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Late Roman Pannonia for specialists

Eric Fournier

PÉTER KOVÁCS, *A HISTORY OF PANNONIA IN THE LATE ROMAN PERIOD I (284-363 AD)* (Antiquitas, Reihe 1, Band 67; Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, Bonn 2016). Pp. viii + 320, figs. 5. ISBN 978-3-7749-4007-9. EUR. 75.00.

As a result of the transformations that occurred during the Principate, the areas bordering the Rhine and the Danube, the NW *limes* for most of the first four centuries of the empire, became increasingly important. That much was already apparent to Tacitus. Marcus Aurelius, who spent many years fighting the Marcomanni at the end of his reign, resided in Sirmium during this period, and his successors, particularly in the 3rd and 4th c. A.D., would continuously reside in that city — an ideal location between the western and eastern centers of power (Rome, Milan, Trier; Nicomedia, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch) — while they led military campaigns on the Danube. As a result, both Sirmium and Pannonia, the Balkan province in which that city was situated, rose in prominence during this period. In many ways, the new imperial residences dominated the history of the later Roman empire, as did the ensuing tension between center and periphery and the transformations that are bound to occur when the periphery becomes one of the new centers. The province of Pannonia on the Danubian frontier between Valeria and Moesia is one of the former peripheral regions that became a new center of gravity in the Late Roman period.

Considering that the last major work in English to treat this subject dates back over 40 years,¹ a volume dedicated to the history of Pannonia in the Late Roman period seemed not only appropriate but an exciting prospect for scholars interested in the subject, and P. Kovács, a renowned expert on the history and archaeology of Pannonia, seemed to be the appropriate person to write such a history. Unfortunately, the book does not meet the high expectations the present reviewer entertained. None of the topics mentioned above, nor any of the questions one might think about when considering the history of Late Roman Pannonia, are considered or even alluded to. For example:

- What was the rôle of Sirmium as an imperial residence?
- What was the impact of the imperial court on the life of that city and on its urban fabric?
- What were the economic effects of the imperial presence in the area?
- How was the provincial culture of Pannonia affected by the influx of outsiders gravitating towards the imperial court?
- Was there a Pannonian culture, or should we speak more broadly of an Illyrian or Danubian culture?
- Overall, how did emperors from Marcus Aurelius onward residing in the area change civilian life in Pannonia between the 2nd and the 4th c.?
- What were the main transformations affecting Pannonia in late antiquity?
- How did the increasing focus of the court on Constantinople affect Sirmium and Pannonia? — and so forth. In fact, this work is more of a research tool for scholars working with ancient sources of relevance to later Roman Pannonia than it is a history *per se*.² Therefore its title is misleading.

While we should expect individual scholars' views of history to differ, one would imagine that most historians would agree that *A history ...*, especially a work covering over three-quarters

1 A. Mócsy, *Pannonia and Upper Moesia. A history of the Middle Danube provinces of the Roman Empire* (London 1974). There are, however, numerous important works in Hungarian. See, e.g., E. Tóth *Studia Valeriana. Az alsóhetényi és ságvári késő római erődök kutatásának eredményei* (Dombóvár 2009), a reference I owe to *JRA*'s readers.

2 For better models of works dealing with specific regions in this period, works that do provide a synthetic picture, see (e.g.) N Christie, *From Constantine to Charlemagne: an archaeology of Italy, AD 300-800* (Aldershot 2006); H. Sivan, *Palestine in late antiquity* (Oxford 2008); J. Conant, *Staying Roman: conquest and identity in Africa and the Mediterranean, 439-700* (Cambridge 2012).

