

Review

ASHLEIGH GREEN, *BIRDS IN ROMAN LIFE AND MYTH* (Global Perspectives on Ancient Mediterranean Archaeology 1). London and New York: Routledge, 2023. Pp. xix + 227, illus. ISBN 9781032162867. £120.00.

The aims of this study, the first in the series ‘Global Perspectives on Ancient Mediterranean Archaeology’, are appropriately ambitious: ‘[to place] birds at the centre of the grand narrative that is the fall of the Republic and the rise of the Empire’, to incorporate the evidence of zooarchaeology and practical ornithology into the study of birds in Rome, and to understand how birds were used to communicate ideas, values and social differences. The latter of these aims is certainly achieved, Green demonstrating that birds functioned as a marker of social status in Roman society, but as is perhaps inevitable in a short book, the former two prove more difficult to execute.

The book begins with an examination of birds in religious and political life through an analysis of the peculiarly Roman practice of augury: the first chapter introduces the concepts governing augury and the interpretation of wild birds such as the vulture, eagle, raven and owl, while the second focuses on the chicken as an augural bird, examining the ritual of the *tripudium*. Though some of the initial discussion is quite general, these chapters succeed in demonstrating the significance of birds to Roman political life, and Augustus’ particular engagement with the sacred chickens as a means of legitimising his rule. After this, however, the chapter topics become much broader, examining the exploitation of birds in Roman society through farming, fowling and entertainment. These chapters sit firmly in the tradition of literary- and art-based studies, compiling the evidence relating to individual bird species: chickens, geese, ducks, pigeons and other fowl are discussed under farming; hawks, falcons, cranes and storks, plus the flamingo and ostrich, under fowling; the jay, parrot, dove, jackdaw and sparrow under pets. The assignment of species to particular topics seems somewhat arbitrary, with several species (chickens, peafowl and pigeons) discussed multiple times.

G. argues convincingly in her introduction for a multi-disciplinary study of birds in ancient life, and her claim that understanding birds’ behaviour will offer a more accurate understanding of Roman practices is well illustrated by a compelling discussion of the identification of the Roman *pica* as the jay rather than the magpie. But the approach is not systematically applied in the treatment of other species, and it is noteworthy that the illustrations include no images of living birds, only Roman (and in some cases Greek) representations. The same is true of zooarchaeological evidence: G. incorporates some illuminating studies, for example on evidence for the consumption of thrushes at Pollentia in modern Mallorca and on chicken remains in Britain as an indication of romanisation, but the effort is piecemeal, and at certain points where the zooarchaeology conflicts with literary texts, for example on the lack of peafowl remains across the Italian peninsula, it is rather too easily dismissed.

The above examples also illustrate the underlying difficulty of mapping archaeological evidence, which is highly site-specific and often broad in chronological span, onto a narrow period of classical history: the zooarchaeological studies cited range widely across the Roman empire and into the post-Roman period, despite the book’s stated focus on the Italian peninsula from 100 B.C. to A.D. 100. The use of evidence from other periods and cultures becomes particularly marked in the later chapters: G. includes texts from Homer, Aeschylus, Aristophanes and Xenophon beside those of Palladius, Prudentius and the *Historia Augusta*, without an explanation of their relevance to the late Republic/early Empire. The illustrations are similarly decontextualised: the fifth-century B.C. grave stele depicting a girl with doves creeps in without explanation, as do several Etruscan tomb-paintings from the same period. It is also surprising to see the Nilotic mosaic from the House of the Faun at Pompeii presented as a reflection of the Italian countryside. Such a ‘kitchen sink’ approach inevitably makes it more difficult to see what is uniquely Roman about the attitudes discussed.

The book certainly offers an exhaustive gathering of evidence on birds in different aspects of Roman life, though (despite the title, ‘a nod to Pollard’s *Birds in Greek Life and Myth*’) some may be disappointed to find very little on birds in mythology. The first two chapters offer an innovative perspective on the role of birds in Roman politics, but the overall conclusions call for

further examination: it may be true that birds were used as an expression of social status, but does this make them in any way different to other forms of conspicuous consumption, whether art, building materials, fabrics or slaves? Can modern farmers really learn from Roman practices as described by Columella and Varro when the context of agriculture was so different? This study offers some valuable examples of what can be achieved by the integration of modern science with the ancient textual material; nevertheless, the breadth of evidence presented here makes it difficult to support the claim that birds were uniquely relevant to Roman culture.

University of St Andrews

sl50@st-andrews.ac.uk

doi:10.1017/S0075435824000054

SIAN LEWIS

© *The Author(s)*, 2024.

Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies.