

IV Sección

Reseñas

Warwick Ball, *Rome in the East*, London. Editorial Routledge, 2000. 523.

Warwick Ball is a Near Eastern archaeologist who was a Director of Excavations at the British School of Archaeology in Iraq and has carried out excavations, monument restorations and architectural studies in Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Ethiopia and Jordan. His former publications includes *Syria: A Historical and Architectural Guide* (Melisende. 1997) and *Persian Landscape: A Photographic Essay* (Scorpion, 1997). In May this year he presented his new title *Monuments of Afghanistan* (1.B.Tauris,2006). Ball, together with his book *Rome in the East*. presents a work that won the James Henry Breasted Prize for History in 2000 and could well have been titled "The East in Rome". In this profusely illustrated and documented document the author presents his view of the Roman presence in the East. The author's main ideas of this book are that the Roman and Hellenistic (and later Arabic) presences in the East are but the upper layers of a deeper Near-Eastern tradition which has suffered a continuous neglect due to an Eurocentric bias towards non-European cultures - since most works that concern the subject had been written by classicists. Rome, a city purportedly born as a result of eastern colonization (from Troy) was going to not only extend it's influence there but was also going to receive a high influx of elements from civilizations far more ancient than it's own and ultimately assume and reshape them in such a synchronized way that aspects which appear are synonymous today with Western civilization are, indeed, Eastern.



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The book is divided into eight chapters. The first being the introduction, in which the author gives a general background and goes on to discuss theoretical aspects such as sources (literary, epigraphic and other material remains), presents his perspective on the problem and then discusses the terminology. The proclaimed aim of the book is "to redress the balance by writing from the Near Eastern perspective" (p.2) and is qualified by the author as "a work of synthesis a general study of the history, architecture and archaeology of the Near Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire, of Roman penetration beyond the frontiers, and of the ensuing eastern influences that brought about Rome's own transformation." it covers a broad temporal space - from 63 BC (conquest of the Near East by Pompey) to 636 AD (loss of the Near East by the Emperor Heraclius) in a geographical scenario that includes the territory of the former Roman provinces of Syria, Palestine. Arabia and Mesopotamia.

The second chapter deals with the general historical background of Roman expansion into the East following in the footsteps of Alexander the Great. Here the author examines the different campaigns against the Hellenistic kingdoms of the area and against mighty Persia until the ultimate victory in the area by the Arabs. One can see that his time analysis comprehends a concept of the period of Late Antiquity which does not make a clear division between the East Roman and Byzantine Empires - transmitting in this way a sense of cultural continuity. Even the Arabs are linked somehow to the Assyrians through their common Semitic past. The third chapter (*The Princely States*) analyses the various Near Eastern Kingdoms under Roman protection such as Emessa, Judaea, the Nabateans and Palmyra. Here Ball makes a profuse use of written sources, archaeological evidence, architectural reconstructions and linguistic evidence to present a broad panorama of the historical dimension



of the area. The fourth chapter (*Rome east of the frontiers*) deals with Roman influence beyond of its borders, not only through its military campaigns but also through trade, art and through the many of its soldiers that fell into the enemies hands as prisoners of war. We know of Roman campaigns to such far off places as Yemen and of Roman trade (through the Romans themselves or their intermediaries) with India. An important statement he makes claims that the Silk Road itself is actually a myth and that it never existed in spite of some indirect trade contacts between, for example. the Chinese and the Romans. Some surviving architectural monuments in Iran are used as evidence of Roman workmanship in the area. Concerning Gandharan Art, the author validates the differing hypotheses for its origin as a combination of forces and influences between Graeco-Bactrian, direct Roman and for Irano-Hellenistic sources. Chapter five (*The towns and cities*) makes an analysis of different towns and cities in the region, such as Antioch, Seleucia, Apamea, Aleppo. Dura Europos, Beirut. and Sidon etc. from the perspective of their being part of a continuous tradition of Near Eastern cities which were occupied by the Romans and which adopted the architectural elements of those who reshaped them. For that he uses architectural and archaeological records showing the continuity of human settlement in these places and the disposition, typology and style of the architecture. Chapter six (*The countryside*) deals with rural space which shows, from the fourth century onward, no decline or (with few exceptions) crisis in its settlement, population, productivity or wealth. The author here proposes to revise our received notions on the so-called decline of the Roman Empire. The seventh chapter (*Imperial veneer: architecture and the resurgence of the East*) focuses again on architecture and examines urban layout, architectural disposition and materials and styles. It emphasizes again the continuous tradition of Ancient Near Eastern architectural forms that made it possible to have a



