

James W. Ermatinger. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Greenwood Guides to Historic Events of the Ancient World. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004, xxxi + 187 p., ISBN 978-0313326929.

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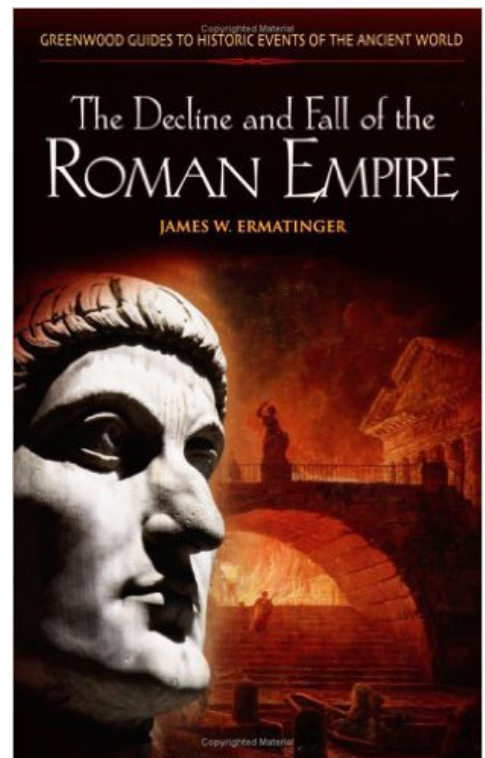
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The *Greenwood Guide to Historic Events of the Ancient World* is an eleven volume book series published by Greenwood Press, covering from the second millennium B.C. through the first half of the 1st millennium A. D. This series looks at a variety of topics in the ancient world including technology, society, nations, and religions. The series is designed by the publisher and editor to be a handy reference providing a comprehensive overview along with guidelines for analysis and further research¹. While the level of readership is not specified, it can be inferred that general readers, primary school students, and undergraduates are the general audience for this series.

James W. Ermatinger is the author of three volumes in Greenwood's Daily Life series; *The World of Ancient Rome: A Daily Life Encyclopedia*, *Daily Life in the New Testament*, *Daily Life of Christians in Ancient Rome*.² He also the author of *The Economic Reforms of Diocletian*, one of only a few economic monographs that focuses solely on the reign of Diocletian and his impact on the economic policy and structure of the Roman Empire³. As such he is well acquainted with the history of the later Roman/early Byzantine period, along with its sources and historiography.

In the late 20th century, based on the scholarship and direction of Peter Brown, many Roman-Byzantine historians moved away from the idea of a "Fall of Rome" in favour of a "transformation" of the Roman state into the Mediaeval kingdoms of the West. With this emphasis on transformation has also come a minimization of the disruptive events of the 3rd and 4th centuries and a heavy emphasis on the socio-cultural aspects of the period, now known primarily as "Late Antiquity"⁴. However, by the turn of the 21st century, some scholars were beginning to revisit the paradigm of 'decline and fall of the Roman Empire' and *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* was the first of three books in the mid-2000's to squarely address that question⁵.

Unlike the other two books focusing on the 'Fall of Rome,' Ermatinger eschews a traditional narrative history and approaches the issue from a thematic perspective. After a ten page introduction providing a historical overview Ermatinger divides *The Decline and Fall* into five thematic chapters followed by a sixth chapter providing a conclusion. Each thematic chapter examines the major general assertions as to why Rome fell including:



¹ ERMATINGER 2004 xi-xii.

² ERMATINGER 2015; ERMATINGER 2008; ERMATINGER 2007.

³ ERMATINGER 1996.

⁴ BROWN 1971 set the rough chronological boundaries of Late Antiquity as AD150 – AD750. His subsequent publications have explored other cultural, religious and social aspects of society in the time period. For a discussion of the development of Late Antiquity and some of the problems associated with a paradigm of "transformation" instead of decline see MARCONE 2008, 4-18; LIEBESCHUETZ 2006. Discussion of the 3rd Century Period and its connection to the issues of Late Antiquity see DE BLOIS 2002, 209-217 and LIEBESCHUETZ 2007, 11-22.

⁵ The other works published are: WARD-PERKINS 2005; HEATHER 2006.

Cultural Decay, Economic & Social Decline, External & Internal threats to the Empire, and Religious controversy⁶. Following these chapters are seven pages of illustrations, a section of short biographies on principal individuals in Late Rome, Primary documents chosen to illustrate state and society in Late Rome, glossary of terms, brief notes, and a short but well annotated bibliography for further reading.

With the Introduction: Historical Overview Ermatinger first sets out the scope and focus of the book, looking at the question of 'When Did Rome Fall' along with causes of fall. While noting that AD 476 is the popular date used Ermatinger points out that there are a number of other options available. He also makes the critical point that while the Roman Empire may have fallen in the West, in the East, based at Constantinople, it would endure and thrive for a millennia. The East Roman Empire commonly referred to as the Byzantine Empire, continued Roman culture, traditions, political structures, and laws until its fall to the Ottoman Turks in 1453⁷. From there Ermatinger offers a brief historical overview of events from approximately AD 250-AD 500. Ermatinger places emphasis on the economic problems which beset the Empire in the 3rd Century along with military problems of civil war, weakened borders and political turnover as reasons for a tremendous number of changes in the economic, political, and social fabric of the empire.

In Chapter 1: *Late Roman Culture (250-500 C.E.)* Ermatinger first looks at the process of Romanization, the merging of Roman and Hellenistic culture with that of the various regional cultures found in the Empire, which occurred in the early imperial period (AD 14 – AD 235)⁸. He notes that since the Italian Renaissance in the 15th and 16th centuries scholars and artists have argued the Late Roman period was a period of cultural stagnation compared to the early period⁹. Taking literature and art as two main sources of cultural transmission Ermatinger proceeds to survey the different types of literature and art during the period. Ermatinger quickly examines the different genres of writing found in the Late Empire looking at *panegyrics*, the legal codes, imperial biographies, chronicles, and the emerging Christian literature including ecclesiastical history and theological works. He then looks the types of evidence that can support or question literary sources such as documentary sources (inscriptions, papyri, and other public documents) and archaeological evidence such as numismatics. Changes in the styles of art are then looked at with Ermatinger noting the use of art by the emperors as a method of imperial propaganda.

Chapter 2: *Society and Economics in Late Antiquity* first covers elements of Late Roman society. Ermatinger puts emphasis on the rigidity of the Roman class system, noting the fact that there was separation based on class but also based on wealth. However, mechanisms did exist

that allowed for lower class citizens to advance their social standing, as the Roman Army proved to be the largest institution that provided the opportunity for citizens to advance their class or monetary standing in the Empire. Ermatinger also touches on the increased role of Equestrians in the Empire as a counter to the older Senatorial class, and new laws designed to combat depopulation by tying peasants to the land. From there Ermatinger moves to look at cities in the Empire, with the prime focus on Rome. He briefly looks at amphitheatres, schools, temples, and theatres to illustrate aspects of city life. Ermatinger also notes the use of a grain dole to Rome and other cities in order maintain a peaceful population. After briefly looking at the changing role of the villa in rural economic life over the course of the 3rd through the 5th centuries, Ermatinger looks at the economic life of the Empire. Noting that the empire received the majority of its income from agricultural taxes, Ermatinger introduces the two main forms of taxation used in the Late Roman period: the land tax or *iugatio* and the head tax or *capitatio*. Ermatinger looks at the market economy and its role in providing trade and communication linkages not only between cities and government, but also between rural markets and the government. Finally, Ermatinger uses the Egyptian town of Theadelphia as an example of a town that failed during the time-period, though he does not feel that the taxation system of the empire was responsible for the towns collapse.

