Roman history

Studies on magistracies have emerged as a solid and important trend in the scholarship on the Roman Republic over the last quarter of a century, and have enabled important connections between institutional history, prosopography, and the exploration of political practice and culture. There are at least three recent additions to this distinguished body of work. Grégory Ioannidopoulos has written a full-scale treatment of the quaestorship, which appears a mere five years after the monograph on the same topic by F. Pina Polo and A. Díaz Fernández.[1] While overlaps in coverage and argument are inevitable, there are also significant differences. Ioannidopoulos does not include a prosopography, but focuses at length on terminological issues. The whole first part is taken up by a discussion of the titulature of quaestors, and the focus then turns to the systematic treatment of the 'institution' (the function of the college, the rules on eligibility, the election process, and so forth) and the powers it entailed at Rome and overseas. The outcome is an impressively full and thorough treatment, which warrants as close attention as its predecessor, and will be profitably consulted side by side with it. Its central ambition is to elucidate a number of important issues of public law; the remit of the discussion is wider, though, and encompasses the contribution of the quaestorship to the development of the empire as well as issues of political practice and culture; the treatment of the bond between promagistrates and quaestors, *necessitudo* (pp. 633–44) is especially rewarding.

Francesco Verrico looks at the role of the Senate in the handling of institutional exceptions through the prism of three magistracies: the *interregnum*, the dictatorship, and extended magisterial commands.[2] The focus is on the early and middle Republic, and takes the Hannibalic War as the endpoint of the discussion. The *interregnum* is a product of the age before the end of the Struggle of the Orders, which enabled the patricians to keep control of the transition of power and oversee the elections. The dictatorship was also a senatorial appointment, whose remit was carefully defined in a decree; the choice was entrusted to the consuls and entailed a significant degree of autonomy, although the Senate had the power to block any appointment that it took issue with. The same picture of tight senatorial control is confirmed by Verrico's overview of the evidence for *prorogatio imperii*, i.e. the extension of the commands of the magistrates who were deployed on a military campaign and reached the end of their tenure. So far so good. In an important appendix, though, Verrico takes another step, and briefly explores the circumstances through which the system came to an end. He views the demands of the Hannibalic War as a decisive factor. After that conflict, the demand of the Senate to oversee those key processes without involving the people becomes untenable ('anachronistic', 260); and the principle of a greater autonomy of the magistrates deployed in the provinces gains traction, as the increasingly frequent use of the clause *uti ei(s) e re publica fideque sua uideretur* ('as seemed to him in accord with the interests of the commonwealth and his good faith') in Senate decrees confirms. The importance of this periodizing moment is beyond doubt. The developments of the

[1] *La Questure. Histoire d'une magistrature de la République romaine*. By Grégory Ioannidopoulos. Liège, Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2024. Pp. 820. Paperback €49.00, ISBN: 978-2-87562-420-8.

[2] *Governare l'emergenza. Sulla gestione senatoria di interregnum, dictatura e prorogatio imperii (V–III sec. a.C.)*. By Francesco Verrico. Acta Senatus B. Studien und Materialien 16, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2024. Pp. 337. Hardback €92.00, ISBN: 978-3-515-13807-9.

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second half of the third century BCE warrant even closer attention in the light of Verrico's argument: in the background there is the need, which Verrico lucidly articulates (261, n. 1), for a full-scale study of the discretional power that magistrates could exercise in Republican Rome.

The discussion of complex technical matters can shed light on historical issues of great significance. That is also one of the key messages of Bradley Jordan's monograph on the *magistri equitum,* the 'masters of the horse', i.e. the subordinates to the dictators, who were appointed on a six-month basis with the brief of addressing specific emergencies.[3] The evidence for the *magistri equitum* is substantial and ranges across the entirety of the Republican period; it also takes us to major historical junctions. However, it has hardly ever received sustained discussion, and Jordan effectively fills the gap by showing how that office had a surprisingly consequential role in the Roman institutional set-up. At the core of this book there is the detailed discussion of all the known actions and initiatives of the *magistri equitum* (seventy-five are known between 501 and 202 BCE, and nine in the first century BCE), framed by a discussion of the role of the cavalry in the Roman military. This is the sort of work that may be profitably consulted on a host of specific problems. It also makes an important historical contention of wide significance. The magistracy had a strong military profile, which entailed the tenure of consular *imperium* and *potestas*: the master of the horse was a fully fledged colleague of the dictator, who could offer 'an extreme check' (146) if necessary. From the fourth century to the Hannibalic War the office was mostly the perquisite of distinguished individuals, usually former consuls; after the disaster of Cannae it was held by men of lesser standing, who would go on to hold the consulship in later years. That was a short-lived change, which is followed by the phasing out of the dictatorship in the years following the conflict. However, the revival of the dictatorship under Sulla and Caesar also affected the office of *magister equitum*: they no longer fulfilled the military role of their distant predecessors, but had a significant political profile. Caesar's practice of appointing a different *magister* every year is a sign of the prestige that the magistracy carried, while the actions that these individuals took confirm the range and importance of their position. It is also an act of aborted innovation, which was intended to put the masters of the horse in charge of Italy in the absence of the dictator. The envisaged Parthian campaign was a central consideration: Caesar intended to rely on directly appointed magistrates during his envisaged long absence from Italy. That did not come to pass. The decision to abolish the dictatorship in 44 BCE, on a proposal of Mark Antony, was a symptom of the revulsion that the revival of that office prompted in many quarters.

However, Jordan draws attention to a (probably unintended) consequence of that change. The dictatorship had the merit of having a degree of balance, which was made possible by the presence of a colleague of comparable standing such as the master of the horse. A few years after its abolition, the *princeps* would emerge as the only individual to whom the solution of a crisis could be entrusted, without any counterbalances being left. Institutional history, then, yields surprising and compelling insights into a crucial political theme.