Mesopotamian or Iranian-style temple and dress it up in Graeco-Roman ornamentation. The name of the gods changed but the old ones could still be recognised by homologous characteristics. Many of these Near Eastern patterns survive still in Islamic architecture. The author provides a rich collection of building plans in order to be able to compare them through synchronic development. Even the grid system, which has been traditionally considered of Hellenistic origin and with widespread Roman use, he dates back to the Mohenjodaro era - thereby linking Hellenism with the Achaemenid empire. The eighth chapter (*The transformation of an empire*) deals with the Asiatic presence in Europe - from Arab and Syrian communities to high hierarchies, where its presence was more than significant: a Syrian pope and the originally Phoenician imperial dynasty of the *Severii* (from Leptis Magna, which was a colony of Tyre) - some of whose emperors were Septimus Severus (193-211 A.C), Caracalla (211-217 A.C) and Severus Alexander (222- 235 A.C.), are just two examples. Julius Philippus (known as Philipp the Arab), who was not a member of this dynasty, but was from a small Syrian town, the author presents, supporting the opinion of Eusebius, as being the first truly Christian Emperor. These Asiatic influences paved the way to Christianity. Thus the cult of the Sun, installed by Elagabalus, and Zoroastrianism were some of the foundation stones of Christianity together with Judaism. At the end, the author emphasizes that "In the West, the Romans were the civilisers: in the East, it was the Romans who were on the receiving end of civilisation." (p.449).

In my opinion, the author has some conceptual problems. It is true that in the first chapter the author differentiates between Greek and Macedonian, Parthian and Persian, Late Roman Empire and Byzantine Empires, but later he lacks a precise definition of what is Asian and European, of what is native and what is not. He states that Dio Cassius, Strabo, Procopius and Eusebius were a few "of the more important native historians from the Near East." Then qualifies Herodotus and Homer like



"natives of Asia, not Europe" (p.3). would never qualify, for example. Simon Bolivar or George Washington as natives - in spite of their have been born in the Americas, or, to put ourselves more in the context of Antiquity. I would never qualify Seneca as a native Spaniard or Iberian but rather as a descendant of Romans that had established themselves in Baetica. I have the feeling that the author sometimes forces facts in order to make them fit as his "Eastern in origin" thesis. In other example. Ball points out that the grid system layout could not have been a genuine Hellenistic invention. Indeed the hypothesis that it was an Indian invention is very interesting and, from my point of view even plausible, but it lacks the evidence that sufficient that the Greeks copied the system from the Achaemenids and that they had not developed it themselves. To conclude, it seems to me that Ball's affirmation at the end of his books sounds exaggerated: " More than anything else, the story of Rome is a story of the East more than of the west: a triumph of the East" (p.450). I think that some of the contributions of Hellenistic and Roman civilization to the East are unjustly minimized in the book, despite my considering it necessary to reevaluate and underline the very important weight of native cultures. A city in the area might well have had a native basis, disposition and layout, but many other elements as well would have made this city familiar to a Roman citizen from Rome, Caesaraugusta or Vindobona. These cities in the western part of the Empire also might have had some local characteristics that perhaps are not now visible to us - but in essence - they were Roman cities. Well, perhaps is just a matter of definition. Apart from these few remarks of reservation, it is necessary to emphasize without restriction the good qualities of this work. It is not only a book of history in the traditional sense of the word or merely of archaeology or of architecture, but rather something which gets nearer to the concept of total history, since it combines different aspects of knowledge in order to give a broad and multiple approach to the complex reality of



an Antiquity full of questions marks. Is a work of synthesis, holistic even. where not only the written sources have something to say but also architectural, archaeological and linguistic evidence. Ultimately perhaps, its best contribution is in displaying a non-traditional and innovative point of view on a peripheral zone of the empire which, under his analysis, itself becomes a centre; a place where ideas, styles and innovations emerged and spread the throughout the Empire. The book provides illustrations, plans and a great many photos and maps that provide an illustrative, visual approach to the subject. *Rome in the Last* is a must for anyone who is interested not only in the presence of the Roman Empire in the East but also in the intrinsic nature of the Roman Empire or in the evolution of Near Eastern vernacular traditions down to the present.

Rest to say that is a new expanded and up to date edition of the book (2016) has recently been published also from Routledge.

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