

REVIEW ESSAY

Roman Society: A Review

The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World. Edited by Michael PEACHIN. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Pp. xvi + 738. Hardback, £95.00/\$150.00. ISBN 978-0-19-518800-4.

Rostovtzeff included in the *Social and Economic History of Rome* many images of men and women at work. A swineherd with his pigs appears on a stele from Bologna, a shepherd with a flock of sheep on a monument from Mainz, a woman selling slippers on a fresco from Pompeii. There are the clothes traders of the Igel monument, a navy unloading an amphora of wine on the Torlonia relief, a cobbler on a stele from Rheims, a ship-builder on a relief from Ravenna. The images presume that labor was an inherent source for many humble men and women of dignity and esteem: an inscription on the item from Ravenna says that P. Longidienus the ship-builder is "hurrying on with his work" (*ad onus properat*).¹

The people portrayed were not incidental figures. They were, or represent, the vast majority of the Roman imperial population, who in a myriad of skilled and unskilled occupations spent their lives working to earn their daily bread. Just how numerous they were emerges from MacMullen's estimates, in his seminal *Roman Social Relations*, of Rome's upper orders. "The senatorial stratum," he wrote, assuming a population at the turn of the second century of fifty millions, "amounted to something like two-thousandths of one percent," and "Equites probably totaled less than a tenth of one percent."² Allowance has to be made for the decurial sector, amorphous and incorporating individuals of many grades from community to community, which MacMullen found impossible to approximate. But whatever the final aggregate, the socially dominant were clearly no

¹ Rostovtzeff (1957), plates III.1, XVI.1, XXIV.1, XXIV.5, XXVI.1, XXVIII.4, XXX.3. This is an abbreviated list. See for comparable collections Kampen (1981) (women); Zimmer (1982) (handicrafts); and for mosaics with scenes of rural work and fishing, Parrish (1984) 25-42; Blanchard-Lemée, Ennaiffer, Slim and Slim (1996) chapters II and V (making clear that working life was for many controlled by the cycle of the seasons). For the initial impact made by Rostovtzeff's images, see Momigliano (1994) 32 (originally from 1954). Inscription: *CIL* XI 139 = *ILS* 7725.

² MacMullen (1974) 88-89.

more than a minuscule proportion of the total imperial population, far outnumbered by a dense and populous mass. One result is to make any concept of marginality in discussions of Roman society problematical.³

In the *Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World*, Michael Peachin begins his fine introductory survey of scholarship on Roman society with Rostovtzeff, and acknowledges MacMullen's crucial study in his discussion. But in the following seven hundred pages or so men and women of the sort identified above do not figure prominently. The shopkeepers, manufacturers, laborers, artisans and peasants who made up the bulk of Rome's population can be presumed to have experienced social relationships with one another, both within their families and in the workplaces where much of their time was spent. At times indeed familial and working relations were inseparable.⁴ It is the elite, however (or the "elites" as they are constantly, and awkwardly to my mind, called), who receive most attention. Every reader will understand that this is due to the nature of the literary sources on which knowledge of Roman society chiefly depends; but given the legacy of Rostovtzeff, the social lives of the majority might have received more attention. What for instance might be said of the social world of men like the *nauta* Bussus, a Celtic ship-owner who seemingly traded with Rome's troops on the Rhine, and whose funerary monument – he died at the age of seventy-five – shows strong indications among his family of "Romanization"?⁵

One of the book's sections, it is true, is called "Marginalized Persons." Two of its categories, however, women and children, are too broad to be historically practicable. The consort of an emperor was hardly comparable, simply by being female, with an ordinary *piscatrix*, and senators' sons were hardly comparable, simply by being children, with the sons of peasants. The categories are different from others in the rubric – prostitutes, entertainers, magicians and astrologers, bandits, the physically deformed – and, constituting sizeable proportions of the Roman population, cannot all have been "outsiders" or "pariahs" (17). In a population demographically tilted towards the young, this is especially true of children.

³ Upper-class views of labor, as at Tacitus, *Annals* 4.13.3: *sordidas merces*, are consequently unrepresentative.

⁴ When Jesus called the sons of Zebedee as his disciples, the fishermen James and John were mending their nets with their father in his boat (Matthew 4:18-22). Working sons commonly followed in their fathers' footsteps.

⁵ Selzer (1988) 95-98.

The *Handbook* aims to establish Roman identity, and the editor in his introduction advances a proposition: “little Romans did not spring to life, ready-made to consort in all the appropriate ways with their peers. To be capable of Roman social relations, would-be Romans wanted education and socialization: they had to be shaped as properly functioning members of their community” (15). The thirty-four chapters that follow are duly arranged in sections called “Mechanisms of Socialization,” “Mechanisms of Communication and Interaction,” “Communal Contexts for Social Interaction,” “Modes of Interpersonal Relations,” “Societies within the Roman Community,” and, finally, “Marginalized Persons.” A guiding principle is to achieve “an etiquette of Roman social behavior”; the overall method, “what might be labeled a cultural approach to Roman social relations” (21).

