

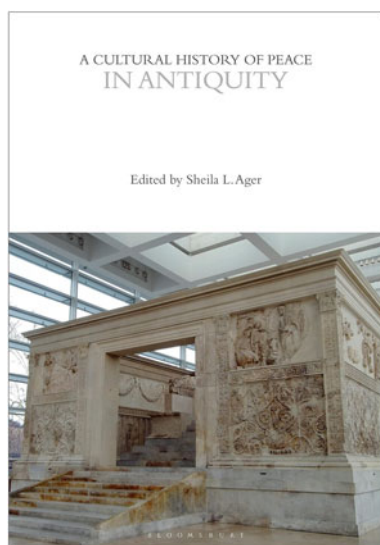
Book Review

A Cultural History of Peace in Antiquity

Ager (S.L.) (ed.) Volume 1. Pp. xiv + 204, ills.
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A Cultural History of Peace in Antiquity, edited by S.L. Ager and published by Bloomsbury Academic in 2020, offers a comprehensive exploration of peace as a cultural construct in the ancient world. This volume is the first in a six-part series that examines the evolving concept of peace across different historical periods, providing scholars, educators, and students with an invaluable resource for understanding how peace was perceived, articulated, and institutionalised in antiquity. The book engages with peace not

merely as the absence of war, but also as a multi-faceted phenomenon embedded within social, religious, philosophical, and political frameworks. This nuanced approach allows for a deeper appreciation of the ancient world's diverse interpretations of peace, making it a highly relevant text for those studying classical antiquity, ancient history, political theory, and peace studies.

The volume is structured around thematic essays written by leading scholars in the field, each contributing to a broader understanding of peace as a cultural artifact. The essays collectively demonstrate how peace was conceptualized in different contexts, including the roles played by political institutions, diplomatic practices, philosophical discourses, religious beliefs, and artistic representations. By focusing on these varied dimensions, the book challenges the often-simplistic dichotomy between war and peace,

illustrating instead how peace was an active and dynamic force shaping ancient societies.

One of the most compelling aspects of this volume is its engagement with classical philosophical traditions, particularly those of Greece and Rome, which have profoundly influenced later Western thought on peace. The contributions discussing the works of thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca reveal the intellectual depth of ancient discussions on peace, justice, and the moral obligations of rulers. For instance, the analysis of Plato's *Republic and Laws* underscores the notion that peace was not merely a political goal, but an ethical state requiring the cultivation of virtue and wisdom. Similarly, Stoic and Epicurean philosophies provided frameworks for inner peace, linking individual tranquility to broader societal harmony. These philosophical perspectives contribute to a richer understanding of how peace was both an ideal and a pragmatic consideration in governance and personal conduct.

The book also explores the role of political structures and institutions in fostering or undermining peace. In the case of ancient Greece, the examination of the Delian League and later the Hellenistic kingdoms highlight the complexities of maintaining peace through hegemony and diplomacy. The discussion of Roman practices, particularly the concept of the Pax Romana, offers an insightful critique of the ways in which peace was often constructed through military dominance and administrative control rather than through mutual cooperation and consensus. This critical perspective is particularly valuable for students seeking to understand the historical paradoxes of peace as both an aspirational ideal and a tool of imperial propaganda.

Religious and ritualistic dimensions of peace also feature prominently in the volume. The examination of Greek and Roman religious practices illustrates how peace was sanctified through divine favour, oaths, and ceremonial acts. The book effectively demonstrates how religious institutions played an active role in mediating conflicts and fostering social cohesion. Additionally, the inclusion of perspectives on Near Eastern traditions broadens the scope of the discussion, offering comparative insights into how peace was conceptualized beyond the Greco-Roman world. This comparative approach enriches the volume, making it particularly useful for teachers and students who wish to explore cross-cultural perspectives on peace in antiquity.

Another significant strength of this book is its treatment of peace in the context of artistic and literary expression. The analysis of visual culture, including sculptural reliefs, coinage, and architectural inscriptions, reveals how peace was symbolically represented and propagated. Literary sources, including epic poetry, historiography, and dramatic works, further illustrate how peace was both celebrated and problematized in ancient narratives. For instance, the discussions on Homeric literature challenge traditional interpretations of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as primarily war-centric texts, instead highlighting the underlying tensions

between conflict and reconciliation. Similarly, the examination of Roman literature, particularly Virgil's *Aeneid*, offers critical insights into how peace was ideologically framed within the context of empire-building.

Despite its numerous strengths, the volume does present some challenges. Given the vast chronological and geographical scope of antiquity, some areas receive more attention than others, leading to an uneven coverage of certain themes and regions. While the Greek and Roman traditions are thoroughly examined, other ancient cultures, such as those of Persia, India, and China, receive comparatively less focus. Although this is understandable given the constraints of a single volume, a more balanced representation of non-Western perspectives would have enhanced the book's comparative potential. Additionally, while the thematic organization is effective in presenting a broad picture of peace in antiquity, some readers may find the lack of a more linear historical narrative somewhat disorienting, particularly those less familiar with ancient history.

For educators, this book provides a wealth of material that can be integrated into courses on ancient history, philosophy, and political thought. Its interdisciplinary approach encourages critical thinking and comparative analysis, making it an excellent resource for classroom discussions. Students will benefit from the clarity of the essays, which are both academically rigorous and accessible.

The extensive bibliography and references also offer a solid foundation for further research, making the book a valuable starting point for those interested in exploring the topic in greater depth.

In conclusion, *A Cultural History of Peace in Antiquity* is a significant contribution to the study of peace as a cultural and intellectual construct in the ancient world. By examining peace through multiple lenses – philosophical, political, religious, and artistic – the book provides a comprehensive and thought-provoking exploration of a topic that is often overshadowed by the study of war and conflict. Its interdisciplinary nature, coupled with the expertise of its contributors, makes it an essential read for scholars, educators, and students alike. While some areas could have been expanded to include a broader range of cultural perspectives, the volume nonetheless succeeds in illuminating the complexities of peace in antiquity and its enduring relevance to contemporary discussions on peace and conflict resolution. This book is not only an important academic resource, but also a compelling invitation to rethink the narratives of ancient history through the lens of peace rather than merely through the prism of war.

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