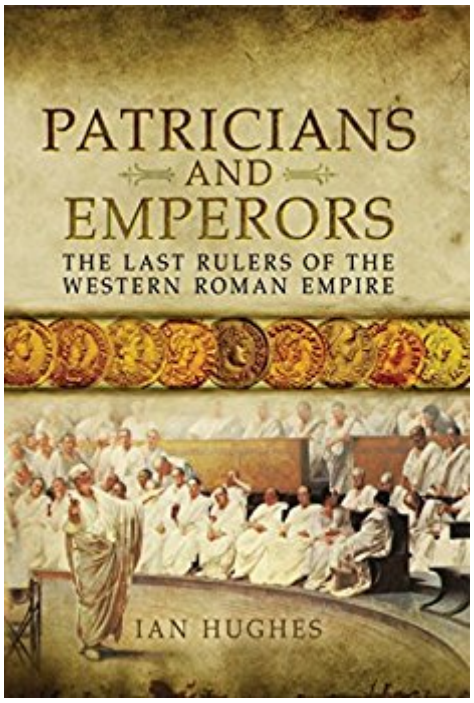
Patricians And Emperors : The Last Rulers Of The Western Roman Empire



Synopsis

Patricians and Emperors offers concise comparative biographies of the individuals who wielded power in the final decades of the Western Roman Empire, from the assassination of Aetius in 454 to the death of Julius Nepos in 480. The book is divided into four parts. The first sets the background to the period, including brief histories of Stilicho (395-408) and Aetius (425-454), explaining the nature of the empire and the reasons for its decline. The second details the lives of Ricimer (455-472) and his great rival Marcellinus (455-468) by focusing on the stories of the numerous emperors that Ricimer raised and deposed. The third deals with the Patricians Gundobad (472-3) and Orestes (475-6), as well as explaining how the barbarian general Odoacer came to power in 476. The final part outlines and analyses the Fall of the West and the rise of barbarian kingdoms in France, Spain and Italy.This is a very welcome book to anyone seeking to make sense of this chaotic, but crucial period.

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Customer Reviews

Not sure how much this will speak to the casual student of Roman history, but if you are new to the era of the end of the Empire in the west, it is a decent introduction with some

alternative-but-not-stupid theories and interpretations of what went on.

Excellent. Hughes provides an Interesting and thorough history of the Western Empire. It is one of the finest books I have ever read in my entire life. I would recommend this to any person interested in the fall of the Western Empire..

This book offers a very clear and concise narrative of the final decades of the Roman Empire, a period notorious for its confusing and fragmentary evidence. As such it should be applauded and deserves to be well-read by anyone interested in the topic who hasn't been able to find any books that cover it in sufficient detail. This period tends to be reduced to a footnote in favor of better documented or deeper referenced areas. For all the warnings about the Fall of Rome (always oddly connected to some modern crisis), polemicists have proven surprisingly uninterested in the actual final fall itself, preferring to resort to generalizations like excessive religiosity, a lack of public spirit, mass immigration, etc. Mostly, even academic books on Rome's final years cover the period up to the sack of Rome in 410 and then quickly summarize events from there, often in a single chapter. Partly this is because such details don't help arguments designed to curb current social ills, but there are also some serious issues concerning sources and how to decipher them. Hughes has written not one but three books on fifth century Rome (Stilicho: The Vandal Who Saved RomeÃ Â andÃ Â Aetius: Attila's NemesisÃ Â being the other two, both of which offer an excellent introduction to this one), and that he has been generally reliable and well read in some highly specialized sources is very impressive. I have some issues with the book, but none at all with his facts, only the conclusions he draws from them.The first thing that I want to talk about is the book's organization, because I think it does a very good job of making a discordant time easy to understand and well ordered. The book is divided up amongst the various emperors who took the throne, with each getting their own chapter or two. It's basically a semi-biographical approach that attempts to provide a narrative of their reigns. Since this is a top-centered look at the period such an approach is intelligent and logical. Within each chapter there are subdivisions into years or regions. These are not as dogmatic as they were in his last book and in this instance they work very well at dividing the information into easily decipherable nuggets. This clarity is aided by numerous helpful maps that, while repetitive, do help in visualizing the regions under discussion. About the only complaint I can make in regards to organization is with Pen & Sword's sloppy editing, which missed several misspellings of names and a recurring tendency to list dates from the fourth century instead of the fifth.One thing I have noticed about Hughes is that he has a tendency to oversell the

uniqueness of his work. In his introduction he implies that his approach is a new one that hadn't been done before. This is untrue. There are at least two works that I know of in English that attempt to do the same thing that he does: John Michael O'Flynn'sÃ Â Generalissimos of the Western Roman EmpireÃ Â and Penny MacGeorge'sÃ Â Late Roman Warlords; both of whom he cites repeatedly. What I will give him credit for is being the first person in a long while to make such a narrative accessible to a wide reading audience. Both O'Flynn's and MacGeorge's books are priced way out of the range of the average reader and can frequently less clear. In fact, many of his conclusions are simply MacGeorge's ones brought to a wider audience. He also owes an enormous debt to Peter Heather, whoseÃ Â The Fall of the Roman EmpireÃ Â covers the period in great detail, although it offers substantially more than just a narrative and as a result has to be abbreviated in key areas. It's written (and priced) for a wider audience. Interested parties should check it out.The one area where I do think Hughes is pushing the evidence is his central argument about Ricimer, which is that he wasn't really an independent kingmaker. This is basically echoing MacGeorge's more nuanced views, but he takes it a step further and argues for the idea that Ricimer, far from setting up and deposing kings to meet his personal goals, was usually acting as a tool of the Senate. Now aside from the highly implausible idea that the Senate, or even a faction within the Senate, had a consistent policy at this time this is flying in the faces of the sources who are often keen to stress Ricimer's attempted control of events. While he likes to stress that none of these sources offer proof of Ricimer's involvement he's ignoring the fact that these sources aren't detailed enough to offer said proof anyway, and what facts prove a motivation? His efforts to find proof of Ricimer's decreased prominence often seem to be desperately grasping at straws. I'm making this issue sound worse than it is since he does reliably record most of Ricimer's actions, but he keeps coming back to the point as if to make clear he's stating something new and radical. His attempts to downplay warlordism at the top of the Roman government is something that would require a great deal more arguing to move it beyond idle speculation.Don't let that put you off the book though. As a narrative history of the period it's pretty much unmatched. The clarity of the layout and the writing makes understanding some very difficult events easy. While I do find some of his speculations simplistic or confusing (Gaiseric's sack of Rome is given three increasingly implausible explanations but never mentions the simplest one which is that he simply took advantage of Roman weakness and the fact that his treaty had been with the just murdered Valentinian) and would really have appreciated some discussion of key issues raised (the renewed importance of the Senate after centuries of irrelevance should at least have been mentioned instead of taken for granted) I can't fault the book for sticking to its stated objective. As a narrative history

it’s about as good as you can get, and offers a clear chronological view on the final decades of Rome. A good buy.

First posted on .co.uk on 9 November 2015Rather than the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“last daysÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•, a slightly melodramatic term that the author uses a couple of times, this book is about the two last decades of the Western Roman Empire, from the murder of Aetius up to the conventional date of 476 AD, when the last Western Roman Emperor, a mere child, was deposed by Odovacar. It is also about the next couple of decades or so, more or less up to the last years of the Fifth Century, which saw the death of Syagrius, son of the last general commanding the Roman field army in Gaul, or what was left of it by this time, and the annexation of his ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Kingdom of SoissonsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• by Clovis, King of the Franks. Finally, it is about the take-over of Italy by Theodoric and his Ostrogoths after a long and bitter struggle against Odovacar, and the last years of Julius Nepos, once an ephemeral Emperor.As other reviewers have noted, the first merit of this book is to offer, at last, a continuous, clear and detailed narrative of this troubled period that is too often neglected, largely because of problems with the sources. It is with a short but to the point description of the various sources and a discussion of their respective value and problems that Ian Hughes begins his introduction. As the author also mentions, he has come up with a number of interpretations to explain certain events, and, perhaps more crucially, what lead to them, their consequences and the intentions of the main actors. To some extent, these could be seen as theories, or even speculations, and they are. However, he generally manages to make his interpretations plausible and likely, although he does not always flag them as such.It is also true that Ian Hughes has extensively used the few existing modern works on the period. This is in particular the case of John Michael O’Flynn’s ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Generalissimos of the Western Roman Empire Ãƒâ Ã Â», published in 1983 and somewhat hard to find, and Penny MacGeorge’s much more recent (2002) but horribly expensive ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Late Roman WarlordsÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•, published as one of the Oxford Monograph series. However, and unlike them, he has not come up with a series of vignettes, or mini-biographies if you prefer, but has tried, and in my view, largely succeeded, to come up with a continuous narrative. He has also been able to make such a narrative accessible, whereas the two books mentioned above, while both valuable, are nevertheless pieces of scholarship, first and foremost.Another merit of this book is the amount of attention that the Roman army, or rather the Roman armed forces made up of dwindling regular units with Roman training and equipment and, increasingly, of war bands under non-ethnically Roman leaders fighting in their own style. This emphasis starts almost straight from the beginning, with the

bookÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s second chapter being devoted to and entitled ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“The Western Army, 454ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (the year Aetius was murdered) and it cuts right through the book. Since another reviewer has, quite correctly, identified some of the modern works that have inspired the author, another here seems to have been the somewhat dated but still valuable Arthur FerrillÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military ExplanationÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•, which concentrates almost exclusively on its slow decline, its gradual weakening and its growing incapacity to replace the loss of regular troops, even when victorious, with anything other than ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“BarbarianÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• war bands.The first chapter lays out the background by summarising the EmpireÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s history since AD 395 which marked the death of Emperor Theodosius, but also the last time that the Empire would be united and ruled by a single Emperor. In fact, and while this book can be read on its own, largely thanks to these two introductory chapters, it also very much reads as a continuation of the authorÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Aetius: AttilaÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s NemesisÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•. Despite its somewhat ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“flashyÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• title, the book on Aetius is about much more than the conflict against Attila. It is essentially the history of a period of roughly thirty years that precedes starts around AD 422 and the death of Emperor Honorius (the son of Emperor Theodosius) up to the death of Aetius himself in AD 454.As two reviewers have also noted, the author does make a number of claims that can be debated, if not disputed. Some of these, such as the point that Ricimer was not the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“KingmakerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• (or rather the ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“Emperor-makerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•) that he is traditionally made to be, in certain respects, seem to be a bit far-fetched. The author seems to have gone from one extreme ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ the traditional view that Ricimer chose puppet Emperors ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â œ to the other extreme - he seems to have acted as the strongman of some faction of Roman Senators. The reality could be something in between or perhaps even a fluctuating combination of the two elements.However, to some extent, Hughes also has a point when indicating that Majorian was not ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“RicimerÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s manÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• and that Ricimer turned against him only right at the hand, once MajorianÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s catastrophic defeat has just about totally discredited. If anything, and from a military perspective, it seems that the two war lords and Aegidius, all three of which were senior officers that had served together under Aetius, might have operated some kind of ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“division of labourÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â•, based on a common view and perhaps mutual interest. Ricimer kept command of the Army of Italy. Aegidius was to contain the Franks, the Allemani and all the other Germanic people and defend the northern borders

while Majorian was to build up an army and building a fleet to reconquer Africa from the Vandals.Another interesting but somewhat questionable point is the authorÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s assertion that, by the death of Aetius, the Western Roman Empire was doomed and would have continued its decline even if he had not been assassinated by Valentinian III. This is not at all sure, although there is some truth. These are that regaining control of the Diocese of Africa over the Vandals and of Carthage and its rich plain in particular, was vital for the EmpireÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s survival because only this could prevent the EmpireÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s finances from being bankrupt.The problem here is that the author is presuming that, in all cases, the loss of AfricaÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s resources was a given and that, without it, the survival of the Western Empire was doomed. The last part of the sentence may be correct, unless the ultra-rich Roman senators could be forced to contribute both men and money to the common defence. The first part appears much more questionable. Had Aetius lived longer, he might have been able to vanquish Genseric and recover Africa following the death of Attila, although, by that time, Aetius was no spring chicken (he seems to have been over sixty).The author is also assuming that MajorianÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s planned expedition as well as the expedition of AD 468, both of which ended in disaster, were both doomed from the beginning, which is quite questionable. Genseric was, as the author asserts quite correctly, a formidable opponent. However, he was far from invincible and his position was not unassailable, as he himself seems to have been perfectly aware. Moreover, the Vandals had suffered several defeat and possibly significant losses as a number of their piratical raids badly failed between 455 and 460 while, in 468, the brunt of the effort against Genseric was born but the much richer and more powerful Eastern Empire.A related point here is what happened to the regular Roman armies. When Aetius was murdered, there still seems to have been both regular forces in Gaul and in Italy and, even if the former were depleted, they could still put up a fight. What the author hints at through his narrative, but never quite gets to make the point, is that these armies, with increasing numbers of Germanic auxiliaries to back them, fought debilitating civil wars against each other and therefore weakened each other. A typical example of this was the short-lived reign of Avitus who brought Gallic units over the Alps and was finally defeated by the Army of Italy. As the author points out rather interestingly, it seems to have been Majorian who was obliged to recruit large numbers of ÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Å“BarbariansÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â• for his planned invasion of Italy. Ian Hughes makes the point that they were cheaper, came with their own equipment and did not have to be trained. He could have also stated that what regular troops were left was needed to hold the Rhine frontier, or what was left of it, to protect Gaul, and Raetia, to protect Italy.To conclude this long review, this is a very valuable and a quite unique

narrative, well-researched and clearly presented, and this review has only touched on some of the main elements contained in this book. Also very valuable and little known, for instance, are the developments on the strategic importance of Dalmatia and of the generals (Marcellinus in particular) whose powerbase it happened to be. For this alone, the book is worth four very strong stars, or even perhaps four and a half. I will not, however, give it five stars, because some of point made by the author, while interesting even when controversial, would have been perhaps more convincing if they had been more thoroughly discussed.To end on a more positive note, and now that Ian Hughes has successfully covered StilichoÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s and AetiusÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢ supremacy, followed by this book that deals with the last years of the Western Empire, and preceded by the reigns of Valentinian and Valens, I hope he will envisage two further books. One could cover the reign of Theodosius, although there already is such a volume, published a decade and a half ago. The other one, which would perhaps be even more valuable and perhaps even unique, would also be more difficult to produce. This would be a book on the Western EmpireÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã â„¢s (relative) recovery from the death of Stilicho (AD 402) to the death of Honorius (AD 422). The key figure of this period would be the little known (Roman) general then Emperor Constantius III, thanks to whom the Wisigoths were stopped and curtailed and the Roman army largely rebuilt. Just a suggestionÃƒÂ¢Ã â ¬Ã Â|

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