

## BOOK REVIEW

*Peoples of the Roman World.* By MARY T. BOATWRIGHT. Cambridge Introduction to Roman Civilization. New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. Pp. xix + 256. Hardcover, \$90.00/£55.00. ISBN 978-0-521-84062-0. Paper, \$25.99/£17.99. ISBN 978-0-521-54994-3.

Mary Boatwright's important book should be required reading for anyone new to the complexities of ethnicity in antiquity. The diversity of its population, Roman writers were prone to boast, was the source of Rome's enduring success, but Boatwright shows that incorporation and assimilation were never straightforward, and concepts of ethnicity varied and shifted over time. In her introductory chapter, she shows that for some, ethnicity was a matter of language or dress; for some, ethnicity did not equal "otherness." Identity depended upon the identifier: a person's beliefs about belonging to a group would not necessarily match the opinions of the larger society. Boatwright asks us to consider whether the opinions of elite male authors (representing the majority of written evidence) were known to, or shared by, many in the Roman world, an estimated 80–90% of whom could not read. Could the average Roman identify which conquered people were depicted on triumphal monuments any better than we can today?

Chapter 2 ("Gauls, Celts, Germans and Other 'Northerners'") dashes all hope of easy answers. These northerners left no written record, a loss that would not be so devastating if Roman testimony were not so ambiguous. Roman writers misidentified whole groups, or lumped them together while at the same time recording a mixture of opinions—admiration, fear and suspicion—about those misidentified barbarians, and often enough in the same text (problems reiterated in subsequent chapters). The ghosts of the Gallic Sack of Rome (390 BCE) haunted Rome's collective imagination, but by the late Republic Cispaline Gaul had become "quintessentially Italian" (45). Tacitus both admired and feared German military prowess, perpetuating the paranoia following the famous loss in the Teutoburg Forest in 9 CE, after which Germans and Gauls were deported from Rome. Can we judge the assimilation of northerners successful because, by the 2nd c. CE, Gaul had produced an emperor?

Boatwright's discussion of Greeks in Chapter 3 provides an effective counterpoint. Greeks seem never to have suffered from the reputation of barbarity, but still the Roman evidence is conflicted: were Greeks ardent admirers of all that was good and noble, or dissipated lovers of luxury? Were Greeks cultured, or were they corrupters of morals? We are especially hampered by the ubiquity of Greek slave names that conceals slaves' true origins. Did the Romans believe that Greek names lent a whiff of luxury and class, or by using them did the Romans determine to humiliate all Greeks? Boatwright does not hazard a guess, but she shows us that we can suspect a host of motives. The suspicion arising from the enthusiastic Hellenizing of a number of Roman emperors is illustrative; the fact that Greeks were members of the senate by the beginning of the 1st c. CE, yet no Greek became emperor, speaks volumes.

Egypt was the exotic "other" in the Greco-Roman world, but who was Egyptian? From the time of Alexander the Great, Greek language and Greek culture held sway in city centers, but Boatwright notes that no one has satisfactorily explained how far removed the ruling Greek elite were from the common folk. Boatwright questions the extent to which the "Egyptomania" of the early Empire infected average Romans. While many Roman writers expressed derision for Egyptian religion, the popularity of these very practices had attracted negative attention in Rome by the 50s BCE. The dire conflict with Cleopatra marked the beginning of a new phase of Roman mistrust; Augustus claimed Egypt as his own personal property and instituted restrictions which kept Egypt "estranged from the rest of the Roman world" (117). A "hierarchy of ethnicity" came into play, with Romans at the top (excepting Antinoopolis, in which Greek, Roman and Egyptian culture flourished). Boatwright ends by exploring Roman worship of Isis and Serapis and the testimony of Egyptians themselves, made more problematic because it is left to us by "Greco-Egyptian" elites.

What constituted successful assimilation is thrown into high relief in Chapter 4, which Boatwright begins by noting that while Jews lived everywhere (and often received official accommodation from the Roman government), they also resisted assimilation everywhere, seeking to be, and remaining, a people apart. We possess more literary evidence concerning Jews than other groups, yet we are hampered by Romans' hazy definition of them. Jews were recognized as a distinct group by the mid-first century yet fifty years later, Jewishness was an unrecognizable quality, and correspondingly Jews suffered (expulsions were not uncommon) or benefitted from the lack of a "consistent Roman policy" (145). A parade

of Roman triumphal art celebrating the end of the First Jewish Revolt (begun 66 CE) illuminates the important turning point this insurrection represented, and the nightmare of Domitian's reign is made frighteningly clear. The horrors of the Second and Third Jewish Revolt end in the telling observation that hardly any evidence survives about Jews in the Empire in the second century.

Christians (Chapter 5), incorporated “outsider” status into their self-representation, identifying themselves as a “new race” (171). Early Christian writers asserted that Christianity enjoyed widespread worship, yet Boatwright reports that by ca. 100 CE Christians represented perhaps 0.01% of the Empire’s population. The Gospels’ account of Jesus’ death provides a useful backdrop to the problems his worshippers would encounter later. Not surprisingly, many Romans had difficulty differentiating Jews from Christians, and one result of the Jewish Revolts was to separate the two. Boatwright guides us with care through the literary evidence, examining the famous letters between Pliny and the emperor Trajan that mark a period of an official “hands-off policy” (179). This time of comparative peace was followed by dreadful persecutions, and here our evidence is made stronger by martyrologies. Boatwright asserts that while the Edict of Milan granted freedom of worship to all, Constantine in all probability did not seek a unified Christian empire.

Romans may have congratulated themselves on their diverse world—the result of conquest and forced assimilation, but also of peaceful migration—but depending upon the time period or the place in the Roman world in which they found themselves, the people who provided this diversity could be subjected to a wide range of reactions, from praise to mild tolerance to blame and finally violence. At best those determined to be “other” living in the Roman world would be left at peace to live and work; at worst, their lives would be in mortal peril. Through centuries of empire-building, depending on the whim of those in power, the Roman world could, with alarming swiftness, shift beneath the feet of its denizens.

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