[3] *The «magister equitum» in the Roman Republic. The Evolution of an Extraordinary Magistracy.* By Bradley Jordan. Berlin-Boston, de Gruyter, 2024. Pp. viii+174. Hardback €99.95/£88, ISBN: 978-3-11-133858-3.

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The case study of the *magistri equitum* serves as a reminder of how central the military dimension is to the understanding of the Roman Republic: Jordan's project is part of a trend that has been gaining increasing momentum over the last decade or so. A brilliant book by Davide Morelli contributes to this set of debates by taking a specific chronological focus – the period from the end of the Latin War to the conquest of Rhegium, 338–270 BCE – in his full-scale reconstruction of the military and diplomatic history of the Middle Republic.[4] This study readily imposes itself as the new reference treatment of a crucial junction in the history of the conquest of Italy: the second and third Samnite wars, the war against the Etruscans, the dealings with Capua, Neapolis, and Tarentum, and the war against Pyrrhus receive a sure-footed and perceptive account. The key merit of this book goes well beyond the careful reconsideration of the evidence, the thorough coverage of modern scholarship, or indeed the impressive clarity of the discussion (the account of the intricacies of the Varronian chronology on pp. 23–4 is exemplary). Its key reward is the comprehensive reappraisal of the centrality of treaties (*foedera*) in the unfolding of the Roman conquest of the Italian peninsula. Building on an insight of Claudine Auliard, Morelli regards diplomacy as a 'tool of conquest', and takes an especially close interest in the specific terms that were set in different treaties, involving different partners at different junctions: the arrangements that were made with the Samnites, for instance, are altogether different from those we see with the Greek cities of Southern Italy. The point is not altogether new, but has hardly ever been discussed to a comparable degree of detail since Beloch's *Der italische Bund*.

Morelli shows how the Roman approach develops and gets more refined by the first quarter of the third century BCE, and how a diplomatic strategy is central to the war effort against Pyrrhus; the polities with which Rome dealt were political communities with their own strategies, concerns, and agendas, whose horizons were not exhausted by their dealings with Rome. Nicola Terrenato's argument that the conquest of Italy entailed a strong transactional component has received much discussion in recent years; Morelli's persuasive claim on the centrality of diplomacy to the Roman conquest of Italy makes an important contribution to fleshing out that account. Morelli shows relatively little interest in positioning himself within wider debates on Roman imperialism, but is very clear on a general contention: diplomacy was not a token of benevolence, but a weapon to which Rome resorted as a matter of course, and which was integral to a strategy of conquest and exploitation. The contribution this book makes to the understanding of the politics of Roman Italy, well beyond the period to which it is devoted, is highly consequential.

Let us turn from earthly bargains to heavenly ones. James Rives' much-anticipated monograph on animal sacrifice in the Roman empire is not just a major discussion of a key tenet of religious practice in the ancient Mediterranean: it is a book on the ancient city and on the place that ritual has in its life.[5] The deep integration between religion and politics in the Roman world has by now become a truism; Rives takes the conversation much further by showing how the enduring success of animal sacrifice may be effectively

[4] *Il ruolo della diplomazia nella conquista romana dell'Italia. Cronologia e contest storico (338–270 a.C.)*. By Davide Morelli. Bari, Edipuglia, 2024. Pp. 356. Paperback €55.00, ISBN: 979-12-5995-054-3.

[5] *Animal Sacrifice in the Roman Empire (31 BCE–395 CE). Power, Communication, and Cultural Transformation*. By James B. Rives. Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. xv+400. 14 black and white illustrations. Hardback £78, ISBN: 978-0-19-764891-9.

explained by its ability to confer meaning and order to the practice of communal life in the Roman cities: to operate, in Rives' words, as 'a source of immanent ideological power' (17). The stated chronological focus of the book may be the Imperial period, but the argument that it puts forward should appeal to those who mainly work on earlier periods, too (its opening case study is from Book 3 of the *Odyssey*). In the masterful first part of the monograph, animal sacrifice comes into focus as a key aspect of the history of euergetism in the Roman empire, which brings together Western and Eastern provinces (although most of the surviving evidence comes from the latter). The performance of animal sacrifice afforded a distinctive opportunity to the benefactors to define their exceptional position in the community to which they contributed, and developed into a major feature of the self-definition strategies pursued by the civic elites of the empire. This backdrop, on which a significant body of epigraphical evidence sheds light, also serves to explain why animal sacrifice was so significant to the running of the imperial cult; most importantly, perhaps, it makes clear why it came under sustained attack from the Christian quarters and was eventually marginalized and suppressed. The second part of the book is a brilliant exploration of the discussion of animal sacrifice in the intellectual discourse of the imperial period, from Paul to Plutarch, from Apollonius to Iamblichus. Rives firmly rejects the view that animal sacrifice was overcome by a process of 'spiritualisation', which brought about a religion without blood sacrifice and without priests; he also brings out the significance of animal sacrifice as a theme in Christian polemic, where it is consistently associated with the death of Christ. The demise of sacrifice, though, is best explained by the changes that intervene in wider power structures. The third part argues that, as the empire becomes more centralized, and the cities have a less significant role in its fabric, and euergetism comes under considerable pressure, sacrifice becomes an easier target. The process is under way by the mid-third century; Constantine is in a position to associate sacrifice with paganism, rather than with traditional Roman practice, and to emphatically distance himself from its public performance. That shift paves the way to the suppression of a practice that had once been pervasive: the process is effectively accomplished by the late fourth century.

Rives' book is a model of how to integrate the close reading of the evidence (literary and documentary) with a strong theoretical proposition; it is also an example of measured and precise writing. The passages in which he argues that animal sacrifice is a pervasive and effective element of euergetism, but not an inherent or essential one, are especially instructive in that regard; and the closing remarks on the 'stubborn particularities of the evidence' and the inherent difficulties in the analysis of the 'wider cultural transformations' (351) in which animal sacrifice is bound up are of genuine epistemological value. Yet Rives' book, for all its clarity and rigour, stubbornly eludes a brief summary. It is a formidably rich and inspiring discussion, which makes a major contribution to the study of Roman religion, and offers an orientation point well beyond the confines of the specific problem it addresses.