With Chapter 3: *Religious Conflict in Christian Rome* Ermatinger takes a closer look at the religious problems, which beset the Roman Empire during this time-period. He begins by looking at a broad view of Paganism, which can cover a number of different religions. Ermatinger first looks at state paganism, which was concerned with civic welfare and salvation, not individual salvation or faith, and the role of ritual in securing the favour of the gods. From there he briefly looks at the mystery religions that saw a rise in popularity in the second to fourth century Empire. These mystery religions, including Demeter, Isis, and Mithras among others, promoted individual salvation but were not monotheistic. Ermatinger touches upon Mithraism, which enjoyed popularity with the army, and on the Emperor Aurelian's attempt to sponsor a new state religion through the worship of *Sol Invictus*, the Unconquered Sun. From here Ermatinger looks at the tenuous position of Christianity in the Roman Empire during the early imperial period. He notes that as Judaism was the only officially sanctioned monotheistic religion in the Empire, Roman officials expected Christians to offer sacrifices to the state gods. When Christians refused to do so, Roman officials classified them either as Jewish or as seditious atheists. Regardless of the classification, the Empire viewed early Christians with suspicion due to the appeal of early Christianity to the lower classes of the Roman Empire. Ermatinger then looks at the persecutions against Christians during the third century, focusing on the methods and scope of the persecutions. He also notes the role of the official persecutions in reinvigorating Christians, that the severity of persecutions varied from region to region, and the end of the persecutions did not mean the end of internal problems for Christianity. Ermatinger rounds out the chapter by looking at three

⁶ ERMATINGER 2004, xxxi.

⁷ See TREADGOLD 2001 for a concise history of the entire Byzantine Period of the Roman Empire.

⁸ This period is also known as the Principate, particularly in earlier literature from the 19th and early 20th centuries.

⁹ This tendency can be noted more easily in French language publications rather than English. In French publications the Late Empire is known as *le Bas Empire*, or the low empire.

distinct areas of conflict in religion during the late Imperial period: Donatism, Arianism, and Pagan Philosophy.

With Chapter 4: *Enemies of Rome* Ermatinger details the various external and internal enemies that beset the Roman Empire during the late Imperial period. Ermatinger starts by looking at foreign threats to the empire, dividing the threats by East or Western Regions. In the East the Sassanid (Sassanian) Empire was the main and most powerful threat to the safety and stability of the borders as several Shah's successfully invaded the Empire's eastern provinces. With the Western region the Empire did not face centrally organized nations, but a large array of tribes that began to coalesce into larger more formidable foes over the course of the third century. Ermatinger then briefly looks at the Franks (in northern Gaul), Saxons (raiding Britannia), Burgundians (in south-eastern France), and the Sarmatians (Danubian region) before focusing on the more militarily important tribes. These larger military threats included the Visigoths, the Vandals, and the Huns. Each of these larger threats would ravage large portions of the western empire, significantly weakening Roman control, and provide the impetus for tribes to establish independent kingdoms in what had been Roman territory. Ermatinger then looks at internal threats to the Empire, namely bureaucrats, magnates, church officials and peasants. Each of these factions was a threat to the empire because of frequent infighting, the replacement of loyalty to Rome with loyalty to a local region in a large number of provinces, and apathy towards the survival of the Empire. Ermatinger concludes by looking at the role of the Emperor in causing instability in the Empire.

The penultimate chapter, Chapter 5: *Why and When Rome Fell*, is divided into two distinct sections. *Why* examines seven major theories as to why the Roman Empire fell: quality and quantity of its armed forces, lack of competent political leaders, lack of an established dynasty or a stable means of succession, religious conflict between pagans and Christians, changes in society, economic changes including the disappearance of a middle class, and finally a retreat from political engagement. With each of these theories, Ermatinger briefly summarizes the argument, and then proceeds to illustrate the weaknesses with each theory. Ermatinger concludes that the reasons for Rome's fall are elusive since the same problems occurred in the East without a dramatic fall. The second section *When Rome Fell* looks at the various dates proposed for the fall of Rome. These include 284 (the ascension of Diocletian), 312 (Constantine's defeat of Maxentius), 337 (purge of the Imperial family), 378 (Battle of Adrianople), 394 (Outlawing of Paganism), 410 & 455 (Sacking of Rome), and 476 (dismissal of the last Western Emperor). After examining and dismissing these dates Ermatinger then proposes that the year 324 represents the best possible date due to disastrous dynastic, religious, economic, military policies put into practice by the Emperor Constantine that fundamentally weakened the fabric of Roman government. To Ermatinger the effect of these policies, along with the psychological impact of establishing Constantinople as the main capital of the Empire, over the course of the next one hundred fifty years would lead to the disappearance of a Roman Empire in the West.

