



<https://doi.org/10.18778/2084-140X.12.30>

RONALD A. BLEEKER, *Aspar and the Struggle for the Eastern Roman Empire, AD 421–71*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2022, pp. XII, 234*.

The reviewed work concerns the life and career of a prominent eastern Roman general, Flavius Aspar. Its author, Ronald A. Bleeker, is an independent scholar who has been an author of an article about Aspar back in 1980, but, as per his own admission (p. vii): *subsequent demands of career and family prevented me from further historical writing for many years*. This book is thus a product of author's undoubted passion, and while it can be commendable and heartwarming to see people outside today's point-driven academia engage with an obscure historical topic, one could expect the results to be riddled with problems stemming from author's detachment from the field. This, however is not the case here, as the reviewed work is a serious academic publication in every regard.

The main body of the book consists of fourteen chapters. The first, *Why Does Aspar Matter?* (p. 1–6), serves as an introduction and outlines the purpose and main points of the work in, best summarized by author's own summary statement (p. 6): *The purpose of this book is to explore the full scope of Aspar's career against the broader background of the Roman world of the fifth century. By exploring these issues, we may come to better understand both Aspar and the reasons for the survival of the eastern Roman empire*. In the following chapter, "Barbarians" and "Heretics" (p. 7–16), Bleeker establishes the complex subject of identity in that period. In the third, *Aspar's antecedents*, he describes Aspar's heritage, his family, ethnic origins, as

well as brings up the revolt of Gainas, to explain the situation of military command on the onset of Aspar's entrance on the political stage of the Eastern Roman Empire. The following chapters describe the subsequent stages of Aspar's political and military career, as well as the historical background of the era. From his early exploits while serving under his father's command, *Ardaburius the Elder & Aspar: Wars in Persia and Italy (421–5)* (p. 33–49), the campaign against the Vandals in Africa, *Aspar in Africa: The War With the Vandals (431–5)* (p. 51–63), and the wars against the Huns of Attila in 440s, *Aspar and Attila: The Wars With the Huns (440–50)* (p. 65–91), Aspar's involvement in the accession of Marcian to the imperial throne in 450 and his service under the emperor's rule, *Aspar and the Choice of Marcian (450–7)* (p. 93–110), and finally, Aspar's role in choosing the emperor Leo, *Aspar and the Choice of Leo (457)* (p. 111–118), the beginning of their conflict, *Aspar's Struggle with Leo Begins (457–65)* (p. 119–129), the part played by Zeno–Tarasikodissa, *The Rise of Zeno (465–7)* (p. 131–140), the failed expedition of Basiliscus against the Vandals, *Leo's African Gamble (467–8)* (p. 141–155), and the culmination of the conflict between the emperor and Aspar, which resulted in the latter being murdered on Leo's orders, *Aspar's Apogee (469–71)* (p. 156–175). The recounting of events is done with attention to detail, which helps in introducing various points of Aspar's biography, and provides additional context. The narrative ends with chapter thirteen, *Aftermath (471–91)* (p. 177–194), in which the author describes the events following Aspar's death, and in the following *Conclusions* (p. 195–206), he provides

* This text was created as part of the project financed from the funds of the National Science Centre, Poland, granted under decision no. DEC-2018/31/B/HS3/03038.

his own observations and closing remarks. The book is accompanied by genealogy trees of Theodosius I, Aspar and Leo (p. ix–xi), map of the Late Roman Empire (p. xii–xiii), *Bibliography* divided into the list of used abbreviations (p. 209), and sections tallying primary (p. 210–212) and secondary sources (p. 213–224), as well as the *Index* (p. 225–229).