Marginalization, as we have seen, is an important theme in Rives' discussion. Its role in Roman religious history emerges as a major preoccupation in two recent studies, which also share some fundamental methodological premises, albeit with a different chronological focus. Thomas Blank has identified a distinctive theme for investigation:

secret religious communication in the Middle and Late Republic.[6] In the subtitle of the book he speaks of 'separateness', rather than 'marginality'; the definition of the religious space is a central concern of the monograph, which takes the third and second centuries BCE as the case study of a society in which there are intense conflicts on the 'definition and functionalisation of religious practices' (31). Most of the book is taken up by the detailed discussion of specific examples, some of which have received extensive scholarly attention in their own right: the introduction of the cult of Magna Mater in Rome, the Bacchanalia crisis of 186 BCE, and religious themes in Plautus. On each of these topics Blank produces a substantial discussion that will go on to inform the debate for some time to come. What may be missing in the way of a summative overview and in the discussion of the links between these themes and the wider developments in Roman history is amply made up by the detailed discussion of the evidence, on the one hand, and by the substantial framing of the theoretical stakes of the problem, on the other.

Renske Janssen concentrates on the Imperial period, and takes on in turn three 'marginalised groups': diviners, Jews, and Christians.[7] As in Blank's book, there is the ambition to articulate a general argument on the basis of three self-contained case studies. Her discussion of the treatment of diviners in the period fills a substantial gap, and productively problematizes the extent of imperial control over the sources of divinatory craft and expertise, bringing into focus some selected case studies from the Julio-Claudian to the Severan period, which cumulatively show the connection between control over divination and attempts to ensure public order. The Flavian age appears to be a significant turning point, after which the evidence becomes much slighter, although the interest that the jurists show in the topic points to its continuing relevance. Divination in the Imperial period has become a topic of increasing interest, as the contributions of A. Antoniou and R. Loriol have also shown in recent years: Janssen has now offered a very productive overview. Her discussion of the position of the Jewish communities in the first three centuries of the empire is comparably wide ranging, and places much emphasis on the role that negotiation in specific local contexts had in shaping the legal interactions with the Roman authorities: there is a firm rejection of top-down dynamics, and a statement of the importance of the arguments that were put forward by the parties. A similar set of principles apply to the Christian communities, whose dealings with Rome are fundamentally embedded in specific local contexts; again, the concept of negotiation is invoked as a key driver in the way in which trial proceedings operate. The fundamental message of the book is that things played out on the ground in much more unpredictable and diverse ways than usually posited, and that marginalized religious practice warrants a close look precisely because it eludes so egregiously any straightforward normative approach. The rich appendices (333–65) provide a valuable inventory of sources and will serve as a catalyst for future work.

The political history of the Empire has been relatively less well served in recent scholarship than religious developments, with one notable exception: the age of Tiberius, on which two very different books have appeared of late. Rebecca Edwards has

[6] *Religiöse Geheimniskommunikation in der Mittleren und Späten Römischen Republik. Separatheit, gesellschaftliche Öffentlichkeit und zivisches Ordnungshandel*. By Thomas Blank. Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge 82, Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2024. Pp. 648. 21 black and white illustrations. Hardback €106, ISBN: 978-3-515-13386-9 (available in Open Access).

[7] *Marginalized Religion and the Law in the Roman Empire*. By K. P. S. Janssen. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. viii+398. 3 illustrations. Hardback £119, ISBN: 978-0-19-285610-4.

produced an extensive case for the fundamental debt that Tiberius owed Augustus, and for the connection that he established with the charisma of his predecessor: a choice that had major long-term implications, and was crucial to the consolidation of the Principate as an institution.[8] The use of a category drawn from the work of Max Weber is relatively innovative, at least in the English-speaking scholarship on the Principate; the overall contention of the book less so. Its rewards are significant, though: an accessible overview of the key political developments of the period, generous coverage of the primary evidence (textual and visual), and sustained engagement with modern scholarship. Those who are looking for a clear and reliable introduction to the Tiberian period will find a very helpful treatment here; scholars who are seeking orientation on specific points will also consult it with profit.

The late Edward Champlin devoted a series of studies to Tiberius and his age, which were intended to lead to a book of comparable calibre to his 2003 *Nero*; ill health prevented him from bringing the project to completion, and his Princeton colleague Robert Kaster took it upon himself to organize those contributions into a single volume.[9] *Tiberius and His Age* includes two unpublished pieces, 'The Death of the Phoenix' and 'Marcus Apicius: A Sense of Place'. It lacks an introduction and a conclusion, but Kaster's brief preface offers an excellent summary of the key themes of the volume: the interplay between representation and self-representation; sex; and the circle of the emperor's close associates and advisors. In its own way, this book is a landmark. The Tiberius we are presented with is an imaginative and idiosyncratic individual, a refined intellectual, and a man with keen religious and astrological interests. It took a scholar of Champlin's learning and imagination to sketch such an original and fascinating figure: his readings of Tiberius' interest in Odysseus (47–73, with a luminous coda on the connection between Ithaca and Capri) and in fire, destruction, and regeneration (74–97) are perhaps the most striking illustrations of his method in action and the insights it can open up, but the pool of available options is very broad indeed. This is not a discussion for the uninitiated; and yet it serves as a wonderful, and indeed teachable, illustration of the potential of the evidence, and of the joys that looking for sources in unexpected places can yield, which can resonate with students of ancient history of all stages and interests.

Broadening our view beyond Rome and Capri, a host of important contributions shed light on various aspects of the history and culture of the Roman empire. A little book edited by a team of scholars from the University of Milan makes a distinctive contribution to the teaching of Roman Italy and puts forward an important example of how to apply different kinds of evidence to the study of local contexts.[10] It is a series of

[8] *Tiberius and the Charisma of Augustus. The Principate Enshrined.* By Rebecca Edwards. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2025. Pp. x+241. 14 illustrations. Hardback £90, ISBN: 978-1-009-47667-6.

