
Review of *The Empire That Would Not Die: The Paradox of Eastern Roman Survival, 640–740*, by John Haldon

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In his 2016 book *The Empire That Would Not Die*, John Haldon examines the social, political, economic, and geographic factors that allowed the Byzantine Empire to survive in the seventh and eighth centuries. According to Haldon, his book offers a “holistic picture” of the Byzantines in this period of time that has not been provided in any previous work. From 565–650, the Byzantine Empire saw a drastic reduction in size, with its territories in North Africa, Syria, and Iraq conquered by the rapidly growing Islamic caliphate. With Islamic invasions in Anatolia, the weakened Byzantine Empire appeared at its end. However, thanks to ideological, organizational, and geographic advantages against the Muslims, coupled with favorable environmental changes, the Byzantines were able to maintain the remnants of their empire in the seventh and eighth centuries.

Haldon examines Byzantine ideologies, political organization, geography factors, the role of the social elite, and the changing environment in Anatolia. He argues that the shrinking of the Byzantine Empire actually contributed to its survival, as it allowed for a centralization of political and religious power, as well as centralization around the city of Constantinople. The Byzantine government became more what Haldon calls “sacralized,” placing the emperor as the head of the church and enabling propagandistic ideologies stating that the emperor would restore Christendom, thus giving the Byzantines a religious and cultural cohesion. This centralization also forced elites to maintain the existing economic and military structures already in place. The reduction of the Byzantine Empire to the rugged region of Anatolia would also prove advantageous. While the Byzantines were better able to defend their remaining territory, the terrain made it difficult for the invading Arabic armies to establish permanent strongholds without eventually being driven out by the Byzantines. Finally, Haldon examines changes in the environment and a simplification of the Byzantine agrarian system that helped compensate for the loss of food supplies from the North African territories that assisted in the survival of the empire. Haldon concludes his book with a summary of his evidence, arguing it supports his position that the Byzantines were able to both adapt to their adverse conditions and take advantage of existing conditions to maintain their survival.

Haldon’s book provides a thorough and compelling picture of the Byzantine Empire in the seventh and eighth centuries. The author employs numerous sources to support his arguments. Those interested in environmental history will be intrigued by Haldon’s use of archeological data, pollen data, and sea surface temperatures to educate the reader on the changing Anatolian environment in this time period. In sum, anyone interested in broadening their knowledge on the Byzantine Empire would find this book to not only be an informative read, but also an enjoyable one.