

BOOK REVIEW

Roman Elections in the Age of Cicero: Society, Government, and Voting. By RACHEL FEIG VISHNIA. New York and London: Routledge, 2012. Pp. xi + 184. Hardcover, \$148.00/£80.00. ISBN 978-0-415-87969-9.

Feig Vishnia's most recent book is a serious scholarly work, aimed at explaining to undergraduates the procedures of republican elections as well as the expectations and ideology that underpin them. Ancient sources are carefully cited and footnotes guide the reader to modern research, mostly though not exclusively in English. There is much of value here, and this book will doubtless (and rightly) find a permanent place in university reading lists for courses in ancient history, though its price may prohibit its use as a prescribed textbook.

In the first chapter, Feig Vishnia offers a potted history of Rome from its foundation to Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon—in thirty pages. So summary a treatment is inevitably liable to false impressions, not least because the author frequently introduces a surprising degree of specificity on contestable scholarly points. For instance, on pp. 6–7 she claims that the so-called *senatus consultum ultimum* “authorized them [viz. the consuls] to strip anyone suspected of threatening the state's security of their citizenship.” This view, which perhaps owes itself to the arguments of Bleicken that the final decree designated specific men *hostes* and therefore no longer proper citizens (J. Bleicken, *Senatsgericht und Kaisergericht* (Göttingen, 1962) 23), is perhaps too legalistic in formulation for what was always an extralegal phenomenon that remained controversial even among contemporaries (see, e.g., A. W. Lintott, *The Constitution of the Roman Republic* (Oxford, 1999) 89ff.). On p. 69, by contrast, we find that the decree “did not specify the scale of powers to be exercised by the consuls or relate to the question whether these prevailed over the basic rights enjoyed by Roman citizens,” which is a far better account of the matter. Still, this chapter is on the whole unexceptionable if somewhat old-fashioned, a quality that is clearest in its treatment of the Roman army's admission of *capite censi* into its ranks. Feig Vishnia attributes this innovation to Marius and deems it significant because “*proletarii* volunteered for military service not out of patriotism, but in anticipation of a material reward at the end of their service” (9–10). Hence the willingness of soldiers

to follow their generals anywhere, even into civil war. But this exaggerates both the presence of *capite censi* in Marius' legions, and in the legions of later republican generals, and assumes, incorrectly so far as one can tell, a profound disparity between the moral fibre of *assidui* and *proletarii* (see A. Keaveney, *The Army in the Roman Revolution* (London, 2007) 24ff., with further references).

The second chapter more usefully maps out (again concisely) various social groupings and categories relevant to any understanding Roman elections: tribes, municipalities, and local administrative districts; the classes of the centuriate assembly; divisions within the Roman elite (patricians and plebeians; nobles and new men; senators and equestrians); and elements defining the lower orders (the rural and urban *plebs*; freedmen; *collegia*). This section is especially good in its treatment of *sodalitates*. Still, a few problems remain. It is not true that "each *municipium* was run by a board of four men (*quattuorviri*)" (39); some were administered by *duoviri* (see E. Bispham, *From Asculum to Actium: The Municipalization of Italy from the Social War to Augustus* (Oxford, 2007) 381ff.). On p. 36 Feig Vishnia describes the classes of the centuriate assembly but without making it clear that hers is a contested reconstruction: our sources insist on providing figures for the Servian classes (always the Servian classes, never explicitly the situation in the republic) in terms of *asses*; in that scheme, the minimum requirement for membership in the First Class is 100,000 *asses*; but this figure could mean that, in the republic, the minimum for the First Class was as little as HS40,000, a commonly accepted conclusion. Feig Vishnia, however, puts the minimum at HS100,000, following, I assume, arguments advanced by M. H. Crawford (see *Roman Republican Coinage* (Cambridge, 1974) 2.622). Students should at the very least be aware that these matters are uncertain and controversial. On p. 41 she asserts that freedmen "comprised the majority of the population in the city of Rome," a view she seems to reject on p. 53 ("the evidence available to us precludes any meaningful estimate of the relative percentage of freedmen") and yet takes up again on p. 125.

The structure of Roman government is the focus, in Chapter 3, of an extended and substantial treatment. The concept of *res publica* is examined, after which the magistracies are discussed with care; senatorial practices and the operations of the popular assemblies follow. This is a detailed and reliable treatment of all these matters, though at three points students could be misled. On p. 82, in discussing grants of *imperium* to *privati*, Feig Vishnia asserts that "in such cases popular approval was only rarely requested." This remark is too general to be clear. Popular legislation was, so far as we can tell, the routine means of conferring

imperium on a private citizen, the apparent exceptions being when a consul delegated his *imperium* to a military subordinate or when, in an emergency, the senate granted *imperium pro praetore* to a subordinate commander in the field, an action that appears to have required a *lex curiata* and so was (admittedly in a tenuous sense) given approval by one of the people's assemblies and was certainly ratified by the gods (see, e.g., Mommsen, *StR* 2.1.652ff. and 677ff.; Lintott, *op. cit.* 114f.; T. C. Brennan, *The Praetorship in the Roman Republic* (Oxford 2000) 190f. and 586f.). In her treatment of senatorial procedures on p. 85, Feig Vishnia states that "all former magistrates who had not yet been appointed to the senate," because since the time of their election a census had not yet taken place, although they could attend meetings were "without voting rights." But this is not the impression of our admitted meager evidence, which suggests on the contrary that in practice, and even in official decrees, no distinction was drawn between enrolled senators and former magistrates destined for enrolment (Mommsen, *StR* 3.858f.). Finally, also on p. 85, we are told that senate meetings could be held in any inaugurated space "as long as it was within the city's official precincts (the *pomerium*)," but in a footnote are directed to sources that, when consulted, indicate that the same requirement obtained outside the *pomerium* as well.