With Chapter 6: *Conclusion* Ermatinger provides

a brief wrap-up of his arguments. He first looks at the impact of the decline and fall of the Empire upon the West. Ermatinger notes that the disappearance of a unified empire and the emergence of small kingdoms, the stratification of society, the loss of international commerce in the West, and the growth of Christian Church helped produce a Latin Medieval West that was culturally separate from the Greek Byzantine East. After illustrating once again that no theory on the cause of the Fall of Rome has produced definite answers, Ermatinger then looks at why the Fall of Rome should be important to citizens of the twenty-first century. He settles on lessons in humility, that all nations can fall; that autocratic governments lose the backing of their citizens, leading to their apathy or hatred of the government; governments should not be economically oppressive to their citizens; and the perils of incompetent leadership, driven by special interest groups, to the stability of a government.

Following these six chapters are several different supplementary materials, which account for approximately fifty percent of the text. Visual materials include three, rather rudimentary, maps of western Germanic kingdoms, invasion paths, and cities of the Roman Empire. Also included are a small collection of photographs, which reference Roman pottery, artwork, seals, statuary, and coinage. Each of the maps and other visual materials are helpfully referenced in brackets at appropriate points throughout the text, giving the reader a frame of reference for the illustration.

This is followed by a selection of short biographies of important individuals who lived during the time frame of the book. Historical figures included in the biographies include emperors, theologians, writers, philosophers, and military leaders. While short in length, each biography is roughly one-three paragraphs in length, these biographies introduce the novice reader to the major figures of the time.

While the "Notes" section is so negligible as to barely be worth including, the Annotated Bibliography is quite substantial. Separated into Primary and Secondary sources this bibliography has short, but valuable, annotations for each entry to provide the reader with a quick reference as to the worth of the source.

The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire does have some problems with its presentation. To start there are some factual errors that occur in the main chapters of the book, primarily in the historical introduction. Valerian did not attack Shapur I in 256. Instead, Valerian's defeat and capture by Shapur came in 260, when he moved the Roman army into Mesopotamia to oppose Shapur's invasion of the region¹⁰. Gallienus did not reconquer the breakaway Gaul, instead the Gallic Empire would last until 274 when the Emperor Aurelian defeated it and reincorporated its territories into the Roman Empire¹¹. Aurelian did not leave Zenobia in control of Palmyra, nor did Zenobia rebel a second time. Instead, Aurelian captured Zenobia prior to taking Palmyra and she was not left in power after Aurelian took Palmyra. Palmyra rebelled the next year (273) at which point Aurelian swiftly returned and destroyed the city¹². Sassanid should be spelled Sassanid, though Sasanian is more

¹⁰ DARYAEE 2008, 25-26.

¹¹ POTTER 2004, 257-266.

¹² POTTER 2004, 272.

common among Iranologists today. The Sasanian Empire did not see itself as the recreation of the ancient Achaemenid Iranian Empire. That idea is the result of assertions in Greco-Roman sources, which are not corroborated by Sasanian sources¹³. Prior to their crossing of the Danube river in 376 to escape the Huns the Gothic tribes were not known as Visigoths and Ostrogoths, nor do those stand for East Goths and West Goths, instead they were known as the Tervingi and Greutungi¹⁴. Most of these mistakes seem to come as the result of condensing a large amount of historical information.

Outside of factual errors, the largest issue with this book is the fact that it does not supply the reader with enough historical background prior to the thematic chapter analyses. The historical introduction is simply too brief and condensed to provide an adequate overview for the reader with no background on the late Roman/early Byzantine period. Six pages is not enough space to provide coverage of the Third Century Crises, the Diocletianic and Constantinian reforms of the empire, the problems of the later fourth century, and the collapse of the Western Empire in the fifth century. Also problematic is the fact there are exactly nine endnotes for the entire book, and the majority of them refer the reader to other volumes in the Greenwood Guide to Historic Events of the Ancient World series. There are literally no notes or references to where Ermatinger's information is coming from, or where readers can go for greater information on a particular topic or chapter. While it is understandable that the publisher wished to limit the notes so as not to scare away general readers, in a book that provides an introduction to part of the ancient world it is a disservice to the reader to nearly eliminate them.

