

Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire. The Roman Army in the East*. Clarendon Press, Oxford 1990. 492 Seiten, 7 Karten.

Taking for granted that admiration for the Growth of Rome belongs to the trashheap of history, the author takes pains to give the same treatment to the Roman Peace. He does so in nine chapters: I. Rome and Persia; II. Consolidation and Internal Unrest; III. The Army of the Principate: An Army of Occupation; IV. The Army of the Fourth Century; V. Enemies and Allies after Septimius Severus; VI. Army and Civilians in the East; VII. The Military Function of Roman Veteran Colonies; VIII. Urbanization; IX. Frontier Policy – Grand Strategy?

The first chapter seeks to brandmark Rome as the aggressor in its war with Persia. Chapter 2 emphasizes that after the conquest of the various lands by Rome came a period of painful consolidation, followed by never ending internal unrest. Chapter 3 casts the Roman army into the role of an occupation force. Chapter 4 contends this still was its character even in the fourth century, though now it does some defending as well which before it neglected. Chapter 5 argues Byzantium had no strategy and no definable military border in the East and it brought down on itself the endless wars with Persia by refusing to withdraw from Mesopotamia, to collaborate with the Persians, and to pay them subsidies. Chapter 6 uses Talmudic texts ("more or less likely guesses") to show what must have been true in the heart of Italy as well: that no one liked taxes and other government levies. Milestones, too, come in for their share of blame: they were propaganda rather than "the work of citizens who loved their ruler". Chapter 7 reduces Roman veteran colonies to informers about nearby Jews and "at best" providers of a local militia. Chapter 8 belittles urbanization, that vaunted Roman claim to greatness and prosperity: "there was no active stimulation or support". Aelius Aristides' statement in his speech *To Rome* "The shores of the sea and the inland regions are filled with cities, some founded, some enlarged under your sway and by your act" are not evidence but "flattering platitudes", and though the legions built the wellknown aqueduct at Caesarea, they did so merely because they had the expertise. Besides, if the emperors gave something, they took it from somewhere – a

handicap that seems not to have afflicted the Herodian client kings whom the author favours. Chapter 9 asks whether protection against all forms of attack was a natural right for everyone and of higher priority even than the sovereignty of the emperor, which leads to the breathless insight that this was not so. The height of absurdity is reached in the statement that the subject peoples of the empire were essentially considered slaves (S. 393) because the government relied on the self-defence of the well-fortified Mesopotamian cities. That the Romans had only a foggy idea of a border of the empire and very little intelligence is meant to further reduce their capability to conceive of strategy.

There is no point in refuting all of this, in showing, for example that the purpose of the Roman army was to assure the safety of the provinces (HDN. 7, 8, 9; FRONTIN. 1, 8; ILS 396), for few will want to read all 500 dismal pages. – The subtitle is misleading in that the book deals with the Roman army less than with other topics. This is definitely not a place to inform oneself about the army's organization, strength, conditions of service etc, the relevant chapters being rushed (for the sub-chapter on provincial militias no more recent work than Mommsen's is adduced, S. 326). Historical phenomena are not described here for their own worth but for the ulterior purpose of crass moralistic self-righteousness. There is little sense in passing moral judgement on the past (and little elegance in doing it so peevishly for one's own profit), but if one does, then honesty demands that whatever harshness Rome caused must be measured against deeds such as reported JOSHUA 6 ff. – No plate graces the volume. On the maps, the legionary fortresses of Bostra and Aela are "settlements" rather than "military sites". The Aravgi river runs straight across the Caucasus mountains – enough!

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