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Walter Scheidel, *Escape from Rome. The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity.* pp. xviii + 670, 29 b/w ills, 5 tbls, 36 maps. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2019. ISBN 978-0-691-17218-7, hardcover £30, paperback £19.

This is a long book with a big theory: that innate features in Europe's geography and culture made it peculiarly empire-proof after the collapse of Rome, and that it is the failure of any empire to control Europe that best explains the exceptional technological, scientific and economic development which gave us the world we have today, in which the majority of us are 'so much richer, healthier and better educated than our ancestors used to be' (p. 1). The principal driver of this change is for Scheidel the persistent polycentrism in Europe after Rome, and the consequent thriving of competition, not only between numerous independent states but also within states, between different groups competing for wealth and influence – merchants, lords, bishops and kings. While Europe enjoyed these conditions, conducive to innovation and growth, more or less continuously after the disintegration of the western Roman empire, most of the rest of developed Eurasia remained under the dead hand of empire. A 'First Great Divergence' occurred around AD 500, with Europe freed from empire, and the rest of Eurasia trapped within it.

The argument for the importance of European polycentrism is not entirely new, as Scheidel readily admits, though he presents it with exceptional thoroughness and detailed comparison between Europe and parts of the world where massive hegemonic empires remained the norm – above all China (whose history Scheidel knows well), but also the Indian subcontinent and the Middle East. More novel is the explanation that Scheidel offers for the persistence of polycentrism in Europe against the persistence of unified empire in China and elsewhere. For him the exceptional trajectory of European history, differentiating it from what happened in China, can only be explained in terms of deep-rooted structural differences, some of them immutable: topographical fragmentation in Europe (with peninsulas, islands and divisive mountain ranges), cultural and ideological divisions (in particular a religion, the Christian Church, that had its own power structure and ideology, separate from those of the state), and, above all, an accident of geography and ecology that separates western Europe from the steppe, the great belt of grassland, inhabited by horse-borne pastoralists and warriors, that once stretched from Manchuria to the Ukraine. The steppe, Scheidel argues, has been central to the creation of the large majority of land-based empires: not only those directly instituted by steppe-peoples (like the Huns, Avars, Mongols and Turks); but also those that emerged amongst settled agriculturalists, by encouraging them to develop strong unified states against the threat of the formidable armies of horsemen that the steppe could produce. Thus China was almost always unified by rulers from the north, because their core territory bordered on the steppe, necessitating the development of an exceptionally powerful military and state machine. Western Europeans, spared this danger, had the luxury of being able to fight bitterly amongst themselves; but, ironically, out of this turmoil came technological and economic development (as well as other things, such as competitive overseas expansion from the fifteenth century onwards).

To argue this case effectively Scheidel has to explain away an obvious anomaly – the Roman empire, which very effectively unified almost the whole of western Europe for some four centuries – and he devotes three chapters to 'Why Rome?', explaining that Roman power emerged in wholly exceptional circumstances, which would never reoccur: a society geared for war, that had the good fortune to sit on the edge of a more developed eastern Mediterranean, and with less well-organised polities

to the north ripe for the take-over. Unfortunately, I lack the expertise necessary to judge this section, though I am sure it will be of particular interest to readers of this journal. He then provides two chapters explaining why every subsequent attempt at European empire (from Justinian to Napoleon) has failed. However, any historian or archaeologist who picks up this book expecting a detailed discussion of the reasons for the ultimate failure of Rome itself will be disappointed: since for Scheidel the existence of the Roman empire was an anomaly, its disappearance does not require in-depth analysis; and anyway, as he rightly notes, a very great deal of scholarly ink has been devoted to this topic in recent years. In reality, despite its title, this isn't really a book about the 'Escape from Rome' – a more accurate if less catchy title would have been 'Lack of Empire and the Road to European Development'.

Archaeologists in particular will also note that Scheidel, who is clearly not archaeologically inclined, gives the technological and economic developments that happened under the empire short-shrift, spending no time on the remarkable upturn in infrastructure (roads, ports and shipping), the boom of large-scale specialist industries and long-distance commerce, the remarkable spread of agriculture (particularly through complex systems of drainage and irrigation), and the clear evidence of internal economic competition (in the shifting geographical centres of oil, wine and pottery production). Nor does he even mention the economic and technological downturn that occurred in the fifth to seventh centuries: it is certainly true that the fifth century saw the emergence of European polycentrism, but it also saw the beginning of a recession that was to last at least 400 years, and which for a while took the economy of much of Europe back to pre-Iron-age levels of sophistication.

If we decide, with Scheidel, to wholly ignore the period between c. 500 and c. 900 AD, then we might agree that European polycentrism can be seen as a crucial economic, technological and intellectual force. But was this the only way that the developments that gave us the modern world could have emerged? Scheidel is very keen on counterfactuals (at one point even discussing whether China's approach to overseas trade would have been different if the world's continents and oceans were differently arranged), and I think a reasonable counterfactual to European polycentric development can be offered: a Roman empire that persisted, preserving a massive and peaceful single-currency area of commerce, where the free exchange of ideas and internal competition led to exponential scientific and technological development long before this actually took off in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some 1200 years after the triumph of European polycentrism. Technological and economic conservatism is not innate in the DNA of imperial powers: science and technology would surely have progressed faster under Napoleon, with his enlightenment views, than under the polycentric *anciens régimes* reinstated in 1815, while modern-day China, lording it imperially over Xinjang and Tibet, has pushed forward scientific, technological and economic development to an extraordinary degree, that we in the polycentric West can only wonder at with awe.

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Rinse Willet, *The Geography of Urbanism in Roman Asia Minor*. pp. xvii + 398, col. ills. Sheffield: Equinox, 2020. ISBN 978-1-78179-843-0, hardback £100; ISBN 978-1-78179-844-7, E-book £100.

The contrast between the classical cities of South West Turkey and the inland areas of Asia Minor has long struck visitors to the region. In 1907, Gertrude Bell recorded her visits to several Roman cities in Western Asia Minor including: Ephesus, Priene, Miletus, Halicarnassus, Aphrodisias, Hierapolis and Sagalassos before she journeyed on to the Central Anatolian plateau to work at *Binbirkilise*, The Thousand and One Churches, on the Karadağ, one of several ancient volcanos dominating the central Anatolian plateau. She wrote about the contrast between the topography of coastal Asia Minor and the interior:

'He leaves behind him a smiling country full of the sound of waters, with fertile valleys ... coasts that the Greek made his own, setting them with cities, crowning them with temples ... [here] the traveller looks round and sees that every feature of the landscape has suffered change ... It is Asia, with all its vastness, with all its brutal disregard for life and comfort and amenities of existence; it is the ancient East, returned, after so many millenniums of human endeavour, to its natural desolation'.[1]

Bell was travelling to work with Sir William Ramsay, one of a long line of epigraphers who had already

[1] Ramsay and Bell 1909: 297-298.