According to the publisher, it is *the first full-length biography in English of Aspar*¹, and curiously enough, even that may undersell it to some extent, as the only comprehensive study on Aspar to that point was an article by Georg Vernadsky published in 1941 in German². Suffice to say, the scholarship of late antiquity has made immense progress since then, so Bleeker's work is, in fact, the only modern full-length biography of Aspar. Considering the importance of this figure to the politics of the 5th century Eastern Roman Empire, it is surprising that only now an attempt has been made to paint a comprehensive picture, even if there is a multitude of works touching on select aspects of Aspar's activity, and even more where the general is featured, simply due to his prominence. Any work claiming to be a comprehensive study of Aspar's life and career would need to incorporate that massive scholarly output, and it seems Bleeker's work generally succeeds in doing so, boasting 66 primary sources and nearly 300 modern works in the bibliography. The selection of literature has however a major shortcoming, since the author used barely any German literature, as it is evidenced from its almost complete absence in the bibliography and footnotes. It can be assumed that it is due to author's lack of familiarity with the language, rather than a conscious choice, and while we cannot expect all the scholars to keep up with the academic output in all languages known to man, in this case, however, I would argue the topic requires at least some select works to be used. The most important one to be named is a monumental, more than 1000-page long analysis of the first 3 years of emperor Leo's

reign by Gereon Siebigs, where Aspar and his relationship with Leo and Marcian is prominently featured³. Fundamental works on military elite by Alexander Demandt⁴ and Evgeniy Glushanin⁵ are also lacking. Same can be said about a modern comprehensive study of Isaurians⁶, numerous monographs on foreign barbarian tribes, especially the Vandals⁷ and the Huns⁸, as well as biographies of such important contemporary (and comparable) individuals as Ricimer⁹ and Aëtius¹⁰. Undoubtedly, if at least some of the aforementioned literature was included, it would benefit the reviewed work immensely, providing more detail and often different perspective to that of publications in the English language sphere.

Some specific Bleeker's claims can also be disputed. Building upon the concept of the evolution of imperial power by Meaghan McEvoy¹¹, the author proposes a similar model for the Eastern Roman Empire, according to which Aspar sought to pick 'ceremonial' emperors who

³ A. SIEBIGS, *Kaiser Leo I. Das oströmische Reich in den ersten drei Jahren seiner Regierung (457–460 n. Chr.)*, Berlin 2010 [= BAIt, 276].

⁴ A. DEMANDT, *Magister militum*, [in:] *RE*, vol. XII, suppl., ed. G. WISSOWA, W. KROLL, Stuttgart 1970, p. 553–790.

⁵ E.P. GLUSHANIN, *Der Militäradel des frühen Byzanz*, Barnaul 1991, which is the translated edition of the original work written in Russian – Е.П. ГЛУШАНИН, *Военная знать ранней Византии*, Барнаул 1991.

⁶ K. FELD, *Barbarische Bürger. Die Isaurier und das Römische Reich*, Berlin 2005 [= Mil.S, 8].

⁷ H. CASTRITIUS, *Die Vandalen. Etappen einer Spurensuche*, Berlin 2006; K. VÖSSING, *Das Königreich der Vandalen. Geiseric's Herrschaft und das Imperium Romanum*, Darmstadt 2014; R. STEINACHER, *Die Vandalen. Aufstieg und Fall eines Barbarenreichs*, Stuttgart 2016.

⁸ I. BÓNA, *Das Hunnenreich*, Stuttgart 1991; G. WIRTH, *Attila. Das Hunnenreich und Europa*, Stuttgart 1999; T. STICKLER, *Die Hunnen*, München 2007; K. ROSEN, *Attila. Der Schrecken der Welt*, München 2016.

⁹ F. ANDERS, *Flavius Ricimer. Macht und Ohnmacht des weströmischen Heermeisters in der zweiten Hälfte des 5. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 2010.

¹⁰ T. STICKLER, *Aëtius. Gestaltungsspielräume eines Heermeisters im ausgehenden. Weströmischen Reich*, München 2002.

¹¹ M. MCEVOY, *Child Emperor Rule in the Late Roman West, AD 367–455*, Oxford 2014 [= OCM].

¹ <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/aspar-and-the-struggle-for-the-eastern-roman-empire-ad-42171-9781350279261/> [8 IX 2022].

