

BOOK REVIEW

The Peace of the Gods: Elite Religious Practices in the Middle Roman Republic. By CRAIGE B. CHAMPION. Princeton, NJ and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2017. Pp. x + 270. Hardback, \$39.95. ISBN 978-0-691-17485-3.

Why did the Pontifex Maximus order an augur to be bludgeoned to death outside the temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus? Whether Nasica's hit job on Ti. Gracchus had a religious dimension remains controversial, but the controversy highlights a fact about ancient Rome: many members of the political elite were also priests. This overlap makes (or should make) questions concerning Roman religion and Roman politics inextricable, but there persists a scholarly tendency to minimize religion. In his new book, Champion attempts to adjust this imbalance by surveying elite (and therefore documented) religion of the Middle Republic, with special emphasis on the well-worn question of whether the Romans believed in their religion. The book's major contribution is its underscoring of the urgency of taking Roman religion seriously as a vital and historically consequential institution.

The introduction (Chapter 1) considers Polybius' ultra-cynical view that Romans' scrupulous observance of ritual was reducible to a mechanism of control over the underclass, a position that Champion calls "elite instrumentalism" and that he argues is insufficient to explain Roman religious practice. The extended treatment of this thesis can be frustrating to the reader since, as he himself admits, Champion is criticizing a position that no serious commentator of Roman religion really entertains anymore. Champion essentially sets up a strawman to knock down, which he treats as an opportunity to characterize the nature of Roman religion, especially the psychology of practitioners. Champion calls this a "counterfactual" approach.

Chapter 2 specifically examines religion in the city. One particularly persuasive conclusion is that elites' religious practices were performances largely for each other. Champion's next move is to argue that religious performance within the elite for an elite audience is incompatible with the elite-instrumental model and therefore implies I think sincere belief.

Chapter 3 treats religious practices of Romans on campaign, particularly in their capacity as field marshals. Champion emphasizes the campaigning generals' uncertainty of every contingency and their virtual independence of action. He argues that uncertainty coupled with the burden of full responsibility would produce anxiousness that is sufficient to explain obsessive observance of ritual to secure divine favor. Champion, I think, too perfunctorily addresses the possibility that the rituals were performances for the benefit of the troops—Roman and allied alike—in a military culture that may to some extent or another have been shared by all.

Chapter 4 approaches Roman religion in the context of Rome's growing empire. This subject includes triumphing generals but is dominated by the inclusion and exclusion of foreign cults. Champion emphasizes the ad hoc nature of actions and argues that it is impossible to infer any consistent program that would imply Polybian cynicism. Champion illustrates this chaotic accumulation of precedents by juxtaposing Rome's diametrically opposed responses to Cybele and the Bacchanalia, with one cult incorporated into city's religion and the other suppressed throughout Italy.

Chapter 5 introduces elite Roman religion into modern discussions of the nature of culture itself. Champion endorses a model of culture in which members of cultural groups are inculcated in ideology but still exercise personal agency by negotiating ideology as circumstances encourage. This model fits well with the dynamism that remains detectable throughout the conservative maintenance of ritual. The author closes by asking what needs were met in the "cumulative polytheism" and "orthopraxy" of Roman religious traditions, and he reiterates the anxiety of the governing class of an imperial society when confronting an increasingly cosmopolitan world.

Champion displays wide reading in modern critical thought, and one asset of this book is its supplying of brief introductions to significant theoretical currents. The book consequently exemplifies some of the potential advantages and limitations of applying theory to the study of antiquity. Champion's use in Chapter 3 of A. Eckstein's application of Waltzian neorealism to Roman history, with Eckstein (and Champion) arguing that Roman militarism was not unique but a common feature of a multipolar and volatile Mediterranean playing field, feels compelling—even if Eckstein's approach still faces criticism (Champion only tangentially admits this). I found myself sharing the constant discomfiture and panic of Roman generals as they strove to secure victory in a hostile world with only the gods and their own wits to aid them. Here theory serves as an academi-

cally respectable means of filling in the contours of the world in which a thesis is positioned. However, the theories do not solve specific problems. In one apparent exception (191–2), Champion uses theories of cognitive dissonance to reconcile the conflicting identities of priest and philosopher in a single individual. These different spheres of cognitive activity, though, were acknowledged by Cicero (whom Champion cites) and systematically analyzed by Varro in his tripartite theology (which Champion never mentions). Even here ancient testimony comes to the rescue, not modern theory.

This book includes almost no consideration of elite Roman women except the Vestal Virgins—and only in the context of their occasional execution for unchastity. Yet, Vestals had far more functions in the exercise of their priesthood than being killed, and we have demonstrable evidence that the women of the Roman aristocracy collaborated with men to preserve divine favor. On the religious practices of elite Roman women, readers may consult C. Schultz' *Women's Religious Activity in the Roman Republic* and M. DiLuzio's *A Place at the Altar* until a fully integrated study is available that gives due weight to both sexes.

The “counterfactual” approach that governs much of Champion's discussion is not a method to be imitated for a professional scholarly audience, though I did find it a useful teaching tool for my undergraduate Roman religion class in spring, 2018. We began with the stark black-and-white elite-instrumentalist model and then examined how Champion nuances it. The class found Champion's prose frustrating, with the author repeating himself and poorly signposting intricate arguments. All told, this is an eccentric but provocative treatment of a fascinating topic.

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