There is much that is stimulating, on topics as diverse as the family and children, the circulation of books and the transmission of letters (chapters 3, 8, 11, 30), bathing and dining practices, and violence (an important aspect of ancient life too often neglected) (chapters 17, 21, 22). A chapter on the second sophistic is a particularly well-balanced analysis of what to many may seem a subject of great inflation (chapter 14); and a chapter on public entertainments is outstanding as a model of the compact historical essay that can simultaneously provide essential material and display a keen sensitivity to change over time (chapter 16). Most contributors understandably work within the approximate chronological limits of c. 200 BC to c. AD 200, so that there is little discussion of social relations in the early Roman community or during the period when the core of empire was formed. But readers will have to supply their own knowledge of how the Roman world was constantly changing in order to maximize the value of what is said. An item on the age of revolution obscures more than clarifies (chapter 2).

Reliable summaries of up-to-date research written by experts can be of great value when an ever-increasing profusion of publications makes currency more difficult and daunting than ever before. The form nonetheless is inevitably constrained by limitations of space and compass, and relevant items, even standard works, can be overlooked. Syme for instance observed and explained the absence of duelling among elite Romans;⁶ Sherwin-White saw that Apuleius’ trial in

⁶ Syme (1979) 511: “The Roman noble was arrogant, conceited, and quarrelsome. But there is no trace of duelling, no hint that the practice was conceivable. In this respect, Rome was a true commonwealth of citizens, in spite of its class structure. Liberty and the

Sabratha was conducted according to the typical informal procedures of a provincial governor's court;⁷ Meiggs had valuable things to say about the *collegia* of Ostia;⁸ Millar monumentally demonstrated that the Roman emperor adjudicated petitions long before the time of Diocletian;⁹ Ste. Croix, Lane Fox and Hopkins made important contributions to the history of early Christianity.¹⁰ All need to be taken into account at appropriate points (161, 383, 487, 506-507, 689). There may also be issues that go unnoticed. If the Roman *cena* was unquestionably an important site of social relations, is anything discoverable about social relations between server and served, as well as among those who did the dining (453)? Or with violence, should a definition be attempted, perhaps to include psychological as well as physical manifestations, before incidents from the literary record are compiled?¹¹ (The violence inherent in slavery, unremarked in chapter 28, might be relevant.) Roman schools may have increased in number over time, allowing opportunities for lower-class education to arise (87), and travel in the Mediterranean may have become easier and safer under Roman rule (106), but how can such developments be demonstrated?¹²

As for the elite themselves, there is a tendency in the volume as a whole to regard them as a monolithic bloc, when, despite their relatively small numbers, they exhibited over time a great degree of compositional change and social differentiation, as the meticulous studies of prosopographical historians, Syme above all, have shown. The "declension" of the Arval Brethren between Augustus and Domitian must affect generalizations about the importance of that priestly body

laws regulated ambition and competition. The nobles had to conduct their feuds through oratory or intrigue" (originally from 1960).

⁷ Sherwin-White (1963) 48, with reference to Mommsen. (One writer can state that Apuleius' speech of defence was "probably fictional" [104] but not explain why.)

⁸ Meiggs (1973) chapter 14.

⁹ Millar (1977).

¹⁰ Ste. Croix (1981); Lane Fox (1987); Hopkins (1999); in an immense bibliography see also Wilson (1992) (a remarkable book); Vermes (2000); Clark (2004).

¹¹ Instances of physical violence are legion in the sources (even vine-dressers could be expected to resort to murder [Matthew 21:33-46; Mark 12:1-12]), but systemization as well as compilation is needed. On abuse of women, see especially Clark (1998).

¹² Hopkins (1978) 76-80, on structural differentiation, is important on educational possibilities: no more than "a small proportion of the total living in the city" likely to be well-educated in the late first century BC.

(538-539),¹³ and by extension render all generalizations about the elite vulnerable. Phrases such as “the cultural imagination of literate Romans across the empire” (102) and “elite Roman self-representation in the specific context of ancient society” (272) are vague and give pause. Very few of the elite, as it happens, are mentioned by name.¹⁴

There is also a risk of underestimating the diversity of local cultures in the broad expanse over which Roman power was exercised. A chapter is devoted to Jewish social relations (chapter 26: a trenchant statement on the misprision of virtually all that has come before); but what might be said about social relations in regions where Celtic, or Punic, or Aramaic culture remained strong, relations which may well have been much more complex than elite reductionism implies?¹⁵ One consequence could have been that many of the millions of men and women for whom labor was the driving force in their lives, scattered across the Mediterranean landscape as they were, were not as interested as it seems in hearing the latest effusion from Maximus of Tyre, or in hanging on every word from an advocate in a court case, or in examining the latest images and legends of the imperial coinage (131, 325, 263). Records from Egypt of men and boys receiving payments for pruning, manuring, weeding, picking up leaves, and pumping water during floods, are suggestive of a more plausible reality (74). They consist with Rostovtzeff’s images of a Celtic ploughman leading his team of oxen, an Egyptian peasant gathering dates from a palm-tree, Tripolitanian workers threshing grain.¹⁶

Multi-authored handbooks have become fixtures of contemporary classical scholarship. They have undoubted utility. Yet their proliferation threatens to relegate to the sidelines – to marginalize – the wide-ranging monograph and the personal voice of the individual historian. Given the great number of pertinent studies that have appeared since the mid-1970s, as Peachin shows, it is doubtful if

¹³ Syme (1980).

