

BOOK REVIEW

God, Space, & City in the Roman Imagination. By RICHARD JENKYNs. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. iii + 407. Hardcover, \$55.00. ISBN 978-0-199-67552-4.

This fascinating exploration of the Roman mind and its perception of the surrounding world, especially the urban fabric in which Romans lived, moved, interacted, and worshipped, is based upon a broad range and detailed analysis of primary sources, complemented by seventeen figures, plans and photographs of major Roman monuments, including the fora of Julius, Augustus and Trajan, and the Pantheon.

In the first chapter, entitled “The Public Eye,” Jenkyns focuses on *conspectus*, on the gaze of fellow citizens, the gods and the city itself, forever watching over Romans and judging their behavior. In this “shame society” the successful and powerful relished the approving gaze of the populace while disgraced Romans often avoided being seen in public.

From this public view Jenkyns moves to “The Private Realm,” i.e. to Roman attitudes towards urban vs. rural life and appropriate contexts for public vs. private life. In this regard, Nero’s Golden House, a private, rural environment constructed in the urban center of Rome, was a severe misjudgment of Roman sensibility and values.

This separation of public and private space leads Jenkyns to the observation, in “Business and Pleasure,” that Romans often used the same public spaces and events for both serious activities and enjoyment. Augustan Rome was a city in which nature and culture, imperial *auctoritas* and public pleasure were co-mingled. The Mausoleum of Augustus, for example, was intentionally designed as not only imperial tomb but a public park.

Having considered the ways Romans saw their city with their eyes, Jenkyns then wonders in “Rome Imagined” how the city was constructed in their minds. Jenkyns suggests that Vergil offers, especially in the *Aeneid*, a poetic and imaginative image of the primitive city in the distant past rather than a vivid description of contemporary Augustan Rome. In addition to imagining their city in terms of this temporal distance, Romans also viewed their city in a spatial context radiating

from the Caput Mundi out into Italy, to distant imperial territories and even to barbarian lands, a geographic tension proudly felt by Romans as they looked at and talked about their city.

Jenkyns then turns to "Movement in the City." Typically, it appears, Romans preferred slow progress rather than fast pace, not only because of congested urban thoroughfares, but also because of that public eye, which encouraged Romans, especially more prominent ones, to proceed through the city in as dignified manner as possible. Conversely, hasty or disorderly movement was a sign of emotional turmoil or even crisis. Besides walking, flowing, pressing, descending and entering all appear to have had important significance for Romans as they described movement through their city.

Jenkyns begins Chapter Six, "Roman Religions," by emphasizing how little is really known regarding Roman religious beliefs and practices, especially on a more personal level. While cautioning that references to deity in Roman poetry are not very reliable indicators of what Romans really believed, Jenkyns senses some strong feeling for the divine in poets like Lucretius, who, throughout his poem, "saturates his poem in religious colour" (221).

Roman interaction with the gods is the subject of "The Divine Encounter," in which Jenkyns notes how little the Romans spoke about or described the cult statues placed in their temples. What mattered to them, apparently, was not an aesthetic appreciation of these cult statues, but their indication of a divine presence. Jenkyns also offers here examples of a sense of the numinous, a feeling of deity manifest, in biographical references to Scipio, Caesar and Pompey and in the works of Tacitus and Pliny the Elder.

In "Patina and Palimpsest," Roman celebration of traditional customs and institutions (the *mos maiorum*) is contrasted with their sense of their city as ever-changing and transitional. Temples and public buildings were forever in need of renovation and rebuilding. The patina of the city existed more in the antiquity of the place rather than the age of the building and the city is seen as a palimpsest, as a multi-layered tension between past and present.

In "Interiors" Jenkyns describes Roman attitudes towards enclosed spaces with special attention to Vergil, who stands out for Jenkyns, not only for his skilled description of enclosed spaces in the natural world (especially the caves in *Georgics* 6, *Aeneid* 4 and *Aeneid* 8), but also for his ability to create a sense of inwardness and enclosure in human-made structures like those in captured Troy and in Dido's Carthage. Jenkyns ends this discussion with Pliny the Younger's description of the

vast interior of the imperial palace on the Palatine Hill and his praise of Trajan for using this space more appropriately than Domitian.

All of this leads, in the final chapter, "Rome's Monuments," to a reflection on Roman attitudes towards architecture and monumentality. Romans often used high hills and towers, more metaphorically rather than literally, to describe with pride their city elevated above the rest of the conquered world. While the Tomb of Augustus, Nero's Golden House, the Flavian Amphitheatre and Vespasian's Forum of Peace all aspired to true monumentality in one form or another, the most remarkable expressions of Roman architectural achievement, for Jenkyns, were the Forum of Trajan and the Pantheon, in which he notes successful attempts to experiment with exterior and interior space.

Jenkyn's wide-ranging study promises to become a basic reference for examining Roman attitudes towards the world around them and the gods which shared that space with them. His linguistic studies, interpretations of literary texts and observations about architectural features of the ancient city will be of interest to scholars in a wide variety of fields, including philology, literary criticism, religious studies, architecture and anthropology. Because of Jenkyn's dense style, however, which challenges the reader on almost every page to delve deeply into sophisticated and erudite aspects of Roman life and society, this book is recommended only for more advanced scholars.

THOMAS J. SIENKEWICZ

Monmouth College, tjsienkewicz@monmouthcollege.edu