-northern Italy it shrank to little more than Ravenna and the Venetian lagoon. Another significant geostrategic consideration was the existence of the Taurus-Antitaurus mountain chain, which made it too difficult for the Arabs to sustain themselves on Byzantine territory. The argument on the impact of distance is cogently expressed, although I am unsure how Constantinople could have sent manpower reinforcements to the threatened provinces; was the capital a major recruitment ground for soldiers? In addition, the value of the Taurus-Antitaurus line deserves further explanation. Why should the Arabs have experienced severe difficulty sending supplies and reinforcements across the mountains? Was it because the passes were blocked with snow in the winter?

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<sup>4</sup> Unless the line between provincial and capital elites was blurred – unless the latter group's wealth was heavily tied up in provincial land.

The next point, about the hostility of Anatolia's climate to the Arabs, is well supported (although it could have used more citations to the sources alluded). There is no doubt that Anatolian winters are considerably more rigorous than in any part of Arabia, at least in the present day. It remains a mystery, to my knowledge, why the Arabs did not think to make use of men prepared for the Anatolian winters.<sup>5</sup> Lastly, Haldon discusses the evolution of Anatolia's agriculture in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. In the 500s, we are told, climatic conditions became significantly more favorable to cereal production. This trend resulted in cereals becoming predominant in the 600s (at the expense of several traditional crops, namely vines, olives, and walnuts). The increased production meant that Pontus and Paphlagonia were able to feed the armies that fell back to Anatolia in the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century. They also served as Constantinople's breadbasket after the loss of Egypt. In pushing forward his viewpoints on the two aforementioned trends, Haldon displays a sound knowledge of Anatolia's climatic geography. He also makes good use of palynological data and literary/sigillographic sources from the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is not difficult to believe that Pontus and Paphlagonia would have been able to supply grain to other parts of Anatolia, since they were among the regions least affected by Arab raids.<sup>6</sup> One only regrets that Haldon does not explain how his pollen samples reflect the trends he is discussing, though clear references to several relevant Anatolian studies are provided.

I will speak briefly about the thematic system, which is showcased prominently in Chapter 7. Haldon's viewpoint here is contradictory. On p. 268, he describes the notion of "farmer-soldiers" as absurd, and contends that such an arrangement never existed in the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, four pages later he cites two mid-8<sup>th</sup> century legal texts as evidence that the Roman armies were in the process of transforming into a more militia-like force, "capable of participating in effective military action but increasingly provincialized." Whatever the author's actual opinion, he does not

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<sup>5</sup> Men from Armenia or the eastern part of the former Sassanid Empire, for example.

<sup>6</sup> I do wonder if the two regions actually produced enough of a surplus to feed Constantinople, given that the capital's population declined sharply in the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> centuries. But it is possible that the grain shipments were offset by the destruction of the aqueduct of Valens (which was cut in 626, and is thought not to have been rebuilt until 766), and by return visits of the Justinianic Plague. The Plague returned to Constantinople at least once, in 698 (Stathakopoulos 2007: 104). For estimates of Constantinople's demographic decline, see Mango, 1985:52 and Magdalino, 1996:18.

discuss the potential contribution of the themes towards averting an Arab conquest of Anatolia. The ultimate result is that Chapter 7 feels like a missed opportunity.

The overall quality of Haldon's argument is mixed. He is fairly successful at promoting strategic geography, climate, and Anatolia's changing agricultural regime as key factors in the Empire's survival, but not the Empire's homogenous ethnicity or the changing nature of its elites. More seriously, the subject of the themes could have been approached with greater clarity and constructiveness. But the book's biggest flaw concerns not its quality, but its structure. One would expect each of the five main factors to be given its own individual chapter, but instead they are largely broken into multiple pieces and scattered across the book. For example, in Chapter 4, we move from the sacralization of the state, to determination of the central government to hold on to territory, to the proximity of imperial armies to Anatolian settlements, to imperial policy of avoiding open battle as much as possible, to the Church's willingness to cooperate with the state. What is the chapter's overarching point? Lastly, Haldon hardly engages with the relevant historiography, even when it intersects with his ideas.

In summary, *The Empire that Would not Die* is a little disappointing. Though the holistic and exhaustive nature of the author's research is praiseworthy, the book suffers from an awkward structure and questionable omission of certain themes. Perhaps these problems could be corrected in a revised edition. In the meantime, the ideas and types of sources that Haldon draws attention to – notably how pollen specimens should be interpreted and why the Muslim armies were so impeded by Anatolia's climate – should form a good basis for debate.

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