

REVIEWS

An Age of Tyrants: Britain and the Britons, A.D. 400-600, by Christopher A. Snyder. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998. Pp. 403.)

The title of this book is a misnomer. A more accurate, if less intriguing, title would be *An Evaluation of the Historical and Archaeological Sources of Sub-Roman Britain*. Snyder does not offer a narrative history of Britain after Rome and prior to the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, but instead discusses the methodology of these studies. This work is divided into four sections: the history of Roman Britain, the literary sources of sub-Roman Britain and the language of the sources, the archaeological record of various sites, and a discussion of who the "Britons" were. While this method of presentation covers the overall topic from many angles, it also leads to repetition and a loss of interest on the part of the reader.

Snyder's purpose in writing this book is to bring a fresh outlook to the study of sub-Roman Britain rather than presenting a narrative history of the subject. He calls attention to the two common methods of viewing the period--the reductionist and the positivist. The reductionist view of Britain between the fifth and seventh centuries argues that since nothing can be accurately documented, nothing occurred. The positivists, on the other hand, say that even though nothing can be positively documented, something happened, and scholars have to figure out what did. Snyder is a positivist, a fact that he states bluntly. This book offers his methods of evaluating and relating the history of Britain after the Romans and before the development of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of the seventh century.

The methodology utilized by Snyder in looking at sub-Roman Britain is refreshing and offers many intriguing possibilities. His first suggestion is finding a different name for sub-Roman Britain, an archaeological label used to differentiate artifact styles. His suggestion is "Brythonic" or "Brittonic," since prior to the Romans the inhabitants of the British Isles would not have called themselves Britons, but after 410 they were not actually Romans nor, yet, Anglo-Saxon or English. He also calls for an integrated use by scholars of historical and archaeological sources, rejecting the trend of historians to ignore archeology and vice versa. The sources for studying Roman and sub-Roman Britain work best when used in conjunction.

The style used by Snyder to present his theories, while covering all topics, leaves something to be desired. Its title notwithstanding, this book is aimed at the scholar, but few scholars will be interested in reading an entire chapter based primarily on the various spellings of Britanniae in the nominative plural. The reason for addressing the spelling variations is important and the author delves into territory that might not be considered by others; however, in the six chapters he devotes to terminology he crosses the line into fussiness.

Snyder is critical of the written sources available for the period although he does not suggest abandoning them. His view is that the sources, mostly ecclesiastical, are useable if one maintains a skepticism and understands the cultural attitudes influencing the writers and their possible agendas. The sources used by Snyder are both secondary and primary, and vast in number (his bibliography soars to thirty-four pages). Unlike many historians, he also uses archaeological sources since he is advocating a synthesis of historical and archaeological research. Secondary sources are likewise because it is historiographical in nature rather than narrative.

Overall, *Age of Tyrants* is well done. Snyder addresses the points he thinks are important and offers proof. He becomes repetitive at points but this is because of the topical organization of the book rather than poor writing. The value of the book lies in addressing the current methodology of research in sub-Roman Britain rather than offering another narrative history. Snyder highlights points of research that are neglected and heralds a new age in late antique/early medieval studies. Regardless of minor faults, this important book addresses often-overlooked aspects of the study of the history of sub-Roman Britain.

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