

Craig B. Champion, *The Peace of the Gods: Elite Religious Practices in the Middle Roman Republic*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2017, xxv+225 pp.

In his monograph “The Peace of the Gods,” Craig B. Champion attempts to answer the question “did elites of the middle republic believe in their gods?” (xii). His point of departure is the contention that what he calls “elite-instrumentalism,” i.e. the assumption that religious actions by members of the Roman ruling elite were taken in order to subdue the masses, instill them with religious fear and thus cement their own political and social standing, has had a long history—beginning with Polybius—that is still not entirely overcome, but underlies modern (pre)conceptions about Roman religion. Instead, he attempts to show that the actions of members of the Roman elite in terms of religion were not so much tools to control the unruly masses and keep them in line, but rather options to bring about or maximize success in an hazardous environment. However, while Champion most certainly does not subscribe to the elite-instrumentalism model, he recognizes it as a useful interpretative tool to provide “a partial understanding of the Roman elites’ religious behavior” (xiv).

Such an undertaking has merits, as it provides interpretation of religious actions on the assumption that the actors actually believed that what they did would have an effect. Champion’s guiding question in his study is to see whether religious actions by members of the political elite, “frequently famous ones”, made sense when regarded as instances of elite-instrumentalism, i.e. directed at the masses and intended to calm them and keep them in line. His chronological frame is the time of the Middle Republic, between “the second quarter of the third century to the aftermath of the Gracchan revolution” (1), i.e. a period in which the Roman Empire expanded its boundaries and the social cohesion of the Roman community came under considerable stress. Here lies one of the pitfalls of the study, as the sources which Champion uses for his study frequently belong to a later time, the Ciceronian age. Though Champion acknowledges the trap of misreading the sources in trying to draw conclusion about an earlier age by relying on sources from a later one and carefully works around it, his boundaries are fuzzy, and the author too frequently relies on later authors to speak of earlier times.

Champion bases his study on literary sources and approaches the topic as a researcher of ancient Rome, rather than a scholar of Roman religion. He divides his topic into three parts: *domi, militiae* and *domi et militiae*, i.e., domestic politics and religion in Rome itself, including priesthoods and their relation to the senate as well as the question of participation of the *populus* in religious rituals; warfare and the role of army commanders in the field as independent, but ultimately responsible agents; and the “rediscovery” of old rituals and introduction of new/foreign gods into the Roman pantheon in times of crises. Chapter five sums up the investigation applying different theoretical models from psychology, anthropology, sociology and contemporary theories of culture.

There is much to recommend in Champion's study, e.g. his careful analysis of Roman priesthods and their relation to the Senate as the political center of Rome. Champion speaks of "heterarchy" rather than "hierarchy", there being no highly-organized or hierarchically structured religious institutions in Rome, with the Senate providing the "whatever top-down organization there was in state religion" (46). He holds that the priesthods developed according to the needs of the changing religious landscape of Rome from the beginning, but did not follow a model that would ultimately provide the Roman elite with the means to exert greater control over the Roman populace via religious offices. Rather than stipulating that religious offices were created alongside political ones in order to ensure "political and socioeconomic control of nonelites," Champion holds that the development of Roman priesthods followed different needs, resulting in an "uncoordinated division of religious powers in the republican system." (40). Consequently, the very notion of "a religious system" is misleading, "state religion" or "the Roman religion" being only one strata of the multilayered religious landscape in Rome that includes various forms of official religious acts, lived and foreign religious practices (though for the remainder of his book, Champion does continue to speak of Rome's "religious system" or her "state religion," an unfortunate inconsistency, though one may write this off as "necessary abbreviation").

Another question which the author frequently rightfully poses and which has much bearing on his leading question is the question of audiences: i.e., who was actually present during *sacra publica*, who witnessed them, who were "the masses" in which the rituals were supposed to instill fear of the divine? Champion holds that "the masses" were more or less a non-existent entity, as there is no way of ascertaining who the *populus* at any given time consisted of (beyond the author's scope of investigation is the exploration of the topography in relation to rituals, which would have strengthened this argument). Even the people at Rome in the area of *domi*, or the soldiers commanded by the general himself in the field of *militiae* were still too great and too diverse a unit to speak of a coherent group with the necessary knowledge and interest to ensure the ritually correct execution of *religio*: in Rome itself, acts of *sacra publica* would only have meaning to Romans (and not even to all of them), but not to the plentitude of foreigners and slaves who also lived in the city, if even these Romans were willing and able to attend. Likewise in the field: who would witness the *devotio* of the commander in ongoing battle, or the *evocatio* of a foreign deity during a protracted siege with the line of Roman soldiers—by necessity—being drawn out or engaged with the enemy, thus unable to witness what their commanding officer did. If, then, such measures were addressed to the "Roman multitude", their effect would have been "far beyond the point of diminishing returns" (221). In the author's eyes, the turn to orthopraxy, i.e., the use of one or more options within a more or less fixed set of religious possibilities, helped to alleviate fears and anxieties, as much on the part of the (elite) practitioner, as on the non-elite audience he is addressing.

In order to understand what a member of the Roman elite might have undergone when faced with a Vestal to be buried for incest or solemn Roman rituals suddenly disrupted by wailing eunuch priests of Mater Magna, Champion turns to three interpretative theories in particular, the theory of situational context, attitudinal ambivalence, and cognitive dissonance, which he applies to determine whether members of the Roman elite believed in their gods (his definition of belief is given in the introduction on p. xiv and repeated on p. 223). He applies the theories to different examples in his sources, which makes the reader wonder: his answer to each single combination of theory and case study is the same, the model of elite-instrumentalism does not provide a plausible frame of interpretation—but would that answer hold if he had applied *all* theories to *all* case studies instead of this careful selection? I am far from wanting to defend elite-instrumentalism as a model for interpreting Roman religion, but it is here that I find Champion's study wanting. The interpretation using different models from psychology, anthropology, sociology and theories of culture is relegated to the final chapter, after the author discussed various (quasi-)historical events and their possible effects on both elites and non-elites in the preceding chapters in some details. Though he approaches his topic, of course, as a scholar of ancient Rome, and neither as psychologist nor sociologist, the introduction of the interpretative theories much sooner than this might have been highly instructive.

As it is, Champion provides a highly readable study of the possible motivations of members of the Roman elite in various (crisis) situations, using elite-instrumentalism as an effective interpretative tool to answer the question of whether the Romans believed in their gods with a resounding: yes.

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