

VINCENT PUECH, *Les élites de cour de Constantinople (450–610). Une approche prosopographique des relations de pouvoir* (Scripta Antiqua 155). Bordeaux: Ausonius 2022. 367 pp., 6 maps. – ISBN 978-2-35613-475-2

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This is a wide-ranging study of the elites of the later Roman Empire: wide-ranging in both its time span and its coverage of the types of individuals appointed by successive emperors to implement their policies. PUECH begins with the mid-fifth century, when the Empire was enjoying a time of peace with Persia and the main struggles for power at court were between the Isaurians and Goths. The Council of Chalcedon held in 451 to resolve the disagreements between the miaphysites (monophysites in this book) and dyophysites (Chalcedonians) only led to further schisms between emperors and popes and within the eastern patriarchates: the doctrinal persuasion of individuals was to prove immensely influential to particular emperors. By the time we reach 610, the military and political situation was very different and far more unstable: the conflicts with Persia and the Avars dominated foreign policy, while the scale of internal unrest with the deposition of both Maurice and Phocas far surpassed anything which had been witnessed in Constantinople since the reign of Zeno. PUECH’s study encompasses this broad sweep of late Roman history through the lens of the individuals selected by the emperor to tell the story on what grounds emperors from Marcian to Phocas selected their officials and how these individuals shaped the running of the empire. In detail and narrative, PUECH augments A. H. M. JONES – J. R. MARTINDALE – J. MORRIS, *Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire (PLRE)*, 3 vols., Cambridge 1971–1992, and he extends the scope of CH. BEGAS’ *Die Senatsaristokratie des oströmischen Reiches, ca. 457–518. Prosopographische und sozialgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Vestigia 71). Munich 2018.

PUECH’s ‘Introduction’ surveys the definitions of élites as identified by other scholars and explains that his study will look specifically at the individuals at court, their backgrounds (family connections, geographical origins, religious beliefs), the reasons why they were selected, and their relationship with the emperor. The main part of the book is divided into three chronological sections: ‘Une naissance dans les crises: l’Empire romain d’Orient de 450 à 518’; ‘Équilibres et ruptures de l’ère justinienne (518–565)’; and ‘Les successeurs contestés de Justinien (565–610)’.

The first part (chapters I–IV) covers the reigns of Marcian, Leo, Zeno and Anastasius. Taken together, these four reigns show the transfer of power from the general Aspar and his family, to individuals from Isauria, the *magister militum*, Zeno, in the reign of Marcian, and the future Emperor, Zeno, during the reign of Leo. After the reign of Zeno (474–491, with a brief hiatus in 475–476 with the usurpation of Basiliscus), the power of the Isaurians wanes with the accession of Anastasius who promoted his own family members to key positions. Alongside this overarching trend, PUECH highlights the role of men from Asia Minor; the selection of officials based on their doctrinal position (monophysite or Chalcedonian); and the fluctuations of power driven by usurpations and revolts, in particular those orchestrated during the reign of Zeno prompted by his mother-in-law, Verina, and the revolt of Vitalian towards the end of Anastasius’ reign. In each case, PUECH seeks to delve into the rationale behind the choice of individual, seeking links between for example, geographical background and doctrinal affinity, and exploring how the choice of individual drove the emperor’s own policy.

The second part focuses mostly on the long and significant reign of Justinian, prefaced by a short chapter (V) on the reign of Justin I. While noting some continuity in the individuals who continued to hold significant positions, it is clear that there had been a considerable shift in policy from the monophysite-leaning Anastasius to the pro-Chalcedonian Justin, and the redemption (albeit brief) of Vitalian. These shifts in policy and direction of rule began to bring new individuals to the fore. The reign of Justinian is the focal point of the book and unlike the other emperors who are allocated a chapter each (or less), Justinian enjoys two chapters: VI: *Le personnel du regime de Justinien (527–565)* and VII: *Révoltes et repression sous le règne de Justinien (527–565)*. This allows PUECH more space to investigate in greater detail the men with whom Justinian surrounded himself, looking at each group of nationals in turn: Illyrians, Thracians, those from Asia Minor, Egyptians, Caucasians, and Africans. While the role of members of the imperial family from the Balkans are highlighted, especially for their military service, Belisarius, as Justinian’s most well-known general, is given his own section. The family and protégées of Theodora are also discussed in the light of the influence that the Empress wielded at court.

