

BOOK REVIEW

Demography and the Graeco-Roman World: New Insights and Approaches. Edited by CLAIRE HOLLERAN and APRIL PUDSEY. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Pp. ix + 215. Hardcover, £58.00/\$99.00. ISBN 978-1-107-01082-6.

The eight essays contained in this volume are explicitly intended to explore the frontier of current historical research on matters of demography such as fertility, nuptiality, migration, and the use of model life tables in classical antiquity. With the exception of the opening and closing chapters, by Neville Morley and Tim Parkin respectively, the remaining six essays are the products of young scholars, in some cases in anticipation of or as a side product from their dissertations or post-doctoral research. Despite the fact that the volume originates from a conference held in Manchester in 2005, its scope goes far beyond what one would expect from the publication of conference proceedings. In fact, the architecture of the volume is well balanced: it is centered on key concepts, which serve as heuristic foci (mortality, nuptiality, fertility and mobility), and which are illustrated by case studies evenly distributed across Greek and Roman antiquity, in both the east and west of the Mediterranean.

No succinct summary can be offered here: the value of the volume rests on the many interesting points of detail made by the authors. I should emphasize that every chapter contributes to current debates with interesting insights and each one ought to be read separately with its unique salient attributes taken into consideration. If we are to evaluate the volume as such, we cannot but agree with Parkin's remark that this collection of essays shows the extent to which the field is open to new research, rather than simply to providing varied responses to old questions. The reader is left with the impression that the real challenge in the study of ancient demography is to ask questions that can be framed within the limits of what the ancient evidence allows, rather than to give answers to traditional questions. As a consequence, a warning is repeated throughout the volume against easy solutions, broad generalizations, and the mechanical applicability of models (this is especially evident in the work of Akrigg on the demography of Athens, in the work of Pudsey on the demographic life cycle in Roman Egypt, and

in that of Hin on fertility). The chapters devoted to mobility—an area of research that is understudied but is crucially important and one which this book addresses especially in the chapters of Taylor on Attica and Holleran on Rome—seek to problematize the concept of migration and elegantly refuse to play the numbers game. Temporary or permanent migration, social expectations and pull factors are, to my knowledge, for the first time clearly evinced as the crucial terms of any discussion about migration in antiquity. Fischer-Bovet's chapter on the migration rate of Greeks and Macedonians in Ptolemaic Egypt stands out from the rest of the volume, inasmuch as she presents an ingenious new method to quantify the number of Greeks living in Hellenistic Egypt. This innovative study, beyond the reliability of its findings, will certainly make its way into the broader field of the general history of Ptolemaic Egypt. However, it is worth stressing that the methodological premises of this study are somewhat at odds with the extreme prudence and caution of the other chapters. In this respect, it is useful for the reader to note the wide spectrum of possible approaches that ancient demography may foster.

The tension between theory and evidence is nevertheless apparent in all of the chapters. The gap between what we wish to know and what is knowable to us is elegantly and effectively filled in by Pudsey's chapter, which clearly makes extensive use of ancient evidence, in this case the census returns of Roman Egypt. It is, however, the exceptional nature of the evidence at hand that makes it possible to firmly embed the argument into that evidence. More often, the divide between models and historical reality is filled with imaginative—or rhetorical—recourse to “comparative evidence.” Here is a major methodological point that this book only partially addresses: to what extent is it legitimate and appropriate for a scholar to draw demographic scenarios and infer conclusions from more familiar societies and epochs? Or, to ask the same question from another point of view, what is peculiarly ancient about ancient demography? Akrigg and Parkin rekindle the dispute about the legitimacy of using the model life tables: Parkin concludes with a good dose of wisdom that they may serve our purposes if we look for orders of magnitude, not statistical precision. The resort to “comparative evidence” is, however, more systematic and not only confined to the biological aspects of the life-cycle in pre-modern societies. There is obviously nothing inherently wrong in invoking comparative scenarios in order to elucidate obscure points of ancient history; only this should be made with the awareness that it blurs our vision of culturally determined and specific phenomena, the same phenomena invoked to explain unexpected or anomalous patterns of migration and

nuptiality, for example. Biology and culture, the socially and temporally determined interplay between nature and nurture, are the constituent factors of any analysis of demographic history.

In sum, the book here under review introduces the reader to the more systematic research that the contributors have under way in publication. The outcome is a complex web of possible paths of research. It is clear that a similar book could simply not have been written fifteen or twenty years ago and this testifies to the centrality that problems of ancient demography have acquired since.

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