

Review

BASSIR AMIRI, *RELIGION ROMAINE ET ESCLAVAGE AU HAUT-EMPIRE. ROME, LATIUM ET CAMPANIE* (Collection de l'École française de Rome 581). Rome: École française de Rome, 2021. Pp. x + 421. ISBN 9782728308378. €35.

Having previously edited a volume on religious practices at the margins of Roman society (*Religion sous contrôle* (2016)), Amiri in this monograph studies the interaction of religion and slavery in the Early and High Empire, tackling both the primary evidence for the involvement of enslaved persons in religious observance and the secondary literature on the (presumed) exclusion of these persons from positions of religious authority. While anchored to central Italy, the book has plenty to offer ancient historians working on other regions of the ancient Mediterranean, beginning with its fine-grained readings of epigraphic evidence '[p]our percevoir les réalités de l'esclave' (14).

Following a preface by William Van Andringa, A.'s introduction critiques the idea that enslaved persons are definable by or containable within 'le cadre juridique' of civil status, highlighting the various social contexts where enslaved persons pursued 'la possibilité de construire et de proposer une image de lui-même radicalement différente de celle que nos livrent les discours officiels' (7). The book's great achievement is to bring to life the multiplicity of those *religious* contexts where this possibility bears fruit.

The book proceeds in three parts of three chapters each. Part I investigates signs of agency and the exercise of authority in the religious domain, moving from the parameters of exclusion/inclusion (ch. 1) to religious practitioners such as *aeditui* and *victimarii* (ch. 2) and the enslaved and freedperson officiants in neighbourhood and domestic cult (ch. 3). Part II sifts through the evidence for social interaction ('sociabilité') in religious settings, first considering the social dynamics and benefits that *collegia* provided (ch. 4) before turning to the activity of enslaved persons within the *familia* (ch. 5) and the oscillation between 'communauté et individualité' in the fulfilment of *vota* (ch. 6). Part III assesses the creation of an autonomous religious realm at home and at work (ch. 7) and the forms of socially constrained religious autonomy that are potentially retrievable from the source material (ch. 8; the discussion of enslaved persons as 'vecteurs religieux' is a highlight) on its way to sampling some of the rich and varied evidence for funerary rituals among enslaved and freed persons (ch. 9). A conclusion reiterates the book's main findings, above all that the religious identity of enslaved persons 'n'est pas seulement définie par le critère juridique, mais par des facteurs sociaux'. Never a 'masse homogène', enslaved persons embraced forms of religious praxis that mirrored their 'hétérogénéité intrinsèque' (369).

There are many virtues to this book, which does more than simply compile the available evidence for the religious practices of the enslaved. First, it mounts, with care and due hedging, a sophisticated argument. At times, the hedging is overdone; but A. makes claims and defends them, in readable if pleonastic prose. Second, several sections of the monograph represent the first determined effort since Franz Bömer to bring together increasingly fissile bodies of evidence for the worship of particular deities by enslaved persons; these will need to be regularly consulted by specialists in Roman religion. A.'s discussion of the Bona Dea's salience in the religious world(s) of the enslaved has already received mention in a recent publication (see the reference to A.'s book in Giovanni Almagno, 'Epigrafia del sacro e committenza libertina in età repubblicana', *Scienze dell'Antichità* 28.3 (2022)). Noteworthy, too, is A.'s challenge to the idea that the worship of Silvanus is 'une spécificité servile' (303), and the salutary reminder that even the apparent overrepresentation of enslaved and freed persons in dedications to a specific deity is not always what it seems.

The book's deficits are few but worth remarking. One stems directly from the book's origins as a *thèse* submitted for a *Habilitation à diriger des recherches* (HDR). While exceptionally and generatively steeped in French and German scholarship, particularly the writings of John Scheid, A.'s range of conversational partners is limited. Other deficits are more methodological. While inspiring in its ecumenicism, the free citation of sources from the middle Republic to the late Empire — from Plautus to Firmicus Maternus — signals an unwillingness to think seriously about diachronic change. For all its dynamism, the world recreated in this book is a pastiche of many different times and spaces. And in its insistence on the porousness of the divide between enslaved and free religious practice, the book sometimes overplays its hand. In a 1977 contribution to a *Festschrift* for Léopold Sédar Senghor ('L'esclave romain et le *genius*'), Georges Dumézil claimed

that the *servus* 'n'a pas plus de personnalité religieuse que d'existence juridique'. Although this position needs to be seriously qualified in light of A.'s arguments, the fact of not only juridical but indeed ontological distinction between the free and the enslaved in Roman cult cannot easily be finessed away. Finally, despite the effective handling of inscriptions that mention women (see e.g. 229–30 on the Pôlitoria curse tablet) and awareness of the work of Judith Butler, the book does not offer anything akin to a robustly intersectional analysis of status and gender in the construction of enslaved religious experience.

In the field of classics at large, the perceived anglophone dominance of *Altertumswissenschaften* is a recurring subject of concern, not least because of the tense relationships among different national traditions of scholarly activity and publication. If, by the standards of my own primarily anglophone intellectual formation, I should fault A.'s book for its limited interface with non-Continental scholarship, its hesitation to join hands with practitioners in other subfields of premodern slavery, and the slight datedness of its theoretical carapace (much Pierre Bourdieu and little else), do I risk being insensitive to the specific demands and expectations that impinge on the HDR? This book is important and essential reading but does feel like a missed opportunity.

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