

Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWED: SEAN D. W. LAFFERTY, *LAW AND SOCIETY IN THE AGE OF THEODERIC THE GREAT: A STUDY OF THE 'EDICTUM THEODERICI'* (CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013), 341 PP. ISBN: 9781107028340.

Lafferty's book, based on his doctoral thesis, is an important and refreshing view on the functioning and administration of Theoderic's rule in Italy. This work stands out for the researcher of the Ostrogoths and, in general, for early medievalists dealing with the political praxis of barbarian kingdoms for several reasons: it argues for a more solid answer concerning the authorship of the *Edictum Theoderici*, it problematises the positive aspects generally attributed to Theoderic's reign and it proposes an interesting legal study that takes into consideration many aspects of a society composed of different ethnicities – Goths and Romans, in this case – and can shed light onto a variety of late antique and early medieval contexts.

The book is divided into five chapters aside from the introduction and epilogue. Lafferty starts with a general introduction, in which he attests the political singularity of Italy in Late Antiquity, that is, how the formal seat of the Roman Empire came under the rule of two barbarian leaders, Odovacer and later Theoderic. Following a brief analysis of Theoderic's legal position and its implications, Lafferty addresses the image of a positive and harmonic Ostrogothic rule crafted through the documents of Cassiodorus, a Roman officer who created the connection between the Gothic bureaucratic machine and Imperial administration. Lafferty proceeds to question this assumption by drawing an overview of the *Edictum Theoderici*, a juridical document that has been barely touched by modern historiography mainly because of problems with regard to its authorship. Nevertheless, this

is a fundamental text, as he also concludes, with the potential to tackle enduring questions, such as the nature of barbarian governments and their bonds with the Roman past.

The first chapter provides the historical context. Its functions are twofold: to address the problem of authorship and, once the author thinks the problem is solved, to propose an understanding of the purposes and scope of the *Edictum Theoderici*. This is the seminal part of the book: the applicability of Lafferty's take on the government of Theoderic depends fully on the matter of authorship. If the document was produced under the rule of the Visigothic Theoderic I or II (two kings proposed as candidates for the issuing), as argued by Vismara (pp. 26-30), then the entirety of Lafferty's narrative falls short. Aware of this problem, the author is convincing when he affirms that we are dealing with an Ostrogothic document. He even goes so far as to suggest a more precise date and place: Rome, 500 AD, the date of Theoderic's *decennalia* – a rather suitable moment to issue an edict and assert his authority over Italy. Lafferty does this by comparing the *Edictum Theoderici* with the *Codex Theodosianus* as well as certain legal and administrative aspects in the writings of Cassiodorus. He also goes against elements that, in the historiography, were used to point to a Visigothic authorship. This argumentative construct is followed by the delimitation of the scope of the document. The comparisons with the *Codex Theodosianus* show a very specific selection and adaptation of passages in the *Edictum Theoderici*, which, according to Lafferty, would indicate the weak aspects of Theoderic's government and the preoccupations of the jurists who composed the document.

What follows is a thorough discussion of the legal context (Chapter 2), the state of law and order (Chapter 3), the society and the family (Chapter 4) and economy (Chapter 5) in the context of Theoderic's reign. Lafferty employs a dense legal analysis in order to construct his main argument: Ostrogothic Italy, viewed under the light shed by the *Edictum Theoderici*, is more complex and less positive than we tend to believe. Lafferty's erudition and the fluency of his legal discourse create a compelling and valid debate, although slightly abstract for the reader without prior knowledge of this type of historiographical approach.

The conclusion summarises Lafferty's main argumentative framework: our approach to Ostrogothic primary sources has to include the *Edictum Theoderici* as one of its most important examples. Only by doing so, we can perceive the flaws and the hardships of Theoderic's reign in opposition to the image created by official propaganda, which inevitably left a certain aura of *civilitas*, collaboration between Goths and Romans or, at the very least, an efficient and successful rule.

Lafferty's arguments are well supported and convincing, although, as mentioned before, they depend on the acceptance of Ostrogothic authorship – which is solid, but as Lafferty himself admits, impossible to prove. Also, the deconstruction of the long-held image of an extremely successful Theoderic makes this book a fundamental part of the specific historiography, and should therefore be part of any study on politics and society in late antique and early medieval Italy.

The overall flow of the work might be rather difficult for non-specialists to follow and, in general, its legalistic approach leaves outside discussions concerning polemical topics such as ethnic definitions. This is certainly not a problem; however, it potentially leaves Lafferty's discourse outside the more traditional *loci* of debate. This reviewer wishes that this will not be the case, because *Law and Society in the Age of Theoderic the Great: A Study of the 'Edictum Theoderici'* is a great book with exciting ideas and a brave methodological approach, and has all the potential to challenge and change our current knowledge of Theoderic's rule.