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Preview

The publication of the second edition of Warwick Ball’s *Rome in the East* could not have been more timely. As I write this near the end of 2016, the world has seen remarkable events in the last year and a half. The recent upheavals in American politics have brought to the fore more public discussions, productive and otherwise, about Eurocentrism. Meanwhile, events in Syria led Ball to issue this dedication in his book: “In memory of Palmyra, a city twice sacked.” The world watched in horror at the cultural (and other) atrocities committed in Palmyra by Daesh starting in May 2015, and after several turns of fortune, the drama of Palmyra continues to play out today. In addition to the human cost, what fuels our anxieties is the cost to historical memory. Palmyra in antiquity was a crossroads that maintained a distinct identity for centuries in the face of the massive tidal forces of the Romans in the west and the Arsacids and Sasanians in the east. How we remember Palmyra and other places like it is, in essence, at the heart of Ball’s study.

Ball’s thesis has not changed since the first edition1: the true nature of the Roman world must be seen in light of mutual cross-cultural influence. Traditionally, Ball contends, consideration of the Roman Empire has been unduly “Eurocentric,” with emphasis on Roman influence in the Near East. The reality is that it went in both directions and that the influence of the East on the cultural forms and political fortunes of the Roman Empire has traditionally been underestimated in modern scholarship. Moreover, the cultural grip the Romans had on the Near East was not as strong as that of the traditions originating there. When the first edition of *Rome in the East* appeared in 2000, it drew varied replies in reviews and other scholarly engagements. The general view was that the book was epic, ambitious, and valuable; important for drawing more attention to the eastern provinces and frontiers; attractive for its lavish illustrations, friendly prose style, and easy-to-digest generalizations about the Roman Near East; but ultimately flawed in its execution (including significant gaps in the bibliography), in the handling of some specifics (often not on the radar of non-specialists), and more broadly in an overzealous presentation of a thesis that makes insufficient allowance for contrary evidence and argues too strongly in favor of the one (the eastern perspective) and against the other (the western, or “Eurocentric”).

In the preface of the second edition, Ball acknowledges many of these criticisms but remains “unreformed” as he “wholeheartedly reaffirms” his thesis (p. xxxvii). Although the bibliography almost doubles in size, most of the presentation remains the same, with occasional new insights and evidence (and updated discussion of such topics as the Gurgan Wall, p. 365) but otherwise no changes in the main lines of argumentation. In short, the strengths and the flaws of the first
edition remain. The new version of *Rome in the East* is still a major scholarly achievement worthy of praise for its wealth of detail on architecture, urban planning, religious cults, and so on. It has even more photos, most of them taken by the author himself. The notes at the end of the book in the first edition have been moved to the end of each chapter, a slight improvement though footnotes on each page would still be optimal. On the other hand, Ball’s contribution to the discussion is as one-sided as before, downplaying the Roman (i.e., “western”) contribution, even as he acknowledges that cross-cultural influences went in both directions (p. xxxvii). Moreover, Ball often fails to remedy some of the problems of the first edition, including some glaring factual errors that reviewers had pointed out.

Chapter One provides the historical background, summarizing events in the Roman Near East from the Hellenistic period to the reign of Heraclius. While this brief treatment provides a useful historical framework for the rest of the book, there are unfortunately two egregious errors (p. 17) left over from the first edition. Bahram II is still called “Gur,” but this appellation applies to Bahram V, while the claim that Narseh defeated Galerius and “was able to retake Mesopotamia” is bizarre, since the events of 298 show the opposite result, a point of particular opprobrium for Shapur II several decades later (Amm. Mar. 17.5.6). Given that this chapter takes a broader view, it has a tendency to make sweeping statements that break down upon closer examination. Especially dangerous are blanket assertions, such as “No attempts were made at gaining worthwhile intelligence” (p. 2). Ball mentions the isolated case of Aelius Gallus in Yemen (p. 23, n.8), a definite failure, to be sure, but certainly cases of intelligence gathering can be found.2

With Chapter Two we get overviews of so-called “princely kingdoms,” essentially Roman vassals in the Near East: Emesa, Judaea, Nabataea, Palmyra, Edessa, and the confederations of Tanukhids and Ghassanids. While there is detailed and excellent analysis of these individual realms, early on there are once again some troubling general statements. Ball says of vassal kingdoms, “If they misbehaved or if the ruler died without a successor, they would be annexed and ruled directly, although very occasionally client status could be restored (as in the case of Judaea)” (p. 28). Although I’m not entirely sure what “very occasionally” means, I think the reality was more often the reverse. A kingdom that demonstrates the point well is Armenia, one of the most important vassal states (despite its fluctuating political orientation), but which is not on Ball’s radar, even though he describes it as “important—indeed crucial” to the history of the Roman Near East (p. 29). With the notable exception of Trajan, the Romans generally made every effort *not* to annex Armenia. As Pompey’s incorporation of the moribund Seleucid domain in Syria shows, the Romans usually undertook annexation in the East only when they felt local authorities had insufficient means (and often motivation) to maintain order, stabilize the frontier, and support Roman endeavors there.

Chapter Three assesses the extent of Roman penetration east of the usual boundaries in Mesopotamia. Under discussion are the military debacles of Antony in Media and Aelius Gallus in Yemen; the deportation of Roman prisoners of war after the battles of Carrhae (53 BCE) and Edessa (260 CE) to parts of Iran, Central Asia, and elsewhere; the extent of Roman involvement in trade with India, China, and Central Asia; and the remarkably “Roman” appearance of Gandharan art in central Asia. To show how light the Roman footprint in the East was, Ball discusses, for example, Antony’s and Gallus’ lack of understanding of the regions they invaded,
the exaggeration in modern scholarship of Roman involvement in eastern trade, and the Eastern
impetus for Gandharan artistic inspiration.

