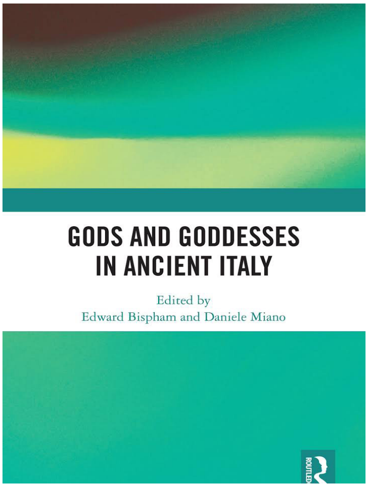
Gods and Goddesses in Ancient Italy



BISPHAM, EDWARD & MIANO, DANIELE (EDS.) (2022). *Gods and Goddesses in Ancient Italy.* Nueva York: Routledge. 180 pp., 29.59 £ [ISBN 978-1-0323-3748-7].

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This enjoyable collection comprises nine case studies of deities who appear across boundaries and in similar forms in different parts of Italy. The deities, Ceres, Feronia, Diana, Vesta, Castor, Liber, Apollon/Suri, Honos and Salus, are familiar to anyone who studies this material, but the essays are uniformly competent, clear and comprehensive, and will support further study.

In comparison with older treatments which tended to outline a more or less forcible homogenization of deities, a vigorous syncretism under Roman influence, all the essays are content with more indeterminacy and plurality. Santangelo concludes his essay on Ceres with a typical position: "We should shift from speaking of the 'Italian Ceres' to engaging with the remarkably diverse and complex evidence for the 'Italian Cereres'" (p. 17). Wyler, who writes a very good account of versions of Liber, including at the persistently intriguing Sant'Abbondio sanctuary, writes of previous accounts of Dionysos and variants that “metahistorical and global approaches are no longer conceivable” (p. 86). Clark is perhaps the most radical in her treatment of *honos* which artfully vacillates between a deity and the notion of an honour, and similarly Miano explores the play between Salus as a god and notions of personal or state safety or salvation.

There are some new observations scattered throughout. For instance, Sekita disentangles the Etruscan Apollo from a chthonic interpretation. Di Fazio pushes further the relationship between Feronia, Ferentina and Diana; Glinister has a very sharp account of Diana as a deity of sovereignty (these two essays needed to speak to each other rather more directly perhaps). Buchet’s focus on the local manifestations of Vesta across Latium is revealing. And, returning to political interpretations, Santi looks at how Castor lost his twin, revising very thoughtfully Koch’s theory that Castor was demythologized at the beginning of the Republic.

The political is an occasional presence in the volume. Depending on one’s standpoint, one might regard it as refreshing that religion is not seen as a machine of Romanization (and indeed the term itself is rare). This perhaps marks out the persistent interest in what is happening in a local context, but of course a local context is always political. So we do see individuals operating in contexts such as Pietrabbondante or Pompeii, where the evidence permits.

North’s introduction (which by itself justifies the whole volume) worries about the non-political nature of the interpretation, and identifies the three key methodological worries for the authors. Why, contrary to Dumézil and others, is function so unimportant? How do we explain the combination of distinct instantiations into single figures (he argues it is unlikely that anyone saw this as the assemblage of a new deity as opposed to a process of identification). And is translation the right way of understanding this process?

Bispham and Miano’s preface briefly mentions the free movement of gods and people, a metaphor that is not pervasive through the volume, but signals another concern for the authors, the way that Italy was open to cross cultural connections. So taken together, we have here an explanation of polytheism which is radical in its sense of movement, translatability, internal transparency.

This is interesting and attractive to a modern temperament. Indeed the preface notes that the conference occurred the day before the Scottish referendum resisted a call for nationalism (as a passing footnote to coincidence, I cannot forebear to mention that Bispham and the current reviewer held another conference on Italian religion on the day the Labour party came to power in 1997, published as *Religion in Archaic and Republican Rome and Italy. Evidence and Experience*, Edinburgh 2000). But it raises some interesting complexities when one looks to the place where the notion of translation largely comes from, Jan Assman's article in a volume edited by Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser entitled *The Translatability of Cultures. Figurations of the Space Between* (Stanford 1996).

Assmann's metaphor is far more problematic in that context. In the introduction, Budick notes that the volume as a whole is troubled by the relationship between German and Jewish culture, and rooted in the problem of alterity, the "fundamentalization of plurality" and a notion of crisis arising from the urgent need to confront the other whilst culture has failed in this specific encounter.

This deeply troubled encounter, a doomed but essential attempt to imagine the other, is rendered more tranquil through Assmann's account. First, there is a sort of assumption of a common core, which is then subject to pseudo-speciation, elaborations of distinction. One might think of the fractioning out of the gods, the pluralizing nature of polytheism. The counter is cultural translatability, so in this model, the two actions are mirrors. Budick then takes this further; Assmann suggests that there can be a secondary speciation which produces a culture which declares its untranslatability, and that can then have a further reaction, where my awareness of my own otherness is predicated on the unknowability of the other.

Now this is, bluntly, miles away from the concerns of the volume in question, but I think North gently points us to ask whether it should be. The notion of translation is lightly explored, for instance by Miano, but it is not put under any real pressure. The work I was expecting to see cited was Denis Feeney's *Beyond Greek. The Beginnings of Latin Literature* (Harvard 2016) which uses models of translation to explain the cultural mediation that is pervasive in the middle Republic, and is part of that free movement of gods and people – although it is free only in a very limited sense. Much of the mediation is done though forced movement and enslavement, and it is now very hard to read this period without a deep awareness of Dan-el Padilla Peralta's focus on the role of slavery in constructing, literally and intellectually, the notion of Roman religion (*Divine Institutions. Religions and Community in the Middle Roman Republic*, Princeton 2020).

For Feeney, the work of translation was the unexpected creation of a national literature. This major project of cultural translation, understanding and indeed the insertion of Rome into a "network" does not look very similar, yet, to the looser processes described in this collection. It may be that this is the product of the looser timeframe, but perhaps there is something else at work here.

Feeney, who is keen throughout to emphasise the distinctiveness of the translation exercise, notes the importance of Schleiermacher's 1813 essay "On the different methods of translation", and the difference between translation and interpretation, the process of understanding oral communication across linguistic and cultural barriers, and how far true translation is from the more common imitation or paraphrase (the essay is itself translated by Susan Bernofsky in L. Venuti (ed.), *The Translation Studies Reader*, New York & London 2007, pp. 43-63). True translation would so fully act as a form of cultural mediation as eventually to transform the target language. So I wonder if we are missing a trick by using a relatively simple version of translation, when we might look instead at interpretation as well imitation, paraphrase and cultural mediation. Miano alludes to this by brief reference (p. 137) to Koselleck's notion of semantic systems within which concepts operate. I think something like this idea is what the authors generally use to dispense with Dumézil's functional theory.

But I think we need to worry about this a bit more. It is fashionable to dismiss Dumézil, but as North points out (p. 3) at some stage "function must have been relevant". However "irrational" the correspondences across systems (I borrow the term from Schleiermacher's note on slippages in meaning and reference across languages), something made possible the dialectic process that eventuates in some form of interpretation, or translation. To revert to the Assmann analogy, in its context within that volume, whatever necessitated the encounter with the other, some process of analysis made possible its rendering as legible.