¹⁴ A discussion of the younger Pliny (280-282) omits reference to Syme (1991) and Birley (2000).

¹⁵ See Millar (1968); Woolf (1998); Adams (2003).

¹⁶ Rostovtzeff (1957), plates XL.2, LIII.2, LIX.1. Observe Eagleton (1996) 167: “Men and women do not live by culture alone, the vast majority of them throughout history have been deprived of the chance of living by it at all, and those few who are fortunate enough to live by it now are able to do so only because of the labour of those who do not.” Cf. Lucretius 5.207-209.

anyone today could write a new version of one of the most successful works of Roman social history of all time – not I think mentioned here – namely, Carcopino's classic *Daily Life in Ancient Rome*.¹⁷ First published in 1939, the book is idiosyncratic to say the least, especially in its views on women; but it is precisely because of its idiosyncrasy that it remains engaging, and informative (Carcopino knew of the *piscatrix*). The hope must be that the handbook does not take over completely. As it is, *The Oxford Handbook of Social Relations in the Roman World* is a valuable guide to many directions in contemporary research, and both editor and authors are to be congratulated for providing an essential resource.¹⁸

KEITH BRADLEY

University of Notre Dame, kbradle1@nd.edu

WORKS CITED

- Adams, J. N. 2003. *Bilingualism and the Latin Language*. Cambridge.
- Birley, A. R. 2000. *Onomasticon to the Younger Pliny: Letters and Panegyric*. Munich.
- Blanchard-Lemée, M., M. Ennaïffer, H. Slim and L. Slim, 1996) *Mosaics of Roman Africa: Floor Mosaics from Tunisia*. London.
- Carcopino, J. 2004. *Daily Life in Ancient Rome: The People and the City at the Height of the Empire*. Introduced by Keith Hopkins. London. (First published as *La Vie quotidienne à Rome à l'apogée de l'Empire* [Paris 1939]).
- Clark, G. 2004. *Christianity and Roman Society*. Cambridge.
- Clark, P. A. 1998. "Women, slaves and the hierarchies of domestic violence: the family of St. Augustine." In *Women and Slaves in Greco-Roman Culture: Differential Equations*, edited by S. R. Joshel and S. Murnaghan, pp. 109-129. London.
- Eagleton, T. 1996. *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (2nd ed.). London.
- Hopkins, K. 1978. *Conquerors and Slaves: Sociological Studies in Roman History Volume 1*. Cambridge.

¹⁷ Cf. Hopkins in Carcopino (2004) xx. See now (impressively) Toner (2009).

¹⁸ Although unable to accept, I am indebted to Michael Peachin for having invited me to contribute to this project.

- 1999. *A World Full of Gods: Pagans, Jews and Christians in the Roman Empire*. London.
- Kampen, N. 1981. *Image and Status: Roman Working Women at Ostia*. Berlin.
- Lane Fox, R. 1987. *Pagans and Christians*. London.
- MacMullen, R. 1974. *Roman Social Relations 50 B.C. to A.D. 284*. New Haven.
- Meiggs, R. 1973. *Roman Ostia* (2nd ed.). Oxford.
- Millar, F. 1968. "Local cultures in the Roman empire: Libyan, Punic and Latin in Roman Africa," *JRS* 58: 126-134.
- 1977. *The Emperor in the Roman World*. London.
- Momigliano, A. D. 1994. *Studies on Modern Scholarship*. Berkeley.
- Parrish, D. 1984. *Season Mosaics of Roman North Africa*. Rome.
- Rostovtzeff, M. I. 1957. *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire* (2nd ed., revised by P. M. Fraser; 1st edn. 1926). Oxford.
- Selzer, W. 1988. *Römische Steindenkmäler: Mainz in Römischer Zeit*. Mainz.
- Sherwin-White, A. N. 1963. *Roman Society and Roman Law in the New Testament*. Oxford.
- Ste. Croix, G. E. M. de 1981. *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World*. London.
- Syme, R. 1979. *Roman Papers II*. Oxford.
- 1980. *Some Arval Brethren*. Oxford.
- 1991. *Roman Papers VII*. Oxford.
- Toner, J. 2009. *Popular Culture in Ancient Rome*. Cambridge.
- Vermes, G. 2000. *The Changing Face of Jesus*. New York.
- Wilson, A. N. 1992. *Jesus: A Life*. New York.
- Woolf, G. 1998. *Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul*. Cambridge.
- Zimmer, G. 1982. *Römische Berufsdarstellungen*. Berlin.