[9] *Tiberius and His Age. Myth, Sex, Luxury, and Power.* By Edward Champlin, edited by Robert A. Kaste. Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2024. Pp. xvi+269. Hardback $38.00/£32.00, ISBN: 978-0-691-13924-1.

[10] *Piccole storie di città dell'Italia romana.* Edited by Simonetta Segenni, Federico Russo, and Michele Bellomo. Rome, Edizioni Quasar, 2024. Pp. 135. Paperback €20.00/£17.00, ISBN: 978-88-5491-471-1.

'small histories' of cities of mostly small- to mid-size. Each chapter is opened by a brief introduction, and is then centred on the discussion of a couple of sources, typically a mix of literary texts and inscriptions. There is no discussion of the wider theoretical implications of this project, nor is any connection established with the methodologies and debates that go under the capacious rubric of microhistory. The result is an excellent teaching tool, informed by robust and judicious scholarship, which could be put to use in graduate seminars, and has at least two general points of import to make.

Most contributions raise questions on the trajectory of a city in the long term and, more broadly speaking, issues of periodization. That is most readily apparent in the chapters of Franco Luciani on Concordia, where two inscriptions provide a distinctive angle on the economic life of the community, and specifically on responses to local crisis, and of Laura Fontana on Larinum, whose dossier enables one to follow moments of the history of the city from Cicero's *Defence of Cluentius* to Iulia Domna's proclamation as *mater castrorum* ('mother of the camps'). Secondly, and even more strikingly, the book makes a strong cumulative point on the enduring vitality and significance of the cities of Northern Italy, which take up half of the volume, and appear as significant presences both at times of political turmoil and in the more stable environment of the imperial period. That is not a new point, of course, but to my knowledge it has never been made with such clarity in the context of a sourcebook.

While the central significance of cities in any history of Roman Italy is uncontroversial, it has long been a matter of debate among those who work on Egypt: in fact, as Alexander Free puts it right at the start of his monograph, Egypt and the concept of city have had a 'difficult relationship'.[11] Cities are very much the exception in the history of the province. Rome tends to rely on village structures, the *nomoi,* whose main settlements – the *metropoleis* – had an administrative function, but were mostly not meaningful city formations. Nor were they regarded as such by the Roman government, which did not bestow the status of city upon them until the fourth century CE. Free productively complicates this picture by bringing to the fore a range of evidence showing that those communities understood themselves and operated like cities well before receiving the imperial endorsement: that was not merely a political and administrative matter, but shaped the way of life of those communities and their elites: it was part of a process of imperial acculturation, and had a fundamentally performative dimension to it. Free focuses on a very stimulating case study: Hermopolis Magna, for which a sizeable body of papyrus evidence survives, as well as an especially rich set of archaeological material, and which may be helpfully discussed in association with neighbouring Antinupolis, founded in 130 by Hadrian. The brief involves a complex and fascinating process: a survey of the modern scholarship on the site, leading to a full reconsideration of the religious landscape of the city and a survey of its institutional and social setup, from the gymnasia to the local council and office-holding elite, down to the role of the relationship with the emperors – notably the Severans. The discussion stretches all the way down to Late Antiquity and to the emergence of the Christian

[11] *Polis und Metropolen im römischen Ägypten. Städtisches Selbstverständnis im Hermupolis Magna.* By Alexander Free. Berlin-Boston: de Gruyter, 2024. Pp. xiv+317. Hardback £107, ISBN: 978-3-11-135888-8 (quote from p. 1).

communities in the city. The story that Free tells is one of full integration into a Greek cultural model, which is unproblematically identified with the imperial paradigm: the proud people of Hermopolis could imaginatively, if plausibly, claim that their city was the oldest in the world. It is also a site that can claim long-term continuity of settlement well beyond the end of antiquity as a centre of major regional significance. Its geographical position was as significant a factor as its *Stadtbild*, its urban landscape. Free has produced an impressively well-documented account that tackles important conceptual problems. It is to be hoped that its approach will be applied to other Egyptian *metropoleis*; this is also a significant contribution to the study of urbanism in the Roman world, which warrants close attention well beyond the remit of the studies on Roman Egypt.

An inspiring book by Matthew McCarty problematizes the notion itself of Roman Africa, and its approach and overall contention are of wider significance to the study of Roman provinces.[12] At first glance it is a study of ritual practices in North Africa, with a special focus on the cult of Saturn and on the persistence of a distinctive offering rite, the so-called *molk*, which entailed the burning of an offering to the god Baal Hammon on a pyre, the collection of the remains in an urn, and its deposition next to a carved stone stele in a sanctuary. Nearly 3,000 of these survive, and have long been regarded as a distinctive feature of religious life in North Africa. McCarty rewrites the terms of that distinctiveness, and reacts against the idea of an unchanging African identity, which he regards as a construction of colonial essentialism. The image of North Africa under Rome is one of local agency and highly diversified ritual practice. Through a searching critique of the modern historiography on the period and a keen use of Gramsci's category of hegemony (mediated through Stuart Hall and Jean and John Comaroff), he advocates the need to see how material culture gives shape to unequal forms of social power, and thus contributes to the making of a hegemonic world order. That order, though, is embodied by a number of local enactments, and by the need of local contexts and the initiatives of different local groups at different points in time. In this context, the continuity of the *molk* ritual and stelae is a factor of persistence in a context that otherwise goes through fundamental change: third-century CE Africa is a radically different place from what it was in the first century BCE. Independently from Rives, McCarty also places sacrifice at the centre of his understanding of how Roman imperial societies operated: it was the single factor that offered a degree of commonality across divides of status, wealth, and power. Thirty-five years ago Richard Gordon influentially spoke of the 'civic compromise' to make sense of the place of religion in the Roman empire; McCarty attractively proposes to broaden the focus to envisage a 'sacrificial compromise', which goes beyond the remit of public religion, and can also account effectively for the lived experience of subaltern or non-urban groups. There is a strong methodological statement at the heart of this book: it would be mistaken to confine it to the remit of provincial archaeology.