The three maps included are rudimentary at best and would have served the reader better to have been prepared by a professional cartographer. Additional maps of the empire in 235, 324, 395, 455 and 476 would have given the reader a greater visual illustration of the collapse of the empire in the West. Additionally, while the short biographies are extremely handy, the lack of a brief further reading suggestion decreases their usefulness to students looking for where to start their research.

The annotated bibliography, while excellent overall, has some missed translations of primary sources and a few omissions in the secondary sources. Primary sources, available when *Decline and Fall* was published, which were not included in the annotated bibliography include the following. A new translation of Joshua the Stylite by Frank R. Trombley and John W. Watt in the 'Translated Texts for Historians' series published by Liverpool University Press¹⁵. The editions and translations of Eunapius, Olympiodorus of Thebes, Priscus and Malchus found in R. C. Blockley's *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the later Roman Empire*¹⁶. A Loeb edition and translation of Herodian's *Ab excessu divi Marci historia* by C. R. Whittaker¹⁷. Available from the Australian Association for Byzantine Studies is

a translation of the *Chronographia* of John Malalas¹⁸. The new edition and translation from Oxford University Press of Lactantius's *De Mortibus Persecutorum* by J. L. Creed¹⁹. The three volume Loeb edition of the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* by edited and translated by David Magie. Lastly, and most critically to the third century, is the translation and commentary by David Potter on the *XIII Oracula Sibyllina*²⁰.

Some omissions in the secondary sources include the following: Glanville Downey – *The Late Roman Empire*; Arther Ferrill - *The Fall of the Roman Empire: The Military Explanation and Roman Imperial Grand Strategy*; Constance Head – *The Emperor Julian*; Peter Heather – *The Goths*; Ramsey MacMullen - *Roman Government's Response to Crisis: A.D. 235-337*; Irfan Shahid - *Rome and the Arabs: A Prolegomenon to the Study of Byzantium and the Arabs*; John Wacher – *The Roman Empire*; Stephen Williams & Gerald Friell - *The Rome that Did Not Fall: The Survival of the East in the Fifth Century*²¹.

However, despite these weaknesses the book has some significant strengths. The thematic chapters on the different aspects of Roman decline are excellent, and the decision to link the included primary source translations to specific points in the text makes it easy for instructors to integrate primary sources into their discussion of the chapters. Despite the lack of further reading options the short biographies offer a quick reference on important personages during the period. The annotated bibliography provides readers and students with numerous suggestions for further reading and research.

As a concise introduction to the Late Roman/Early Byzantine Empire, and the issue of 'Decline and Fall,' this book does not work. The best short introduction for students, in this reviewer's opinion, is Glanville Downey's slender volume *The Late Roman Empire*.²² However, if used in concert with a good historical overview such as Downey's, or appropriate chapters from the three Cambridge Ancient History volumes dealing with the Late Roman/Early Byzantine period, this book will offer an excellent starting point for discussion on the Fall of Rome. Recommended in conjunction with other works for undergraduate classes.

ADDITIONAL PRIMARY SOURCE TRANSLATIONS

The following translations of primary sources have appeared since *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* went to press in 2004.

Amidon, P. R. (trans.), *Philostorgius: Church History*. Writings from the Greco-Roman World Vol. 23. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007.) Philostorgius was a member of heretical sect of Christianity and provides a very different view of the Late Roman/Early Byzantine world.

¹⁸ JEFFREYS/JEFFERYS/SCOTT/CROKE 1986.

¹⁹ CREED 1984.

²⁰ POTTER 1990.

²¹ DOWNEY 1969; FERRILL 1986; FERRILL 1991; HEAD 1976; HEATHER 1996; MACMULLEN 1976; SHAHID 1984; WACHER 1987; WILLIAMS/FRIELL 1999.

²² DOWNEY 1969 – While published in 1969, unlike its more recently published competitors by Averil Cameron (*The Later Roman Empire 284-430*) and *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity A. D. 395-700*), this work is concise, chronologically organized, and covers the almost the entire Late Roman/Early Byzantine period from 235 to the end of the Emperor Justinian's reign in 565.

¹³ See DARYAEE 2008, 15-16.

¹⁴ HEATHER 1996, 51-57; WOLFRAM 1987, 57 & 85-86.

