
Alexander Demandt, Marc Aurel. Der Kaiser und seine Welt, München (C.H.Beck) 2018, 592 S., 44 Abb., 18 Abb. im Tafelteil, 3 Ktn., Stammbaum, ISBN 978-3-406-71875-5 (geb.), € 32,—

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“Marc Aurel. Der Kaiser und seine Welt” is the newest monograph of Alexander D(emandt), an octogenarian with an impressive state of service in German ‘Altertumswissenschaft’. The book project was already planned in the early 1990s, but due to circumstances D. only picked it up again in February 2016. The result is an impressive book. The life and times of the philosopher-emperor provide D. with ample opportunities to portray his unparalleled knowledge and insights about the Roman Empire and far beyond.

Unlike Anthony Birley, who in the sixties wrote a chronological biography of Marcus Aurelius, D. opted for a thematical approach. This allowed him to thoroughly explore almost all aspects connected to Marcus’ reign. The book starts with a general overview of the Roman Empire of the first and second centuries AD, focusing on political and administrative aspects. The second chapter is a profound discussion of the sources, fulfilling all requirements of decent ‘Quellenforschung’. The third chapter deals with Marcus’ youth and family, ending with his succession to the throne in 161. Chapters four to six are a chronological political-military narrative of the wars Marcus had to fight against his will. For the first time in its history, the Roman Empire was hard-pressed from many sides and was simultaneously ravaged by the so-called ‘Antonine plague’. Marcus himself spent many years at the Donau frontier, fighting various tribes such as the Marcomanni, the Chatti, the Quadi and the Jazyges. The last four chapters are again thematically ordered, dealing with Marcus’ administrative and judicial work, the relationship of the Roman state with the expanding Christian faith, Marcus well-known stoic philosophy and finally his death and legacy.

All these aspects of Marcus Aurelius’ reign are discussed by D. with great erudition. This erudition is at once the major strength and weakness of this book. Let us begin with the positive aspects. D. shows a great mastery of the sources, which are referred to in 3.094 footnotes spread over 98 pages. Throughout the work, D. unceasingly bombards his readers with interesting pieces of information, comparisons and references. He constantly jumps to later epochs to pinpoint similarities or differences. I learned, for instance, that buttons did not exist in antiquity nor in the middle ages, but came to Europe from the Ottoman Empire, or that the charity foundations set up by Marcus can be compared to the Prussian ‘Luisenstiftung’ of 1810. At certain moments, D. uses his own experiences

from his travels, thereby honouring the historiographical tradition of Herodotus. When writing about the destruction of Seleukeia, a city on the west bank of the Tigris, D. remarks that in 1965 he only saw a grove of date palms at the location of the ancient city. After an excursus on the history of Edessa in present-day Turkey, he writes that in 1964 the Armenian church served as the power station of the city, and in the same year he saw money changers in Bagdad using wooden tables just like their predecessors in antiquity. In chapter 9, dealing with Marcus Aurelius' stoic philosophy, D. pulls out all stops: he not only draws parallels with other ancient philosophers, but also with Christian thinkers – the bible book Ecclesiastes appears quite often – and with later writers such as Goethe, Schopenhauer, Schiller, Spinoza and Kant. In short, all these facts and excursions, gathered by decades of experience, make his book a fascinating read.

At the same time, I found this wealth of information often a burden. The many excursions are not always relevant, and they sometimes hamper the argumentation. It is easy to lose the thread of the story. In general, I found that the information in this book is too fragmented, and that loose ends are not tied up. D. describes in detail what happened at the frontiers of the empire, but the general characteristics of Marcus Aurelius' foreign policy are not clearly drawn out. When arguing that Marcus Aurelius did what he could to put his stoic beliefs in political practice (397), differing opinions from other scholars are not mentioned (e.g. Stanton in: *Historia* 18.5, 570–585, and the reaction of Hendrickx in: *Historia* 23.2, 254–256). The argumentation furthermore lacks hierarchy: when D. reveals important broader patterns – e.g. the growing importance of Syrians in Roman imperial politics and culture (234) – these easily get lost amid the mass of other data.

Another point of criticism concerns the first chapter of the book, which is arguably the weakest part. The overview of the general characteristics of the Roman Empire strongly focuses in the tradition of Mommsen on juridical and administrative structures. This reminded me of what Syme wrote in 1982: “some students of the Principate are prone to set a high value on administration. The Romans did very little of it” (HSPh 86, 181–211). Indeed, in the last decades many scholars have shifted their focus to the practical side of governing in the Roman Empire. How did the emperor in fact rule, what were his aims and what could he hope to achieve? These questions are not addressed in D.'s book. I was surprised not to find the influential “The Emperor and the Roman World” (1977) by Fergus Millar in the bibliography. Millar, who often uses Marcus Aurelius as an example, saw the emperor as a rather passive ruler, who only reacted to petitions made by his subjects. The debate about Millar's thesis is still going on, but unfortunately this book does not contribute to it.

Another thing quite struck me when reading the first chapter. D. has a very positive attitude towards Roman imperial rule, describing it as efficient, rational

and even enlightened. To prove this, D. bases himself on laws such as building regulations or rulings protecting slaves from abuse. There is, however, a strong difference between theory and practice. To what extent could all these laws be enforced? The specific building regulations can equally show that people were in fact not really inclined to follow them. And for all the humane laws protecting slaves, most of them remained under the absolute and arbitrary power of their masters. An incident described in a later chapter conflicts with this idea of rational and humane rule. In 172/173, rural Egyptians driven to despair by oppressive taxation revolted in the Nile delta and came close to capturing Alexandria before they were destroyed piecemeal by Avidius Cassius. Clearly Marcus Aurelius' humanity did not reach down to these desperate souls. For D., the insurgency was caused by a lack of Roman civilization: "Zweihundert Jahre Römerherrschaft konnten das Reich nicht flächendeckend zivilisieren" (210). But was Roman rule and oppression not the cause for the *boukoloï* to revolt rather than a lack of Roman civilization? D.'s interpretation of the revolt strongly mirrors Roman propaganda, which was at pains to portray native Egyptian rebels as uncivilised barbarians (see T. Polański, *Boukoloï Banditry. Greek Perspectives on Native Resistance*, *Grazer Beiträge* 25, 229–248). D.'s enlightened Roman rule is a far cry from how Chris Wickham described the empire in "The Inheritance of Rome" (2010): "The Roman world was seriously corrupt, as well as violent [...]. The Roman state was not particularly 'enlightened'." Arguments for both interpretations can be found, depending on the data one chooses to focus on.

These remarks do not detract from the merits of this monumental work. In the preface, D. warns his readers that they will not find spectacular new insights in it. Rather, it serves as a new attempt to bring all available information on Marcus Aurelius' reign together and "aus diesem ungeheuren Schatz die Zimelien immer wieder herauszugreifen und in einer Form darzubieten, die ihren Glanz zur Geltung bringt". In this, D. absolutely succeeds. For many future students and scholars, the book's encyclopedic power and exhaustive 'Quellenforschung' will provide a valuable anchor point. For anyone interested in history and culture, it is a treasure trove of facts and insights not only about Marcus Aurelius or the Roman Empire, but also about western cultural history up to this day.