

Zsuzsanna Várhelyi, *The Religion of Senators in the Roman Empire. Power and the Beyond*. Cambridge: University Press, 2010. Pp. xii, 267. ISBN 978-0-521-89724-2. \$95.00.

Cultic praxis is a very efficacious instrument of coagulation and definition of social groups and “collective identities”. This is especially true for the Imperial epoch, when the Roman *civitas*-religion was organized by and received financial support basically from the elites, and, consequently, the synergy of political authority and senatorial religion revealed a peculiar dynamic capacity in representing the power and shaping the social order.

Zsuzsanna Várhelyi’s approach to this issue is explicitly inspired by several previous “sociological” and “culturalist” studies of the history of religions: in particular, following Rodney Stark’s model, the author challenges John Scheid and Simon Price’s works, which limited the dynamism of the religious senatorial role, and she tries to “adjust” Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price’s theory of “marketplace”, accepting the creativity, variety and multiplicity of Roman religious options, but stressing how deeply the individual cultic tastes and interests were conditioned by social status.

These and other theoretical preliminary considerations are collected in the “Introduction” (1–19), where V. presents the above-mentioned research targets and defines their geographical and chronological limits: the Roman Empire from the reign of Augustus to the death of Severus Alexander (i.e. 27 B.C.–235 A.D.).

The body of the volume is organized into three main sections, each one further divided into two chapters. The first one (“*The new senate of the empire and religion*”, 23–55) analyzes the radical transformations that the senate passed through between the Republic and the Empire. On the one hand, the loss of political power undermined the senate’s corporate authority, and the communal identity of the *ordo* as a body was preserved and strengthened by the maintenance of prerogatives strongly related to religious matters (such as decrees on sacrifices, vows and temples); on the other hand, with Augustus the number of senators was reduced and began to include a growing presence of non-Italian members. The maintenance of familial, property and religious connections with their homeland did not imply that the new provincial senators became at the same time religious innovators: basically, even if they did not stop their participation in the cultic practices of their *origines*, they were not interested in promulgating them away from the *patria*. They preferred to be involved in the cults performed in the locations where they had to spend time on official duty: rather than proselytizing new cults in new places, they opted for appropriating local ones as a religious display and potential expression of power.

In the next chapter (“*Religious groups among senators*”: 56–90), the focus is shifted from the senate as a body to the smaller subgroups that could arise inside of it. The survival of senatorial religious identity was facilitated by the creation of memberships and *sodalitates*, through which senators could maintain as a collectivity the religious power that they had lost as individuals. The communal consumption of meat during the dinner parties which regularly followed sacrifices was one of

the occasions for contributing to the reinforcement of the priesthoods' community. Likewise common prayers, visits and discussions with physicians among the friends of a sick senator could become a less formal occasion for social networking in self-selected senatorial intra-groups.

The first chapter of Part II deals with "*The dynamics of senatorial religion in Rome and Italy*" (93–121): in the capital, senators did enjoy a corporate visibility, but actually not an individual religious authority, which they had the possibility of enhancing (by appropriating the emperor's model) only in some of their non-priestly magistracies. Leaving Rome, senators' religious interests concentrated on local deities, who could be involved, for example, in senatorial landownership or in personal health concerns, and gradually the opportunities for individual visibility increased due to senatorial euergetism: the funding of religious buildings and festivities reinforced the close connection between piety and the display of political power and authority.

These opportunities further multiply in the provinces ("*Representing imperial religion: the provinces*", 122–150). Yet, at the same time, the religious activity of senators (in their role as representatives of the imperial power and as the highest authorities in religious matters) is strongly intertwined with the local practices of imperial cult, representing a model of loyalty for the local elites. In military posts, this element is even more accentuated: by honouring the main gods of the Roman *pantheon*, the imperial cult and the local religious traditions, senators improved the military cohesion of the camp.

Part III is dedicated to the presumptive senatorial attempt to create a "theological" conceptualization of Roman religion ("*Towards a «theology» of Roman religion*", 153–185). In the author's opinion, this took place through three different approaches ("poetic", "legal" and, in particular, "philosophical"), which facilitated the construction of a new cultural identity involving and linking the different members of the elite.

Senatorial and emperor's powers cohabitated in a dynamic and active connection, with a mutual influence and inspiration in the construction and shaping of the Imperial religion ("*Innovations and aspirations*", 186–208). Three features are particularly relevant in this perspective: the worship of the *genius*, the representation of the empty *sella curulis* and the use of "*pro salute*" formulas. Basically, senators used the cult of the *genius* to avoid direct worship of the living emperor, towards which they always showed a strong aversion. Yet V. suggests the identification of a sort of experimental step in its development in the worship accorded during his lifetime to the Augustan senator *L. Volusius Saturninus* (and so predating the formal establishment of senatorial worship of the living emperor's *genius*). Similarly, the *sella curulis* (a status symbol of Republican senators) began to be used in relation to the emperor's claim to divinity and apotheosis, and, in an opposite trend, the "*pro salute*" formula was soon extended out of Rome from emperors to senators.

The "*Conclusion: Two saecular games*" (209–214) is followed by several "*Appendices*" (215–225), which provide useful lists of about 180 names of "first-generation

provincial senators whose ancestors had been involved in the imperial cult”, senators “originating from the provinces with ongoing involvement in the imperial cult” and “buried in the provinces of their *origo* from the west” or “the east”, and then “*fetiales*”, “*salii*”, “*luperci*”, “senatorial children involved in ritual assistance of *arvales*” and, finally, “*aediles cereales*”. A “*Bibliography*” (226–252), an “*Index hominum*” (253–259) and a “*General index*” (260–267) conclude the volume.

The book is exhaustively documented, clearly structured and well presented. The author skillfully masters the rich epigraphic evidence that she deals with, and the volume shows her to be perfectly at ease with its prosopographical analysis. Many of V.’s proposals are very original, convincing or at least stimulating: in particular, the absence of senatorial concerns of proselytizing, the appropriation of local cults for both religious and political display, and the complex and dynamic intertwining and mutual influence between the features of expression of senatorial and imperial power.

Nevertheless, the main claims of this study appear several times very disjointed and not properly fitted for a central thesis. The author’s empirical approach also misses an equally accurate theoretical discussion relating to the distinctive features that characterized the senatorial religion: particularly regretful is the lack of further clarifications concerning V.’s conception of some problematic (but basic) issues such as the relationship between the senatorial class and the wider elite groups (8, 44–45, 122), between cultic practice and belief (6, 12) and, finally, between private and public (101–2, 109–11, 175–6): topics that scholarship has recently and richly investigated. Which is the discriminating line or the overlapping degree between the religious activity and power expression of senate and elites? Does a real senatorial “belief” exist? The attempt at demonstrating how senators strove to create a “theology” of Roman religion (a concept whose use remains unclear: 13, 18, 153–4, 167) is mostly unconvincing, and the role of a sort of friendship solidarity towards a sick senator in generating senatorial intra-groups is, in my opinion, quite overstated.

Despite that, undoubtedly the author does succeed in showing some of the limits of the “marketplace” theory and the degree of conditioning of social status in personal religious preferences. This represents the main merit of V.’s important volume.

VALENTINO GASPARINI
UNIVERSITÄT ERFURT