

Grant, Michael, *The Severans: The Changed Roman Empire* (London & New York: Routledge Press, 1996), xvi + 117 pp. ISBN 0-415-12772-6. £25/\$##.

This slim volume is a logical follow-up to Grant's recent *The Antonines: The Roman Empire in Transition* (1994) and is very much modelled on the same pattern. Although it does not follow the earlier book's straightforward division into two halves (the first dealing with persons, the second with movements), of its twelve chapters, the first five might be described as narrative, the last seven as analytical. However, *The Severans* departs from, and improves on, the format of its predecessor by abandoning its clumsy system of bald *References*, followed by *Notes* referring to sections underlined in the main text, in favour of returning to endnotes of a more traditional kind. With 7 maps and 32 black & white plates, the earlier volume's lavish standard of cartographic and photographic illustration is maintained; though in comparison the maps are somewhat lacking in quality and elegance. Imperial portraiture dominates the plates, amongst which coin obverses are heavily represented, attesting to the author's original incarnation as a numismatic historian. With these maps and pictures the publishers have probably correctly targeted their intended audience, 'the student of ancient history as well as the general reader', as the blurb on the inside flap of the dust-jacket claims. Their third major selling-point, the 'extensive further reading list', is another matter. As a bald bibliography, ranging as it does from the obscure, if still useful (e.g. W. Thiele, *De Severo Alexandro Imperatore*), to the positively eccentric (e.g. J.S. Hay, *The Amazing Emperor Heliogabalus*), its utility or appeal for either group is limited without further guidance. Neither it nor the endnotes will enlighten the student curious to track down the source of E. Rohde's opinions ~~in~~ in fact *Die griechische Roman* (1914) ~~is~~ tantalizingly alluded to on page 53.

The justification of the subtitle is to be found in Grant's chapters on the army and finance. Here he is right to emphasize the link between Severus's dependence on the legions in bringing him to power, the spiralling costs of military expenditure to ensure their loyalty, and the various devices to optimize revenue (such as the grant of universal Roman citizenship) employed by him and his successors. Grant is also right to highlight the now open acknowledgement of the role of the military in maintaining the emperor's position. Those, such as Macrinus or Severus Alexander, who failed to establish or maintain a rapport with the troops were doomed. The emperor would not now risk defending an unpopular minister, such as Ulpian, from the troops' anger; hence Cassius Dio's fear, alluded to, without being sufficiently explained (p. 87). However, description of this state of affairs as 'military monarchy' (p. 38) is inadequate. Moreover, the gravity of Severus's drastic debasement of the silver coinage in order to stretch his budget is curiously underplayed (p. 42). This expedient was probably the most significant legacy of the Severans, since their successors' repeated resort to it precipitated the eventual demise of the *denarius*. Grant does not even hint at what that later third-century emperors were to discover the hard way: that the 'financial miracle', for which he gives Septimius so much credit (pp. 41-2 & 86), was a short-sighted and unsustainable solution.

While one does not necessarily look for cutting-edge research in a book aimed at the

general reader, a certain mastery of scholarship and Quellenkritik is expected. Here again Grant disappoints. To take one page (51), it is well known that the *Pauli Sententiae* are in fact a pseudonymous work and there has been no real doubt as to the time of Ulpian's death since the publication of *P.Oxy.* 2565 in 1966. Personalities are confused or inaccurately described. That Frankenstein's monster, 'Comazon Eutyichianus', lives again (pp. 15 n.5 & 25), Severus's brother was Publius, not Lucius, Septimius Geta (cf. p.16), and the future emperor Macrinus was not a jurist (as p. 22) but an advocate ~~an~~ an important distinction. And it is alarming to find laughable details from the *Historia Augusta* (e.g. the sale of palace dwarfs, p. 31) peddled as fact.

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One might be more forgiving of such errors if there were evidence of clear argumentation or even if the prose were polished and well structured. But neither is the case. Some of the techniques of argument could hardly be said to be good models for student readers. For instance, the phenomena of social stratification and social mobility are confused (p. 49). And why praise Severus as 'not far wrong' in bequeathing the empire jointly to both his sons on the grounds that a practical partition of the empire took place in the later fourth century (p. 4), when there is no evidence that geographical division was any part of his plan? To say that Celtic and Punic 'came to be used in official documents' (p. 29) is a rather sweeping generalisation from the fact of juristic recognition of the validity of *fidei commissa* written in these languages (*Digest* 32.11.pr, not 32.A as it is mysteriously given in n.11). On what bases lie the claims that the *Constitutio Antoniniana* 'universalized religion' (p. 31) or that 'the civil service was militarized' (pp. 35 & 37)? And what is the point of criticizing the hapless Cassius Dio for lack of prescience in failing to perceive the threat to the northern frontier and the future rise of Christianity (pp. 32, 86 & 88)?

In general the prose is rather disjointed and inelegant; not at all what one would expect to flow from the pen of one trumpeted by the publishers as 'one of the world's greatest writers of ancient history'. One notes, for example, the peculiar closure of chapter 1 (p. 13) and the abrupt introduction of Severus Alexander and Elagabalus into the narrative at page 15. Furthermore, the text is all too frequently marred by tortuous sentences and embarrassing grammatical lapses: 'As for the Romans, they would not have had to fight any more expensive, unsatisfactory eastern wars against their principal rivals, who the Parthians, as long as they lasted, were. As it was, Artabanus's refusal gave Caracalla an excuse to invade Parthia (by a trick) in 215, attempting for a short time to annex Armenia (although it had remained neutral, under the influence of subsidies).' (p. 32) ~~is~~ hardly consonant with the 'erudite and accessible' as well as 'learned and exciting' style for which the author is exalted on the dust-jacket. Moreover, the reader is conscious of too frequent a recourse to padding out (most acute in chapters 10 and 11) with extensive quotation from secondary literature, including the verbatim recycling of sections from elsewhere in his *oeuvre*, sometimes attributed (e.g. 65-7, 69-70, 71 & 77-8) but sometimes not (e.g. pp. 14-5, 61-2 & 75). Indeed this has the feeling of a book written, or rather pasted together, by a team of research assistants without adequate authorial or editorial supervision. For trivial slips and infelicities abound, some of them glaring, for example, 'his attempts to reduce army costs

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was (*sic*) not liked by the soldiers' (p. 38), others careless, such as giving the Turkish of Prusa as ~~Brusa~~, rather than Bursa, ~~twice~~ (pp. 75 & 87). All this testifies to inadequate copy-editing, allowing errors that could be misleading to the unwary to slip through: such as the reversal of Severus' grandfather's journey *to* Rome in chapter 1 note 1 (p. 93). The overriding impression is of a minimal level of authorial input. It is difficult, otherwise, to imagine the author of *Imperium to Auctoritas* (1946) personally committing the blunder of equating 25,000 *sestertii* with 10,000, rather than 6,250, *denarii* (p. 2).

Even if this book's content matched up to the attractiveness of its production, it would still be hard to justify the cover-price. Bearing, as it does, all the signs of a hurriedly assembled product from the conveyor-belt of Michael Grant Publications Ltd, this volume is most notable for the attempt, perhaps by author and publisher alike, to trade on reputation.