

WALTER POHL, *Eastern Central Europe in the Early Middle Ages – Conflicts, Migrations and Ethnic Processes* (*Florilegium magistrorum historiae archaeologiaeque Antiquitatis et Medii Aevi*, Redigit Victor Spinei), București: Editura Academiei Române/ Brăila: Editura Istros – Muzeul Brăilei, 2008, 414 pp.

The volume with the title indicated above is included in a prestigious collection, *Florilegium magistrorum historiae archaeologiaeque Antiquitatis et Medii Aevi*, coordinated by Victor Spinei, who also signs the foreword (“Erudition and Sagacity: Walther Pohl”). The editors of the volume, Cristina Spinei and Cătălin Hriban, made a selection of the most significant articles (in German, English and Italian) published by the Austrian historian Walter Pohl during the last two

decades. The historian under discussion is an outstanding representative of the Vienna School, within which he appears as a disciple and continuator of Herwig Wolfram. Pohl’s main academic preoccupation is with the complicated political and ethnogenetic processes that marked the passage of East-Central Europe from antiquity to the Early Middle Ages. (Among other things, Pohl is known as author of a remarkable monograph on the Avars: *Die Awaren. Ein Steppenvolk in Mitteleuropa*,

567–822 n. Chr., München, 1988, with a second edition published in 2002.)

The editors of the volume made a distribution of Pohl's articles into three parts: I. *Studying the Barbarians: Approaches and Methods*; II. *From Attila to Alboin*; III. *The Avar Period*. The articles of the first part that are more manifestly theoretical center on conceptual elements such as "ethnicity," "construction of communities," "acculturation," and the "*Germanenbegriff*" (some of the most interesting articles of part I being "Conceptions of Ethnicity in Early Medieval Studies," "The Empire and the Integration of the Barbarians," and "Vom Nutzen des Germanenbegriffes zwischen Antike und Mittelalter: eine forschungsgeschichtliche Perspektive"). It is quite obvious that Pohl (in following the example of immediate predecessors like Wenskus and Wolfram) aims to get away from the traditional views on "people" and "tribe", that is, the views shared by forerunners like Hoops and Kossinna. He also totally gets away from the popular (rather than scholarly) vision of *Völkerwanderung* and of *Kampf um Rom*, according to which valiant Germanic tribesmen were imagined as invading a rotten Roman Empire in order to replace it by their own (much healthier) social structures. A principal idea in several of Pohl's articles is "integration of barbarians," which refers to a process that basically meant *imitatio imperii*; in that context, the following statement (Patrick Geary's) is presented as both paradoxical and brilliant: "The Germanic world was perhaps the greatest and most enduring creation of Roman political and military genius" (p. 20). Much of what Pohl writes on "the post-Roman kingdoms" directly reflects his activity as a member of the European project entitled *The Transformation of the Roman World (TRW)*. Worth mentioning is that, far from focusing exclusively on the historical behavior and the mentality of Avars, Franks and Langobards, Pohl repeatedly refers to harmful ideological manifestations of recent times, such as the "bizarre revival of the fair and reckless Germanic hero" by the German Nazis, or the rediscovery of "the nineteenth-century ideal of the homogenous nation-state" by today's East European nationalists (see p. 17).

Part II includes articles such as "Die Völkerwanderung: Wandlungen und Wahrnehmungen," "Invasori e invasi", and "The Empire and the Lombards: Treaties and Negotiations in the Sixth Century," to name only a few. Most of those articles, like the ones of part I, refer mainly to the complex relationship between barbarians (be they Huns, Avars, Langobards, or Slavs) and the Empire, as well as to what Pohl calls "successor states" (p. 143). Especially well pointed out are the differences between, on the one hand, barbarian "military peoples" (*Heer-Völker*) that often established relationships of a *foedus* type with the Romans (pp. 139–140), and, on the other hand, the "peripheral" Slavs, whose *Kulturmodell* (showing very few signs of social stratification) eventually proved to be "amazingly successful" (*erstaunlich erfolgreich* –

p. 141). Pohl pays special attention to the mechanisms of power, mainly the ones of the Empire as opposed to the *potere barbaro* (see the article on *la sfida attiliana* – pp. 173–190); but he also deals with a major religious-ideological issue, namely the adoption of Christianity by barbarian populations. In the latter respect, worthy of attention is the article on the "deliberate ambiguity" of the religious options of the Langobards (pp. 253–264), as well as an article of part III (pp. 393–412), namely the one on "the mild yoke of Christ" (*das sanfte Joch Christi*).

Part III mainly reflects Pohl's remarkable knowledge of the *Awarenzeit*, his theoretical vision of that period being visible especially in the first three articles of that part of the volume: the first on ethnogenetic problems (in regard to both Avars and Bulgars); the second on most significant achievements in the field of *Awarenforschung*; and the third on methodological issues in approaches to the field under discussion. Speaking of Pohl's own scope and methodology, most representative are his statements on p. 396 of the article on the "mild yoke" of Christianity, where he synthetically refers to the most significant *Gesellschaftsmodelle* specific to the East-Central European passage from antiquity to the Middle Ages: the North European heathen-Germanic communities (*Gemeinschaften*), the East European "way of life" (*Lebensweise*) represented by the Slavs, and, last but not least, the steppic rule-systems (*Steppenreiche*) of the Avars and the Bulgars. It is on the same page that one may detect a certain (probably unavoidable) bias in Pohl's vision of early mediaeval East-Central Europe. He refers, for instance, to the "imposition of a Western-Christian model," although (for East-Central European areas temporarily dominated by Old Germanic *Heer-Völker*, then by Avars and Bulgars) the Byzantine Christian model played a quite significant part too. Also, one should observe that the low-profile (eventually successful) *Lebensweise* was a survival method adopted not only by the Slavs, but also by the East Romance population. In that respect, what Pohl says on the *Romani tributarii* (under Langobard rule) can certainly be applied, for instance, to the East Romance population of *Gepidia*. (Among other things, the situation of Alpine-Italian *Romani tributarii* may actually provide a clue to the semantic shift by which *rumân* came to mean 'serf' in regions that later became part of the Romanian ethnic space.) We can only hope that, in his future books and articles, Walter Pohl will make use (however critically) of more Romanian bibliography, taking into consideration that an important number of works by Romanian historians (from Iorga and Diclescu to Pascu and Spinei) have been published in French, German and English, and many of those works refer exactly to the historical fortune of East-Central Europe during the early Middle Ages.

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