

BOOK REVIEW

The Oxford Handbook of Roman Epigraphy. Edited by CHRISTER BRUUN and JONATHAN EDMONDSON. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp xxvii + 888. Paperback, \$120.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-533646-7.

As mentioned by the editors, this volume does not aim to satisfy the “militant epigrapher,”¹ but by reading it, it is undeniable that it provides an exhaustive guide for the amateur inscription reader to become one.² The book consists of 35 chapters and their bibliographies, written by 28 international specialists, who discuss topics ranging from the early Republic into Christianity and Late Antiquity. It is complemented by 7 appendixes, 2 indexes, 154 figures, 2 maps and 31 charts including epigraphic conventions, common abbreviations, Roman onomastics, kinship terms, voting tribes, Roman numerals and a list of digital resources, as well as both source and general indexes. By titling the volume as “Roman” instead of “Latin” epigraphy,³ the editors have extended this field beyond the use of Greek or Latin language, providing a deeper insight into the society and culture of the Roman world. The topics discussed are illustrated with insightful anecdotes of epigraphers, such as Mommsen, Pflaum or other less known ones, giving a human perspective of this science.⁴

The first part tackles the methodology and history of epigraphy, mentioning two current problems of the discipline such as the consideration of epigraphers as

¹ “Someone who has the opportunity to work with the actual physical objects that inscriptions are- to study and record carefully the archaeological context of a new discovery and to present an exhaustive description of the text and the object on which it was described” (5).

² Other didactical works on the field have been devoted to fields circumscribed to the domain of the “militant epigrapher,” such as I. Di Stefano Manzella, *Mestiere di epigrafista: guida alla schedatura del materiale epigrafico lapideo*, Rome, 1987, or are addressed to undergraduate students, such as M. Hartnett, *By Roman Hands: Inscriptions and Graffiti for Students of Latin*, Cambridge, 2012.

³ As was done previously by other scholars starting with R. Cagnat, *Cours d’epigraphie latine*, (4th ed.) Paris, 1914; and following with A.E. Gordon, *An Illustrated Introduction to Latin Epigraphy*, Berkeley and L.A., 1983; I. Calabi Limentani, *Epigrafia Latina*, (4th ed.) Milan, 1991; A. Buonopane, *Manuale di epigrafia Latina*, Rome, 2009; A. Cooley, *The Cambridge Manual of Latin Epigraphy*, Cambridge, 2012.

⁴ E.g. check pages 3, 47 or 179. Highlighting the importance of these anecdotes, cf. Bruun, 69.

mere technicians and the lack of a uniform way to search, access and download digital information on inscriptions. Part 2 is considerably shorter, and examines the classification, creation and habits⁵ reflected in modern scholarship when studying inscriptions. Finally, Part 3, which constitutes the most considerable piece, explores the different fields of the ancient world in which epigraphy plays a key role by supplying information and nuancing the interpretations bestowed by other sources. This part includes different disciplines and concepts including the army, law, family, religion or status, sometimes focusing on the case of Rome, and others on the rest of Italy and abroad. The way the topics are addressed in this part opens the door to further research, because the authors include reflections on bigger theoretical issues concerning inscriptions, such as their spatial dimension,⁶ underlying narratives⁷ or phenomenology.⁸

This book is characterized by a deep methodological approach, indicating the ways to study different kinds of inscriptions and their related contexts. In addition, it mentions different warnings and explanations about the problematic study of the materials, its limits or the possible absence of evidence in certain fields of the discipline.⁹ The chapters and their sections are complementary,¹⁰ which unavoidably causes the repetition of some topics, sometimes referring to other chapters or providing different views on some issues.¹¹ The taxonomic approach adopted along the volume is something needed when addressing such a wide array of sources, but it does obscure some nuances of the fields touched in the chapters, such as the problematic division between public and private, especially on what

⁵ Here, by “habit” the author is obviously addressing the seminal article by R. MacMullen, “The Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire,” *The American Journal of Philology* 103-3 (1983), 233-246.

⁶ E.g. Bruun’s chapter on “Roman government and administration,” which can be placed in relation to the interests of the currently active ERC project “SpaceLaw” (<https://www.helsinki.fi/en/researchgroups/law-governance-and-space>).

⁷ The best example is illustrated in Chapter 17, by Potter “Inscriptions and the narrative of Roman history”

⁸ E.g. Horster on “urban infrastructure and evergetism outside Rome” (519).

⁹ Page 277 of the book highlights the caution needed when using arguments *ex silentio*, but at the same time stresses that the absence of evidence does not necessarily imply evidence of absence, quoting Ecks’ concept of “Aussagefähigkeit.” Cf. W. Eck, “Sozialstruktur des römischen Senatorenstandes der Hohen Kaiserzeit und statistische Methode,” *Chiron* 3 (1973) 375-394.

¹⁰ E.g. Chapters 12-13 (local elites) or 19-20 (religion); Chapter 6, section A.2.2 and Chapter 35 or the section entitled “the Roman elite” of Chapter 22 and 24.

¹¹ For example, while Beltran Lloris quotes Christian beliefs as one of the reasons for the decay of the “epigraphichabit” in epitaphs (144), Mazzoleni (450) does not mention anything on the topic.

concerns the field of juridical epigraphy.¹² This reviewer misses a deeper insight into the importance of *instrumentum domesticum*, not just as economic proxies, but also as artefacts of legal and social significance. Notwithstanding these last remarks, this volume is not just an essential, but also an entertaining tool that will satisfy the interest of a broad audience composed by both militant and amateur epigraphers, curious readers or students.

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¹²The particularities of this epigraphic field can be consulted in some volumes such as: G. Luzzatto, *Epigrafia giuridica greca e romana*, Milan, 1942; A. D'Ors, *Epigrafia jurídica de la España Romana*, Madrid, 1953; G. Purpura, "Per una storia dell'Epigrafia Giuridica: l'uso di titoli e manoscritti nel Medioevo ed oltre," *AUPA* 46 (2000) 229-254; O. Licandro, *Il diritto inciso: lineamenti di epigrafia giuridica romana*, Catania, 2002; P. Lepore, *Introduzione allo studio dell'epigrafia giuridica latina*, Milan, 2010.