

Anthony R. Borley, *Septimius Severus: The African Emperor*. Revised Edition. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989. Pp. xi+291. 25 illustrations+3 maps. \$ 29.95.

Presumably the subtitle is meant to tease and even to some extent appease the liberally oriented reader, but race is never an issue for discussion in this revised edition of a book that was originally published by Doubleday and Company in 1982 under the same title and has appeared in Great Britain as *The African Emperor: Septimius Severus* by B.T. Batsford Ltd (1988) practically simultaneously with the American updated, rewritten, expanded and illustrated edition. The book has already become the standard work on Septimius, has taken into consideration the archaeological discoveries of the last twenty years, and is very heavily documented (pp. 200-273). It is more than a biography of a particular Roman emperor; it is a recording of the historical record before and during Septimius Severus' reign (A.D. 193-211). There is hardly a detail –historical or biographical– that Birley, who is professor of ancient history of the University of Manchester, misses. Birley sees Septimius Severus «as a remarkable phenomenon, the first truly provincial emperor, for Trajan and his successors from the western colonial élite were not only descended from Italian settlers but themselves thoroughly assimilated to the metropolitan society, born and brought up at Rome, not at Italica, Nemausus or Ucubi.. Septimius Severus was a product of Africa, and of an African city in which Italian settlement had been unusually meagre. It cannot be known whether, for example, the ancestral gods whom he honoured under their Roman names were also familiar to him as Shadrapa and Milk'ashart... The African emperor who died in Britain has to remain an enigma» (p. 200).

Anthony Birley has done more than any single scholar to date to help us understand this enigma. In seventeen chapters he describes for us life in Tripolitania, where Septimius Severus was born and raised and a city where Septimus' grandfather became a rich knight and which had enthusiastically welcomed Roman presence. This new Hannibal of the Caesars, who has been described as a typical cosmopolitan bureaucrat, spent early career as a senator and was married to a Julia Domna, a beautiful Syrian woman from Arab Emesa. Birley takes us through Septimius' rise to power, the overthrow of Marcus Aurelius' unbalanced son Commodus; the murder of Pertinax, Commodus' son; Septimius' march on Rome to take vengeance for the slaying of Pertinax; and the proclamation of Septimius as emperor. Even though Gibbon may have seen Septimius Severus as the destroyer of the existing social order, Septimius expanded the frontiers of the empire –especially, in the East, where he annexed Mesopotamia, added to Syria and Arabia; oversaw Egypt; made a triumphant return to Africa; and came to Britain, where he attempted to conquer Caledonia, and was himself killed.

Birley weighs the evidence of ancient encomia and modern adverse criticism and tries to reach a fair assessment of the man who had «the longest reign of any emperor between the death of Marcus in 180 and the accession of Diocletian in 284» (p. 197). A cruel and brutal ruler, he was by Aurelius Victor called wise, courageous, and successful in war. Birley takes into account both negative and positive criticism, but no matter what individual assessments may be made of this Roman emperor, one thing is for sure –he had a tremendous impact in his time and Birley' book is a strong reminder of that fact.

JOHN E. REXINE
Colgate University