

A. KEAVENEY and L. EARNSHAW-BROWN (EDS), *THE ITALIANS ON THE LAND: CHANGING PERSPECTIVES ON REPUBLICAN ITALY THEN AND NOW*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. Pp. xv + 143. ISBN 9781443811293. £34.99.

Republican Italy has always been the subject of important and lively debates that have frequently cut across archaeology and history. Recent years especially have witnessed a marked upsurge in interest as fresh insights on the subject have prompted a serious reconsideration of several long-held assumptions (e.g. about the Gracchan reforms, the ‘villa economy’, and Roman demographic patterns). Perspectives are indeed changing and even traditional evidence seems to yield different interpretations once it is subjected to these new approaches. This volume collects seven (out of ten) papers that were originally presented at a conference by the same title held at the University of Kent on 11–12 October 2008, plus another one not delivered then (Anderson). As the Editors explain in the Foreword ‘this was a conference where different viewpoints and methods might be expounded and subjected to informed discussion’ (ix).

The opening paper by Arthur Keaveney (1–9) provides some reflections on the possible relationship between the annual nature of Roman magistracies and the inability of political leaders to pursue a long-term policy of constitutional reform: only moderate changes would have been possible as the main actors driving them were irremediably bound by a short-term perspective. Political initiative in response to changing external conditions is the subject of the analysis by Saskia Roselaar (11–29). By employing notions from the evolutionary theory of land rights she frames the juridical and historical evolution of the *ager publicus* on the background of the economic rise of Italy: as favourable market conditions prompted increased investment in agriculture, formal private rights on public land were being gradually introduced. The more specific policy of Caesar in the context of grain laws and land distribution is what Luca Fezzi (47–64) aims to address in his own contribution. By reviewing several laws proposed between 66 and 44 B.C., he contends that Caesar consistently favoured land laws against corn laws — although this argument does not emerge clearly from his own analysis. The participation of the Italian people in Roman politics is emphasized by William Rees (85–101), who identifies periodic markets (*nundinae*) as a possible forum for political discussion at the local level.

The actual nature of Italian agriculture is addressed by Annalisa Marzano (31–46) who engages with its allegedly extensive reliance on slave labour. By critically reviewing archaeological evidence for slave barracks (*ergastula*) in Roman villas and by looking at the actual increase of small farms (usually associated with a free peasantry), she argues for higher levels of free rural population than usually assumed, making demographic pressure a more fitting background for the Gracchan reforms. A similar line of argument is developed by Daniel Hoyer (65–84), who points to the economic co-existence of villas and farms in the territory of Cosa. He suggests that this could have been made possible by their lack of direct competition as they aimed to produce for either overseas export (villas) or the local urban market (farms). Roman views on agriculture are explored by Graham Anderson (107–21) who employs literary analysis to track down the specific attitude of individual authors. On the subject of demographic analysis, the closing paper by Louise Earnshaw-Brown (123–36) warns about the possible misuses of modern population statistics (Model Life Tables) as a form of comparative evidence.

As a whole — unfortunately — the volume does not work very well. The level and depth of analysis is markedly uneven throughout. Despite the Editors’ best intentions for it to be ‘an occasion to find out what others were doing and to learn from them’ (ix), there is very little cross-referencing across the papers — if any at all. Indeed, the editorial work has done little to make the volume more cohesive: the Introduction amounts to nothing more than a list of abstracts and even formatting is not consistent (Hoyer). In summary, this book harbours some interesting ideas and arguments (some admittedly better than others), but it is a curious case where the whole is ultimately less than the sum of its parts.

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