

Book Reviews

Ravenna: Capital of Empire, Crucible of Europe. *By Judith Herrin*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020. xxxvi + 537 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. Paperback, \$21.95. ISBN: 978-0-691-15343-8.

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Reviewed by William Caferro

Ravenna: Capital of Empire, Crucible of Europe begins with a poignant, personal introduction that traces the author's lifelong fascination and relationship with the Italian city of Ravenna, which, despite its historical importance, has not received its scholarly due. Ravenna served as imperial capital, fulcrum of Greek East and Latin West relations, home of the famous mosaics of the Byzantine emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora, and site of numerous religious, political, and military conflicts during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages. Judith Herrin provides an integrated and comprehensive account of the city from the fourth to the ninth century. The book is aimed primarily at an educated, popular audience. It is elegantly produced, with numerous color images and useful maps; it proceeds in chronological order, pegged mainly to the lives and activities of political, religious, and military figures.

Herrin synthesizes an uneven and disparate scholarship into an accessible and engaging narrative. She divides the book into nine parts, beginning in 390 CE with the career of Galla Placidia and ending in 813 CE, the last year of Charlemagne's reign. A brief introductory chapter charts the rise of Ravenna as a port city, with its strategic advantages both external, with regard to the Adriatic Sea and commerce across the Mediterranean, and internal, with regard to local rivers and trade within Italy. Marshes and lakes protected the city militarily from enemy attack. Herrin breaks her narrative into numerous sections, which serve as "microhistories," highlighting the activities of prominent figures and the vicissitudes of important events. Part 1 is largely devoted to Galla Placidia, daughter of the Roman emperor Theodosius, who served as regent of the empire in Ravenna from 425 to 438 CE. Herrin also pays careful attention to the career of Emperor Theodosius I (379–395 CE), the impact of the Gothic invasions, and the religious divisions of late antiquity. The second and third parts of the book trace the rise of bishops in Ravenna (notably Bishop

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Neon), the sack of Rome, the role of rituals, diplomacy, and legal reforms attendant Ostrogothic rule. Throughout, Herrin includes brief subsections devoted to “living in Ravenna” that connect the parts and outline aspects of everyday life, taken from papyri, wills, and other sources.

The fourth part of the book represents an important point of departure. It deals with the reign of Justinian, his reconquest of the Western half of the Roman Empire. It highlights, above all, the construction of the church of San Vitale and the creation of the famous mosaics of Justinian, Theodora, and the imperial Byzantine court, which, the author makes clear in the introduction, stand at the core of her interest in Ravenna. Herrin nicely contextualizes the mosaics and gives a succinct and nuanced interpretation of their meaning. She follows that discussion with a return to political and military events, notably the Lombard conquest, the establishment of the exarchate at Ravenna, and the pontificate of the church father Gregory the Great. The Lombard conquest played a key role in distancing Ravenna from Constantinople. Part 6 (610–700 CE) is devoted to the expansion of Islam and the fundamental changes produced by it in the polarities in the Mediterranean. The rise of Islam coincided with a church council in 680–668 CE and a still very vibrant Ravenna, where geographers produced sophisticated maps and social life included interactions with Jewish communities (pp. 312–13).

The last two parts of the book, covering the years from 700 to 813 CE, trace the marginalization of Ravenna that resulted from the rise of the Carolingians up north and the “translation of Empire” by Charlemagne. The discussion of Charlemagne, which includes his numerous campaigns, his famous “donation” to the papacy, also highlights his visit to Ravenna and the effect of the mosaics at San Vitale on his conception of Empire. These views found expression in the imperial palace Charlemagne constructed at Aachen, his capital in northern Germany, which was laid out in a manner similar to San Vitale, with some building materials taken from Ravenna.

The strength of Herrin’s book is its comprehensive nature, which is no small feat given the relative scarcity of sources. Indeed, Herrin notes explicitly that such source materials need to be treated “forensically” and with “imagination,” to draw any meaningful portrait of this overlooked city (p. 390). She succeeds well in this respect, and her mastery of those sources genuinely “brings life” to Ravenna. For scholars of economy and business history, however, Herrin offers relatively little. She discusses briefly (in a single paragraph on p. 250) the Pirenne thesis and the debates that have arisen as a result of it. She does not pursue the issue, nor does she pursue larger issues of trade in the Mediterranean and the overall consequence of Islam in that regard.

Admittedly, this is a big topic and Herrin's focus is steadfastly on Ravenna. Her economic information relates largely to Ravenna internally and its favorable position on the sea and internal Italian waterways, without meaningful elaboration. The approach differs sharply from that of Michael McCormick's *Origins of the Medieval Economy* (2002) and his subsequent studies on economy, climate, and plague in the early medieval period. McCormick draws on archaeological, climate, and biological data to trace Mediterranean trade and the Justinianic plague, among other phenomena. Herrin likewise employs archaeological data but in a more political and social manner. One may indeed read Herrin as an implicit commentary on the distinction between the disputed labels of "late antiquity" and "early medieval." But the economic aspect of this discourse, and the activities of the Mediterranean more generally, do not figure into the calculus.

In any case, Herrin more than amply succeeds in her mission to breathe life into Ravenna. She provides scholars with a nuanced and readable portrait of the city during the most critical years of its existence. The difficulty of doing so should not be minimized; Ravenna, as Herrin notes in the conclusion, did not produce its own historians to celebrate its importance. Nevertheless, late antique and early medieval Ravenna was a unique place of interchange between the Greek and Latin worlds that bequeathed to the modern world some of the most celebrated and intriguing artistic artifacts of the premodern world. Herrin conveys this with great enthusiasm and elegance.

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Transforming Inner Mongolia: Commerce, Migration, and Colonization on the Qing Frontier. *By Yi Wang*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021. 354 pp. Figures, maps, tables, bibliography, glossary, index. Hardcover, \$105. ISBN: 978-1-53814-607-1.

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Reviewed by Matthew Lowenstein

Over the course of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the Han population of Inner Mongolia more than doubled, from roughly 700,000 in the late sixteenth century to 1.5 million, bringing them from a minority to