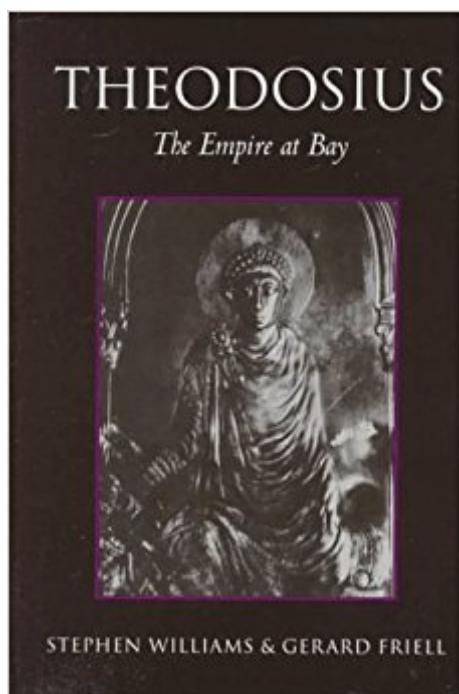


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Theodosius: The Empire At Bay (Roman Imperial Biographies (Paperback))



Synopsis

Theodosius I, a towering figure in the history of the late Roman Empire and the early Church, was the last Roman emperor to rule a unified empire of East and West. His reign from 379 to 395 represents a turning point in the policies and fortunes of the late Roman Empire. In this fascinating biography, Stephen Williams and Gerard Friell examine Theodosius's life and character, placing the military, religious, and political struggles of his reign in the context of the troubled times of the empire. Drawing on literary, archaeological, and numismatic evidence, the authors describe how Theodosius was summoned to the throne after the disastrous Roman defeat by the Goths at Adrianople and was called upon to rebuild the armies and put the shattered state back together. They show how Theodosius instituted a new policy toward the barbarians, in which diplomacy played a larger role than military might at a time of increasing frontier dangers and acute manpower shortages, and how a series of political misfortunes led to the separation of the Eastern and Western empires despite his efforts. They also discuss Theodosius's importance in the Christian Church. Baptized in 380, Theodosius established the Apostolic Catholic Church as the only State religion; unlike Constantine and the other Christian emperors, he suppressed both heresy and paganism and enforced orthodoxy by law. By fully exploring these various facets of Theodosius's life and reign, Williams and Friell present a new and absorbing picture of this important emperor.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In my edition, in Chapter 2, there is a footnote #55 and the source is not cited in the notes. I had a

question that I had hoped this book would answer. I may not even find an answer. I was trying to understand if many of his decisions were actually based on his religious beliefs or just necessary politically motivated self-preservation tactics due to constant "intrigues" and mob action. I am drawn to the latter from pieces of information taken from other sources as well as this. I'm no expert though. I mention it only because in the 12th Chapter there is a troubling sentence. "His devoted love for his family and dynasty led him to neglect the best interests of a united empire." I didn't read anything in the book that would have led me to that conclusion. What this book did do was take me through the changes in the military structure painlessly. It also provided information on taxes and ways to get out of paying them and the overall economic climate. I liked the information on propaganda.

This book should have been called, 'The Roman Empire During and After the Reign of Theodosius'. But that's probably too long. Overall, this book is another interesting look in to the sad failing years of the Roman Empire in west. First, unfortunately, we are presented with an overly positive portrayal of Gratian and an overly negative portrayal of Valens relating to the events of Adrianople. Noel Lenski's book: Failure of Empire has a much more accurate and balanced explanation of the debacle of Adrianople and the events preceding it. Gratian is wise enough to realize that he needs someone with authority dedicated to resolving the problems arising after Adrianople. Theodosius is selected and demonstrates considerable diplomatic and military skill in the years leading to the gothic treaty in 382. There is little direct information about Theodosius himself and how various segments of the Roman Empire east and west viewed him. If this was due to a lack of source material then the authors fail to mention that. Following Gratian's death Theodosius record is more spotty. We see an Emperor bowing to the will of a bishop (Ambrose) and doing penance. Something a great like Constantine would never consider. Theodosius gives the nod to crushing new laws and now the tables are turned; pagans are persecuted while the emperor approves or does nothing. The emperor submits completely to the will of his Catholic Bishop, Ambrose. The dark ages are ushered in. An era when free thinking comes to an end and the narrow world view of the early christian church holds sway for the next thousand years in Europe. Theodosius is clearly focused on his own paternity over the good of the Roman Empire. He fights a disastrous civil war the year before he dies, paving the way for his two idiot sons Honorius and Arcadius. The era of the 'puppet emperor' begins and title of western emperor never regains its prestige. This is a time of domination for religion and foppish court officials, truly a sad time in Roman history. The final chapter deals with Stilicho's futile efforts to hold the empire together and the years following. Stephen Williams book on