of a century during which many key events unfolded (e.g., the ‘Great Persecution’, Constantine’s ‘conversion’, the Council of Nicaea, the establishment of Constantinople as a ‘new Rome’ in the East, etc.), should present some sort of synthesis or overview. One would also imagine that most readers would expect to find an overarching argument in answer to a central historical question. By contrast, the book presents a myriad of details without any synthetic view or overarching argument addressing a larger historical question. There is no introduction to present the work and its contents, its context or its methodology, the subject or its historiography, and there is no conclusion to summarize its particular arguments and findings. Kovács’ work is based on his own, prior work on the *Fontes Pannoniae antiquae*, for which he assembled, edited, translated into Hungarian, and commented upon all the sources for Pannonian Roman history for the first four centuries A.D.³ This seems to be the genesis of the present work, which includes the original text of all the relevant sources at the end of each chapter — no doubt the book’s greatest strength. The emphasis on literary sources probably explains the surprising absence of archaeological material from the book, despite the author’s extensive knowledge of Pannonian archaeology. The author’s concept of history, however, is traditional and conservative: Kovács is mainly concerned with political and military history, with the book focusing almost exclusively on establishing dates for and locations of imperial movements as well as military campaigns (mostly against the Sarmatians). The exception comes in the last two chapters, devoted to Christianity in Pannonia during this period.⁴ Throughout, the author devotes considerable space to analyzing conflicting sources, seemingly with the goal of establishing a narrative, only to conclude, more often than not, that the evidence is contradictory or inconclusive. The intended narrative remains elusive, with the exception of the last chapter on the history of the Christian church, for which there is an abundance of sources, yet this narrative is tendentious since it follows the overwhelmingly Nicene perspective of most of the sources.

The book is divided into 5 chapters. The first three are organized chronologically, with the last two on Christianity. There are 4 appendices: on the inscription of a Phrygian soldier in Pannonia (*SEG* 31, 1116); on the location of two forts built by Diocletian *contra Acinco et Bononia*; on Palladas’ *Epigram* 11.27-35; and on the use of the toponym *Constantia* in the province of Valeria. Before diving (rather abruptly) into his material, Kovács presents, in an extremely brief Preface, a minimalist introduction which does not explain his editorial decisions. Why, for instance, end the book with Julian, if the author plans a second volume to complete the 4th c.? Chapter 1 focuses on the “first tetrarchy”, chapter 2 on Constantine, chapter 3 on Constans, Constantius [III] and Julian,⁵ chapter 4 surveys Pannonian martyrs, and chapter 5 presents “A history of the Pannonian church between 314 and 363”, with an appendix on “St. Martin and Pannonia”. With the exception of chapter 5, none of the chapters presents a continuous narrative but instead discusses what the author regards as prominent debates in Pannonian history. This may be illustrated by the topics discussed in chapt. 1: the settlement of the Carpi in Pannonia; the Sarmatian campaigns during the Tetrarchy; Galerius and the *lacus Pelso*; the province’s administrative re-organization and its new borders. Readers who are not well-versed in the historical controversies on any of these topics, however, will have a hard time following the

3 B. Fehér and P. Kovács (edd.) *Fontes Pannoniae antiquae* 1-2 (Budapest 2003-4); P. Kovács (ed.), *Fontes Pannoniae antiquae* 3: *ab A.D. CLXVI usque ad annum A.D. CXCII* (Budapest 2006); id. (ed.), *Fontes Pannoniae antiquae* 4: *in aetate Severorum* (Budapest 2007); id. (ed.), *Fontes Pannoniae antiquae* 5: *ab anno D. CCXXXV usque ad annum CCLXXXIV* (2nd edn., Budapest 2013); id. (ed.), *Fontes Pannoniae antiquae* 6: *in aetate Tetrarcharum I (A.D. 285-305)* (Budapest 2011); id. (ed.), *Fontes Pannoniae antiquae* 7: *in aetate Constantini* (Budapest 2012). On the nationalism of such projects, and the seminal *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* upon which the Pannonian *Fontes* is obviously modeled, see P. J. Geary, *The myth of nations: the medieval origins of Europe* (Princeton, NJ 2002). He also published vol. 1 of the work under review: *A history of Pannonia during the Principate* (*Antiquitas*, Reihe 1, Band 65; Bonn 2014).

