

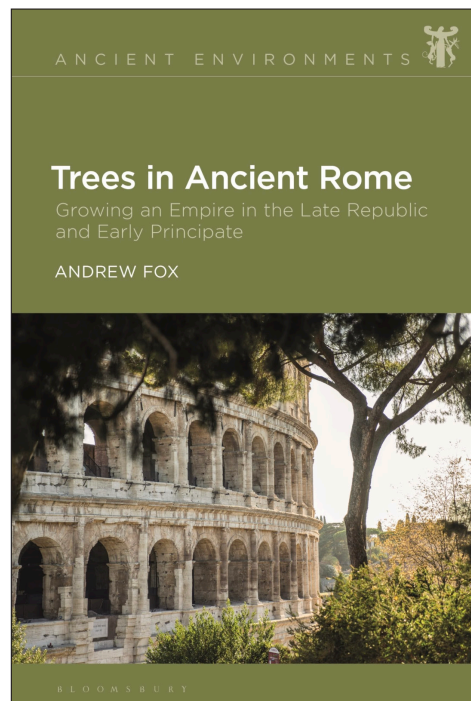
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Book Review

Fox, Andrew. 2023. *Trees in Ancient Rome: Growing an Empire in the Late Republic and Early Principate*. Ancient Environments. London: Bloomsbury; 978-1-3502-3780-3 hardback £85.

The topic of trees and forests has great relevance due to the role they have in environmental issues, and because of the need for greater protection of such important elements in our ecosystems. When analyzing a topic by understanding its origin, a greater knowledge can be achieved. Therefore, it is worthy to analyze the significance of trees and groves in ancient Roman society, which had a relevant role in the Euro-Mediterranean area.

The author addresses the topic with competence and depth over six chapters, providing a critical view of words and concepts, and making the treatise lively and brilliant. The text stimulates a critical reflection in the readers, as the proposed view is not always conventional, but it offers new points of view. It is also rich in historical references, and comments by previous scholars, mostly referring to the fundamental books in the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder, but also to other classics, such as Vergil, Varro, Livy, Vitruvius, Juvenal, Ovid, Columella, Tacitus, etc. This gives strength to the various concepts addressed. From a modern perspective, it may be surprising to consider vines as trees, despite the common



wooden structure, and to view the wood of a tree as still containing the essence of the originating species.

In Chapter 1, the author begins by discussing the introduction of trees in urban spaces. Subsequently, starting from the complex history of the Ruminant Fig, the author analyzes the role of trees in ancient society, such as their value in producing utilities, most importantly timber. In our contemporary society, we cannot fully imagine the fundamental importance that trees had in antiquity for building and shipbuilding, or their essential role in religious ideas. This section summarizes important points of view from previous scholars when approaching the theme of trees, with an evident awareness of the differences existing among the various species. Consequently, it is more than an introduction, but rather an occasion to broaden the focus providing the idea of the complexity of an apparently simple topic. The not negligible point of nomenclature and the need for a correct understanding of the names used to refer to a tree is also introduced well. Here, however, I cannot neglect the ambiguity and misunderstanding of the word *citrus*, which is widely used in the book, and needs to be related to cedars, avoiding confusions with agrums, as now they are called using this genus name.

The first section comprehensively describes memory and trees, analyzing both trees which were present at the time of the city's foundation and trees that were later introduced. The author also stresses the relevant role that trees had in the origin of the city settlement, since at that time different groves completely covered the landscape, and some neighbourhoods were named after their demolition. It is not surprising that the values of trees were connected to their provenance, age and the role of the people who planted them, but it is not commonly known that the role of trees in Evander's Rome can be derived by examining the Aeneid's wide use of the suffix *-etum*, which was used to denote a grove. As primary examples, the author gives relevance to the sacred laurel grove at the Villa of Livia in Prima Porta, and to the grove at the Camenae (the Muses) at Porta Capena, as the mythical meeting point between Numa and Egeria. Here, the author interestingly explores the messages given in the related communication, underlying their sacral and symbolic role and enhancing the role of monumental trees.

In a further part, the author also emphasizes the significance of bringing trees to Rome, as a 'totem of *luxuria*'. It is interesting, but also controversial, how the author views the *Natural History* as a struggle between 'utility and luxury', and the accumulation of knowledge in these books as 'an act of conquest in itself and an exertion of power over the natural world'. The author also comes back to concepts previously introduced, remembering Pliny's view when looking at utility, which can relate to trees' feeding potentials, or their provision of gifts such as timber, or also in giving shade. Such values indeed are only one part of their as later the author also recalls their symbolic

and religious values, as well as the air depurative action, which was also relevant in the urban context of ancient Rome.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the role of trees in triumphs, used in the processions as crowns, trophies and spoils. Thus, they could be considered, as like other elements, as a means of communicating control and conquest. The use of Roman leaders' interaction with nature, as a metaphor for their rule, is also well introduced, enhancing the Eastern origin of such an attitude, as well as other German traditions. The representation of trees in Trajanic triumphal architecture is documented with great attention.

Finally, the value of keeping trees in the city is also carefully analyzed, looking at the ways and the meaning of their incorporation into the monumental cityscape. The dual role of influencing and being influenced by factors in the urban space is shown, underlining their strictly symmetrical plantation within buildings, and showing the relevant role in emblematic place such as the Mausoleum of Augustus.

In conclusion, the reading of *Trees in Ancient Rome* is stimulating and extremely useful in this modern era of 'plant blindness', helping us to rediscover the great relevance of nature in the life and imagination of ancient people.

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