P. Stephenson, ***New Rome: The Roman Empire in the East, AD 395-700****.* Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 2022. ISBN 9780674659629, hardback, paperback, e-book, 464 pages, 30 B+W and 30 color photos, 14 maps.

Paul Stephenson's book is a valiant attempt to integrate a traditional late Roman history based on texts and material culture with the deluge of environmentally based scholarship about late antiquity. It focuses on eastern Roman affairs from 395 to *c*.700, and thus overlaps somewhat with Michael Kulikowski's *Tragedy of Empire* (2019), covering eastern and western history from Constantine to 476 and also published by Harvard University Press. Kulikowski's work is more traditional, however, whereas this volume frequently mentions the environment, along with a fear that much of this will be out of date soon (4).

The book has three parts. The first looks at life in the Late Roman world in five chapters, with a timeless and (mostly) eastern approach. Chapter 1, on the "Lead Age", takes a very scientific approach to life in the Late Roman Empire, which in Stephenson's view was nasty, brutish, and short. The ample evidence for lead ingestion, malnutrition, and poor dental hygiene, which resulted in poor health and short lives, is well-presented. Since most Romans lived in the countryside in non-industrial environments, it might be interesting to discuss whether urban Roman lives were shorter or more painful than those of rural Romans, or of the inhabitants of the Hellenistic world or early Medieval world. Chapter 2 is more traditional, using texts and archaeology to examine themes of family and Christianity. The third chapter describes late Roman cities, with a focus on Ephesus, Antioch, and Alexandria. Stephenson makes good use of Libanius, but by doing so provides a description emphasizing fourth-century cities rather than later cities which were more heavily Christianized. Chapter 4, "Culture, Communications, and Commerce", provides highlights of these themes across the Mediterranean. Synesius' letters are usefully exploited, and there is even a rare foray to the west for a brief discussion of a late-fourth century female burial at York in Britain (86). There's far too much evidence available to fit into a single chapter, of course, but it would have been good to have some discussion of the role of the church and the army in moving goods around the Empire. The last chapter in this part covers Constantinople, with a description of the city and the imperial administration, as well as some useful comments on imperial processions, relics, and ideology. The first part, though inevitably impressionistic, is a good introduction to these topics.

The second part covers power and politics in four chapters of traditional narrative over 150 pages, focusing on imperial events by reign between 395 and 700, with some useful analysis at the end of each chapter. The second part of the book, unfortunately, does not link well to the first part, so that few connections are built between the world of cities and daily life and the world of the Roman leadership. Although there is an

occasional mention of natural phenomena, e.g., the dark events of 536 and 627, the Justinianic plague gets only a short paragraph here, but is covered in more depth later.

The third part returns to social history. Chapter 10 contains an excellent summary of archaeological evidence for the sixth and seventh centuries for those parts of the Empire still controlled by Constantinople, i.e., excluding Egypt and the Levant, though with some comments about Africa. Chapter 11 deals with natural phenomena, including earthquakes, with much more detailed coverage of the 536 dark event and the Justinianic Plague (328-329) than earlier. The twelfth and final chapter starts with some political theory, mentioning Kaldellis' bold theories of the Roman Empire as a republic (330-331), followed by discussion of architectural changes to the palace in the reigns of Justin II and onwards, something that feels a little out of place here, as do the discussion of pantomimes and Anastasius' banning of various public entertainments, Theodosius II's portrayal by Socrates, or the David plates. And then suddenly the book is over. There's no conclusion or bibliography (though full citations are provided in the end notes), but there is an index, useful maps, and some nice color plates supplementing the half-tones in the text.

Writing synthetic history is difficult, requiring the extraction of representative material from a wide range of sub-disciplines to cover a large space and time. Stephenson is good at this. But a synthesis also involves weaving together this material into an explanation of why things happened. We're still learning how to incorporate climate and environment into our grand narratives of the end of the Roman Empire. This represents a middle ground approach, in contrast to other recent approaches ranging from Harper's *Fate of Rome* (2017) which built the story around natural phenomena to my own *Roman Empire in Late Antiquity* (2018) which focused almost entirely on politics and said little about these sorts of events, similar to Mitchell's *History of the Later Roman Empire* (2nd edition, 2015).

Stephenson's book is well-suited for a popular audience, less so for undergraduates. Overall, it is a good read, but more as a succession of narrative chapters with interesting anecdotes than as an explanation of change in the eastern Roman Empire in the fourth to seventh centuries.

HUGH ELTON
TRENT UNIVERSITY
hughelton@trentu.ca