Alessandro Esposito. 2019. Performing the Sacra: priestly roles and their organisation in Roman Britain. Archaeopress Roman Archaeology 53. Oxford.

Priests can be difficult to see in the Roman provinces. A crucial part of Roman civic life, examples both of cultural exchange and imperial dominion, they formed an essential strand in the fabric of ancient political life. They are most visible in and around the city of Rome, but for the provinces the image is rather different. We know that they were there, with sporadic written references to them (in particular epigraphic remains), but this allows only for a muted and sporadic sense of who and what they were. Allessandra Esposito’s study of priests in Britain is then a necessary and important endeavour. The book recognises the many issues facing a study of priests in the provinces, and shines a useful light on what we can know from the archaeological remains. There is an awareness of the limitations to this field of research, but Esposito should be commended for engaging so well with the many different types of finds available, and providing a coherent organisation of each.

There are issues here. The first, a somewhat minor one, but one that becomes increasingly distracting, is the level of editing and clarity of prose. Esposito is a fluent writer, and a careful interpreter of the historical past, but the book would have benefited from a much more rigorous editing stage, to remove unclear aspects of prose, typographical errors, and help shorten each section. The book takes a little too long to reach the central thrust of research and analysis. The second concern, is that although useful research questions are being asked of the evidence, there is a lack here of a consistent and effective argument. This is a shame as the points being made throughout are well reasoned and demonstrate a depth of understanding and a willingness to look again at familiar but complex patterns of evidence. The book needed a stronger sense of Esposito’s voice, and a greater willingness to provide a coherent and guiding argument, to bring the various strands together.

The book is divided between seven chapters, with two appendices, and an extensive bibliography. The first chapter (1-19) provides a good introduction to the topic, working through a variety of different approaches and scholarly perspectives regarding priests in the Roman empire and the provinces. Although rather more needed to be made of classical ethnography and its role in shaping Roman historical writings, Esposito summarises the historiography very well. This is an impressive opening, and one that demonstrates a deep understanding of the shifts in scholarly readings of priests, empire and Roman religion. The strongest element here is where Esposito considers epigraphy, iconography and the methods of discovery (12-16). When looking at literary sources (9-12), each source chosen would have benefitted from being placed more firmly in the intellectual milieu of Roman politics and society, in particular Cassius Dio. The research questions provided give a useful structure to the book, and each is an important question in its own right, in particular 1.6.3 ‘What information do the different depositional contexts offer about priestly activities?’ (17). The second chapter is short and in truth unnecessary (20-29). Although methodology is important, this needed to be incorporated more carefully into the opening chapter, and provides a superfluous juncture it what is otherwise a promising opening.

The next two chapters work best when read together, looking first at the material evidence for priestly regalia (30-65), before then considering the context and distribution of these artefacts (66-98). These are the strongest chapters in the volume, and although there is still a lack of a consistent argument, the items are well discussed and analysed. Esposito begins by looking at headdresses, chain headdresses, crowns and diadems (30-36). While his section is broadly descriptive in tone, it forces the reader to recognise the diversity of finds, and how difficult it can be to fully interpret them. The discussion of sceptres is more nuanced, and here the sceptre heads are analysed with great care and precision, drawing upon aspects of Roman religion, as well as zoomorphic imagery, imperial iconography and the bindings and component parts of the sceptres (36-52). The closing pages of this chapter, where the evidence is discussed, provides a number of useful observations but needed a tighter structure and more rigorous sense of argument. The points made are compelling but needed to be developed in a slightly more sophisticated manner. The fourth chapter looks to the ways in which these artefacts were discovered, and this is a persuasive and eloquent summary of the finds and how they may have been originally deposited (which of course must allow for different insights into the regalia, their sue, and change over time). This is a comprehensive and in parts persuasive discussion, in particular when thinking about the geographical distribution (95-98)

The two penultimate chapters look at iconography and epigraphy (99-109; 110-128). Both are useful but both would have benefitted from a stronger engagement with the other types of evidence, and how they can work closely together. There are some excellent points made here, especially when Esposito looks at the inscriptions (esp. 113-125). These isolated engravings can of course be rather difficult to analyse; in particular when thinking about what they could mean for religious activities across Britain. The comments about the potential haruspex are particularly enlightening, and point to a number of possible realities (114-115), and the exploration the *seviri* in York is convincing. The conclusion (129-134) offered provides a summary of the preceding chapters, and answers those questions found in the opening. The two appendices are very useful for students looking at this period, with a collection of primary sources and a database.

To close, this is a book that asks useful questions of Roman Britain and the evidence we have for priestly activity. Esposito provides careful analysis of the archaeological finds, and it is here where the book and the analysis are strongest. Greater cross-comparison would have helped support some of the points made, but the central issue here is that Esposito’s argument comes through only intermittently, and thus do not lend itself to as coherent and persuasive perspective. This is a book that reflects excellent industry and close scrutiny of the evidence, and one that will be useful for those looking at the provinces and thinking about the practice of Roman religion.

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