The material evidence covered in Chapters Four through Seven is where Ball, an archaeologist,
is understandably most comfortable, and his thesis is best demonstrated in these pages. Chapter
Four looks at towns and cities, especially in the second to third centuries CE, while Five
considers the countryside, mainly in the late period. Urbanization in the Near East long predates
the coming of the Romans, and even Roman expansions of cities starting in the second century
are merely an enhancement of local urban achievements. The countryside, and especially the
Dead Cities region in Syria, demonstrates a material prosperity that should more properly be
attributed to local enterprises than to Roman initiatives.

Chapters Six and Seven were originally one very long chapter about architecture and related
topics. Six covers secular architecture while Seven covers sacred. Here, Ball collects an
impressive array of evidence that seems to minimize the credit the Romans could take for many
infrastructural and architectural features, such as the layout of cities (the famous Hippodamian
grid pattern), colonnaded streets, forums, temenos temples, high places (possibly traceable back
to ziggurats), tower tombs, and many other features. Ball finds Near Eastern precedents for these
features, though his case sometimes seems circumstantial.

Chapter Eight, where Ball presents his conclusions, highlights the roles of the Severan emperors
(and also Philip the Arab), Lepcis Magna, and Christianity (as a phenomenon anchored in eastern
traditions) in transforming the Roman Empire. At this point, it bears noting that much of what
Ball has been talking about is the question of what we mean by “Roman,” even though he prefers
not to address that topic directly: “Philip—and the Severan emperors—were ‘Romans’ above all.
But that is irrelevant” (p. 470). In doing so, he has squandered an opportunity to explore the vital
issue of constructed identity that might have served him well. Much of the book describes
precedents that informed later Roman developments, but also in play is a contemporary
syncretism that complicates matters of identity. Ball offers tantalizing glimpses of syncretic
tendencies in Cappadocia and Commagene (pp. 487-88). Even after these regions became
Roman provinces in the first century CE, Zoroastrianism remained an important part of the
religion landscape. Certainly it influenced Roman culture beyond Anatolia, not least through
Christianity. In Anatolia, to be “Roman” was no simple matter; Ball effectively demonstrates this
in the case of Syria and elsewhere.

Unfortunately, Anatolia and neighboring regions to the east are largely outside the scope of the
book, and that has resulted in unfinished business. Including these regions would have
complicated Ball’s arguments, but would have also made them more honest. Again I briefly offer
Armenia as an example of where Ball’s thesis comes up short. As in Cappadocia and
Commagene, an Iranian substratum was very strong in the culture of Armenia, even into late
antiquity. This resulted in such things as a political structure that more closely resembled that of
Iran, where an often precarious relationship between the king and the noble houses prevailed, a
state of affairs that cannot be said to have influenced the Roman system at all. One cannot place
very much emphasis even on Armenia’s conversion to Christianity (officially in the early fourth
century), whatever syncretic developments may have led to it, as Ball briefly implies (p. 488).
While the conversions of Tiridates and Constantine did politically align Armenia and Rome, in
the end the two churches went their separate ways, especially after the Romans rejected monophysitism at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. One other note regarding Iranian influence on the West: to say that the priest Kartir’s organization of a Zoroastrian “church” in Iran provided a precedent for Constantine’s takeover of the Roman Christian church is not credible. For one thing, the modern consensus now is to reject the idea of an organized Zoroastrian church in the Sasanian realm. Secondly, saying that Zoroastrianism was “an extension and instrument of Iranian state policy” (p. 486) is highly problematic if that instrument is placed in the hands of the priests. Kartir was powerful, to be sure, but more often the great kings were the real architects of “state policy,” and their use of religion tended to be motivated by political, not theological, concerns. In short, broadening the scope of his book would have likely forced Ball to adjust his thesis, but the examples of Anatolia and Armenia to which he briefly eludes, when given a fuller accounting, make his broader characterizations less facile. Eastern influence on the Roman world is undeniable, but Ball has overstressed its extent.

The above criticisms notwithstanding, the book is still outstanding in its scope and detail. Anyone reading it will learn a great deal about the culture and history of the Roman Near East, especially in the chapters that cover Ball’s areas of expertise. As for his accounting of the cultural dynamics of the region, his attempt to strengthen his case in the second edition is more quantitative than qualitative. While that may not be enough for some of his critics, a lot of water has flowed under the bridge since the first edition. Ball’s position has remained steady while broader swaths of scholarship have now come around to it by giving greater consideration to postcolonialism, Eurocentrism, and other paradigms with which the study of the ancient world must grapple. Perhaps Ball’s most important contribution is the cultivation of a self-awareness to which all scholars should aspire. Whether one agrees with Ball’s conclusions or faults him for his lack of balance, there is certainly no harm, and much benefit, to being aware of one’s biases when subjecting literary, material, and other evidence to the interpretations that frame our discussions, professional and otherwise, and inform our understanding of the Roman Empire and other ancient venues. To that extent the new edition of Rome in the East successfully furthers the conversation.

Notes:

1. For Geoffrey Greatrex’s review of the first edition, see BMCR 2001.08.32.
2. See, for example, A. D. Lee, Information and Frontiers: Roman Foreign Relations in Late Antiquity, Cambridge, 1993.