Diocletian was head and shoulders better than this one, but perhaps the subject matter has a lot to do with that.

Review first posted on .co.uk on 27 November 2011 I bought this book in 1997 and this is the third time that I have read it. It was initially published in 1994 but it remains very valuable and is a superb read. It is relatively short (less than 200 pages) and very well-written book, well illustrated with maps and photos, and its appendices are particularly worth reading. Its main aim and merit is to set the record straight and provide a thorough discussion of the Empire's strengths, weaknesses and predicaments after the disaster of Adrianople in 378. Of particular interest to me were the chapters on the Roman army, which was certainly not in decline and suffering from "barbarization" before Adrianople, the "top heavy Empire" and the endemic civil wars that continued to weaken it during the whole of the 4th century, including during Theodosius' reign. Also of interest is the careful analysis made by the authors of the rule of Theodosius, the last emperor to rule the whole undivided Empire. As they conclude, he was not among the greatest Emperors and the title by which he is remembered was essentially because of his pro-Church and anti-pagan policies. This added yet another element of division and discord within the Empire. He was also influencable, especially by the Church, and by Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, in particular, to which he gave in on a number of occasions, and at the expense of his own authority. He seems to have trusted too much some of his entourage, and some of his choices turned out to be mistakes, such as the choice of Arbogast as commander in chief and unofficial regent the West. A military assessment of Theodosius is more difficult. He certainly was an active and good general, following in the footsteps of his father, but probably at a time when an outstanding general would have been needed. The criticism levelled at him for having accepted to let the Visigoths settle within the Empire in 382 is somewhat excessive and unfair. There is probably not much else he could have done since he did not have the manpower (and needed it, hence another short term advantage of the settlements was to provide soldiers and warriors) to destroy them. Attempting to do so through another pitch battle would have meant running the risk of losing the forces that he was just rebuilding. So, given his means, he managed to fight them to a standstill through small actions and by denying them supplies before finally giving them land within the Empire, but on his own terms. However, he did decisively defeat another attempt by another host of Goths (and others) to cross the Danube in 386. This time, the Empire did not underestimate the threat and won hands down. Another criticism levelled against Theodosius is that, by the end of this reign and after two hardly fought civil wars, he left the army badly weakened, especially in the West. While true, this is also partly unfair. As the book shows,

once Gratian was overthrown and killed in the West, Theodosius did not immediately march on the usurper Maximus. He only reacted after Maximus invaded Italy several years latter. Again, the explanation probably had to do with the state of his army because, as the book also shows, once he did decide to do away with Maximus, the campaign was methodical and rather swift. His responsibility in the second - and even more costly - civil war against his former general Arbogast seems heavier, especially since the hard fought war lead to considerable losses on both sides. This was even more so for the losers, with the Western army being defeated a second time in less than 10 years. However, both he and Stilicho, his right-hand man by the end of his reign and who became regent in the West, certainly did all they could. They made mistakes, but they also faced huge problems, of which one of the main ones was manpower shortages that rippled through to the economy, affected the imperial treasury and the army, and largely explain why emperors settled Germans within the Empire's borders even before they lost their military supremacy. Perhaps the main disaster that occurred was Theodosius' premature death, when the army had not yet had time to recover from its losses and his heirs were still children. Both would turn out to have long reigns, would not rule, would never, unlike their father, command an army in the field (and neither would any of their successors for a long time), would remain cut off from the world in their palaces and would be among the least capable of all Emperors. As another commentator mentioned: he did everything he could, up to the point of exhaustion, but it wasn't enough. I would add to that that many didn't really help (starting with the Church) and that his untimely death was a stroke of extraordinary bad luck.

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