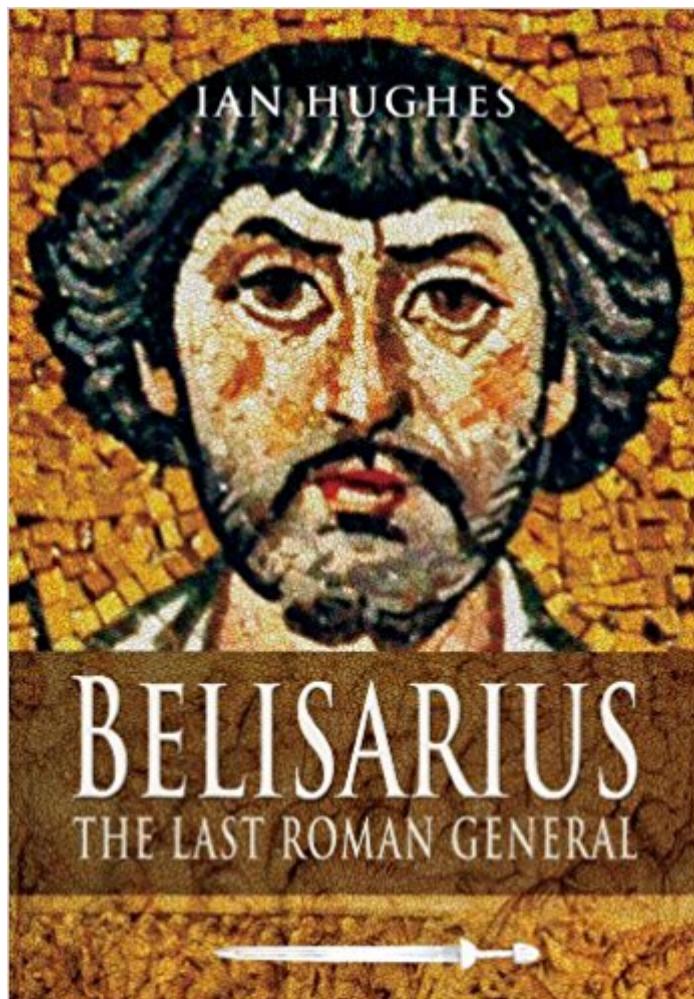


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Belisarius: The Last Roman General



Synopsis

A military history of the campaigns of Belisarius, the greatest general of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Emperor Justinian. He twice defeated the Persians and reconquered North Africa from the Vandals in a single year at the age of 29, before going on to regain Spain and Italy, including Rome (briefly), from the barbarians. It discusses the evolution from classical Roman to Byzantine armies and systems of warfare, as well as those of their chief enemies, the Persians, Goths and Vandals. It reassesses Belisarius' generalship and compares him with the likes of Caesar, Alexander and Hannibal. It will be illustrated with line drawings and battle plans as well as photographs.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

competing military systems, weapons, tactics, and leaders, and includes considerable background material, to help explain the "why" of various political and even strategic decisions. Although marred by a lack of footnoting, Belisarius is an excellent work, useful for the serious student of the period, and a valuable introduction to the times for the novice. (NYMAS)

Ian Hughes - a teacher by profession, this will be his first book, but he comes highly recommended by Dr. Adrian Goldsworthy (the leading author on the Roman Army by a long way) who taught him at Cardiff University. So impressed was Goldsworthy, that Ian Hughes now reads and comments on all his manuscripts before publication.