The endpoint of this is the construction of a discourse that permits reflection on religion, a process which Jorg Rüpke has often and brilliantly discussed, and located usually in the later Republic (see for example *Religion in Republican Rome. Rationalization and Ritual Change*, Pennsylvania 2012). It is no coincidence that the beginning of Rüpke's timeline dovetails well with Feeney's translation moment. Indeed one might propose some sort of hypothetical and obviously inadequate and overly teleological version where Assmann's pseudo-speciation was met by a basic flow of understanding via interpretation, where function may have had a larger role to play, before the need for a deeper understanding of the other, driven by imperialism, violence, and political dynamics drove more profound versions of the translation project that operated both internally in transforming semantic systems and externally in generating networks across which meaning flows, sometimes smoothly and sometimes with difficulty.

Much of the evidence that might furnish support for such a model, and which would make it appear problematic, can be found in this volume, even though it itself does not propose any such model. The trickiest part, I suspect, is the earliest stages of the process. How do we understand the earlier process of pseudo-speciation and how thin or thick was the act of interpretation? Influenced, perhaps, by Schleiermacher, and also by the role of the *interpres* in legal contexts, Feeney (pp. 46-47) discusses the role of the interpreter as a literal movement of words from one language to another. Even there, the notion comes under pressure.

There is no doubt that the translation of religion happened early in central Italy, and not only between Latins (the example of Castor in this volume is illustrative), but also between Etruscans and Latins and between Italic and Greek and Phoenician peoples. A marvellous example is the Pyrgi tablets, in which Punic and Etruscan worlds interpenetrate, and in writing. So we are always nudging into translation, which makes this such a valuable collection, but we are always nudging into very complex and nuanced positions across the distinctive acts of interpretation, imitation, paraphrase and translation, which means there is still a good deal of work to be done.

Lastly, the volume eschews for understandable reasons any overarching framework of divinity. However, this has a disadvantage, in that it leaves the work of "translation" as a highly human and rationalizing approach to cultural mediation. The gods themselves are absent from the work of comparison.

I worry that this seriously underplays the strangeness of the ancient cosmopolity. In his last work, *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe. An Anthropology of Most of Humanity* (Princeton 2022), Marshall Sahlins offers a final reflection on his brilliant reassessment of immanentist theology, the deep notion that the gods are everywhere, and it is the gods, not humans, who power and explain the world. It is our modern myth that we invent the gods – and to an extent Assmann's pseudo-speciation is part of this foisting of transcendentalism onto an immanent world view.

What is the lived experience of the discovery that in different parts of the world, there are similar forces which govern our existence? It can hardly have been a surprise that the deities discussed here and present across Italy were remedying the challenge of human finitude, in food, drink, fertility, death, war, and power. The world after all was full of gods. The risk of thinking through translation is that we over-rationalize and overstate human capacity. Livius Andronicus had to work his way through Homer, but we can too easily 'translate' that into humans observing the entities associated with fertility, instead of thinking through what it means to live in a world confusingly and comprehensively characterized by human finitude. The successful or unsuccessful interaction with the immanent metapersons is the condition in which we flourish or fail. The environment is not other than us, but rather a society of societies, a multiplicity of entities.

In the Italic context, this multiplicity is especially fascinating because the interplay between local instances and wider regional presences intersects with the political complexity of Italy. But reversing the agency to put human translation ahead of divine interactions may precisely miss the point. It is not that humans created the connections in the *cosmopoliteia*; that society existed and humans discover it, to some extent usurp its effects and powers, but largely to discern a model of divine interaction. As Sahlins says (p. 69), "In immanentist cultures, the gods, ancestors, and other metaperson denizens of the cosmos are not only occasional visitors; for all their distance and invisibility, they are also and ever present in human affairs, ever on call. People couldn't live without the immanent metaperson beings and forces that invisibly power their endeavors, making them efficacious or, too often, fruitless. If the gods are doing what people do, they are present, for all their distance, as an integral part of human existence, even as they manage their own affairs. Partible beings, the gods are present for all that they are distant; they are potent agents of humans' fate for all that they are unseen". From this standpoint, even if the authors may not acknowledge it, this volume is eavesdropping on the conversations of the gods.