² G. VERNADSKY, *Flavius Ardabur Aspar*, SF 6, 1941, p. 38–72.

were willing to cooperate with a military commander, himself, and in that way control the affairs (p. 196–198). There is no doubt that Aspar wanted to choose candidates he could rely on to realize his own goals, however, this category of ‘ceremonial’ emperors is opposed to a traditional idea of Roman rulers, who possessed martial virtues and were military commanders themselves. If so, why, in both instances, did Aspar choose veteran soldiers for that position? While Leo, in the end, became the ‘ceremonial’ emperor, mostly confined to the palace, the same cannot be said about Marcian, who was a quintessential soldier-emperor, and one of the few late Roman rulers who personally led soldiers on a campaign, which took place in 451 against the Huns in Pannonia (and Bleeker is aware of that, p. 103). The model that Bleeker proposes does not seem to account for those irregularities.

Then there is a problem of Aspar’s motivations. Bleeker seems to follow the ideas outlined by Brian Croke, who comprehensively criticized the older interpretation of the conflict between Aspar and Leo through a framework of an ethnic struggle¹², and rightfully so, however, his own proposal, explaining those events through clashing dynastic ambitions has its own problems. Bleeker, just as Croke does, assumes Aspar wanted to set up a new dynasty and put his own son on the throne (see, eg. p. 101; 108), which somehow would be guaranteed by getting him married to one of Leo’s daughters. Leo’s avoidance in the matter was what led to the emperor and the general quarrelling. This interpretation brings, however, another set of questions. Why did Aspar not secure the throne for his son, Patricius, in 457, when he was almost certainly free to choose whatever candidate he liked, and according to some accounts, was even proposed to access the throne himself (p. 114)? How would the marriage with Leo’s daughter set up the succession, considering Leo was a candidate out of nowhere, not connected to any established imperial dynasty? How did Aspar account for a possibility of Leo having a son born, which

in fact happened in 463¹³? Leo’s wife, Verina, was fit for bearing children, and the emperor’s direct heir would always have a dynastic precedence over a person from outside of imperial family, even if married to one of emperor’s daughters. The idea that Aspar always yearned imperial throne for his family, and was constantly scheming to achieve that goal seems to be taken for granted. However, the above questions would need to be addressed if we were to accept that view. Otherwise, the more likely explanation is that the general initially did not have such ambition, and the plan to put his son on the throne was conceived in the final stages of the conflict with Leo, when that seemed like the last and only chance for the elder general to secure his legacy.

Bleeker also assumes Flavius Zeno was Aspar’s rival (p. 94; 99) for which there is no evidence. In fact, Zeno accepted the candidacy of Marcian, who was after all a former subordinate of Aspar, and took part in steering emperor’s policy towards the Huns, something that Aspar was also deeply concerned with (p. 70). It also seems Zeno and Aspar shared disdain towards Chrysaphius, so it is that much more likely they were allied, or at least were willing to co-operate¹⁴. Bleeker is aware of all those facts (p. 94; 100–101), yet still insists on assuming Aspar and Zeno were political opponents. Similarly, the author’s assumption that Pulcheria was somehow directly involved in elevating Ardaburius the Elder and Plintha to the highest military ranks (p. 35–36) seems to be based on Kenneth Holum’s views¹⁵, is not supported by evidence, and may generally overestimate Pulcheria’s engagement military matters of the period.

Most of those contentious views already appear in the historiography, often in popular and established publications, so Bleeker cannot be accused of making groundless claims, however, it can be said that he could have put modern

¹² B. CROKE, *Dynasty and Ethnicity. Emperor Leo I and the Eclipse of Aspar*, *Chi* 35, 2005, p. 147–203.

¹³ The child, however, died shortly after.

¹⁴ C. ZUCKERMANN, *L’Empire d’Orient et les Huns. Notes sur Priscus*, *TM* 12, 1994, p. 176.

¹⁵ K.G. HOLUM, *Theodosian Empresses. Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*, Maryland 1981, p. 101–102.

literature under closer scrutiny and be more critical of it. Especially, since he often shows awareness of evidence to the opposite, yet does not always address them, despite the doubts they raise against the established interpretation.

One can assume that much of the problems with Bleeker's work can be explained by the author having to tread new paths, to take into account many differing interpretations scattered through various monographs and articles, and to create a one comprehensive picture based on them. This never was going to be an easy task, and in some cases, it appears the author struggled with determining which view to side with, and left the reader with several conflicting views and not much in terms of commentary.