This is a serious book but is not a biography of Belisarius. It is a military history of Belisarius' involvement as a general during Justinian's reign. It does not cover, in any detail, his beginnings and training nor does it tell us what made him the brilliant tactician he was. Granted, this would be mostly conjecture, but Hughes easily could have extracted some meaningful information from extant sources and it would have given us some idea of what made the man. The first third of the book tells us, in almost exhausting detail, the geopolitical history of the Byzantine Empire starting around 400 A.D. through Justinian's accession to the throne in 527. Hughes covers every tribe, major and minor, and every ruler, major and minor, that had any impact on the burgeoning Byzantine Empire before Justinian took the throne. This is wonderful information, but contributes little to the main part of the book concerned with Belisarius the general, and at times seems almost irrelevant in that context. He also addresses in great detail the equipment used by the Byzantine army and cavalry, and again, it might be just a little too much detail. I found myself turning pages and looking for relevant passages about Belisarius. But once Hughes actually starts writing about Belisarius the book picks up and tells a fascinating story from Belisarius' defeat of the Sassanid Persians, the Nika Riot, and his assignment to recover African territory and his long assignments to take back Italy and Sicily from the Goths. Much of his information seems to come from Procopius: History of the Wars, and Anekdata. One of the interesting things I discovered in this book was about the tenuous hold any commander had on his troops. Loyalty was fungible and had to constantly be nurtured. A commander's hold on his subordinate officers was also tenuous and it was difficult to have complete trust in them. As a commander, one sometimes never knew if orders would actually be carried out. Even with these handicaps, Belisarius was a successful and brilliant tactician but even though the battles were won, the wars were lost. Overall, this is a very good history. The first third of the book gives a lot of background to Justinian's political problems in maybe a bit too much detail, but the story of Belisarius as a Byzantine general is well done indeed.

I applaud Ian Hughes for attempting the first English language biography of the great general, Flavius Belisarius in nearly two hundred years. The paucity of current scholarly (or popular) writing on him is a mystery bordering on tragic. In a world in desperate need of heroes, of people that inspire through deeds not words, of public figures who are decent, honest and incorruptible and selfless - it would seem that Flavius Belisarius' story is as salient and powerful today as it was when Procopius first wrote of him 1,500 years ago... Onto Ian Hughes oftentimes excellent work. As other reviewers have noted, the author did an superb job reviewing the primary sources on Belisarius (limited as they are), teasing out the facts, and reconstructing the General's martial exploits. That is

where the book excels, as a scholarly work focused on Belisarius' extraordinary military achievements (as well as the strategy and tactics of the General's opponents). What is exceptional about the book also makes it disappointing as a popular biography. Mr. Hughes focuses on the facts but does not delve into the more speculative world of Belisarius' past, his motivations, his personality - in short, the 'softer' aspects of the General that cannot help but captivate the (admittedly small) circle of his admirers. So, in conclusion, this is a book that does us a great service looking at the military exploits of Justinian's general, the 'Autokrator' with fresh and unbiased eyes. That said, those looking for a more romantic, and sympathetic look at the General's life may be disappointed.

First off, this book is a military history. Viewing it as anything else is going to be counterproductive. If you want a straight biography then you're just going to have to wait, or else you can read Lord Mahon's biography from the 1820s. So, the good points first. As a military biography it works. It works quite well in fact. Thanks to Procopius we have a great deal more information on Belisarius' career than on anyone else in that century. Certainly more than we have for any non-Emperor. And Hughes' understanding of the military aspect of his career is almost flawless. I don't know what the other reviewer was talking about, I thought his enthusiasm for the era came through quite well. The book progresses in chronological order starting with a chapter on the political situation in Western Europe at the time. It details what little is known about Belisarius' past and private life as well as the lives of the other major players in the book. Some of this information is really thrust at you. A rather longer introduction would probably have been advisable. This section is definitely the weakest in the book. Once it gets onto his battles though, things start to pick up. Each battle has a diagram of the troop formations which is immensely helpful in following what happens during battles. The battle descriptions are easy to understand and the author makes clear their context in the whole war. Throughout Belisarius comes across as an inspired military leader and an expert strategist, although Hughes believes that his tactical ability was not as great as some of Rome's early generals. There are a number of rather nice illustrations, but several of them are reconstructions and several more are taken from other books. It gives the book a hastily thrown together look and I wonder if there was a deadline involved. The weaknesses of this book come about where it tries to be anything other than a military history. The political situation is rather rushed through (Although he does have interesting thoughts about Belisarius' wife Antonia and where she fit in) and the economic and social conditions are barely mentioned. This is the only reason I rate this book as less than five stars. If it had billed itself as a purely military biography I'd

have given it that extra one. The other issue in terms of the Italian war is that it only covers the section where Belisarius is directly involved. There is an obvious reason for that, but it does make it confusing when he goes back. I'd recommend this book be read in conjunction with The Gothic War to get the full picture. I'd also recommend Hughes' other book Stilicho: The Vandal Who Saved Rome. It deals with a somewhat earlier period but it covers the material in a similar way.

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