The chapter dealing with elections is the most substantial, and the best, part of the book. Feig Vishnia guides her reader through the various facets of a candidature, in a discussion that in a very brief space provides an admirable treatment of the *Commentariolum Petitionis*. She is right to observe the relevance of Roman sumptuary legislation to the aristocratic concerns operative in canvassing (111, on which point see now E. Zanda, *Fighting Hydra-like Luxury: Sumptuary Regulation in the Roman Republic* (Bristol, 2011) 52ff.). The difficulties of translating Roman electoral practices and assumptions into modern ones are addressed, principally by way of a discussion of terms like *coitio*, *amicitia*, and *factio*. The mechanics of voting, still uncertain or controversial owing to the sheer inadequacy of our sources on these matters, are carefully rehearsed, including a very sensible survey of the *leges tabellariae* and their purposes. There is also a lengthy examination of *ambitus*. As Feig Vishnia rightly discerns, the Romans' legislation against *ambitus* as well as their denunciations of it constitute sources that are crucial for our own reconstruction of what was traditional and normative in political campaigning. Here Feig Vishnia is inclined to share the Romans' own moralizing concerns about electioneering. She expresses agreement with Cicero's anxiety that *pecunia omnium dignitatem exaequat* (*Att.* 4.15.7), though the examples she

provides of nobles defeated in elections by men of lesser rank are all men from houses in decline, like Catilina: the *fasti* make it clear that the nobility continued to excel in Roman elections to the very end of the republic. Still, she is right that bribery became a significant and disturbing factor in elections and that cash was the culprit, a conclusion that comes into sharper focus when one considers the very real novelty of pervasive monetisation in the late republic (see D. B. Holland, *Money in the Late Roman Republic* (Leiden, 2007) 15ff. and 111ff.). This chapter concludes with an assessment of the democratic quality of Roman elections, in which matter Feig Vishnia finds herself perhaps closer to the conclusions of H. Mouritsen than of F. Millar or A. Yakobson.

A few qualifications. Feig Vishnia's depiction of *ius honorum* is probably a bit too prescriptive for what was mainly a matter of tradition and not formal regulation, except in the case of individuals, like the sons of the proscribed, who were legally prohibited from standing for office (see, e.g., Mommsen, *StR* 1.480ff.). Feig Vishnia cites Polybius 6.19.1–2 as evidence that ten military campaigns were required before one could stand for office, but even the early enforcement of this rule has been doubted (Mommsen, *StR*. 1.505f.) and in any case it no longer applied in the late republic (W. V. Harris, *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome, 327–70 BC* (Oxford, 1985), 12): Cicero himself did not fulfil it. In discussing antecedents to the *Commentariolum Petitionis*, Varro's exposition of senatorial procedures composed for Pompey the Great, his *Commentarius Eisagogikos*, is adduced as if it, too, were an "advisory letter" (109). But although Varro's later revision of this work took the form of a letter (the *Letter to Oppianus* cited at Gell. *NA* 14.7), we have no way of knowing what form the *Commentarius* took. At p. 108 Feig Vishnia insists that "only listed candidates were allowed to stand" and that "if voters cast ballots for a non-approved candidate, they were discarded." But this is not easy to prove. Even if *professio* became a legal requirement in the late republic, it had previously been possible for the people to elect whomever it chose (see E. S. Staveley, *Greek and Roman Voting and Elections* (London and Ithaca, 1972) 146) and it is hard to imagine that, short of declaration by the presiding magistrate that he would refuse to declare a specific individual elected (e.g. C. Piso on Lollius Palicanus in 67: Val. Max. 3.8.43), the people's choice would be rejected at any time.

The book closes with a very brief (150–2) consideration of Fergus Millar's thesis that the Roman republic can fairly be described as democratic. Feig Vishnia rightly sees merit in Millar's challenge to entrenched academic notions

regarding Roman politics and government, and equally rightly she turns to Polybius in order to define the limits of the legitimacy of Millar's claims.

My emphasis here has been, obviously, on disagreements over matters of detail. But this should not distract anyone from the sentiment of my opening paragraph. Feig Vishnia has written a very useful book that will be consulted frequently by all students of Roman republican history.

Misprints are few and mostly in the book's cross-references: e.g. p. 00 on p. 32 (twice), on p. 33 the reference to p. 140 should be to p. 78, and on p. 41 the reference to p. 106 should be to p. 56.

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