



Roman Working Lives and Urban Living by A. Macmahon; J. Price

Review by: Andrew Gardner

The Journal of Roman Studies, Vol. 96 (2006), pp. 233-234

Published by: [Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20430509>

Accessed: 13/11/2012 09:28

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A. MACMAHON and J. PRICE (EDS), *ROMAN WORKING LIVES AND URBAN LIVING*.
Oxford: Oxbow, 2005. Pp. viii + 224, illus. ISBN 1-8421-7186-0. £20.00.

The stated aim of this volume is to draw attention to the daily lives of the many artisans and craftspeople of the towns of the Roman Empire. The editors have indeed succeeded in marshalling papers which present a wide range of material relating to this topic, both archaeological and literary. However, the book is somewhat lacking in coherence, and in innovative approaches to the significance of these 'working lives' beyond mere descriptive elaboration. The absence of a full introductory chapter to highlight connections and themes in the papers is a significant factor in this, and the book is therefore more likely to be referred to for particular contributions than for significantly pushing forward a broad research area. Several of these contributions are individually important and interesting. The volume begins with a single-page introduction which simply outlines its origins, in a conference at Durham in 2001, and lists the papers. The first five of these are collected under the heading 'Urban Living and the Settings for Working Lives', dealing mainly

with spaces, while the remaining seven are categorized in terms of 'People at Work: Owners and Artisans, Crafts and Professions', and focus on artefacts and other evidence for particular activities.

To give a brief overview of the topics covered by these chapters, the first block of five cover urban boundaries (Esmonde Cleary), houses (Perring), and shops or workshops (DeLaine and two papers by MacMahon). The points of reference in these are most frequently taken from Britain or Italy, but the key issues raised across the group as a whole — the identification and meaning of particular kinds of space — are of course relevant across the Empire. The second part of the volume is more eclectic, and comprises contributions on the following: the organization of different industries in Pompeii (Robinson); trade along the Tiber (Graham); artisans and traders in London (Hall); pottery (Evans), glass (Price) and plants (Ciaraldi) as urban commodities; and the role of medical specialists in town life (Jackson). Britain and Italy are again the main sources of material, though some authors draw upon wider examples. Connections between these papers are a little harder to define than in the first section, though all make at least some effort to look at the working people behind the artefacts, and a number make good connections between different crafts or spheres of life. However, just as there is no real introduction, the book lacks any concluding discussion piece to pull these threads together.

The strengths of the volume are therefore to be found more in the detail than in the bigger picture. Some particular highlights include Esmonde Cleary's interesting examination of the ritual intertwining of space, time, and society in boundary-marking ceremonies in Britain, and Robinson's detailed study of the relationship between work and status in Pompeii. Price and Jackson both produce well-rounded accounts of the lives of glass-workers and healers, respectively, while Hall's survey of evidence for an enormous range of crafts across Roman London is very useful. Graham, Evans, and Ciaraldi all explore the important connections between towns and the surrounding landscape in quite different ways, while Perring, DeLaine, and MacMahon tackle aspects of the most ubiquitous structures in Roman towns — houses and shops — which add a range of different angles for consideration.

However, and as already noted, the volume as a whole is somewhat uninspiring. Any edited volume will, of course, contain variable emphasis on particular themes, but it is the job of the editors either to guide contributors in specific directions, or to overtly address the collection at key problems within the field. The absence of introductory or concluding discussion chapters means that this direction and focus is conspicuously lacking. There is, therefore, only rather sporadic attention to major issues like the nature of Roman towns, and to consideration of how terms like 'markets', 'trade', or 'retail' describe the social and economic relations between the people living in them. Our understanding of these people, who are the volume's major explicit concern, is also compromised by the rather descriptive approach of a number of the papers. Some fuller discussion of the relationship of occupational identities to others — and not just status, but also gender, ethnicity and so on — would have been welcome, as these are now major themes in Roman studies which connect it to other disciplines. Major areas of research in the sociology and anthropology of consumption and its relation to identity are, for example, almost entirely ignored. How the working lives of the Roman Empire contributed to the ongoing development and change of that empire is thus hard to discern from the detail, and their real significance — and interest, potentially, to those outside the discipline — has still to be effectively captured.

Institute of Archaeology, UCL

ANDREW GARDNER