

UC Berkeley

UC Berkeley Previously Published Works

Title

JONATHAN J. PRICE and KATELL BERTHELOT (EDS), THE FUTURE OF ROME: ROMAN, GREEK, JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN VISIONS. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp ix + 315. isbn 9781108494816. £75.00.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9qk349bw>

Author

MacRae, Duncan E

Publication Date

2022-11-01

DOI

10.1017/s0075435821000848

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

JONATHAN J. PRICE and KATELL BERTHELOT (EDS), *THE FUTURE OF ROME: ROMAN, GREEK, JEWISH, AND CHRISTIAN VISIONS*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp ix + 315. ISBN: 9781108494816. £75.00.

Early agrarian polities in Western Eurasia, both in the form of small city-states and large empires, were remarkably brittle. Recent syntheses of the archaeological evidence for urban destruction and abandonment and the historical record of repeated imperial precarity and fission suggest that the inhabitants of early states in the Mediterranean and Near East could count on a coming decline and/or fall. By the middle of the first millennium B.C.E., Herodotus can comment on the inevitability that minor cities could become great and great cities could become minor, since “happiness does not stay in the same place” (Hdt. 1.6); Thucydides projects the ruination of Sparta and Athens (Thuc. 1.10); and the apocalyptic-minded authors behind the book of *Daniel* assume a historical succession of empires (*Daniel* 7–8). With the establishment of Roman hegemony in the late first millennium, therefore, these assumptions of imperial fall and succession shaped expectations both in center and periphery for the future course of universal history. Over the following centuries, the endurance and extent of the imperial state, a remarkable historical exception in its macro-region – as Walter Scheidel has recently prominently argued (*Escape from Rome: The Failure of Empire and the Road to Prosperity*, 2019) – forced continual reconsideration of the future of Rome.

These rethinkings are the subject of the volume under review, which stems from a 2013 conference held in Tel Aviv. The central focus of the collected chapters is historical and political thought under Roman rule, with some consideration of liturgical texts. Aside from a succinct introduction that sketches the outline of the volume, the essays can be divided into the four perspectives signaled by the subtitle. For the Romans, Carlos Lévy, Brian Breed, and Ayelet Lushkov in turn sketch the views of Cicero, Virgil (*Ecl.* 4), and Virgil (*Aen.*) and Ovid on urban and imperial change and persistence. In a stand-out fourth chapter of this section, Greg Woolf uncovers the temporal logics at work in the inscribed *Acta* of the Arval Brothers and the ritual practices that they record, arguing that the Arval priests both assumed future continuity (of empire and their ritual practices) and faced up to risky uncertainty (of divine favor and the safety

of imperial rulers). The Greeks under Roman rule get a single chapter of their own: Jonathan Price considers the idea of a succession of five world empires in Polybius, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, and Appian.

The following five chapters consider Jewish materials. Katell Berthelot reads across the writings of Philo to excavate his implicit theology of history, while both Samuele Rocca and Jonathan Davies consider Josephus' explicit (Rocca) and implicit (Davies) views on God's role in history. Rocca covers ground that will be familiar to students of Josephus; Davies more innovatively close reads the narrative construction of the rise and fall of Caligula in the eighteenth and nineteenth books of the *Antiquitates judaicae* to reveal Josephus' historical consciousness. If Philo and Josephus, as authors in a traditional sense, are relatively stable targets for analysis, the rabbinic and liturgical corpora and the composite Sibylline Oracles, the subjects of chapters by Vered Noam and Erich Gruen, are more elusive (disclosure: Erich Gruen is an emeritus colleague of the reviewer). These texts combine traditional materials (especially the Hebrew Bible) with changing perceptions of Roman imperial power to develop varied ideas about the ultimate course of divine redemption. The fourth set of essays cover Christian texts: Peter Oakes discusses *Revelation* 17:1–19:10, Marko Marinčič considers the exegesis of *Eclogue* 4 that is found in the Emperor Constantine's *Oration to the Assembly of Saints*, and Hervé Inglebert rapidly surveys ideas about the Roman empire and the end of the world in fifth-century Latin literature.

The editors have provided a valuable service by collecting and curating these essays to provide an aggregate panorama of political and historical thought under Roman empire, with particular concern for the role of philosophy and religion in shaping ideas about the future of Rome. Beyond the very well-informed discussions of particular texts or sets of historical evidence, readers of the volume as a whole are presented with useful and impressive overviews of how particular groups within the empire varied between and among themselves about the future of their state. Despite the now-commonplace calls for studies of antiquity that go beyond the "classical" pair of Greece and Rome, such broader perspectives and scholarly collaborations are still rare (or amount to a token essay in such a collected volume).

This catholicity pays off; for readers who do read across the chapters, some clear patterns become visible. The authors and traditions covered in the volume emerge as *bricoleurs*, consistently improvising new accounts of the place of Rome in universal history from older materials (the prophetic texts of the Hebrew Bible, classical Greek philosophy, and Hellenistic literary forms are all prominent) in ever-changing political contexts. Another prominent theme is the person of the emperor: even in the work of Cicero and in the triumviral *Eclogue 4*, the character and fate of the ruler dominates thinking about the empire and its history. The monarchic motif appears in highly varied forms: for instance, we can compare the sacrifices and vows of the Arval Brothers dedicated to securing the emperor's future safety, Josephus' use of the death of Caligula to demonstrate the agency of God in history, the various roles played by the Sibylline version of Nero, and Constantine's self-representation as a new Augustus, anticipated by *Eclogue 4*. By contrast, it was striking to this reviewer that the city of Rome was not so prominent in the futures covered in this volume. Despite stereotypes of the "eternal city", the urban future of Rome appears only intermittently in the pages of this book; according to Inglebert, even the fifth-century sacks of Rome – one of them is depicted on the cover – did not affect historical and political discourses more than temporarily.

As will be clear, readers who come to this volume for studies of temporality or futurity as such, perhaps attracted by the title, will mostly be disappointed. With the signal exception of the chapter by Woolf, these essays largely concentrate on élite or sometimes sub-élite political thought. This means that the broader temporal experience of the inhabitants of the Roman world is missing from these pages. In a provocative recent essay in this journal that discusses military planning and financial calculation, Brent Shaw has suggested that a singular autonomous future was absent from Roman culture (*JRS* 109 (2019) 1–26; not cited in this volume); whether this claim is true or not, Shaw points the way to another path of investigation: might we look now for lived Roman futures and not just for the historical and political future of Rome?

DUNCAN E. MACRAE

University of California, Berkeley

duncanmacrae@berkeley.edu