¹⁵ TROMBLY/WATTS 2000.

¹⁶ BLOCKLEY 1983.

¹⁷ WHITTAKER 1969.

Banchich, T., (trans.), *The lost history of Peter the Patrician: an account of Rome's imperial past from the age of Justinian*. (London: Routledge, 2015.) The first translation into English of the fragments of Peter Patricius's History, with detailed commentary by Banchich.

Banchich, T., & Lane, E. (trans.), *The History of Zonaras: from Alexander Severus to the death of Theodosius the Great*. (London: Routledge, 2009.) The first published translation of any portion of Zonaras into English, with extremely detailed notes and parallel translations from other sources. Though written in the late-12th century Zonaras had access to sources that are lost to us making his account of considerable value.

Banchich, T. (trans.), *Epitome De Caesaribus*. Canisius College Translated Texts, No. 1. 2nd Ed. (Buffalo: Canisius College, 2001.) <http://www.roman-emperors.org/epitome.htm> Published on the internet and not in print. This is the only English translation of the *Epitome* available and other than a brief introduction does not have any notes.

Given, J. (trans.), *The Fragmentary history of Priscus: Attila, the Huns and the Roman Empire, AD 430-476*. (Merchantville: Evolution Publishing, 2014.) A new translation of the fragments of Priscus, slightly different arrangement than that of R.C. Blockley, and considerable more affordable.

Jaquith, T. (Trans) *The Breviary of Festus*. (San Bernardino: CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2015.) While two translations of Festus are available on the internet, this is the first print translation of Festus published. Also includes the Latin text of Foerster and detailed historical and philological notes.

ADDITIONAL SECONDARY SOURCES

The following books have appeared since *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* went to press in 2004 and can be used to supplement the bibliography provided by Ermatinger.

Christie, N., *The Fall of the Western Roman Empire: An Archaeological and Historical Perspective*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011.) Looks at the Western Roman Empire from an archaeological standpoint, with emphasis on the gradual transformation of the Empire.

Daryaee, T., *Sasanian Persia: the rise and fall of an empire*. (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd. in association with the Iran Heritage Foundation, 2009.) Arranged thematically, each chapter covers political, cultural, religious, linguistic, economic and administrative history.

Daryaee, T., *Sasanian Iran (224-651 CE): Portrait of a Late Antique Empire*. Sasanika Series, No. 1 (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2008.) A concise political history of Sasanian Iran by the one of the leading scholars of the Sasanian Empire.

Gregory, T. E., *A History of Byzantium*. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.) A good general history of the Byzantine Roman Empire from the time of Diocletian to the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

Haegemans, K., *Imperial Authority and Dissent: The Roman Empire in AD 235-238*. Studia Hellenistica Vo. 47. (Leuven: Peeters, 2010.) Excellent study of the Roman Empire during the reign of the Emperor Maximinus (Thrax).

Hedlund, R., & Nilsson, H. "*Achieved nothing worthy of memory: Coinage & authority in the Roman Empire c. AD 260-295*". (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2008.) A more specific monograph, limited to the second part of the 3rd Century crises, which focuses on the role of coinage in Roman Empire, and how the imperial imagery on the coinage was used to reinforce the legitimacy of the Emperor.

Millar, F., *A Greek Roman Empire: Power and Belief Under Theodosius II (408-450)*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.) A study of the eastern portion of the Roman Empire by one of the foremost scholars of the Roman world.

Mitchell, S. *A History of the Later Roman Empire, AD 284-641: The Transformation of the Ancient World*. (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2007.) A good general history of the Late Roman period up to the death of Heraklios in 641. Mitchell is particularly good at integrating cultural as well as administrative history.

Southern, P., *The Roman Army: A History 753 BC - AD 476*. (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2015.) A well-illustrated narrative history of the Roman army. While as a popular history it lacks any type of notes, the author has helpfully arranged the bibliography by chapter providing an excellent jumping off point for future research.

Treadgold, W. T., *The Early Byzantine Historians*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.) An excellent study, from a leading Byzantinist, on the major historians of the Early Byzantine Empire. While the focus is on the East there is considerable overlap in the 4th and 5th centuries.

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