



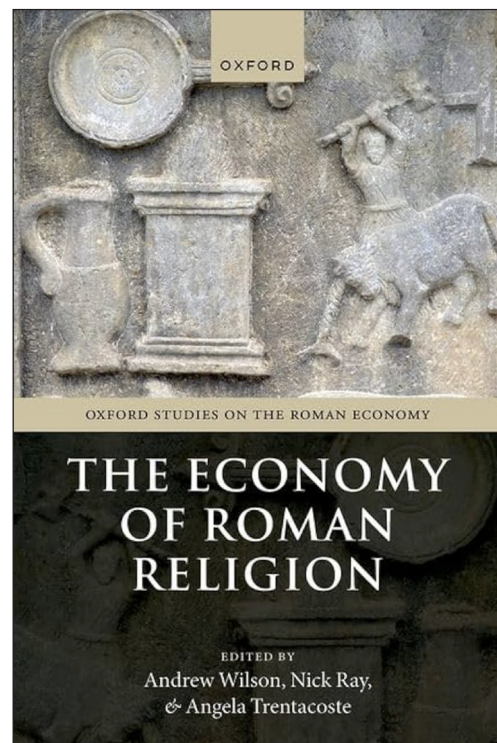
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## Book Reviews

Andrew Wilson, Nick Ray, and Angela Trentacoste (eds). 2023. *The Economy of Roman Religion* (Oxford Studies on the Roman Economy). Oxford: Oxford University Press; 978-0-1928-8353-7 hardback £83.

It's fair to say that the relationship between religion and economics is often fraught. Christianity—with its legacy of Jesus expelling the money changers from the temple and asserting that man cannot serve both God and mammon—has led to a culture in the modern west where faith and money are seen as polar opposites. When the two do mix, there is often controversy, as seen with the debate around churches and tax exemption in the United States. Nevertheless, religious institutions cannot operate without money, and it would be naive to think that they do not exist in the same economic climates as other organizations, or that those who run them are not influenced by economic thinking from outside.

What then, of the economics of Roman religion? As Wilson notes in his introductory chapter to the volume under review, this is not a question that has often been considered by either historians of Roman religion or of economics, but there has been movement recently. A special edition of the *Religion in the Roman Empire* journal is a notable comparison, especially because of the difference in approach (discussed below).



The volume under review derives from a conference held under the aegis of the Oxford Roman Economy Project in September 2016. All but one of the speakers has contributed a paper, with the absence covered by Jörg Rüpke, who adds a translated and updated version of a paper originally published in German in 1995.

From his introduction, Wilson is clear in emphasising that this should not be seen as a comprehensive handbook, but a range of perspectives on aspects of the topic, intended to stimulate further debate and discussion (p.16). This it amply achieves, covering both a breadth and depth of topics in which any interested scholar will find something of use. Chronologically, the volume mainly focuses on the imperial period, with the exception of Potts' chapter, which reveals the archaic foundations of many later Roman practices (Chapter 3). Geographically, there is a good balance between Rome and Italy on the one hand and the provinces on the other, with several chapters using case studies from beyond the imperial centre. King (Chapter 9) looks at sacred flocks in Britain and Gaul, Chaufray (Chapter 7) examines the finances of a single Egyptian temple and Horster (Chapter 6) draws widely from across the eastern Mediterranean. As such, archaeological, epigraphic, and papyrological evidence takes centre stage throughout, demonstrating the wide range of material available in exploring the ancient religious economy.

There are chapters here that would be excellent introductions to their subject for undergraduates, notably Wigg-Wolf (religious uses of coinage), Horster (the cult economy of the Greek East) and MacKinnon (practicalities of animal sacrifice). At the same time, chapters by Verboven (religious activity in *collegia*), Rüpke (budgets of state priesthoods), Domingo (cost of temple buildings) and García Morcillo (legal status of gifts to the gods) provide deep, technical analyses. For the needs of established scholars, these tightly focused chapters are more successful in demonstrating the value of an economic approach to studying religion. The picture that emerges from the whole volume is of considerable variety in the management and operation of religious institutions across the Empire, and this is revealed most effectively in those chapters that engage in close reading of a well-defined evidence base.

Despite the variety in evidence-types, chronology, and geography, key themes emerge across all the papers in the volume. The question of how temples, priests, and ritual activities were funded appears regularly, as does the engagement of temple authorities in broader economic activities, such as, for example, acting as tax collectors, banks, and markets. There are commonalities in the answers, drawn out by Woolf in his concluding chapter (Chapter 12). Temples across the Empire, from Britain to Egypt, secured income and produce from direct ownership of land and/or livestock, supplemented by entrance fees for new priests and euergetism from local elites. As recipients of gifts in coin and precious metals, temples removed wealth from circulation, often loaning it out again, stimulating local economies through investment.

Woolf recognises historical developments, arguing for a general trend towards Roman norms of management, i.e., a reduced influence of independent priests and an increase in municipal political control.

Given the venue for this review, I should comment on the theoretical content of the volume. Readers familiar with the landscape of Roman religious studies over the past decade may be surprised to see little recourse to the ‘lived ancient religion’ model in this volume. Individual experience has become the central focus of this field since the pioneering work of Rüpke and the Erfurt school, convincingly deconstructing the notion of ‘polis-religion’. However, with this volume we are firmly in that former space, with state control (either municipal or imperial) over religious practice and somewhat cursory attention paid to the participation of individuals, especially below the level of elites. Here we might make more of the comparison between the present volume and the *RRE* edition on ‘Lived Religion and the Economy’, which is more in tune with theoretical developments, not just in Roman religion, but in broader archaeological and historical studies. By engaging with lived experience, new materialism, and space theory, the papers in *RRE* present a rich, vibrant picture of ancient religion beyond state institutions and the activities of the elite. I offer this comparison not to suggest that either approach is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, and indeed there is immense value to be gained from considering the two volumes in parallel. Both larger-scale institutions and individual actors had important roles in the organisation and production of religion in the Roman world.

In summary, this is a thought-provoking book from an impressive line-up of scholars. It achieves its aim to investigate the meeting points between economics and religion, and will no doubt stimulate much further discussion and debate in both fields.

Stuart McKie

School of Arts & Humanities

The Open University, United Kingdom

[stuart.mckie@open.ac.uk](mailto:stuart.mckie@open.ac.uk)

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