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NIKOLAS HÄCHLER, Ostrom-Byzanz zwischen Resilienz und Vulnerabilität. Bedeutung, Gebrauch und Transformation staatlicher Herrschafts- und Verwaltungsstrukturen unter Kaiser Herakleios (610–641) (Klio. Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte; Beihefte. Neue Folge 41). Berlin – Boston: De Gruyter 2025. XII, 649 S. – ISBN 978-3-11-914718-7

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The emperor Heraclius has received a good amount of attention in recent years. Since WALTER KAEGI's rather traditional biography in 2003, the year 2021 alone saw the publication of three volumes with him at the centre: JAMES HOWARD-JOHNSTON's 'Last Great War of Antiquity', the pinnacle of a long career of research; and two German books by early career researchers: THERESIA RAUM ("Szenen eines Überlebenskampfes. Akteure und Handlungsspielräume im Imperium Romanum 610–630") and myself (NADINE VIERMANN, "Herakleios, der schwitzende Kaiser. Die Oströmische Monarchie in der ausgehenden Spätantike"). While HOWARD-JOHNSTON's book is a comprehensive military history, RAUM's work and my own both stem from a German scholarly tradition of analysing the Roman monarchy in its structural setting, which we apply, albeit with different foci, to the early seventh century. These latest volumes build, each in their own way, on a wide array of scholarship that has covered various elements of the reign of Heraclius and the seventh century more broadly: the history and transformation of political culture, religious controversy, imperial ideology, literary production, eschatological thinking, legal and administrative developments, to name only a very few. Heraclius is hardly understudied.

NIKOLAS HÄCHLER has now presented another book on the reign of Heraclius, his 'Habilitationsschrift', with a rather long title that announces to analyse the meaning, use, and transformation of structures of rulership and administration in what he calls "Ostrom-Byzanz", the Eastern Roman Empire, between 610 and 641. As set out in the Introduction (chapter 1), this work aims to explore how economic, military, ideological, political and administrative structures were adjusted under Heraclius in order to respond to the crisis of the early seventh century: the Sasanian occupation followed by the expansion of the Muslim Arabs. HÄCHLER 's analysis centres on two interrelated concepts, vulnerability and resilience, which he employs

to highlight the capacity of East Rome to overcome a crisis that challenged its very existence. By considering practical as well as ideological contexts, he claims to be able to highlight new perspectives on how individuals (the emperors and his staff) identified vulnerabilities and strategized to increase the state's potential for resilience.

The book is structured chronologically, with five chapters that trace Heraclius' reign from his seizure of power in 610 up to his death in 641 (chapters 2–6). These chapters cover how Heraclius set up his rule after having deposed Phocas; how East Rome responded to the Sassanian aggression and how the emperor sought to build up state resilience as the Eastern provinces fell to the enemy; how Heraclius tried to consolidate Roman dominance after his spectacular victory in 628; and the limits of his attempts that manifested in the rapid Arab expansion into Roman territory in the 630s which tainted the emperor's final years. Chapter 7 looks at changes in the administrative sector up to the mid-seventh century. After a concluding chapter, HÄCHLER presents a line of appendices: a timeline of Heraclius' rule, a list of natural disasters and plagues, evidence for the office of the *kommerkiarios* up to the mid-seventh century, a list of diplomatic interactions under Heraclius, a timeline of the Arab expansion, and an exhaustive bibliography and index. The book features a substantial number of figures, graphs, and maps in colour, showing, for instance, Heraclian coinage or quantity and distribution of imperial edicts.

Within this chronological structure, there are some major throughlines appearing in successive chapters. One is HÄCHLER's analysis of imperial representation and ideology, based mainly on his reading of the poems of George of Pisidia but supplemented by a wide range of sources that he uses to reconstruct the political and religious thought world of the time. He shows how Heraclius' PR strategy began with an emphasis on traditional imperial virtues and the capacity for restoring peace in the immediate aftermath of his usurpation. An adjustment of imperial ideology then happened when Heraclius engaged in war with Persia more directly: Here, HÄCHLER confirms what various publications have already shown, namely how the idea of Heraclius as warring emperor in a religiously charged war was modelled on biblical figures and holy men, adding that it was soldier saints in particular that rose in significance during that period. HÄCHLER argues that this was not a radical reinvention of imperial ideology but the careful readjustment of existing models of emperorship and imperial victory through divine favour.

