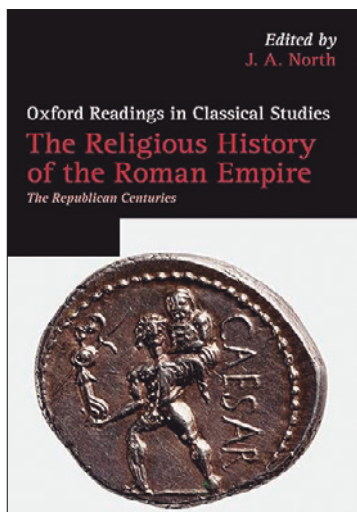


THE RELIGIOUS HISTORY OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE



NORTH, JOHN A. (ED.) (2023). *The Religious History of the Roman Empire. The Republican Centuries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 416 pp., 100.00 £ [ISBN 978-0-19-964406-3]

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The volume under review is part of the series *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies*, whose stated aim is to provide “students and scholars with a representative selection of the best and most influential articles on a particular author, work, or subject”.¹ It is focused

1. <https://global.oup.com/academic/content/series/o/oxford-readings-in-classical-studies-orcs/> (consulted on 25/02/2025).

on the history of religion in republican Rome, complementing a volume in the same series published in 2011, and focused on the imperial period.² This volume, however, is not typical of the series due to an incredibly long production history, as the editor explains in the introduction. The book was supposed to be co-edited with Simon Price and, at the time of his untimely death in 2011, much of the planning work had already been done, including a definition of the content of the volume. Consequently, the content is somewhat dated: three chapters were originally published in the 1980s, two in the 1990s, eight in the 2000s and the final and most recent one in 2011. There are only three chapters originally published after 2006, which makes the bulk of the content of this book almost twenty years old at the time of writing this review. Unquestionably, this makes the content to an extent out of date. However, some measures were taken to update the book: the authors were given the opportunity to write afterwords to their chapters, and at the end of the volume there are helpful “Suggestions for Further Readings”, covering works published from 2011 to 2021. John North acknowledges the issue in the introduction, claiming that this volume could be “a basis for future studies”, or “mark the end of an era and the launching of a different one” (p. 2). It is very sad to read these words again after the news of Prof. North’s passing, a few days before the time I am writing. I believe that John would appreciate the irony of how his death retrospectively gives a renewed, heightened significance to this collection, a reader on Roman religion brought together by one of the most significant scholars of the field in the last half century, whose voice is now sadly lost to his colleagues and friends. The end of an era indeed it is.

It is arguable that the book is both “a basis for future studies”, and that it “mark[s] the end of an era and the launching of a different one”. Its fourteen chapters are structured chronologically, or rather pseudo-chronologically, because the great majority of them tend to be focused on late republican Rome, with some discussions sliding into the Augustan period. This is, to an extent, inevitable, as so much of the primary sources were produced in that period, or even later. In the introduction, the editor outlines an alternative, thematic arrangement for the chapters, according to the themes “Gods and Goddesses”, “War-rituals”, “Priests”, “Communication”, and “Innovations”. This alternative thematic arrangement had the virtue of not insisting on a chronological order which, because of the available sources, is almost impossible to follow. I think that North wanted to keep the structure agreed with Price at the end of the 2000s, both for convenience and for respect

2. North & Price, 2011.

for his late co-editor, but he also wanted to give a sense of how he would have approached the collection if he had no such constraints at the time of the publication. This difference between the actual structure of the book and the alternative arrangement of the preface is already telling of how the field has evolved and what the editor saw as the most productive topics of discussion in today's scholarship.

The first section ("Early Rome") consists of two chapters written by Christopher Smith and John Scheid. Smith addresses early Roman ritual, and the methodological issue on how one should reconcile archaeological data with written sources. Scheid's chapter, originally published in 1984 and one of the oldest in the volume, aged incredibly well, and provides a discussion of the relative position of priests and magistrates during the republican period, and how it changes in the early imperial period, which is still relevant and stimulating (although one could argue that it is perhaps somehow misplaced in the "Early Rome" section).

The second section ("Republican Practices and Ideas") is the longest of the book, consisting of five chapters. The contributions by Mary Beard, Jörg Rüpke, Andreas Bendlin, John North, and Olivier de Cazanove, touch upon the role of myth in defining the place of priests in Roman society (Beard, nicely in dialogue with the preceding chapter by Scheid), the interconnection between war and religion, using as *comparandum* early modern Mesoamerica to cast new light on Roman practices (Rüpke), a theoretical discussion of Roman polytheism (Bendlin), the task of reconstructing Roman rituals using ancient historiographical sources (North), and the interaction of Roman and Samnite war rituals (de Cazanove).

The section "Sacrifice" consists of the chapters of Rebecca Flemming, who makes the case against viewing the participation of women in ritual action as exceptional, and of Denis Feeney, who studies poetic representations of sacrifice in Roman literature in the context of modern historiographical debates.

This is followed by the section "Rome and Italy". Here, Daniel Gargola studies the texts of Frontinus and Hyginus Gromaticus to analyse the intersection between centuriation, ritual and antiquarianism. Filippo Coarelli studies the mid-republican inscriptions from the sanctuary at the *lucus Pisauensis* to argue for an early date and a connection with Roman imperialism. Finally, John Scheid looks at Augustus' recovery of old Italian sanctuaries in order to appropriate their value in terms of collective memories.

The final section of the book ("Late Republican Transformations") has chapters by Mary Beard and Alfred Schmid. Beard takes a closer look at Cicero's *De divinatione*, and to a lesser extent other late Ciceronian dialogues, to make the argument that Cicero's authorial voice is not necessarily identical with positions expressed by

any of the character of the works, and that Cicero's philosophical oeuvre was highly original. Finally, Schmid's chapter studies the Augustan field of Mars in light of the development of a cosmic monarchic ideology based on astrology.

The authors were encouraged to write afterwords to place their essays in current debates but, regretfully, not all of them have done it. Those who did had different understandings of the task at hand, from providing brief bibliographic updates to writing longer and more engaged texts (esp. John Scheid did this brilliantly). Oxford University Press could and should have done a better job in the production of this volume, which contains several mistakes. Thankfully, the content remains entirely comprehensible.

This book is a highly useful collection of extremely influential studies in the field. Teachers of courses on ancient religion in anglophone universities will be happy to see important work in French, German and Italian made available to their students. Moreover, there is undoubtedly added value in bringing these studies together. Reading these essays provides an understanding of foundational debates, offering a lens through which to view the development of ideas that are central to today's academic discussions.

John North, with his ever-stimulating ideas, his acumen and wit, and his outstanding ability to turn scholarly problems upside down by looking at the sources without ideological or methodological preconceptions, is no longer with us. In this painful absence, this book provides an important document of his view on what are the foundational texts for scholarship on Roman religion in the last 30 years, and what are the most important problems worth focusing on in the next decades.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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