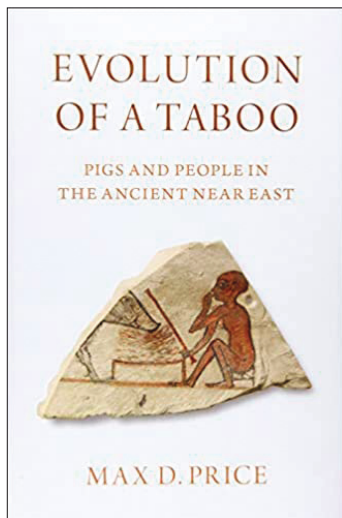


EVOLUTION OF A TABOO



PRICE, MAX D. (2020). *Evolution of a Taboo. Pigs and People in the Ancient Near East*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 312 pp., 38,30 € [ISBN: 978-0-1975-4237-6].

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MAX PRICE (NOW MP) OFFERS AN ORIGINAL AND ATTRACTIVE SYNTHESIS around the history of pigs, considered here vertically (since prehistory), successfully combining archaeozoology and anthropology. The book is pleasantly written and embellished with skillfully introduced digressions towards contemporary questions related to the problem. The author claims prudence and discernment in this dense subject, which has already produced a very abundant literature, which offers an impressive bibliography (pp. 247-307) revealing in itself the very broad investigations carried out by the author. We would like to highlight here first of all the qualities of the work,

which tackles this very broad documentation mastered. Certainly, when one brews an archaeological and historical material which extends over more than ten millennia, the need for simplification is essential, and one can congratulate the author for having been able to order such a large mass of data.

The comparative treatment of the subject (the “taboo” of pork in the Near East) is not in itself new. The author’s material was the subject in 2006 of a publication bringing together various specialists in the ancient Near East, edited by Brigitte Lion and Cécile Michel.¹ This book is known to MP, but his use of it is quite limited. However, important theoretical and methodological axes are exposed there, and touch exactly on this complex problem – transcultural and transdisciplinary: the question of the so-called “taboo” concerning pork in the Jewish religion, then in Islam, considered in its possible origins or prefigurations in the Near East. The author assumes a more than broad chronological horizon, since it unfolds from the Pleistocene to the contemporary era, while granting great importance to prehistoric times which see the first major changes linked to the relationship between man and animal, passing from the hunted animal (the wild pig, wild boar) to domestication, and the questions inherent to it. The landscape is therefore a Near East that stretches from Egypt to present-day Turkey.

This story, which leads to the Iron Age, would be for MP the cradle of what will constitute the central subject of the book, namely the constitution of the “taboo”. The cross-cultural approach is undoubtedly important for the comparison between cultural groups. But it necessarily leads the author to frequent areas that he more or less masters. This is the case here with the treatment of ancient Egypt, which is at the very least incomplete, fragmented and insufficiently documented. The present reader is embarrassed to have to point out in these lines that he himself wrote a monograph on pork in ancient Egypt (which MP does not cite), which also offers an anthropological reflection on what would constitute a “taboo”.² To tell the truth, the sources used by MP concerning Egypt are in my opinion too meager for the author to be able to extract a real problematic from them. However, this requires taking account in a balanced way not only of archaeozoology (which offers specific insights into specific contexts) but also of more general religious and symbolic data, which emanate from the particular treatment of the animal in the pharaonic context, which implies a general reflection on the place of animals in pharaonic thought. Thus, MP misses the fact that, in Egypt, the pig and its female, the sow, are not at all connoted in the same