[12] *Religion and the Making of Roman Africa. Votive Stelae, Traditions, and Empire*. By Matthew M. McCarty. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2025. Pp. xix+460. 88 illustrations. Hardback £120, ISBN: 978-1-107-02018-4.

Collin Elliot's *Pox Romana* has a catchy, and indeed quite memorable, title that somewhat undersells it.[13] There is much more about this book than a well-informed and carefully judged reconsideration of the evidence for the epidemic which hit the Roman empire from the mid-160s to the 180s, and goes under the conventional name of Antonine plague. Elliott puts forward a brilliantly wide-ranging account of the social, economic, and religious history of the second half of the second century, and of the complex background of the third-century crisis: he is as interested in 'Antonine' as he is in 'plague'. The opening section of the book is an effective exploration of the many failings of imperial governance in the Antonine period, and a cumulative case for the structural vulnerability of the empire at the time when it was hit by a new disease – not a plague, but a form of pox that eludes precise definition, even though it wrought 'the world's first pandemic' (xxiii; the account of Rome's sanitary conditions on p. 9 is especially pithy). The connectivity enabled by the empire and the changing climate conditions were conducive to its spread across a polity that was just about able to secure its food supply, but was facing challenges on a number of levels. Its cities were becoming increasingly populated, large crowds of 'climate refugees' were pressing on its borders, and malnutrition was a distinct part of the lived experience of many of its inhabitants. Elliott is rightly cautious in positing a single cause for the arrival of the pathogen that made its way from the East to the Western provinces. His discussion of trade and the military as potential conduits of the disease is an impressive statement of their importance and complexity. He is equally judicious in skirting away from a firmly statistical account; his view of a disease that keeps showing its ugly head at various, unpredictable intervals carries descriptive and explanatory value, and is well in keeping with the patterns that the evidence from China shows. The story that Elliott argues for is one of exhaustion on an imperial scale: a shock to the system that was not sufficient to bring the edifice down, but affected its foundations and changed the overall internal dynamic irreversibly. Depletion of the mining resources, coinage debasement, a demise of military discipline, an exacerbation of the migration movement from unsafe countryside to overcrowded cities, new challenges to food supply, and the emergence of new religious practices – a chain of issues that were already on the horizon – were exacerbated by the epidemic, and did not leave the stage even after the disease petered out (probably by the early 190s).

Elliott makes a point of not producing an account of the demographic consequences of the epidemic. He is aware of how many unknowns there are at play, and his focus is on producing a qualitative argument. On balance, he envisages a relatively low mortality rate (and this is one of the most significant points of dissent with Kyle Harper's *The Fate of Rome* – a major influence on this book): the epidemic was not a catastrophe in itself, but it unleashed catastrophic consequences. Elliott's Roman empire is a structurally dysfunctional entity, which was decisively imbalanced by the epidemic, but whose days were nonetheless numbered. There is much of interest in the kind of Roman history that Elliott explores, and the evidence for it may be found in many different places, from Galen's writings to land-rental contracts in Egypt, from a necropolis in Gloucester to the

[13] *Pox Romana. The Plague that Shook the Roman World*. By Colin Elliott. Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2024. Pp. xxiv+304. Hardback $32.00/£28.00, ISBN: 978-0-691-21915-8.

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statues of the 'plague demon' Hariti in the Kushan empire. There is nothing straightforwardly predictable, and certainly nothing exemplary about it either.

A comparable call for the need to widen the scope to a host of different kinds of evidence comes from a book that otherwise takes a very different approach: Lucy Grig's major study of popular culture in Late-Antique Gaul.[14] Its focus is strongly regional, or indeed microregional; the overall contention, though, is that through the discussion of very precisely defined case studies and the application of carefully framed theoretical approaches some insights of wider relevance may also be drawn. Grig's starting point is a capacious working definition of popular culture that takes stock of complex debates that have been unfolding well beyond ancient history. The work of Stuart Hall and its argument on the dialectical, conflict-fuelled nature of any form of popular culture is central to her thinking, and leads to the need to place different contexts and different sources in close dialogue with one another. Santo Mazzarino's concept of 'democratisation of culture' also proves a very productive interlocutor.

Grig's book is a social history of a segment of the late-Roman world for which an exceptional field of evidence survives, and about which unorthodox questions can be asked on several levels: on the relationship between city and countryside (especially in and around Arles and Marseille); on patterns of occupation and settlement (in Provence and Languedoc); on the dynamics of Christianization; and on the enduring significance of forms of religious participation that are not in keeping with a 'top down' approach. The 'lived religion' model is eminently adaptable to the study of popular culture. The brilliant exploration of the festival of the Kalends of January and of the failure of the Church to bring about its full Christianization gives the measure of the vitality and importance of the non-elite and not-state-sponsored traditions to which this book is devoted.

Grig has not just demonstrated the significance of the material from Southern Gaul. She has set a blueprint for how studies of specific provincial contexts might be linked up with the exploration of much wider themes. Just as importantly, she has shown how transformative some key working assumptions can be. If we refuse to see top-down change as the default rule of the game, and are prepared to see outcomes that elude straightforward definition, we might be in for exciting surprises. She has also shown how rewarding, and indeed how stimulating, it can be to work and argue against the grain of some of your key evidence: Caesarius, the bishop of Arles whose writings are such a central source for this book, is in fact the key proponent of the hostile and dismissive approach to popular culture (in the name of Christian piety and restraint, but with class prejudice never far from view) against which this book so effectively reacts. 'Ancient history from below' has never had it so good, and Grig's book is just the sort of contribution that is needed to keep up that momentum, and to sustain and further new, much-needed explorations.

