

## BOOK REVIEW

*The World through Roman Eyes: Anthropological Approaches to Ancient Culture*. Edited by MAURIZIO BETTINI and WILLIAM MICHAEL SHORT. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xiv + 471. Hardback, \$150.00. ISBN: 978-1-107-15761-3.

This fascinating collection of essays presents itself as a handbook of sorts for those interested in the methods of ancient anthropology. The aim is to understand ancient (here, Roman) culture quite literally on its own terms: the evidence employed is primarily textual and approaches are often even lexical. Methodology consists, as the title suggests, of balancing the desire to “see” from the perspective of ancient cultural insiders with the interpretive perspective allowed to cultural outsiders in order to describe explicitly the patterns of thinking, interpreting and knowing that were unconsciously assumed as natural by the ancients.

An orienting introduction is followed by two chapters, each of which introduces a fundamental tool. The first, “Comparison” (M. Bettini), is in fact an explication of the usefulness of contrast, of noticing the things that strike the cultural outsider as “oddities,” since these provide points of investigative departure. The next, “Metaphor” (W. M. Short), demonstrates the nature of metaphorical image (both textual and material) as a reflection of culturally-specific cognitive organization.

The rest of the book comprises thirteen chapters focused on the application of these methods to specific subjects of cultural significance. “Polytheism” (G. Pironti and M. Perfigli) contrasts ancient Greek genealogical divine constellations with Roman hierarchized divine “social units,” where myth and action determine position respectively. “Myth” (M. Bettini) demonstrates the interconnection between narrative that is objectively false and the context of communal identity that renders it undeniably true. “Sacrifice” (F. Prescendi) investigates the eternal cycle of exchange between the human and divine realms (sacrifice is revealed to be not *do ut des*, but *do et das*). “Witches” (L. Cherubini) observes the culturally persistent and culturally unique associations that witches possessed, specifically on the

sensory plane. “Kinship” (M. Lentano) demonstrates that kinship is a cultural, not a biological concept; discussion includes the extent of Roman kinship relations (six degrees backward, forward, and horizontally) and the critical concept of *pater* as an organizing metaphor.

“Friendship and the Gift” (R. Raccanelli and L. Beltrami) explores *amicitia* and *beneficia*, the former an abstraction concretized in the latter, cultural forms beloved by philosophers but not theirs alone. “Economy” (C. Viglietti) considers the economy of the early Republic through the lens of cultural economic anthropology, which frees the investigator from the assumption of conflict between limited goods and limitless want. “Space” (G. De Sanctis) considers Roman “places” (where “place” is an “elaborated, domesticated, and normed” space, 250) such as the city and *templa*, and discusses the elements – verbal and material – that constituted and delineated them. “Animals” (C. Franco) undertakes a series of case studies, extending from Circe’s bestiary to the Roman arena, to explore culturally-specific representations of human-animal interactions. “Plants” (S. Hautala) demonstrates that modes of classifying plants reflect cultural organization of non-vegetal fundamental concepts, such as the body, and so can provide a sort of investigative map.

“Images” (G. Pucci) starts from the notice that scholarly interpretation of ancient visual evidence has long employed anthropological methods. These methods approach visuals as “text” to be “read” by viewers, whose interpretations were influenced by context, both their own and that of what they were seeing. Current understanding of a variety of areas of interest are then summarized, such as the situation of *imagines*, representation of gesture, generic idealization and realism, and the nature of Roman “copies.” “Signs” (G. Manetti) traces ancient semiotics from Homeric revelation to divination to medicine, historiography, Aristotelian syllogism and Roman rhetoric in order to discuss how reality was constructed through the interpretation of signs. Suitably, it is followed by “Riddles” (S. Beta), the final chapter, which demonstrates how reality was simultaneously concealed and revealed through words organized into analogies and metaphors.

The contributions are almost uniformly accessibly, even beautifully, written. Together they powerfully demonstrate how familiar evidence can be reorganized in unfamiliar ways – ancient categories were not the same as our categories – to explicate not the works of such-and-such authors but the sentience of a culture. In this way, the collection achieves its goal of introducing and modelling the methods of often under-utilized but productive approaches to antiquity. But I would suggest that this collection has an additional, broader value that was perhaps not

foreseen or intended by its editors and contributors. The vast majority of contributors are Italian or are working at Italian institutions. As explained by Bettini (39-41), gaining the distance from their Roman material necessary to achieve “etic” awareness is a challenge: they must self-consciously separate themselves from the too-familiar Latin elements of their mother tongue and from the too-Roman organization of their material and intellectual traditions in order to do objective scholarship. For those of us on the other side of the Atlantic, where disentangling classical studies in the present from its place in the creation of political dispositions of the past is an act towards social justice, the approaches offered in this collection offer means. Cultural differences, not similarities, are the focus, and the point of finding them is not to engage in approbation or disapproval, but in understanding.

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