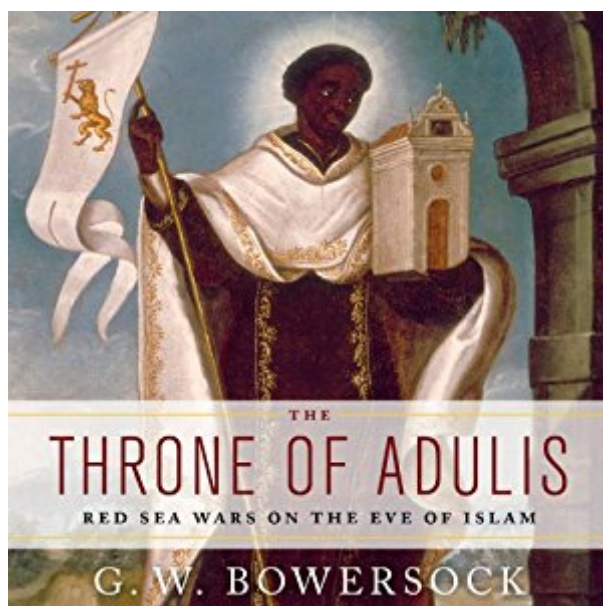


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The Throne Of Adulis: Red Sea Wars On The Eve Of Islam



Synopsis

Just prior to the rise of Islam in the sixth century A.D., southern Arabia was embroiled in a violent conflict between Christian Ethiopians and Jewish Arabs. Though little known today, this was an international war that involved both the Byzantine Empire, which had established Christian churches in Ethiopia, and the Sasanian Empire in Persia, which supported the Jews in what became a proxy war against its longtime foe Byzantium. Our knowledge of these events derives largely from an inscribed marble throne at the Ethiopian port of Adulis, meticulously described by a sixth-century Christian merchant known as Cosmas Indicopleustes. Using the writings of Cosmas and a wealth of other historical and archaeological evidence from the period, eminent historian G. W. Bowersock carefully reconstructs this fascinating but overlooked chapter in pre-Islamic Arabian history. The flashpoint of the war, Bowersock tells us, occurred when Yusuf, the Jewish king of Himyar, massacred hundreds of Christians living in Najran. The Christian ruler of Ethiopia, Kaleb, urged on by the Byzantine emperor Justin, led a force of 120,000 men across the Red Sea to defeat Yusuf. But when the victorious Kaleb - said to have retired to a monastery - left behind weak leaders in both Ethiopia and Himyar, the Byzantine and Persian empires expanded their activity in the Arabian territory. In the midst of this conflict, a new religion was born, destined to bring a wholly unanticipated resolution to the power struggle in Arabia. The Throne of Adulis vividly recreates the Red Sea world of Late Antiquity, transporting listeners back to a remote but pivotal epoch in ancient history, one that sheds light on the collapse of the Persian Empire as well as the rise of Islam.

Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 3 hours and 50 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Audible Studios

Audible.com Release Date: March 11, 2014

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B00I493LN2

Best Sellers Rank: #109 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Africa #269 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Middle East #305 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Ancient

Customer Reviews

This slender book (133 pages of body text) is divided into nine chapters. The first five trace the history of various regimes in Ethiopia. One chapter deals with the rise of the Arab-Jewish kingdom of Himyar, mostly through an analysis of the Ethiopian regimes that preceded it. The actual overthrow of that kingdom by an Ethiopian king is the topic of the next chapter. Final two chapters deal with the role of the Byzantine and Persian empires in this area of the world, and the way in which the history recounted in the book forms the context for the development of Islam. In other words, one learns very little about the actual conflict itself, and even less about Himyar. For this reason you don't quite get the story which the book promises. This is not a volume which presents a vivid reconstruction of a time and place that many readers will find exotic, relegating the scholarly apparatus to footnotes. Rather, the book puts epigraphy front and center, and scrupulously refuses to imagine or extrapolate life in the time described. It is clearly written, but if you do not nod your head at references to Apollonius of Tyanna or enjoy reading sentences like "it is in Sabaic epigraphy of the early third century that the earliest attestations of the presence of Axumite forces in this region occur" then this book is probably not for you. I personally enjoyed *The Throne of Adulis* and learned -- in fact, I read it straight through from beginning to end in about three hours. But I am the kind of person who reads the *Bulletin of SOAS* and thinks "this looks so interesting -- if only they would pull the camera back a bit and show the bigger picture to nonexperts like me". So... yeah...

The 'Emblems of Antiquity' series by OUP presents aspects of ancient history for the general reader by focusing on a particular object from antiquity and teasing out its ramifications for the period in question. Glen Bowersock's study of the throne of Adulis fulfils this remit admirably. The subject matter of the book is summarized succinctly in the 'Book Description' given above (taken from the dust-jacket). It is a fascinating micro-history of a little known period in ancient history, and readers should not expect more. While Bowersock does draw out the wider implications of the period for the religious and political history of the middle east, the book is not designed to be a general introduction to such matters, for which the interested reader can readily go elsewhere. What the book does do is present for the general reader the findings of painstaking research into historical events for which the literary record is largely non-existent. As such, the ancient historian is forced to fall back upon other types of evidence, and to combine these in order to reconstruct events. The backbone of the present work is a 16th century manuscript copy of a work written by a Byzantine traveller in the 6th century, who copied out the inscription on a ceremonial throne (the 'Throne of Adulis') which is now lost. In order to supplement this scant material, various sources are called

upon: inscriptions written in ancient Ethiopian, coinage (always crucial in ancient history), entries in late Byzantine encyclopedias, and much more.

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