This exposition of imperial representation is linked to a comprehensive analysis of how society at large, or at least those sections represented in the available sources, responded to the existential crisis of the early seventh century. What we encounter here are the common tropes of divine wrath inflicted upon a sinful people, for instance in connection to the Persian seizure of Jerusalem. Imperial absence from Constantinople, especially during precarious moments such as the Avar-Persian siege of 626, was compensated by an increased focus on the Virgin Mary as saviour figure. This, HÄCHLER argues, led to an adjustment in the imperial eschatology ("Reichseschatologie") where the survival of the state was detached, to a certain degree, from the emperor. With his victory over the Persians, however, Heraclius could once again be presented as an agent in the History of Salvation: A messianic figure who, in an eschatological scheme, had initiated a final era of peace. The fact that this peace lasted only a few years before the Arabs pushed into Roman territory naturally made it hard to sustain this narrative towards the end of the emperor's rule.

HÄCHLER also traces more practical measures that the emperor and his government employed to respond to the crisis and increase state resilience, noting that the central economic and fiscal pillars kept working despite the substantial loss of territory. For instance, coin hoards and the addition of local mints serve as evidence that coin circulation in the Eastern provinces was increased to respond to military needs. The Roman territories in Italy and Spain, meanwhile, were left largely to their own devices. To fund and manage his war with Persia, Heraclius employed austerity measures and reintroduced new coin types, such as the silver hexagram. Finally, HÄCHLER notes adjustments in army recruitment and supply, such as the rise of *kommerkiarioi* who managed the supply of the emperor's field armies. For the period after the Roman victory over Persia, he discusses the military reorganisation of the reconquered Eastern provinces that came with the establishment of several *duces*. HÄCHLER sees these measures as careful adjustments within existing structures, rather than fundamental reforms. Overall, this yielded a certain degree of success. However, as Arab troops pushed into Roman territory while the Empire was still amidst a phase of restructuring and recovery, a state weakened by protracted warfare was unable to resist the onslaught.

In the religious sphere HÄCHLER traces Heraclius' attempt at establishing a doctrinal compromise that would unite the schismatic churches, which he promoted together with the patriarch of Constantinople, Sergius. While this showed some promising results in the immediate aftermath of the Roman

victory, the fronts quickly hardened with resistance galvanising around some ultra-Chalcedonian players. HÄCHLER argues that this backlash against Heraclius' religious policy weakened the Roman defence capacity and made support for Heraclius crumble within the Empire and his own government.

Some of the throughlines relating to administrative change culminate in chapter 7 that sits slightly awkwardly besides the otherwise chronological structure. Here, HÄCHLER focuses on societal components and their role in the survival of the Eastern Roman state up to 650, such as the senate, the circus factions, the urban prefect, and the imperial administration. While he observes a high degree of continuity in the capital, there are clear changes in the provincial, fiscal, and military administration that coincided with the Roman loss and reconfiguration of territory, such as the gradual disappearance of the praetorian prefecture and the rise of new offices, among them the *sakellarios* and *logothetes* as financial officers. For the military sector, HÄCHLER confirms what is by now the common opinion, namely that very first traces of what would become the Byzantine theme system may be visible when the Roman armies retreated into Anatolia, but that themes as clear administrative units formed only later.

In the conclusion, HÄCHLER presents a table of "Resilienzfaktoren" and "Vulnerabilitätsfaktoren" which he divides into strategies employed by the state and factors outside of state control. The main take away is that HÄCHLER's Heraclius tried his best to deal with the crisis the Empire was in, but that his strategies – sometimes daring, but mainly conservative, be it pertaining to imperial representation or military strategy – remained within established structures; he was not a great reformer of the Roman state. These strategies worked and increased the polity's resilience but came to their limits when another adversary rose from the Arabian Peninsula.

In a work of this scope, some slips and oversights may be forgiven. However, some of these have more of an impact, for instance the fact that HÄCHLER's mention of *miliarisia*, which he claims were distributed in Constantinople and show Heraclius in military attire, lack references (p. 212 and again p. 312); I was not aware of these rather crucial pieces and would have liked to have taken a closer look!

Then, there are elements in HÄCHLER's argument, on a larger scale, that the reader, based on their respective background and expertise, will find less convincing. For me, it is his reading of Phocas' rule and Heraclius' usurpation (chapter 2). HÄCHLER presents Phocas as incapable and doomed

from the beginning. Despite acknowledging the force of Heraclius' retrospective smear campaign that tainted most available sources, he is happy to label Phocas as a tyrant and the root cause of the Roman calamities. Based on that, HÄCHLER deems the senate the main driver behind Phocas' overthrow, arguing that its members longed for a virtuous peer – a "tüchtigen Herrscher aus der senatorischen Oberschicht" (p. 48) – instead of a low-life soldier and hence invited Heraclius to take over. This interpretation, in my view, has a line of weaknesses: it falls for teleological and romanticising narratives propagated in Heraclius-friendly sources instead of assessing Phocas in his own right; it fails to consider whether, in early-seventh-century Constantinople, there was such a thing as 'the senate' as an institution with a clear political will and agency (I would argue that this was not the case!); and it overlooks the plain ambition of individuals such as Heraclius. Finally, HÄCHLER disregards the fact that under Phocas, the Roman-Persian war amounted to not much more than skirmishes around the frontier; the major Sassanian incursion into Roman territory happened after Heraclius had come to power, as the Roman defence had been weakened by years of civil war that preceded his seizure of Constantinople. So, we might wonder, who was the real culprit then?

