

Chaniotis, A. (ed.)

Ritual Dynamics in the Ancient Mediterranean. Agency, Emotion, Gender, Representation (Heidelberger althistorische Beiträge und epigraphische Studien (HABES), 49). Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 2011. 390 pp. Pr. €62.00 (pb). ISBN 9783515099165.

By now, it should be apparent that a ‘ritual turn’ has taken place in the study of ancient history. It is widely acknowledged that, by reinforcing social norms and categories, ritual practice played a fundamental role in sustaining the fabric of ancient societies; more fundamental even, some would say, than political action or the dispensation of law, as ritual action sets the social norm that serves as moral benchmark both in the assembly and in the law courts. Rituals stand at the very core of ancient society, whether as part of a festival of the gods, a burial ceremony or at a political meeting. They reflect society’s most pressing preoccupations by defining transgressional behaviour and demarcating social roles and hierarchies. *Ritual Dynamics in the Ancient Mediterranean*, Angelos Chaniotis’ new edited volume, fits squarely within this paradigmatic shift. The collection of papers has its roots in a 2008 Heidelberg conference, entitled “Ritual Dynamics and the Science of Ritual” and reflects the editor’s position at the forefront of the study of ancient rites.

Like norms, rituals are constantly being negotiated and are thus subject to constant change. This leads to several important questions, some of which are posed by the contributors to this book, concerning human agency: Who stands to benefit from changes in ritual practice? How are social identities (e.g. women, age groups, artisans, soldiers etc.) shaped and negotiated by ritual action? Who is responsible for manipulating ritual practice (power)? How are rituals experienced on an emic level (emotion)? And how is ritual experience enhanced by physical imagery (representation)? In the introductory chapter, the editor introduces the concept of ‘ritual dynamics’, coined to capture the—often hidden—social meaning of ritual activity. It is largely dependent on agency, the most prominent, and certainly the most essential, of the four categories listed in the book’s subtitle, which further suggests that emotion, gender and representation are somehow related. Of these the first and last are clearly derived from agency. Emotion relates to the effect of ritual on the individual or collective psyche, enabling either to be attuned to a specific social message. Representation describes the physical, non-choreographic attributes available to the participants in a ritual and includes grave markers and temple decorations.

Gender is a more difficult fit. While none would deny that the female social persona was negotiated by ritual, gender represents a rather limited choice of potentially interesting social roles. And indeed, only a few contributions deal with women head on (Perego, Martzavou), begging the question why gender was included in the first place. Chaniotis' own contribution, moreover, shows the potential of focusing on other social groups, such as citizens, initiates and pilgrims as 'emotional communities'.

A more serious grievance concerns the title's claim that the book deals with ritual dynamics in the ancient Mediterranean. The contributions of several 'non-Greek' specialists notwithstanding (Perego, López-Bertran, McCarthy, Verbovsek and Icks), the bulk of this book is devoted to the Greek world and conceptually developed from Chaniotis' own work on Greek rituals and their fundamental role in Greek society. What do chronologically and geographically disparate environments like Republican Hadrumentum, Classical Eleusis, Roman Athens and pre-Roman Veneto have in common? And in what sense do they define Mediterranean ritual practice as opposed to, say, ritual activities in the Ancient Near East? None of this is made apparent, not in the brief editor's introduction, nor in any of the individual contributions. The label 'Mediterranean' in the title thus appears to be a theoretically meaningless conveyance of topographical affinity. As a result, the book would have benefited from a stronger editorial focus, either narrowly on the Greek world of the polis, or on the wider Mediterranean, by showing idiosyncrasies in ritual practice that are characteristic for this part of the world. While a few contributions attempt to supersede a specific local environment—notably Chaniotis' own paper on 'emotional communities'—none achieve a true pan-Mediterranean perspective that goes beyond traditional regional subdivisions such as 'Greece' or Egypt. The absence of a deeper programmatic focus than the loosely defined 'ritual dynamics' is largely responsible for the book's somewhat loose coherence.

Unwittingly, Perego's contribution illustrates the looming disparity between our sources and how anthropologists predict society will behave. In between the hermetic certainty of anthropological models and the world of our ancient sources lies a gap and much work is to be done for a penetrating analysis to take shape that combines both. While Perego's theoretical account of ritual agency in archaeology certainly is sound and useful, it is rather top heavy for the modest conclusions she is able to draw from her source material (primarily cult sites and burials in Pre-Roman Veneto) and would have been better placed in a separate, introductory chapter. The conclusion that at Este "women were endowed with both social visibility and direct agency in the ritual sphere"

should come as no surprise to anyone versed in Iron Age archaeology. Here and elsewhere, a comparative approach is missed. How does gender differentiation vary from place to place, and from one period to the next? And what significance does this have for the social framework at large? In not answering such questions, the book is largely limited to a broad collection of individual case studies.

A failed book, however, *Ritual Dynamics in the Ancient Mediterranean* certainly is not. There is much to be found if one is prepared to do the cherry picking. In particular the focus on emotion in some papers is innovative. Joan Connelly's spatial analysis of ritual sites in Athens, Messene, and Yeronisos (Cyprus) focuses on processions, song, and dance that filled otherwise empty spaces. This important contribution to the 'emotions' subtheme shows how these ritual activities defined social roles in the communities that performed them. Alexandra Verbovsek shows how ritual activity was used to regulate emotion in ancient Egypt, for example during mortuary rites or at the king's accession rituals, channeling strong emotions such as grief or adoration through tightly staged ritual proceedings. Chaniotis' own contribution, mentioned above, ably discusses the emotional responses at play during cultic rites in the Greek East during the Roman period. Based on inscribed evidence, he elucidates a variety of rituals that promoted communal gratitude, civic pride, and fear or awe in the face of a deity's power.

The importance of bringing these emotions to our attention lies in their potential to focus the public's attention on the normative aspects of the occasion and their ability to shape the way a society is structured. The main achievement of the book, then, lies in the various inroads that are made into the individual psyche of the participants of ritual acts. From the experience of walking through a sanctuary of the gods (Connelly) to the workings of ritual agency in Attic drama (des Bouvrie), the papers in this book are almost all concerned with the psychological-adaptive powers of rituals, once more underscoring how far away the field has moved from the traditional, formalistic approach to ancient ritual practice.

A final note should be devoted to the book's overall standard of production, which leaves something to be desired. Misspellings are abundant and the fact that many of the contributors are not seasoned English-writers, has not been countered by sufficient editorial rigor, apparently having been relegated to graduate students (cf. editor's statement, p. 8). In general, illustrations are scanty, even where the text would have clearly benefited from their inclusion, and are unevenly distributed. Details of photographs are often hard to identify and would have deserved a more professional desktop editing. Finally, the

omission of several books that are mentioned in the notes reinforces the impression of editorial haste.

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