A couple more recent studies are worth at least a brief reference in this connection. Francesca Bologna's excellent study of 240 Fourth Style Pompeian paintings offers new

[14] *Popular Culture and the End of Antiquity in Southern Gaul, c. 400–550*. By Lucy Grig. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. xi+260. 13 black and white and colour illustrations, inc. maps. Hardback £85, ISBN: 978-1-108-49144-0.

insights into their attribution and into the make-up of the teams of craftspeople that produced them.[15] The established idea that stable workshops were active in the city is effectively questioned, and a model of fluid cooperation among different groups of craftspeople, largely determined by the requirements of a specific commission, comes into focus. The conclusions are of wider import to the social history of the city, especially in the period between the earthquake of 62 CE and the eruption of 79. We are usually not looking at workshops of artists, but largely of small units of artisans who undertook modestly paid work and would often have to take on other jobs, especially since local demand was typically quite low.

Anna Bonnell Freidin has written a history of childbearing in imperial Rome that takes risk as its key vantage point on what she terms – following on an insight of Judith Butler – the 'matter of the mother': the ways in which mothers and their bodily materiality are deemed to matter.[16] This methodologically eclectic and exceptionally well-written study revolves around a microhistorical experiment: the reconstruction of the life of a woman called Veturia, whose funerary inscription, written as a first-person address to the viewer, survives on a sarcophagus discovered at Aquincum (modern Óbuda, near Budapest: *CIL* 3.3572). That informs the study of different interconnected dossiers: the metaphorical language of risk, with its insistence on an imagery drawn from agriculture and maritime spheres; the tract on childbearing by Soranus; the material evidence of amulets that were used during pregnancy and childbirth; and the religious discourses surrounding the role of the gods, fortune, and fate in childbirth. The topic eludes a neat summative conclusion, just as the 'birthing subjects' that populate it also elude a neatly focused discussion (265). But it is precisely the sense of openness, of unresolved opportunity that this book leaves its readers with that serves as a statement of the potential of the subject.

An edited book on freed persons in the Roman world, based on a conference held at UC Santa Barbara in 2019, comes with a remarkable set of ambitions.[17] The tricolon in the subtitle – *Status, Diversity, and Representation* – is revealing of a willingness to go beyond the focus of the legal framework and explore the wider set of experiences of those that were part of it, placing the emphasis on heterogeneity: there is an avowed debt to the work of Kostas Vlassopoulos. Much of the new claim collectively put forward by this collection lies in a spelling choice: in their introduction the editors do not speak of 'freedpersons', but 'freed persons': the emphasis is on the range of their lived experience and the extent of their agency (terminological choices have helpfully been left to individual contributors, rather than enforcing homogeneity). The volume readily stands out as a major contribution to the field. The editors' introduction provides invaluable guidance on recent and ongoing debates on slavery in the Roman world, as well as setting out the general claim of the volume. A first set of chapters is focused mostly on

[15] *Painting Pompeii. Painters, Practices, and Organization*, *Studies in Classical Archaeology 14*. By Francesca Bologna. Turnhout, Brepols, 2024. Pp. xvi+116. 20 black and white, 60 colour illustrations, 8 black and white tables. Paperback €85.00, ISBN: 978-2-503-61119-8.

[16] *Birthing Romans. Childbearing and Its Risks in Imperial Rome*. By Anna Bonnell Freidin. Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2024. Pp. xx+314. 19 illustrations. Hardback $45/£38, ISBN: 978-0-691-22627-9.

[17] *Freed Persons in the Roman World: Status, Diversity, and Representation*. Edited by Sinclar W. Bell, Dorian Borbonus, and Rose Maclean. Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp. x+294. 10 illustrations, 1 map. Hardback £85, ISBN: 978-1-009-43853-7.

the epigraphical material. Franco Luciani reconsiders the dossier of freed public slaves, and argues against the view that they were in any way privileged over other groups of freedmen. Marc Kleijwegt takes the cases of three Campanian notables to offer a reconsideration of the role of freedmen in the politics of Roman Italy, emphasizing the extent of their integration within the local elites and stressing the emotionally charged language that they used. Katharine Huemuller handles a rich dossier of funerary inscriptions in which an individual is mentioned as *libertus* or *liberta*, and views it as a relational title, rather than as the marker of status. The focus then turns to the literary evidence. Nicole Giannella focuses on the evidence for fictional laws on ingratitude towards former masters, and discusses them in the context of the later practice of re-enslavement, which gained momentum in late antiquity. Fábio Duarte Joly discusses the depiction of freed people and aristocrats in Neronian literature; Kristof Vermote takes a wider focus, and looks for instances in which the voice of free people may be heard in some key Latin authors, from Cicero to Tacitus; and William Owens holds a contrastive discussion of the position of freed people in Xenophon of Ephesus and the *Cena Trimalchionis*.

A very substantial closing piece by Dan-el Padilla Peralta tackles a question that is as demanding as it is pressing: how freed people lived through the transition from slavery to freedom, and dealt with the survivor's guilt that derived from it. Working at the intersection of psychoanalysis and postcolonial theory, Padilla Peralta proposes to view the problem under the rubric of race: manumission is a process of racial formation, because it creates a group that is differentiated by its own distinctive 'affective system' (248–9). On this reading, biological or physiognomic differences are not the only constituents of race. Rather, freed people went through an experience of being turned from objects to subjects, and thus experienced a state that Padilla Peralta terms 'racial melancholy'. The keen interest that freed people show in autobiography (of which Padilla sees an example in *Satyricon*) is a function of the trauma they experienced and the need to extricate themselves from it by plotting an alternative past. This is a strong analytical proposal, which identifies a new working agenda for the study of Roman freed people. The way in which it brings the concept of race to bear on the exploration of dynamics of oppression, exploitation, and emancipation, though, is in fact of much wider significance to the study of Roman history. Trauma on a massive scale is identified as a key dimension of the imperial project as a whole. This working assumption cries out to be tested on other problems and sources, and will no doubt attract much interest, dissent, and debate over the years to come.