4 For Christianity in Late Roman Pannonia, see now E. Tóth, T. Vida and I. Takács, *Saint Martin and Pannonia: Christianity on the frontiers of the Roman world: exh. cat. 2016, Iseum Savariense, Szombathely*, a reference I owe to *JRA*’s readers.

5 Spelled “Julians” in the Table of Contents.

discussion when there is no introductory overview, no summary of the historiography being treated, and no discussion of the significance of any of these debates in the wider scheme of things. This makes for a frustrating read, particularly in view of the meagre results of long discussions over points of details that do not seem to affect the big picture significantly.

This frustration is compounded by a convoluted writing style that includes both copious notes, typically several notes per sentence rather than limiting notes to the end of a sentence, coupled with the parenthetical references to sources within the text; in addition there are extensive quotations of sources in the original languages, also within the text. Two examples may suffice to illustrate this point:

Hilary of Poitiers, who was busy organizing the resistance in Gaul⁴⁵⁸ and had severed communion with Valens together with several other bishops,⁴⁵⁹ was exiled slightly later, at the Council of Baeterrae held in the first half of 356,⁴⁶⁰ a synod attended also by Valens (Hil. *C. Const.* 2, *De syn.* 2, Coll. Antiar. Par. B I.5, Hier. *De vir.* Ill. 100, Chron. 240c, Ruf. *H.E.* X.21, Sulp. *Sev. Chron.* II.39.7).⁴⁶¹ [p. 220].

All four of these notes refer to Brennecke 1984, in addition to four other authors. It would have been much simpler to group notes together, especially when referring to one main author.

The emperor received them [Pannonian bishops Valens, Ursacius, Germinius and Gaius], although the exact place where they met remains unknown⁴⁷⁴ (Sulp. *Sev. Chron.* II.41.7, Socr. II.37.75, Soz. IV.19.1, Ath. *Ep. ad. Afr.* 3.4, Coll. Avell. II.16).⁴⁷⁵ [p. 223].

Once again, it is unclear why notes are needed here, in addition to a parenthesis.

What is clear is the result, which does not facilitate comprehension or understanding of what is already complicated material for the uninitiated.

While chapt. 4 (on Pannonian martyrs) is mainly descriptive (presenting the original texts relating to each martyr, with some discussion ranging from one line to several pages, in some cases with some source criticism, and references to modern literature), chapter 5 attempts to establish a narrative of the history of the Pannonian church during this period. Despite references to recent literature that analyzes the theological controversies and the use of labels such as “heretics” and “orthodox” or “Catholic” as socially and rhetorically constructed, Kovács systematically takes a Catholic perspective without employing quotation marks or any discussion of the problems involved in the use of such controversial titles. In any event, there is not much novelty in this chapter as it mainly reiterates what we already know from the major syntheses of ecclesiastical history for this well-studied period; and when he addresses controversies, Kovács tends to assert rather than to demonstrate, as when he maintains the existence of a synod in Sirmium (348/349) against scholars who “challenge the very existence of the synod” (218), but does not provide any supporting argument for doing so.

Following the interesting detailed appendices, the book ends abruptly, without any conclusion to help readers digest what they have just read. The reader is left on his own to interpret what any of this means and to relate it to the larger framework of Roman history and its late-antique transformations.⁶ In this book and throughout his career, Kovács has set on a more secure footing the material for writing a history of Late Roman Pannonia, but the more interesting task of writing that history or, more specifically, updating Mócsy in light of almost five decades of research, remains. The audience for this book will thus be limited to those who are already scholars of Pannonia’s Late Roman history.

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6 For a broader view, see now M. Sághy and E. Schoolman (edd.), *Pagans and Christians in the Late Roman Empire: new evidence, new approaches (4th-8th centuries)* (Budapest 2018), another reference I owe to JRA’s readers.