Clarion Review

History

The Roman Empire: Fall of the West; Survival of the East

James F. Morgan
AuthorHouse
978-1-4772-9318-8
Two Stars (out of Five)

Diligently researched, intriguing history says Western Roman Empire fell for lack of food.

Whether the Western Roman Empire fell with a bang or a whimper—or fell at all—remains earnestly debated and somewhat nebulously questioned. In revisiting the matter in his book *The Roman Empire, Fall of the West: Survival of the East*, James F. Morgan posits his explanation on an often-neglected factor—that exhausted land producing ever less food undermined the empire and caused its subsequent "fall."

Morgan provides a far-ranging array of statements by Greek and Roman authors recording loss of agricultural productivity and the hardship, social unrest, and military limitations that followed. He notes that Rome fell in 476, but he does not comment on whether or how daily life changed, nor does he analyze the food supply or adequately consider other stability-producing factors of the more resilient and prosperous Eastern Roman Empire. Morgan offers little more than the following: "Production was high enough that the taxes levied were adequate to maintain an army capable of defending the empire, (or to pay tribute), and to provide effective government"—both statements that can be challenged.

The book needs structure and balance—the Western Roman Empire gets eleven chapters, the Eastern Roman Empire only one—and that without any detailed reference to its food supply. Morgan does not offer parallel analyses of the two entities against the same baseline and concerns, nor does he suggest that the division of the empire primarily reflected changing geopolitical realities and defense needs.

Though the volume is not lacking in interesting facts reflecting diligent research, Morgan often presents them in isolation; he has not provided the socio-economic context needed to fully

explain Rome's decline. He does, however, emphasize that women's desire for expensive jewelry resulted in a huge outflow of bullion to foreign manufacturers. He draws upon authors without commenting on their backgrounds, perspectives, and reliability. Thucydides, Xenophon, Strabo, Athenaeus, Ammianus Marcellinus, and others are referenced only as "Greek writers," while Varro, Frontinus, Cicero, Pliny, Tacitus, and others are merely "Roman writers"; each deserves a brief characterization.

Too many emperors are described as being "fully aware of the many problems in the empire" and as having made attempts to reverse them, but specific actions and outcomes are seldom cited. A clutch of later emperors, attempting nothing, clutter the text. All the reader learns of Libius Severus is that "He was a figurehead who was deemed ineffective. He was probably poisoned," while Olybrius "had a short uneventful reign, and died of dropsy."

Grammatical errors and misspellings abound; the notes cite book titles in a typographically undifferentiated and unpunctuated bibliography instead of citing authors, thus complicating access to sources. A needed chronology and index are lacking. Nonetheless, Morgan offers much intriguing information; if he had presented it along a time axis rather than by region (with little regard for time shifts), the book would be more useful.

Peter Skinner