

BOOK REVIEW

Invisible Romans. By ROBERT KNAPP. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011. Pp. 400. \$29.95. ISBN 978-0-674-06199-6.

Robert Knapp's *Invisible Romans* presents an engaging and informed picture of the lives of "the great mass of people who lived in Rome and its empire" in the first three centuries CE (1): for Knapp, these men and women who seem "invisible" in the elite sources. He uses the term "ordinary people" to distinguish them from the elite and to leave "their definition open to the wide range of their existence, from fairly wealthy to modestly well-off and downright poor, male and female, slave and free, law-biding and outlaw" (3). This wide range of lives extends not only chronologically over some three hundred years but also geographically to include evidence and people from the entire empire. The latter offers up a rich mixture of human lives, though at points a conflation of times and places obscures some of the developments that altered those lives. This is a highly readable book aimed primarily at an interested, general audience, but individual sections also will engage the interests of classicists in various specialties (though they may debate some of Knapp's observations in their own fields of expertise).

Knapp organizes the material effectively, moving from chapters on free men and women, with a separate chapter for the poor, to slaves and ex-slaves, and then to soldiers and their families. He ends with three chapters on those who might be considered socially and legal on the margins—prostitutes, gladiators, and bandits (and pirates). Though the concerns of every chapter are roughly similar topically, they are approached in distinct ways appropriate to the particular conditions of the group under consideration and following the emphases in recent scholarship. In defining its subjects, each chapter deals with the complications of overlapping categories, locating them in the large social order. Knapp sketches the economic and material conditions of each group, attuned especially to the variety of limiting conditions that characterized the lives of "ordinary" people and shaped their values and perceptions. The latter, what Knapp calls the "mind world," is the book's special focus: "the aim will be to get, so far as we can, inside the minds of

these different people: what attitudes and outlooks they had, what fears haunted and what hopes inspired them” (3).

Knapp is acutely aware of how the limits and nature of the ancient sources make this project difficult. To this end, he reads the elite sources critically, but above all he draws on other literature—fables, proverbs, novels. He makes good use of documents authored by “ordinary people”—inscriptions (especially epitaphs) and papyri (letters and contracts). And he deploys works whose audiences were ordinary Romans: magical texts, the *Carmen Astrologicum*, and Artemidorus’s *Interpretations of Dreams*, for example, trace the worries and hopes of men and women, free and slave. Interweaving bits and pieces from this variety of sources produces passages of thick description that enliven the lives of the businessman anxious about financial success, the poor man ever on the edge, the slaves “forging spaces of action” (147), or the bandit dividing the gang’s loot into equal piles (21–2, 104, 147, 306). In many places, Knapp lines up passages from a series of documents that address a similar concern but with a difference: for example, several epitaphs in which ex-slaves commemorate their origins or multiple dedications in which slaves act as a group (139–40 and 143; cf. 22–3, 92–3, 107–9, 113). In doing so, Knapp conveys the general point without sacrificing all the particularity of varied, individual lives. The effect perhaps is especially important for non-specialists used to “big men” histories of ancient Rome, but whose interest in “ordinary” people has been piqued by the picture of lower-class life in HBO’s *Rome*. Knapp takes one more step. Not only does he provide a guide to the sources and their use at the end of the book (“Sources”), he also constantly engages his readers in the problems of the sources and his own use of them throughout the substantive chapters of the book.

A book on such a large topic, and one accessible to non-specialists, has its limitations. Though the book has thirty color plates and thirty-two black and white images, Knapp barely refers to them and omits material evidence from his discussion almost entirely, as he himself observes, leaving it to “another more versed in the material.” In addition, the book mentions a few scholars at points in the text, though not with any consistency, and it lacks footnotes. In “Further Reading” at the end of the book, Knapp gives a fairly extensive list of relevant scholarship for each chapter (with few exceptions, scholarly work in English, as is appropriate for the English-speaking general readers who are the book’s intended audience). The absence of scholarly apparatus creates a smooth and more readable narrative for a general audience; however, the drawback is the reader’s inability to see the scholarly work relevant to particular points in the discussion.

In short, Robert Knapp's *Invisible Romans* is a well-written and well-researched account of the lives of ordinary Romans living in the Roman empire, intended especially for the non-specialist.

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