The attempt to sharpen the focus on the plight and significance of subaltern groups must necessarily entail an interest in the intellectual apparatuses that were devised to enable and support their exploitation. A bold and provocative book by Toni Alimi takes as its key topic the argument with which Augustine legitimized slavery: like other Christian thinkers, he did not contest it, nor did he advocate improving the predicament of the enslaved.[18] The position was underpinned by a theological argument, which Alimi carefully expounds: humans were made as slaves by God, who rules them as master for their own good. Human suffering is caused by the clash between divine will and human

[18] *Slaves of God. Augustine and Other Romans on Religion and Politics.* By Toni Alimi. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2024. Pp. xvii+306. Hardback $35/£30, ISBN: 978-0-691-24423-5.

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will; God is the only master, and anyone who seeks to impose themselves as a master is necessarily cruel. Religious coercion is acceptable when it is intended to impose or restore a correct religious allegiance; chattel slavery is also legitimate as it is intended to guide slaves towards God, and it mirrors the nature of the bond between God and mankind. It is morally sound, provided that masters enable their slaves to become Christian; denouncing it as harmful would, in fact, amount to denouncing God's design, and would thus be inadmissible.

Slavery thus emerges as a fundamental operating principle of Augustine's system. It captures the nature of the bond between God and mankind, and it also defines the terms of religious deviance, which Augustine frames as slavery to sin; or, alternatively, those who are no longer loyal to God may be regarded as runaway slaves. Questioning chattel slavery is tantamount to questioning divine slavery. In this vein, Augustine reflects on the problem of the responsibility of power: only divine power is free from any form of accountability, while earthly power must be subject to scrutiny if it is to retain its morality: a theme that clearly emerges from the critique of the Roman empire, and which is related to earlier reflections on slavery, notably Cicero and Seneca. In Augustine's vision, slavery is not a natural condition; it is a punishment for sin. But there is a further corollary to the argument. In his justification for slavery, Augustine casts Christianity as a religion of slaves and masters; in doing so, though, he complicates and problematizes the distinction between the two groups. On an important level, it is a religion of slaves. Alimi's discussion is impressively well structured and consistently judicious; the claim that slavery is a central axis of Augustine's reflection has been conclusively proven. The implications of this study go well beyond the remit of Augustinian studies, and are of import to the understanding of the social and intellectual history of late antiquity. They also raise wider questions about the legacy of the Augustinian tradition, notably of its engagement with issues of power and status, and, as such, they point to fundamental themes in the religious and intellectual history of Europe.

Following Augustine's footsteps, let us cross back to North Africa, and turn to a book that takes us to the fringes of the subject as it is conventionally constituted, whilst speaking to some of its fundamental challenges and opportunities. Sandra Bingham and Eve MacDonald have filled a substantial gap in English-speaking scholarship by producing an account of the history and archaeology of Carthage from antiquity to our own time: a distinctive addition to the *Archaeological Histories* series at Bloomsbury, and an exceptionally demanding brief.[19] The project required them to straddle a wide range of historical, cultural, religious, and linguistic remits, and to make sense of the complex legacy of Carthage in what eventually became Tunis. The resulting book achieves at least three major objectives. It gives a crisp and reliable account of the historical trajectory of a major site in the Southern Mediterranean, showing what a productive vantage point it is for wider themes in the history of the Mediterranean, most notably, on the transmission of knowledge and the dynamics of cultural change. It gives a clear overview of the archaeology of the site, drawing attention to its key features, from the Port to the Byrsa Hill and the Tophet, and directing readers to the rich and multilingual bibliography on

[19] *Carthage (Archaeological Histories)*. By Sandra Bingham and Eve MacDonald. London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2024. Pp. vii+152. 38 black and white illustrations. Paperback, £19.99, ISBN: 978-1-4725-2276-4.

the topic. It shows the profound connections between the history of Carthage and the strategies through which its archaeology was explored and understood. The stories of individuals, such as the Danish consul Christian T. Falbe, the Dutch officer Jean Emile Humbert, the English missionary Nathan Davis, the American antiquarian Byron Khun de Prorok, or the French excavators Charles-Ernest Beule, Charles Lavigerie, and Alfred-Louis Delattre, show how the impact of impressively driven and capable individuals is never decoupled from the political landscape in which their research agendas are pursued, and has in fact an inherently political dimension. The connection between colonialism and archaeology is a profound one, although it does not lead to predictable outcomes: Delattre, most notably, was committed to pursuing the investigation of the site beyond the Christian contexts and in close cooperation with the local community.

After independence in 1956, what to do with Carthage was a significant question for the Tunisian political establishment: the long-standing association between the ancient site and European presence and exploitation has gradually been undone, and new ways of integrating into the cultural landscape of modern Tunisia have been pursued. Over the decades, though, the challenges presented by the building developments on the site have become more apparent. The same applies to the ongoing challenges of preserving Carthage and its heritage, and indeed furthering our knowledge of the site. The prospect that Bingham and MacDonald point towards at the end of their discussion – Carthage as a site of peaceful coexistence, where the pluralist nature of its past is recognized and celebrated – has a traction that goes well beyond the remit of a single site. Carthage is a very special place, and its lessons have much wider relevance.

Place and locality have been playing an increasingly important role in the study of Roman religion, and their fundamental connection with ritual practice has long been explored from a number of angles. Over the last decade, urban religion has emerged as a key theme in the 'lived ancient religion' paradigm that Jörg Rüpke and his colleagues at the Max-Weber-Kolleg in Erfurt have so effectively (and, in some quarters, controversially) placed on the agenda over the last decade or so. Emiliano Rubens Urciuoli – a member of that research team – has published a number of valuable contributions on the urban dimension of early Christianity, which have now been collected in a single volume.[20] Its publication is not worth flagging up just because it makes readily accessible a number of stimulating contributions, but because of the impressively capacious theoretical framing that it offers. The fundamental ambition is eloquently articulated in the opening chapter (1–42), which could also be read with profit as a free-standing contribution. Urciuoli reacts to what he regards as the dominant paradigm – an idea of religion as a factor of political and social cohesion, which is traced back to Fustel de Coulanges' *La cité antique* (1864) – and argues for a new understanding of the evolution of religion and urban life, in which religion is an ever unstable set of practices, and cities are venues and drivers of religious change. Hence the need for a new terminology: Urciuoli speaks of 'citification of religion', placing the emphasis on the processes of adaptation and appropriation that eventually lead to the emergence of a form of urban religion (see p. 23 for a fuller working definition). In a similar vein, he

