

BOOK REVIEW

The Roman Empire in Context: Historical and Comparative Perspectives. Edited by JOHANN P. ARNASON and KURT A. RAAFLAUB. Malden and Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. Pp. viii + 319. Hardcover, £90.00/\$149.95. ISBN 978-0-470-65557-3.

How could one study the Roman empire “out of context”? The trick is to find the appropriate context for each specific enquiry being undertaken. The stated context for Kurt Raaflaub’s series *Ancient World: Comparative Histories*, of which this is the fifth volume to appear, is a broad set of societies from the Bronze Age to the early Middle Ages along with (more contentiously) other societies “that are structurally ‘ancient’ or ‘early’” for which pre-modern Japan and pre-Columbian America are the paradigms. Not pre-capitalist, then, nor pre-industrial, nor even pre-modern since Europe and western Asia after 600 AD are excluded. Those readers worried about unacknowledged Eurocentrism might be more comfortable with a sociological-cum-technological definition such as Ernest Gellner’s “agro-literate state” or either a Weberian or Marxist version of early/tributary empires. Arnason and Raaflaub lean, in different ways, towards recent reworkings of Karl Jaspers’ Axial Civilizations concept: appropriately the dedicatee of this volume is Shmuel Eisenstadt.

This particular volume collection originated in a conference held in Florence in 2005 and brings together 16 papers, most of them first given on that occasion. About half are written by Roman historians with interests in comparative studies: the other half by like-minded scholars from cognate fields. Assyriology, Mediaeval History, Byzantine Studies, Sinology and Islamic and Iranian Studies are all represented. The line up—which includes Mario Liverani, John Haldon, Michael Loewe, Egon Flaig, Garth Fowden and Guy Stroumsa—is impressive.

Few chapters disappoint, but there is little in the way of an overarching theme.¹ Apart from the editors, only a few contributors undertake explicit comparative analysis. Notable exceptions are Peter Fibinger Bang on universal

¹ The volume is less successful in this respect than other volumes in the series, such as the tightly focused and very interesting K. Raaflaub (ed.), *War and Peace in the Ancient World* (Malden, 2007).

empire,² Michael Loewe whose paper on early China makes frequent references to Rome, and Ted Lendon and David Cohen who co-author an entertaining chapter comparing the letter style of Roman emperors and a mediaeval Aragonese king.³ Because the original conference was focused on the “formation and transformation of empires” several papers consider transitions across conventional historical periodizations: from Republic to Empire, from the early empire to late antiquity, from Rome to Byzantium, and so on. This offers a different kind of comparison, diachronic rather than taxonomic, with the accent on interpretative narrative rather than structural analysis.

For the most part, then, the volume offers the academic equivalent of “proximity talks,” with the work of compare and contrast, of generalization and differentiation, largely left to any interested reader who works through the whole collection. Perhaps inevitably for papers originally aimed at colleagues in other disciplines a good deal of introductory material is included. Roman historians may feel they have learned more about other empires than about “their own,” but that may be no bad thing. A few papers on Roman themes do indeed find new things to do with familiar material: invidiously I single out Egon Flaig on the end of the Republic and Arnason’s interesting if challenging chapter comparing approaches to Rome as a state, as an empire and as a civilization.⁴

The Roman Empire in Context does not offer a unified and novel perspective on Roman history, nor a major contribution to the theorizing of early empires.⁵ Perhaps this is not the sort of project from which it would be fair to ask for a more rigorous historical sociology.⁶ But reading it does provide an opportunity to think

² A study for his own collection P. F. Bang and D. Kolodziejczyk (eds.), *Universal Empire. A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History* (Cambridge, 2012).

³ A model worth pursuing. For a very successful recent application of this technique to interdisciplinary history, a collection in which every chapter is co-authored, see A. Shryock and D. L. Smail (eds.), *Deep History. The Architecture of Past and Present* (Berkeley, 2011).

⁴ This essay includes a rare engagement with the important study H. Inglebert, P. Gros and G. Sauron, *Histoire de la Civilisation romaine* (Paris, 2005).

⁵ For this, readers should return to S. Eisenstadt, *The Political Systems of Empires* (London, 1963), J. H. Kautsky, *The Politics of Aristocratic Empires* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1982), S. E. Alcock, T. D’Altroy, K. D. Morrison and C. M. Sinopoli (eds.), *Empires. Perspectives from Archaeology and History* (New York and Cambridge, 2001), I. Morris and W. Scheidel (eds.), *The Dynamics of Early Empires: State Power from Assyria to Byzantium* (Oxford and New York, 2009), P. F. Bang and C. A. Bayly (eds.), *Tributary Empires in Global History* (Basingstoke, 2011).

⁶ See the useful survey by P. Vasunia, “The Comparative Study of Empires,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 101 (2011) 222.

harder about the comparative enterprise. Few individuals will probably want to pay quite so much to own the proceedings of this experiment, but those interested in a pursuing serious comparison between early empires will learn a good deal from consulting it.

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