Chapter VII gives PUECH an opportunity to delve more fully into the individuals who opposed the rule of Justinian (or with whom Justinian disagreed) and those he employed to get rid of them. Religion, politics or family rivalries caused these men to be on the opposing side to imperial

policy, and this chapter perhaps more than the others leads PUECH away from the prosopographic-led analysis of each reign to a more narrative-led and analytical approach. He chooses four key episodes: the issue of ‘pagan’ officials in 529; the Nika riot (532); the military revolts in Africa (536–546); and two individuals who participated in plots against Justinian: Artabanes (548/49) and Aetherius (560–562). Although these events fall loosely under the umbrella of plots they are all quite different incidents in terms of background, location, causes and outcomes. In his conclusion to this chapter (pp. 197–198), PUECH pulls them together by reference to their relationship with members of the court of Anastasius, their relationship with Theodora, or their doctrinal affinity.

The third part seeks to contextualise the remainder of the sixth century and beginning of the seventh in the light of the reign of Justinian. Chapter VIII covers the reigns of Justin II and Tiberius II where inevitably the influence of Justinian is at its strongest, but PUECH also brings out the significance of the Empress Sophia as well as highlighting Justin’s ambiguous position regarding the monophysites. Chapter IX focuses on the reign of Maurice, underlining continuity with the reign of Tiberius, and ends with Phocas’ coup d’état. Chapter X concludes the main section of the book with a discussion of the key individuals in the reign of Phocas, and also introduces us to the future emperor Heraclius.

In a short general conclusion (pp. 247–249), PUECH sums up his main themes: emperors appointed their officials (both military and civil) for their family connections, marriages, geographical origins, and doctrinal affinity. On the other side of the coin, revolts against the emperors were driven by similar connections. However, as PUECH points out, the relative stability in the capital can be attributed to the strong continuity of the elites from one reign to another. He also makes a good point that with the exception of those at the end of the period with the brutal overthrow of Maurice in 602 and Phocas in 610, purges carried out by emperors were generally limited. The book ends with a useful annex (*carrières*): this is a prosopography of many of the individuals referred to, augmenting *PLRE* III and very fully footnoted. This is followed by three genealogy tables (Marcian, Leon I and Zeno; Anastasius, Theodora and Justin II; and Tiberius II and Maurice); six nicely produced maps; a bibliography; an index of sources cited; and an index of the individuals included in the book. In this last index, PUECH highlights in bold the individuals for whom he has suggested changes to the information included in either BEGAS or the *PLRE*, which is very useful.

However, as pointed out by another reviewer (FLORIAN BATTISTELLA in *H-Soz-Kult* [14.11.2022](#)) there can be omissions and duplications (for example, the identical footnotes for Severianus p. 158 and p. 286).

In general, this book is a valuable addition to the corpus of publications on this period of late Roman history. It would be possible to take issue with the criteria for selecting the individuals, and the strict chronological order means that it is necessary for readers to bear in mind the key themes, lest the main thrust of the narrative become lost under the weight of the prosopographical material. On the other hand, the strengths of PUECH's approach lie in its coverage of a relatively long period, from 450 to 610, which allows for a number of long-term trends to be identified: family connections, religious affinities, and geographical provenance. It also allows us to see the importance (or otherwise) of the influence and connections of some of the empresses, for example, Verina, Theodora, and Sophia. PUECH's discussion of some of the significant revolts and the personnel involved in them adds an interesting dimension to his study and throws additional light onto the relationships of power at the Constantinopolitan court.

**Keywords**

Late Roman Empire; aristocracy; prosopography