Overall, it remains to state that in some places, I would have wished for a greater degree of focus. Does the book really need, for instance, a detailed exposition of the history of pre-Islamic Arabia and a biography of the prophet Mohammad to understand how the Romans responded to the Arab expansion? A work that is clearly not intended as a handbook or companion-style publication might have benefitted from some rigorous cutting, which could have been encouraged by the editors of the Klio series.

Now, after almost 500 pages of text, one is left with the question of what this work adds to the scholarly debate on Heraclius and the Eastern Roman Empire in the early seventh century. HÄCHLER's book is a testament to his impressive command of a vast range of material, with nuanced readings of primary sources, attention to detail, as well as broad strokes of analysis; however, it remains mainly a synthesis that combines existing insights, methods and approaches. It is a comprehensive and well executed synthesis for sure, that adds nuance to some historical details, but ultimately it reinforces rather than reshapes current interpretations. Someone familiar with the period might find it rather unsurprising.

HÄCHLER does address the question of his original contribution to the field by introducing the German terms of "Resilienz" and "Vulnerabilität" as

innovative heuristic concepts. However, in the end these are, essentially, elevated terms for what scholars have emphasised all along: East Rome was in a really bad place and somehow it survived, emerging from this multi-crisis in a different shape and form. This is, for example, the core of JOHN HALDON's "Byzantium in the Seventh Century" (1990), and, even more explicitly, his "The Empire that Would not Die: The Paradox of Eastern Roman Survival, 640–740" (2016). Although focusing on the period after Heraclius, the latter already explicitly combines the analysis of administrative structures with those of the narratives and beliefs that dominated society and politics at that time, concluding that pathbreaking transformations may have been initiated under Heraclius but came to their fruition only in the later seventh and early eighth centuries.

In the introduction, HÄCHLER positions his work in contrast to the books of THERESIA RAUM and my own by highlighting his more comprehensive perspective on the entire reign of Heraclius that would allow him to flesh out the "Anpassungen staatlicher Herrschafts- und Verwaltungsstrukturen" (p. 37). This is in fact valid, since both 2021 books have a narrower focus, RAUM on the period of 610–630, and my own on the political processes in the capital. However, HÄCHLER's work is indebted to the very same German-Ancient-History tradition of structural history that analyses Roman monarchical rule, an emperor's actions as well as imperial rhetoric, within its structural opportunities and constraints. This has been pioneered by EGON FLAIG on the Principate ("Den Kaiser herausfordern: Die Usurpation im Römischen Reich", 1992) and applied by various scholars to Late Antiquity and the Eastern Roman Empire, most comprehensively by RENE PFEILSCHIFTER ("Der Kaiser in Konstantinopel. Kommunikation und Konfliktaustrag in einer spätantiken Metropole", 2013). HÄCHLER's book is now the third work (within five years!) that uses this angle on Heraclius; despite a broader scope and a good degree of nuance, it arrives – unsurprisingly – at rather similar conclusions. In all this, one may of course acknowledge the pressure that the German(ophone) academic system puts on candidates to produce a second "Qualifikationsarbeit", the Habilitation; however, I am left with the feeling that this specific take on Heraclius has been exhausted, and it would have been time to come up with something new.

This is not to say that the last word on the reign of Heraclius has been spoken – far from it! There are studies under way that, for example, read the reign of Heraclius primarily through documentary and archaeological evidence; or approaches that prioritise the immensely rich sources not written

or preserved in Greek or Latin – from Armenian to Arabic and Ethiopian –, rather than using these as supplementary material to what is still mostly treated as the authoritative narratives in the 'classical' languages. These approaches have the exciting potential to de-centre the emperor and shed a different light on political, religious and administrative processes; however, they require skills (linguistic and others) that most historians (me included!) do not possess. One thing is clear: Good old Heraclius, arguably one of the most tragic figures of Roman/Byzantine history with his highest highs and lowest lows, will keep attracting scholarly attention, and understandably so.

Keywords
Heraclius