

Michele Renee Salzman, Marvina A. Sweeney & William Adler (eds.),
The Cambridge History of Religions in the Ancient World (2 vols.)
(New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013) | 1

However variously and perhaps even ambiguously understood the term “religion” may be, all ancient civilisations inhabiting the lands surrounding, or surrounded by, the Mediterranean Sea have left ample material and textual evidence of their widespread and regular acknowledgment of the supernatural as a dimension of individual and collective existence, the personal and social need for relating to it in structured meaningful ways, and the articulation of these relations to the supernatural within the wider socio-political, economic, cultural and artistic contexts. The two-volume publication hereby reviewed charts and discusses recurrent religious phenomena (e.g. ritual worship, erection of temples and shrines, priesthood, etc.) in the ancient world, organised by geographic region and time period.

Specifically, volume one covers the period that goes from the 3rd millennium BCE to the reign of Alexander the Great (336-323 BCE), whilst volume two engages with the one stretching from the Hellenistic age to late Roman antiquity (up to about the conventional date of 476 CE, i.e. the year in which the alleged last western Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus was deposed by the Germanic chieftain Odoacer). Each volume contains essays divided geographically: their parts I dealing with Mesopotamia, the Iranian plateau and the south-eastern region of the Near East; parts II with North Africa, most notably Egypt; parts III with the Greek peninsula and Asia Minor; parts IV with central and western Europe, most notably the Italian peninsula, where the Etruscan and Roman civilisation flourished.

Given the great disparity of sources, times, technologies, economies, languages and circumstances of the many civilisations discussed in the two volumes, the essays differ considerably in specific focus and overall character. Still, some features are fairly prominent and common to most, if not all the thirty-three essays (fourteen in volume one, nineteen in volume two). To begin with, the contributors seem deeply aware of the distorting power of modern theories and earlier Euro-Christian conceptions vis-à-vis our comprehension of past cultures and peoples, hence they often spend some time establishing, defining and discussing the key-terms that they employ, some of which have been notoriously thorny in scholarly debates (e.g. “syncretism”, “paganism”, “polytheism”, “Hellene”). Secondly, ancient deities and the ritual and/or mythological depictions thereof constitute a major focus point in the contributions to the book. Also, these depictions of deities are analysed and interpreted by the authors within the broader socio-political contexts in which they emerged and manifested themselves, with special emphasis placed upon their function in giving

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shape to civic identities (the so-called “polis-religion model”), their geographically specific modulations and the gender roles that they fostered. Mutual influences, cultural commixtions and changes through time are also highlighted in the authors’ approach to the ancients’ understanding of their deities, whether there are textual sources available or not.

The essays published in the two volumes and authored by well-established specialists from three different continents are too many to be summarised here. Also, it would be unfair to single out some as superior to the others in scholarly excellence, given the conspicuous value of all contributions, which convey in a concise yet comprehensive way truly clear pictures of what we know today about ancient religions in very different settings—this knowledge being inevitably uneven, given the remoteness in time of the studied civilisations and the remarkably diverse basis of evidence available to the academic inquirer. Therefore, I shall limit myself to highlighting Ian Rutherford’s “Mycenaean Religion” (vol. I, pp. 256-79) and William Van Andringa’s “Religions and Cities in Roman Gaul (First to Fourth Centuries CE)” (vol. II, pp. 446-83) as two notable examples, respectively, of effective succinctness in exposition accompanied by a thoroughly organised critical-bibliographic apparatus, and of insightful combination of textual and pictorial material in the presentation of the author’s analyses.

The book is praiseworthy for the high scholarly quality of the essays that it comprises, many of which include tables, maps, figures and vast bibliographies extending beyond sheer cited references, suggesting as well further readings on specific subjects that may interest the reader. If anything negative can be stated about it, it is the book’s prohibitive price, which is bound to make these two volumes into an elite publication for well-funded public libraries, select research centres and affluent committed specialists. University students and young researchers in divinity, archaeology, ancient history or classics are hardly likely to be among the book’s purchasers.