

## BOOK REVIEW

*Views of Rome: A Greek Reader.* By ADAM SERFASS. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018. Pp. 316. Paperback, \$29.95. ISBN 978-08061-5793-1.

This book, part of the Oklahoma Series in Classical Culture, grew out of a Greek course given by Serfass at the Intercollegiate Center for Classical Studies in Rome. It offers thirty-five selections by Greek authors discussing Roman history and culture. The authors span nearly a thousand years, from Herodotus to Procopius, and discuss Rome from its legendary origins to its recapture from the Goths by Belisarius. The goal is to bridge the gap between “The Greeks” and “The Romans” via readings accessible to advanced undergraduates or graduate students in Classics. Each reading is therefore accompanied by helpful explanatory notes. There is also an ample bibliography, mostly of English-language books and articles, accompanying both each individual reading and the book as a whole. Since it was designed for a course at the ICCS, where the art and archaeology of Rome and Italy are a crucial focus, Serfass notes that “This reader has been designed so that the artifacts and monuments from classical antiquity may be studied together with many of the texts” (4).

Attitudes to the Romans found herein are as diverse as the provinces of the Roman Empire. According to Serfass’s introduction, the Greek authors “characterize the Romans as barbarians, fellow Hellenes, civilizers, rubes, sybarites, money-grubbers, divine agents, Satan’s spawn, peacemakers, warmongers, persecutors, traditionalists, innovators, copycats, bureaucrats, technocrats, syncretists, multiculturalists.” (3). The book is divided into five sections: “Early Rome,” “Expansion in the Republic,” “From Republic to Empire,” “Jews and Christians” and “Late Antiquity.” Readings are arranged thematically as well as chronologically, with opposing viewpoints occasionally juxtaposed: Two readings from Plutarch contrast the philhellene Flamininus with the antihellene Cato the Elder; Cassius Dio’s account of Boudicca’s denunciation of Rome is followed by Aelius Aristides’s praise of Rome. Serfass lists several themes running throughout the readings, among them Empire, Politics, Religion and Identity. He asks compelling questions, which can serve as

useful springboards for class discussion, especially those revolving around identity. What does it mean to be a Roman, or a Greek? If the Romans were descended from emigrants from Greek-speaking lands, does that make them Greek also? Could one be both an observant Jew or Christian and a loyal Roman citizen paying homage to the Emperor? These discussions could lead to some thought-provoking tie-ins with contemporary issues of identity.

Because of the focus, this is an unusual set of selections. Apart from Herodotus (offering his thoughts on the origin of the Etruscans) and Plutarch (represented only by selections on Numa, Flamininus and Cato the Elder), many of the authors are likely to be largely unread by students of classical languages. A few are extremely obscure, though fascinating, such as Phlegon of Tralles. Although the authors span a broad period, most of them come from a time when Greek literature has generally been considered in decline. The inclusion of Lucian would have been welcome; he (and his mouthpiece characters) had plenty to say about the Romans in *Nigrinus* and *De Mercede Conductis*.

Still, this is a welcome corrective to the conventional view that Greeks confined their literary attention to Greece and Asia Minor. It is useful to recognize that “The Greeks” were not just a source of inspiration to the Romans even though their own days of cultural glory were over. Even when they consciously imitated authors of earlier times, their literary contributions remained vibrant and strong. Serfass has done all teachers of Greek a favor by reminding us of this.

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