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God, Space, & City in the Roman Imagination [Review]

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R. JENKYNs, *GOD, SPACE, & CITY IN THE ROMAN IMAGINATION*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. x + 407, illus. ISBN 9780199675524. £35.00.

This ambitious book aims to convey what ancient Romans saw, thought, and felt as they experienced their city. Jenkyns focuses primarily, though not exclusively, on literary sources in his attempt to reconstruct how the Roman worldview of the late Republic and early Principate was shaped by the city of Rome itself, and *vice versa*. The built environment and public space are the principal points of emphasis, but the volume ranges widely over many other topics as well, including religious devotion, attitudes to the countryside, and Roman tourism.

The book opens with a series of chapters that explore different aspects of Roman mentalities about urban life. The first chapter (“The Public Eye”) examines the importance of visibility in the Roman imagination, particularly on the political stage, tackling subjects such as the triumph, public punishment, and visible tokens of status. The chapter also considers the sounds and smells of ancient Rome, a section that sits a bit awkwardly beside the surrounding parts. The second chapter (“The Private Realm”) also has a somewhat misleading title, since the chapter is not so much about the domestic life of the Romans, but instead proposes to define ancient views of urban life by way of contrast, particularly to rustic life; the chapter also examines the distinction between simple pleasures enjoyed in private and the public grandeur for which Rome was famous. The third chapter (“Business and Pleasure”) is more firmly grounded in physical space, since it considers the function of the Roman forum and of public porticoes in urban life. The fourth chapter (“Rome Imagined”) considers what Rome looked like to an ancient Roman, both in physical terms (solid, lofty, and a bit shabby), and how the city was perceived in more abstract terms (particularly as a node at the center of empire).

The fifth chapter (“Movement in the City”) is one of the more successful parts of the book, thanks to its unified theme and clearer organization. The

chapter considers the associations of walking and running in the public spaces of Rome, imagery of flowing or pressing crowds that convey the density of Rome's population, the act of descending from Rome's hills, and rituals associated with entering the city. The chapter showcases one of J.'s strengths, namely the way that he easily conflates the metaphorical with the literal, and the mental with the physical (see, for example, page 181, where he demonstrates how the philosophical tradition of the "view from above" was a perfect match for Rome's hilly topography).

The next two chapters treat religious experience in the Roman world, and in the city of Rome in particular. Chapter 6 ("Roman Religions") is centrally concerned with describing the "inner world" of religious experience—what religious practice "felt like" for the Romans—while chapter 7 ("The Divine Encounter") discusses Roman interactions with sacred spaces, both at home and abroad. The latter chapter makes the intriguing argument that it was a distinctively Roman experience to encounter (and even seek out) the presence of the divine while traveling in foreign lands, particularly in the Greek east, and that this experience was less a point of emphasis in the city of Rome itself. The chapters argue for an ineffable "sacredness" as a defining quality of Roman religious experience (the word "numinous" is a recurring shorthand) that challenges the more common scholarly view that ancient polytheism had more to do with ritual performance than states of mind.

The final three chapters are mostly stand-alone treatments. Chapter 8 ("Patina and Palimpsest") offers one of the more appealing, and novel, arguments in the book: namely that despite the Roman obsession with antiquity and age, they did not seem to derive any aesthetic pleasure from looking at old, crumbling buildings. Chapter 9 ("Interiors") explores what Romans thought interior spaces felt like, or should feel like, considering everything from caves to coffered ceilings. And a final chapter ("Monuments") examines the Roman aesthetic of monumentality, height and grandeur. This chapter is the only one that focuses on the physical remains of ancient Rome, with special attention paid to Trajan's Forum and Markets and the Pantheon.

On the whole, the book manages to be both panoramic and finely detailed, which is no small accomplishment. Many of the close readings are quite compelling, particularly when J. is unpacking a passage from one of his favorite authors, such as Lucretius or Virgil. Given the scale of the book, it is not completely surprising that J. does not always situate his many astute observations in the context of scholarly debates on the subject: this is a work where the *index locorum* is over twice as long as the bibliography. Yet one also gets the sense that this reticence is not merely a matter of convenience but also a conscious choice. J. is clearly willing to engage in scholarly debate where he so chooses, and one of the book's more or less explicit goals is to dial back the new historical and ideological approaches to Roman literature that have dominated in the last several decades in favor of a restoration of a more aesthetic mode of interpretation. Nonetheless, many readers will inevitably find sections where they would have enjoyed more direct engagement with broader conversations. In the end, *God, Space, & City* is expansive, eclectic, assertive, impressive and occasionally disorienting—exactly, I suppose, what ancient Rome must have felt like to those who wandered her streets.

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