[20] *Citifying Jesus. The Making of an Urban Religion in the Roman Empire*. By Emiliano Rubens Urciuoli. Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 520, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2024. Pp. x+309. Hardback €139, ISBN: 978-3-16-162371-4.

rejects the familiar notion of 'Christianity' as a potentially anachronistic misnomer for a much more diverse and unstable set of religious practices, and speaks instead of 'Christ religion' and 'Christ groups'. There is no way around the fact that this is a linguistically awkward choice, but it does have its heuristic rewards. The nine essays of which the book consists discuss various 'trajectories of citification', which have as their common denominator the efforts of the early Christian communities to make their mark on the urban spaces they inhabited: from intellectual critiques of polytheistic temple-building to the role of neighbourhoods in religious practice, from a study of the position of the urban street poor to the discussion of the Christian communities in Dura, Tyre, and indeed Carthage. Much space is given to several key texts – the *Acts of Justin*, the *Letter to Diognetus*, the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, and Augustine's *City of God* – and the overall focus is firmly on the literary evidence. Urciuoli's citification model has three key points: the need to explicitly declare one's theoretical assumptions; the need to place at the centre of historical analysis a set of interactions, understood in a non-hierarchical sense; and the need to primarily view cities as venues of divergence and conflict. There is a strong methodological proposal here, which derives from sustained engagement with the social sciences and makes a powerful case for the controlled use of historical imagination and analogy. This new citified account of religion in the Roman world now waits to be put to the test of its engagement with other clusters of evidence, archaeological and documentary alike.

Let us end with an important contribution to the history of the discipline. Dame Averil Cameron has written an autobiography that stands out, both as a document of her life and intellectual trajectory and as an account of key aspects of higher education in Britain in the last half century.[21] A comparison with Peter Brown's recent memoir inevitably comes to mind, not least because of the analogy between their research interests (and their close bond with Arnaldo Momigliano, one might add). This is a fundamentally different project, though, and not just because, as Cameron puts it, '(o)ur late antiquities are ... different, as is the extent of our move into Byzantium' (13). Cameron covers the entirety of her life; she comments rather sparingly on the development of her intellectual interests and on the key questions she addressed in her work; and much of the focus is on the people that she interacted with and the institutions to which she contributed. More importantly, she lived a very different life from Peter Brown: she grew up in a working-class family in North Staffordshire, studied at Oxford, and then embarked on a stellar teaching and research career, first in Glasgow, and then – for over two decades – in London. At King's College, Cameron was a driving force behind the development of the Centre for Hellenic Studies: a visionary undertaking in a number of ways. It was largely on the back of that achievement that she eventually came into contention for a College headship: in 1994 she moved to Keble College, Oxford, where she had a distinguished tenure as Master for sixteen years. Dame Averil also held a considerable number of roles at a variety of cultural institutions; and it is worth stressing that she pursued most of this extraordinary trajectory whilst being a single mother (p. 88 is illuminating and sobering on what that meant in mid-1970s Britain).

[21] *Transitions. A Historian's Memoir, Studi e testi tardoantichi, 25*. By Averil Cameron. Turnhout, Brepols, 2024. Pp. 307. 7 black and white and 7 colour illustrations. Paperback €80, ISBN: 978-2-503-61298-0.

This book is an instructive and inspiring read for anyone who might wish to learn more about the teaching of Classics and Ancient History in British universities during the second half of the twentieth century. But at the heart of it there is the human interest prompted by a remarkable personality. This is a story of great intellectual achievement, a profound and warm intelligence, and an outstanding sense of public duty. It is also a story of social mobility. And, in that connection, this book speaks to us about a set of conditions and opportunities that are mostly no longer within reach in 2020s Britain.

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General

It is perhaps a sign of the times we live in that there is an increased academic interest in weirdness, hybridity, and monstrosity. Just recently a colleague of mine from the English Department here at the University of Virginia mentioned in a casual conversation that he's been drafting a syllabus for his new course entitled 'Weird'. Noticing my surprise, he patiently introduced me to the world of Weirdcore literature ('Think Lovecraft on steroids minus racism and xenophobia'), and aesthetics ('Norm violating hybridity is the key, representations of human-mushroom bodies, rainbows with eyes, fish with human feet, surrealism meets low resolution anime and 80s video games graphics, basically'). The reason why Weirdcore is popular among Zoomers (the generation born between 1997 and 2012) became clearer to me after a while. What more suitable recourse does this brilliant (judging by my UVa students) generation of digital natives have, having been raised in a politically, environmentally, and economically volatile world, but to embrace the incongruity and celebrate the absurd?

Let us turn to the question of what made the Greeks and Romans develop fondness for weird and scary hybrids and creatures. The substantial *Oxford Handbook of Monsters in Classical Myth*[1] comprises forty chapters and provides an up-to-date, highly readable, and often entertaining overview of the variegated world of the more fantastic denizens of Greek imagination. More or less everyone you might expect to find, including humans, make an appearance in this well-produced and helpful handbook, from underworld menaces, over sea monsters, to terrestrial and avian creatures. The volume is organized in four unequal sections: the first and the most substantial part is a sort of a who-is-who among monsters typically encountered in hero-quests and creation narratives (from Cerberus to Harpies and most of the creatures in between); the second section, dealing with folklore and ethnography, features blood-suckers, ghosts, revenants, monstruous animals and 'monstruous', that would be somatically non-normative, humans. The

[1] *The Oxford Handbook of Monsters in Classical Myth*. Edited by Debbie Felton. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2024. Pp. 602. Hardback £130.00, ISBN: 978-0-19-289650-6.