Despite those criticisms, there are undoubted merits to Bleeker's work. One of his most important observations is that the conflict between Aspar and Leo should be perceived as a clash of personalities (p. 203–207). Not only does the author present convincing evidence for that to be the case, he also manages to put it very succinctly, which is impressive, considering he describes something intangible and normally difficult to determine through historical research. Bleeker rightfully reminds that even major political developments of the past could originate in personal motivations of prominent individuals, thus illuminating the humanity of the characters he describes.

Overall, Bleeker's work is a welcome addition to the scholarship of late antiquity, especially since the topic he chose was long overdue in having a proper, comprehensive treatment. The author does a good job of assembling information from numerous sources and works of modern scholarship, which is a notable achievement. His book, however, is not without its faults. Bleeker at times struggles to form the variety of views one can encounter in the scholarship, into one, internally consistent picture. Some of the views he sides with are also disputable, more so than the lecture of his work would let the reader believe. However, his findings in regard to the role the personalities of Leo and Aspar played in their conflict will remain an original and valuable inclusion to the scholarship on the matter. In addition, thanks to

Bleeker's efforts, the scholars who would want to take up the topic on Aspar will no longer be in a position that he was in, and his work certainly can serve as a starting point for further research.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ANDERS F., *Flavius Ricimer. Macht und Ohnmacht des weströmischen Heermeisters in der zweiten Hälfte des 5. Jahrhunderts*, Berlin 2010.

BÓNA I., *Das Hunnenreich*, Stuttgart 1991.

CASTRITIUS H., *Die Vandalen. Etappen einer Spurensuche*, Berlin 2006.

CROKE B., *Dynasty and Ethnicity. Emperor Leo I and the Eclipse of Aspar*, "Chiron" 35, 2005, p. 147–203.

DEMANDT A., *Magister militum*, [in:] *Paulys Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, vol. XII, suppl., ed. G. WISSOWA, W. KROLL, Stuttgart 1970, p. 553–790.

FELD K., *Barbarische Bürger. Die Isaurier und das Römische Reich*, Berlin 2005 [= Millennium-Studien, 8].

GLUŠANIN E.P., *Voennaja znat' rannej Vizantii*, Varnaul 1991.

GLUSHANIN E.P., *Der Militäradel des frühen Byzanz*, Barnaul 1991.

HOLUM K.G., *Theodosian Empresses. Women and Imperial Dominion in Late Antiquity*, Maryland 1981.

MCEVOY M., *Child Emperor Rule in the Late Roman West, AD 367–455*, Oxford 2014 [= Oxford Classical Monographs], <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199664818.001.0001>

ROSEN K., *Attila. Der Schrecken der Welt*, München 2016, <https://doi.org/10.17104/9783406690310>

SIEBIGS A., *Kaiser Leo I. Das oströmische Reich in den ersten drei Jahren seiner Regierung (457–460 n. Chr.)*, Berlin 2010 [= Beiträge zur Altertumskunde, 276], <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110225853>

STEINACHER R., *Die Vandalen. Aufstieg und Fall eines Barbarenreichs*, Stuttgart 2016.

STICKLER T., *Aëtius. Gestaltungsspielräume eines Heermeisters im ausgehenden Weströmischen Reich*, München 2002.

STICKLER T., *Die Hunnen*, München 2007.


VERNADSKY G., *Flavius Ardabur Aspar*, "Südost-Forschungen" 6, 1941, p. 38–72.

VÖSSING K., *Das Königreich der Vandalen. Geiserichs Herrschaft und das Imperium Romanum*, Darmstadt 2014.

WIRTH G., *Attila. Das Hunnenreich und Europa*, Stuttgart 1999.

ZUCKERMANN C., *L'Empire d'Orient et les Huns. Notes sur Priscus*, "Travaux et mémoires" 12, 1994, p. 159–182.

Lukasz Pigoński (Łódź)*

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5760-6420>

* University of Lodz, Waldemar Ceran Research Centre for the History and Culture of the Mediterranean Area and South-East Europe



© by the author, licensee University of Lodz – Lodz University Press, Lodz, Poland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution license CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>)
