

Douglas Boin, *Ostia in Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013. Pp. xix, 287; 1 map; 57 b/w-illustrations. Hardback; list price \$ 99.

This book is a re-elaborated and updated version of a PhD thesis directed by L. Michael White at the University of Texas in Austin. Its topic is not perfectly, but more precisely outlined by the title of the dissertation: “Temples and Traditions in Late Antique Ostia, c. 250 – 600 C.E.”, so it is *not* a book on Late-Antique Ostia in general. Though the focus is clearly on religious history, essential information on other aspects of (social, economic, artistic etc.) life at Ostia is summarized within the first part (“background”) of the book. As to that, the author depends on recent studies by different scholars (e.g., Axel Gering, Michael Heinzlmann, Archer Martin, Carlo Pavolini¹). Since the latter are often dedicated to rather specific questions, the overview offered by Douglas Boin (especially in chapter 2) proves to be really useful and helps to clarify how our vision of Rome’s most important harbor town in Late Antiquity has changed over the last decade. Consequently, the idea of an economically desolate and dying city must be modified in more than one respect.

Part two (“foreground”) addresses the religious manifestations of “continuity and change” over a time span of about four hundred years. It contains four chapters; each of them is dedicated to one section within that time span. Chapter 3 deals with the situation of the 3rd century CE. Several religious phenomena of the time are analyzed against the background of a vibrant civic community, which yet does show some signs of economic crisis. The presentation exemplarily focuses on individual monuments of different categories and ‘levels’: the so-called Round Temple in the city center, a huge building of official character, to which the author ascribes a mixed, administrative-religious function; an amulet as a testimony of individual, ‘magic’ practices; the loci of group-specific cult which was practiced by small-scale collectives within houses or workshops as well as by Mithraic, Christian and Jewish communities.

The discussion of 4th century-Ostia in chapter 4 is centered on the creation of a new urban image which includes, re-evaluates and reuses older monuments or parts of them. Archaeological evidence for this development is contrasted with epigraphic documents which typically recall former neglect and renewed splendor of architectural and sculptural monuments. Treated as part of the same discourse – and thus downscaled with regard to its supposed aggressive religious impact – is the so-called Pagan revival, a notion coined by Herbert Bloch². Accordingly, Boin refers the

¹ See, for instance, A. Gering, Plätze und Straßensperren, “Zum Funktionswandel Ostias in der Spätantike,” *MDAI(R)* 111 (2004) 299–382; A. Gering et al., “Das Stadtzentrum von Ostia in der Spätantike. Vorbericht zu den Ausgrabungen 2008 – 2011,” *MDAI(R)* 117 (2011) 409–509; A. Martin and M. Heinzlmann, “The Joint AAR-DAI Research Project at Ostia, 1998 and 1999 Seasons,” *MAAR* 45 (2000) 288–293; A. Martin and E.C. De Sena, “Agricultural and Craft Supplies in Late Roman Ostia. Pottery Evidence from the DAI-AAR Excavations,” in: *LRCW 1. Late Roman Coarse Wares, Cooking Wares and Amphorae in the Mediterranean Archaeology and Archaeometry* (Oxford 2005) 385–393; C. Pavolini, “Un gruppo di ricche case ostiensi del tardo impero – trasformazioni architettoniche e cambiamenti sociali”, in: *Marmoribus vestita. Studi in onore di Federico Guidobaldi*, 2 (Roma 2011) 1025–1048.

² H. Bloch, “A New Document of the Last Pagan Revival in the West,” *HThR* 38 (1945) 199–244.

restoration of a *cella Herculis*, which is mentioned by an inscription of late 4th century-date, not (as Bloch had done) to the Republican temple near the *bivio del castrum* but to a hall of the *Terme di Porta Marina*. Most interesting and original, though, is the comparative and connective analysis of Jewish and Christian communities: the author hereby plausibly demonstrates how different modes of self-representation responded to each other.

Chapter 5 is concerned with the 5th century CE. After a rather short discussion of new insights into the chronology of the synagogue building, the patrocinium of the Ostian cathedral is questioned. Against the attribution to Peter, Paul and John, and the Emperor Constantine as the donator (according to the version of the *liber pontificalis*), Boin proposes Lawrence, as the patron saint, and a senator named Gallicanus (following the *Acta Sanctorum*). This alternative attribution is subsequently interpreted from the perspective of a growing Christian anti-Judaism and a supposed opposition between ecclesiastical elite and lay elite within the Christian community at Ostia. Unfortunately, the whole argumentation must remain pure guesswork since there are no hard criteria to decide the patrocinium-question. In the last part of the chapter, the “evidence for traditional religious practices” in 5th-century Ostia is discussed, taking as example the sculptural furnishing of the *Campus Matris Magnae*. Actually, the latest dedication belongs to the 4th century (namely a statuette of Dionysus, rededicated by a certain Volusianus, presumably the *praefectus urbis* of 365–367 CE³). The author fails to explain why he assumes a lasting visibility of this and the other statues: did he remark traces of ongoing frequentation within the area of the (former) sanctuary? The only apparent connections to a 5th-century horizon are statements by Augustinus on the worship of Attis — but it remains uncertain whether they can tell us anything about the situation in Late Antique Ostia.

