

Book of the week: The Inheritance of Rome

Power, Tom Palaima learns, was easily gained but damned hard to keep

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In *The Inheritance of Rome*, the latest volume in the Penguin History of Europe series, Chris Wickham lays out, in 23 chapters, 600 years of early medieval political, social, economic and religious history. He begins with a concise description of the culture and belief systems of the late Roman Empire and the crises that led to its dissolution, then goes on to cover post-Roman Western Europe between 550 and 750, the Byzantine and Arab empires between 550 and 1000, and Carolingian and post-Carolingian Europe between 750 and 1000.

Realising that the early Middle Ages offer "few household names for a wider public", Wickham provides "political narratives" for each subperiod and explores "the social and cultural (including religious) environment[s] inside which men and women made political choices". He gives us a good feel for these environments by making the most of the uneven evidence for economic exchange networks, political and social hierarchy, religious beliefs and practices and intellectual life.

By judicious selection of primary texts and by paying attention to the increasingly sophisticated interpretation of material remains, Wickham places us in many different early medieval worlds. In chapter ten, which he calls the book's central chapter, he studies the political messages of Emperor Justinian's church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople (537), Caliph al-Walid I's Great Mosque in Damascus (716), the Northumbrian palace at Yeavering (c600), Pope Paschal I's church of Santa Prassede in Rome (c820) and the Carolingian palaces at Aachen and Ingelheim in the late 8th and 9th centuries.

Wickham then takes up archaeological evidence for the other end of the social spectrum, how village layouts attest to what he later calls "the caging of the peasantry" between 800 and 1000. His phrase for this process of trapping lowly land-workers within the self-contained power structures of local regions is a translation of the French term *encellulement*. He uses a pejorative image because of his sympathy for the nameless human beings in medieval times who never wrote or read a word, who never fought in aristocratic armies, who never designed or visited palatial buildings.

Wickham draws on *Beowulf*, the *Deeds of Charlemagne*, accounts of visitors to Damascus and an 11-page eulogy of Hagia Sophia in Prokopios' *On Buildings* to explain the ceremonial uses of his culture-defining buildings and their effects on visitors. Rome, Constantinople and the West used these structures in connection with wide streets, forum areas, theatres, amphitheatres, "processions and public participation". Arab states "did not use processions as a major part of their political legitimisation", opting for the "relatively unhierarchical space" of the mosque's courtyard with its "emphasis on the community of believers".

Of course, as Wickham points out, al-Walid was asserting Muslim supremacy by building the Damascus mosque on top of the demolished cathedral of the largely Christian city. The *Deeds of Charlemagne* describes imaginatively a visit of Byzantine ambassadors to the palace of the emperor. Its spatial layout, furniture and wall decorations asserted Carolingian supremacy to outsiders. Paschal I, too, was "reasserting papal centrality... inside and against a world with different political configurations".

Wickham drives home the lesson that power is not so hard to get, if you are intelligent, observant, ruthless and lucky, but it is damned hard to sustain and pass on. This holds true for individuals and for the elites who control the fates of cities, regions, nation-states or empires.

A second lesson is that those who acquire power must be ingenious at justifying their right to keep and use it. However this is done, in each era the anonymous masses suffer the consequences. The third lesson is that power is a zero-sum game. Wickham admits that *The Inheritance of Rome* offers "less about the peasant majority than there might have been", but is clear on how those with power extract it from others.

There are historical surprises. Constantinople, thanks to its massive fortifications facing the Balkans and the protection the Bosphorus Strait provided against land attacks from Anatolia, managed to retain its eastern empire in some form throughout the period. The empire lost "two thirds of its land and three quarters of its wealth" between 610 and the 630s. With the loss of Egypt to Persian and then Arab armies, Constantinople no longer could provide free grain to its people. Its population fell from about 500,000 to between 40,000 and 70,000. It was still the largest city in Europe. Where did all those people go?

But less is sometimes more. Between 669 and 687, the Anatolian imperial heartland was reorganised into four military districts called "themes". Soldiers were rewarded with land, and their produce was their pay. Cities were weakened or vanished altogether in outlying areas subject to raids. Social status outside Constantinople was determined not so much by wealth or birth, but by "office in the army or administration".

Constantinople itself gained in relative importance. During the period of Byzantine revival (850 to 1000), its elites reinforced their power in ceremonies so elaborate that Wickham asks, "Can all this really have taken place, for every feast in every year, with all these people^^?" The answer is "yes", and these displays validated the political and religious hierarchies.

As a scholar interested in kingship ideology and the power structures of Greek Bronze Age palatial societies, I found chapter 16, "The Carolingian century, 751-887", especially interesting because of Wickham's analysis of how power in the Carolingian state was formed, increased, conveyed and eventually lost.

First, Pippin gained power by force, but only after securing the nihil obstat of Pope Zacharias and later a public ritual legitimisation by Pope Stephen II. Both popes served as vital sources of what Wickham calls "external, non-Frankish, moral power".

Second, Charlemagne's aggressive military campaigns generated the wealth he needed to act as king and then emperor. He acquired booty from the pagan cult-site of Irminsul in Saxony and revenues from Lombardy, and absorbed Bavaria by threat of force. Lastly, he attacked the Avars on the Hungarian plain and brought back enormous riches from their royal residence.

Third, Charlemagne consolidated and controlled power by distributing honores, offices and land allotments. He granted use of land as beneficia, keeping ownership so he could reclaim it if the recipient acted contrary to royal wishes.

Fourth, he instituted a cultural programme through legislative acts aimed at correctio, the cultivation of cultivated, restrained behaviour by those in power. Justice, harmony and the avoidance of hatred were key public virtues.

Fifth, he promoted reciprocal gift exchanges. And sixth, he sent out royal agents, missi, to correct abuses. Charlemagne's son and successor, Louis the Pious, placed strong emphasis on the moral behaviour of aristocrats and public officials.

The Carolingian system did not recreate Gibbon's happy age of the Antonines. Wickham points out that missi were often sent out to put a stop to abuses by other missi, and judicial corruption was widespread. Yet, as Wickham explains, aristocrats "are always violent, corrupt and greedy, but they were at least aware of public responsibility [and]... linked it to their desire for personal salvation after death". The peasantry had hope of protection because

local powers had to pay attention to kings. For les misérables, this period was probably better than most, and then the cage doors were slammed shut.

When I finished *The Inheritance of Rome*, which Wickham dedicates to the students with whom he studied ancient and medieval history at the [University of Birmingham](#) from 1976 to 2005, I thought, "Lucky students" and "Lucky us now, too."

The Author

Chris Wickham is the Chichele professor of medieval history at the [University of Oxford](#) and fellow of All Souls College.

Prior to this, he spent nearly 30 years at the [University of Birmingham](#). Wickham says that although academia was not a conscious career choice for him, he "fell quite quickly" into it, and was always aware that his specialist subject would be "something that wasn't Britain".

He specialises in medieval Italy, in particular Tuscany and central Italy, but he is also very interested in comparative history.

When asked what he enjoys about Italy, he says that it has "an interesting political engagement". He also takes pleasure in travelling around the Mediterranean in general, and particularly likes the region's landscape.

Back at home, he has three cats, Fluffy, Wamba and Victoria, who have had one of Wickham's books dedicated to them, "to the great amusement of the Italians".

The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000

By Chris Wickham

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