1. Lion & Michel, 2006.

2. Volokhine 2014, 2015, 2019 and 2020.

manner. The pig is conceived as an aggressive animal that takes life (link with Seth, gradually becoming an enemy god) and the sow, maternal and protective (which is linked to the celestial Nut). This particularity is not without interest with regard to the food consequences. Also, MP passes too quickly on the fact that the speech of the potential rejection of the animal, present to various degrees in the Egyptian texts, asks to reflect fundamentally on the Egyptian notion of *bwt*, which asks to evaluate the question within the framework of an Egyptian idea of the forbidden in a sacerdotal (and not social) setting. The links between the priestly world and society are also to be considered in the other ancient worlds that are treated here. It was the Greeks, since Herodotus, who misunderstood the status of pigs in Egypt to anchor the idea of a general impurity affecting the species. In this respect, MP necessarily evokes Greece, but there too one might be surprised at the absence of references to some key works.³ It is thus the Greek authors who will really constitute a discourse on the prohibitions linked to the consumption of pigs, a discourse in which the Egyptians and the Jews meet, and everything happens as if we were involuntarily always following in their footsteps. The articulation between archaeozoology and the study of discourses is certainly a very delicate thing, one showing what the other hides, and vice versa. The author brings to light precisely what he calls the “complexity of the pig”. But truth be told, the pig is no more complicated than any other animal: it is human discourses that makes it complex. And the first step to lift the veil on this complexity would also be to question not only the theories on taboos, but ultimately the very notion of “taboo”. However, this does not really bother MP, who uses it constantly, as if it were anthropological evidence. The historiography of the notion is treated quickly (pp. 92-95) (Steiner’s omission is surprising),⁴ which perhaps reveals that the author uses this notion of “taboo” in short posed as a universal category. We would have expected may be more nuance in this case. On the other hand, the author then engages in a useful examination of the various theories proposed about the prohibition of pork in the Jewish religion and manages skillfully to refute all the reductionist proposals. For MP, the “taboo” is a social fact in constant evolution, which depends on socio-economic contingencies, carrying within it a charged imagination inherited from its genesis. In general, if the author considers with finesse the socio-economic or political conditions, he does not, in my opinion, go into enough detail of an anthropology of diet considered not only with regard to consumption habits, but especially with regard to the symbolic status of animals, in the perspective for example of a

3. Grottanelli, 2004.

4. Steiner, 1956.

Michel Pastoureau.⁵ However, this question is not unrelated to agricultural hierarchies, and often prevails over utilitarian aspects. The theme of the prohibition of pork in the Jewish religion is obviously central. In the end, the author does not add much to this two-thousand-year-old debate, except that he summarizes it, to conclude, no doubt with reason, that the “taboo” of pork is a heritage reinterpreted from a perspective identity. But the question of the identity of a group is not, any more than that of the “taboo”, devoid of presuppositions. If the pork “taboo” provides an identity barrier to separate Jews from others, then of course that would also be the function of all the other particular religious rules. However, this theme, more than others, has been emblemized, but above all in the context of relations between the Jews and their Greco-Roman and then Christian neighbors. On the uses of the animal as a negative emblem of identity, such as what the author aptly calls “weaponry”, and it should be noted here that the work of Misgav Har-Peled⁶ escaped the author. The question of imaginary ritual crimes and the presence of the pig in these discourses, discussed by MP, until the famous case of the “Judensau” could obviously have been considerably extended, insofar as this is indeed where expresses the idea of identity of the uses of the animal, but we recognize that the author does not pass over anything in silence and constantly opens the horizon.⁷ On the question of the treatment of pork in the Islamic world, MP could have quoted the works of Mohammed Benkheira an author who has the advantage of also integrating to an anthropology of diet the question of the prohibition of the swine.⁸

In conclusion, one could think that the option of linking the prehistory of the pig to the history of discourses on the animal is ultimately not that convincing. The “prehistoric” part and the part dealing with debates and discourses can almost be read independently. In the end, the wild boar of Göbekli Tepe does not so much enlighten the pigs of Nippur, any more than the pigs of Amarna anticipate those of the garbage collectors of contemporary Cairo. Knowledge of the genealogy of the life of the species and its domestication certainly provide a background, but this remains not very enlightening in the end for understanding ideas whose putting into perspective and analysis is often guided by our own conceptions of what establishes an identity or a community. Finally, despite the few specific reservations we have expressed, we can only recommend reading this book, which is now essential on the subject.

5. Buren, Pastoureau & Verroust, 1987.

6. Har-Peled, 2011-2012, and 2013.

7. Fabre-Vassas, 1981 and 1985; Har-Peled, 2016.

8. Benkheira, 2000, 2002 and 2006.

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