“The continued visibility of traditional cults”, even into the 6th and 7th centuries, is among the issues of the last chapter. But, again, the author must heavily rely on earlier sources when postulating a persistence of pagan festivals in the collective consciousness of a by then predominately Christian population. The latest testimonies are Polemius Silvius’ calendar, composed about the middle of the 5th century CE, and the *Cosmographia Iulii Caesaris*, most commonly dated to the same century. Both authors mention celebrations in honor of the Dioscuri at Ostia; both are dependent on information adapted from older documents. Polemius Silvius himself explicitly states: *laterculum quem priores fecerunt ... mutavi*⁴. I doubt that he could have had any possibility (or even the intention) to check if the feast for the *Castores* was still celebrated or remembered by the local community. Nevertheless, Douglas Boin may be right in assuming that commemorations for local Christian saints were not accidentally concentrated within the same season as, formerly, the most important pagan festivals had been.

Finally, I have to address two main, structural features of the study which appear debatable. Firstly, the division of the representation into single chronological

³ Cf. A.-K. Rieger, *Heiligtümer in Ostia* (München 2004) 150–153.

⁴ Quoted from Th. Mommsen, *Polemii Silvii Laterculus, Gesammelte Schriften* 7² (Berlin 1909; Repr. Berlin – Zürich 1965) 633–667, here: p. 640 (§1).

horizons: as already noted, not all the sources analyzed within a chapter necessarily stem from the period indicated by that chapter's headline. Yet, this procedure is sometimes acceptable, for example when it helps to comprehend the interrelations between pagan and early Christian religious calendars. Moreover, as the author himself clearly shows (e.g., pp. 21, 180), the different chronological layers of religious history were interwoven (not least topographically) in more than one point. Thus, traditions and monuments from earlier historical stages were still present and visible in later phases of the city's life. So why not take fuller account of this insight by breaking up the chronological structure in favor of a stronger accentuation of the 'urban landscape'-concept (to which the author refers more than once, see esp. pp. 28–31)?

The second point of criticism is a more fundamental one: Rather than building his historical reconstruction upon the archaeological record and the written sources available for Ostia, the author seems to use these documents merely as illustrative material for a general narrative of the emergence of Christianity (or Christian communities) within a framework of still surviving traditional (pagan) elements. Not only does this approach neglect the fundamentally local, place-bound character of ancient religion, but it often bypasses indispensable discussion of the primary evidence. It may suffice to quote only a few examples: The author challenges the common opinion that the cult of Mithras was extinct at Ostia already at an early date, apparently before the 4th century. His main objection is that the situation in the city of Rome seems to be quite different (p. 114). Thus he disregards the specific situation of Ostian Mithraism, which was rooted in a social milieu of rather modest commerce and industry and might have been highly sensible to economic change⁵. At another point, Boin is claiming the existence of early Christian *domus ecclesiae* at Ostia. He mildly criticizes Michael Heinzelmann and his collaborators for not having investigated the relationship between the Ostian bishop's church and its predecessor building on the same spot, which apparently had been an insula-complex (p. 160). Actually, the excavation report leaves little doubt that this complex had been totally torn down and that there is simply no evidence for Christian cult during the phase before the construction of the church-building⁶. On the other hand, hypothetical reconstructions are sometimes straightforwardly accepted, for instance Heinzelmann's localization of the temple of the Dioscuri above the so-called *navalia*-structure on the banks of the Tiber⁷. Moreover, it is not even questioned how long this presumed temple did exist and if it could be the same as the one mentioned by late-antique sources (pp. 204 f.).

To conclude, the greatest merit of the book lies, according to my opinion, in the emphasis given to new methodological orientations in the field of religious studies on

⁵ Cf., for example, M. Clauss, *Cultores Mithrae* (Stuttgart 1992) 40–42

⁶ F.A. Bauer, M. Heinzelmann, and A. Martin, "Untersuchungen im Bereich der konstantinischen Bischofskirche Ostias. Vorbericht zur ersten Grabungskampagne," *MDAI(R)* 106 (1999) 301–303 (M. Heinzelmann).

⁷ M. Heinzelmann, S.T.A.M. Mols and M. McKinnon, "Ostia, Regionen III und IV. Untersuchungen in den unausgegrabenen Bereichen des Stadtgebietes. Vorbericht zur vierten Grabungskampagne 2001," *MDAI(R)* 109 (2002) 225–233.

the ancient world. Some of these perspectives have been put to the test by applying them to a specific situation. Still, the author's welcome approach would have profited from a more careful and more detailed argumentation in some points.

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