

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Single Life in the Roman and Later Roman World*. Edited by SABINE R. HUEBNER and CHRISTIAN LAES. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 2019. Pp. x + 425. Hardback, \$130.00. ISBN: 978-1-108-55627-9.

“A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle.” Second wave feminists used this and other witty remarks to subvert the millennia-long tradition that a single woman needs a man to fulfill her personal and social life. Indeed, our attitudes toward single life, for both genders, have significantly shifted in the past fifty years and living alone has become an important rite of passage into adulthood. Yet, “singleness” had not received much attention in Roman scholarship until the recent publication of *The Single Life in the Roman and Later Roman World*, the first volume dedicated to the study of single people, broadly defined, in the Roman empire.

This edited volume sets out to investigate “singleness” in the Roman and Late Antique world, to fill a gap in the scholarship of the Roman family, which – as pointed out by Christian Laes in the Introduction – rarely takes into account the state of temporary or permanent celibacy (with the notable exception of Krause, 1995 on widowhood).<sup>1</sup> Studying celibacy highlights the variety of familial experiences in the Roman world, a multicultural empire with a multitude of family structures. Laes recognizes that the book is a product of its times, when the rise of individualism and increased financial independence has turned singleness and living alone into an identity, a choice to be made without the necessity of religious justifications (32). Nevertheless, it is undeniable that being single (either temporarily or permanently) is a condition that people in all societies have shared. The contributors to the volume focus their attention on the concept of “singleness” in diverse times and spaces, from Republican Rome, to Roman and Coptic Egypt, to the Jewish world, to Early Christianity while – a praiseworthy choice – also introducing more modern *comparanda* from Early Islam, late medieval Belgium and 19<sup>th</sup>-century Italy.

The volume is divided into nineteen chapters, beginning with an introduction

<sup>1</sup> Krause, J.-U. (1995) *Witwen und Waisen im römischen Reich*. 4 vols. Stuttgart.

by Laes which well serves the book as a whole by showing how difficult it is to find an initial and trans-cultural definition of “singleness,” which has undeniably influenced the late development of this area of study. The remaining eighteen chapters are arranged according to a largely chronological order, with the sections on late antiquity and modern case studies following a thorough analysis of the Roman world during the imperial period. The only chapter that focuses on late Republican Rome is Henri Kiiskinen’s contribution (125-146), which introduces a classic pair – Catullus’ poems and Cicero’s *Pro Caelio* – and finds new and compelling cultural similarities and stereotypes between the two when describing single people, such as living alone, heightened emotional desires and freedom from care.

Several chapters, including Kiiskinen’s, stand out for the originality of their argument or comparative approach. An excellent example of a study that pushes the evidence towards new possibilities is Anna Lucille Boozer’s chapter on single persons in the archaeological records of Roman Egypt (56-84). With the help of cross-cultural comparisons and documentary papyri, Boozer suggests finding singles in temporary housing structures, such as military *praesidia*, *insulae* accommodating young artisan apprentices and “field houses” occupied by seasonal farmers. Equally praiseworthy is Sabine R. Huebner’s study (37-56), which perfectly highlights the flexible nature of the ever-evolving familial composition through the census documents of Roman Egypt. Among the chapters that rely primarily on literary evidence, Mina Petrova’s analysis on the character of the *lena* shows how these unmarried and (too) independent women were the perfect cultural embodiment of the sum of all fears of Roman society (178). Moreover, it would be a mistake to give not enough attention to the chapters that cover topics that have traditionally been studied extensively, such as Judith Evans Grubbs’ analysis on the Augustan marriage laws’ impact on single people (105-124) and Kevin Funderburk’s investigation of apostolic celibacy (203-224).

Among the chapters on Late Antiquity and Early Christianity, particularly intriguing is Stephanos Efthymiadis’ study of single individuals living alone in Byzantium during the period between the 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries which brings the reader into a colorful milieu of the perceived dangers of such a lifestyle for both women and men, engaging in sexual promiscuity and becoming subject to other dangers such as burglars and emotional distress (309-319). Raffaella Cribiore, through her analysis of the letters of Libanius, highlights how gender influences the perception of widowhood: widowed women with children were spared from social

compulsion to remarry, while men never escaped such pressure (259-275). In this section also stand out Ville Vuolanto's cogent discussion on familial involvement in the decision for young women to lead an ascetic and celibate life in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries CE (276-291), and Jennifer Cromwell's detailed analysis of the presence of widows and divorcées in letters and economic transactions written in Coptic (320-337).

The last section of the volume introduces modern *comparanda* less familiar to a Classics reader, such as the early Islamic unlawfulness of celibacy discussed by Mohammed Hocine Benkheira (341-353), daily single-life in 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup>-century Belgium (354-361), and forced celibacy due to male primogeniture in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Italy (362-373), investigated by Julie De Groot and Matteo Manfredini respectively. The resistance of many communities to allowing individuals to remain unmarried for moral reasons is a recurring theme in the volume, and the discrepancies between the legal and moral expectations on marital unions and the actual practices remain issues worthy of being analyzed across societies.

While the quality of the scholarship remains high, well-sourced and appropriately cited throughout the volume, some individual contributions add less than others to the scholarly discourse. For example, Nathan's chapter on the bachelorhood of Augustine (both pre- and post-conversion) surveys the well-known arc of the saint's life through his own writings and does not significantly advance the topic (292-308). Goessens' search for single persons in the epigraphic record of Early Christian Rome – no easy task – remains unconvincing (227-258). Wim Broekaert's argument that the organization of labor in the Roman economy "seriously complicated the establishment of harmonious family life for [...] social inferiors" (85) appears to underplay slavery as the prime cause of unwanted singleness in the enslaved community.

As a whole, the book adeptly explores the underrepresented status of temporary and permanent "singleness" with an effective comparative approach that, although not equally utilized by all contributors, is much needed in order to give a viable future to the field. Also praiseworthy are the frequent cross-references between chapters, which suggests a strong internal coherence. In conclusion, the volume delivers what it promises: the first investigation of its kind into the status of "singleness" in the Roman and late Roman world that employs a sociocultural and comparative approach, breaking free from the temporal constraints of the Ancient World and landing in the fertile fields of World History.

