



Robert Knapp. *Invisible Romans*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011. 400 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-06199-6.

Reviewed by Alison Jeppesen (Red Deer College)

Published on H-Albion (March, 2013)

Commissioned by Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth

Investigating the Mind-set of Ordinary Romans

What was life like in ancient Rome? For a slave in Rome, were the conditions horrific or tolerable? Did women yearn for a better life or were they satisfied with what society gave them? Julius Caesar and Cleopatra are well-known figures from antiquity but what about Marcus Volcius Euhemerus and Posilla Senenia? These two Romans, known only from their tombstone inscriptions, are examples of the 99.5 percent of Romans who lived below the level of the upper-class elite who are often associated with Rome. These are the “ordinary” Romans that Robert Knapp seeks to make visible to the modern reader (p. 3). What were their hopes and dreams? What were their fears? What did they think and believe, individually or as part of a group? What was their “mind world” (p. 105)? The difficulty of this type of project lies in finding a common mind world for such diverse groups as “the poor” and “women,” and one questions if these groups would have had the same overarching concerns.

Whether male or female, slave or free, poor or moderately wealthy, the lives of these people are difficult to recreate. In his efforts to make these Romans visible, Knapp combines a variety of sources for a nonspecialist audience. He brings together recent work and presents it in an accessible way. For a general reader, this work will be both inspiring and depressing as it breaks down the romanticized view of ancient life that has plagued the perception of ancient history and, instead, highlights the realities of life in the empire. For the student, this work provides an excellent overview of the ordinary with avenues for further investigation. Overall, Knapp succeeds in presenting a readable text with excellent illustrations and a very good list of further readings for each chapter (necessitated in part by the lack of footnotes, which, though adding to the readability for nonspecialists, will likely irritate anyone looking for the exact reference to an idea).

In nine chapters, Knapp discusses ordinary Romans:

men from the middle (not the poor and not the rulers), women, the poor, slaves, freedmen, soldiers, prostitutes, gladiators, bandits, and pirates. This is a daunting list of invisible people to make visible in some three hundred pages. There is bound to be overlap. Knapp makes clear distinctions between ordinary men and the absolute poor whom he defines as those with no “resource cushion,” but between ordinary women, the female poor, and prostitutes, there is definite repetition (p. 95). The four chapters separating the chapters on women (chapter 2) and prostitutes (chapter 7) seem like an odd delay (both male and female prostitutes are discussed in chapter 7 but as the focus is mostly on female prostitutes the two chapters might have been better placed together). Some readers may also take issue with Knapp’s terminology, as he casually switches between calling ancient sex-trade workers “prostitutes” and “whores.” Some discussion of the nuances of Latin terminology would have been beneficial for all readers as would some clarity between chlamydia and genital herpes, which he treats as the same sexually transmitted infection. Notably absent is a chapter devoted to children. Children appear in various chapters (on women, soldiers, and freed people) but there has been enough research done on children in Rome that a chapter bringing the evidence together would have been a welcome addition.

Where Knapp achieves his goal of presenting the mind-set of the ordinary Roman is in his portrayal of the drudgery of life in antiquity and the struggle for survival. Even a trip to the often glamorized baths might end poorly: the description of the putrid waters is bound to affect all readers as is the account of the young woman beaten at the baths in Egypt. The lives of women come across as particularly dismal. Certainly the slave collar found with a woman’s skeleton requiring the return of the “adulterous prostitute” indicates a horrid life, but the overall portrayal of women seems more negative than

other topics (p. 244). Interestingly, Knapp illustrates his points with multiple sources for other groups in the book. For women, however, the larger scale well-known monuments, such as Aurelia Philematium's epitaph, receive the greatest attention while elite women are seen as "ac-counterments" rather than "partners" (p. 96). Together, these two chapters would have benefited from additional context and greater nuance in assessing the evidence.

Knapp's use of ancient evidence is commendable. Throughout the book, he avoids the use of the usual suspects (e.g., Suetonius, Tacitus, and Cicero) and turns, instead, to the less usual: inscriptions; papyri; fables and proverbs; astrological works, such as the *Carmen Astrologicum* by Dorotheus of Sidon (a first-century astrologer) and the *Interpretation of Dreams* by Artemidorus (a second-century astrologer); and other nonelite sources, including the New Testament. Knapp argues that these works, since they were aimed at a wide audience of ordinary people, encompass the "actual concerns of real people" (p. 320). The variety of evidence used is good and illustrates how these materials can be used to

investigate what average Romans may have thought and felt, though the degree of common ground found in any one of these groups may be a topic of debate. More discussion of the temporal and cultural context is given in the sources section, but additional discussion would have been worthwhile in the main body as it can be confusing to the reader when various authors and their works are treated largely synchronically. Knapp is up-front about the "problematic insights" granted by some of his sources, but this comment appears at the end of the work and would have been useful at various points in the main text (p. 315).

Overall, however, Knapp has made visible the invisible by presenting the lives of everyday Romans. These are Romans who have more in common with us than the Caesars and Cleopatras of antiquity but have, until relatively recently, been less studied. Ordinary Romans, such as those presented in this work, will make Rome more real to modern readers, and Knapp's attempt to help these marginalized members of ancient society speak to us will benefit many.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Alison Jeppesen. Review of Knapp, Robert, *Invisible Romans*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. March, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=37416>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.