

BOOK REVIEW

Ostia in Late Antiquity. By DOUGLAS BOIN. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. xix + 287. Hardcover, \$99.00. ISBN 978-1-107-02401-4.

Don't be fooled by its nondescript title: *Ostia in Late Antiquity* compellingly, though on occasion unevenly, engages some of the most important debates in late antique history—e.g. the third century “crisis,” Christian “triumph” (or Christianization to use a more, or less, neutral synonym), and the fifth-century “collapse” of the western Roman empire—through the prism of late antique Ostia.

While the title suggests a broad overview of Ostia from the third to the eighth centuries, Boin presents a series of emblematic vignettes on Ostian material cultural and literary sources in an attempt to model a new approach to late antique religious and urban change. Boin argues that the so-called crisis had much less impact on Rome's port as archaeological and textual sources reveal enduring patterns of classical urban life into the sixth century, a century after the western empire's “collapse,” and that the entirely contingent process of Christianization was a slow and stuttering process that itself stretched from the fourth to the sixth centuries as Roman traditional religions long maintained a robust presence.

Part One, “Background,” outlines the theoretical toolkit of the work and sketches the basic contours of late antique Ostia. In chapter one, “New Approaches to daily life in Late Antique Ostia,” Boin signals a commitment to post-processual archaeology, social memory (or the persistence and power of the past in which Roman traditional religions remained vibrant for much longer than expected), and the complexities of identity (which complicates the facile assumption that a ring with Christian symbolism necessarily belonged to a Christian). Chapter two, “The new urban landscape of Rome's ancient harbor,” orients the reader with a rapid tour of late antique Ostia from the inner harbor to the coast line (with its collegia, villas, synagogue, and baths) to the civic center and its surrounding housing stock, demonstrating that Ostia remained dynamic and diverse, attracting people of various religious, social, and economic stripes.

Part Two, “Foreground,” proceeds more or less chronologically. Chapter three, “The third century: Roman religions and the long reach of the emperor,” offers analyses of the Round Temple, which Boin argues was a multi-purpose imperial audience hall, domestic and workplace religious installations, and the renovations of the synagogue, now thought to have been founded in the second century. The assembled snapshots demonstrate the ongoing vitality of third-century Ostia, which was little impaired by the supposed third-century “crisis.”

After summarizing recent studies on Constantine, Julian, and the anti-“pagan”—an adjective Boin rightly critiques—legislation in the Theodosian code, Chapter four, “The fourth century: proud temples and resilient traditions,” tackles the supposedly swift Christianization of the Roman Empire after Constantine’s conversion. Though cities continually “decline,” Ostia’s Capitolium and Forum were carefully maintained demonstrating the persistence and power of the “pagan” past in the late antique present. Also in the fourth century, the synagogue added a kitchen and new architectural decoration, perhaps in response to an increasingly powerful, though internally conflicted, Christian community, whose modest public presence, one intramural church and a handful of extramural martyr basilicas, belies narratives of Christian “triumph.”

Chapter five, “The fifth century: history seen from the spaces in between,” surveys the fifth-century’s rambunctious religious diversity and competition when the synagogue took on its most monumental form, the Christian Pianabella basilica employed spolia from the sanctuary of Vulcan, intimating a discontinuity between the classical past and contemporary conceptions of Christian identity, and a stunning statue collection which was displayed in the sanctuary of Magna Mater. This civic diversity was echoed in the Christian community as an intramural church, commonly understood to have been dedicated to Peter, Paul and John by the ecclesiastical establishment, may have been understood by the local aristocracy as a church of the very popular Roman martyr Lawrence.

Chapter six, “The sixth and seventh centuries: a city in motion, shifting traditions,” departs from the chronological structure to assess the continuing visibility and viability of Roman traditional religion—namely, a sacrifice to Castor and Pollux in 359 as well as Isis festivals and the Vulcanalia, Ostia’s principle civic festival, as evidenced by the calendars of 354 and Polemius Silvius (mid-fifth century)—and the efforts to create Christian memories of Ostia through martyr stories. In particular, the festival of the martyr Ostian Aurea, whose *gesta* was possibly compiled in the fifth-sixth centuries, was celebrated in direct competition with the Vulcanalia. Her church later became the core of the medieval town of

Gregoriopolis. In other words, Christianity “triumphed” ever so slowly even as ancient Ostia was ever so slowly abandoned—echoing, seemingly, the cadences first composed by Gibbon.

In general, the paucity of material evidence necessarily leads to an impressionistic picture of late antique Ostia, into which the, at times, passionate debate with the grand narratives of late antique historiography (which have been contested for some time) were, at times, shoehorned. At the same time, the same relative lack of evidence also led Boin into the archives of earlier excavations and to re-evaluate the extant material in individual sketches of objects, places, and spaces, which are particular strengths of the book. In the end, the monograph models a valuable approach to late antique urban history emphasizing the need to employ archaeological and textual evidence together but also critically, to view historical processes as contingent, avoiding teleological analyses, and to reconsider the grand narratives handed down by our scholarly ancestors.

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