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Book Review

Stassi, Silvia. 2022. *Costruire, violare, placare: riti di fondazione, espiatione, dismissione tra fonti storiche e archeologia. Attestazioni a Roma e nel Latium Vetus dall'VIII a.C. al I sec. d.C.* Roma: Sapienza Università Editrice; 978-88-9377-250-1 ebook Open Access.

The study of ancient ritual practices presents considerable challenges, as direct observation or interviews are not possible, and indirect sources often lack sufficient detail. While it is possible to identify their material remains to some extent, the difficulties increase considerably when dealing with the immaterial dimension of rituals: gestures that have left no material traces, the religious beliefs that inspired them, as well as their meaning, can only be partially reconstructed from textual and/or iconographic sources and require a multidisciplinary approach. Consequently, a rigorous methodology is essential, as is establishing a dialogue between different disciplines. Silvia Stassi's book, the published version of her doctoral dissertation, exemplifies this approach. The three infinitives in the title, *Costruire, violare, placare* (or, to build, to violate, to appease), are carefully chosen to reflect the thematic focus of



the study: ritual practices associated with building activities, analysed on the basis of historical and archaeological evidence in Rome and its surroundings, from the eighth century BC to the first century AD.

The introduction (Chapter 1) outlines the research focus and delineates the historical and geographical framework of the study. Stassi's focus on a limited geographical area balances the broad chronological range, facilitating a more historically grounded perspective on Roman religion. Her main research objectives are to identify patterns in content and location of the ritual deposits, to explore the relationship between these deposits and the types of buildings they are associated with, and to develop a systematic methodology for data collection and analysis, with specific regard to a precise cultural context: Rome and Latium Vetus.

Chapter 2 presents a concise yet comprehensive literature review. Stassi traces the development of research on rituals related construction, from its roots in the history of religions and anthropology to its later expansion within archaeology: more specifically, she discusses classifications of sacrificial practices as well as the roles of human sacrifice and ritual killing. She additionally surveys archaeological scholarship on the topic, noting advancements in certain areas, such as the ancient Near East, or in relation to periods, such as the Bronze and Iron Ages, compared to classical archaeology, where sustained interest has emerged only since the 1980s (p. 32–36). The concluding paragraphs analyse both modern and ancient definitions, including the term *piaculum*. Though brief, this section lays the conceptual groundwork for Chapter 3, which analyses ancient literary and iconographic evidence. Organized into two sections, Greek and Roman, this chapter examines ritual practices related to the foundation of cities, the construction of city walls and public buildings (with a specific section on the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome), and the dedication of statues and *cippi*.

In Chapter 4, Stassi analyses the available archaeological data, appropriately underlining the difficulties of identifying material remains of ritual activity, due both to the limited data from excavations that occurred before the introduction of the stratigraphic method and to the inherent complexities of such analyses. Critically addressing the classification of certain deposits as ritual, the author proposes a set of indicators for identifying ritual activity (p. 110–112, Table 4.4). In the absence of universal criteria, such parameters are generally established at the regional level; Charlotte Potts (2011: 19–20) recently identified parameters for archaic central Italy. The author, for her part, recognises intentionality and non-reversibility as essential criteria for identifying ritual activity and emphasizes the primacy of material evidence in context over typological features (Table 4.5), arguing that identifying an archaeological context as ritual requires the verification of intersecting factors (p. 99–104).

Recent scholarship on Roman religion has placed increasing emphasis on material evidence (Szabó 2018; Moser 2019), with the notion of materiality likewise gaining prominence in the broader field of ancient religion (Raja and Rupke 2015; Morgan 2016). While conducting a detailed analysis of written and iconographic sources, Stassi places material evidence at the centre of her investigation, organizing it into a coherent and well-structured two-tiered catalogue: Topographic Units (UT), referring to buildings or structures identified by a progressive number (ID), and Archaeological Units (UA), corresponding to the deposits associated with them. Each UT includes identification, localization, bibliographic references, and descriptive data, while each UA contains information on chronology and moment of the deposition, planimetric-stratigraphic data, modalities of deposition, description, ritual indicators, interpretations and observations. A total of 34 UTs were identified: 26 in Rome, with 48 UAs catalogued in detail, and 8 in nearby cities, Gabii, Lavinium, Ardea, Lanuvium, Praeneste and Satricum, with 11 UAs briefly described.

While the absence of a distribution map of the deposits, especially for Rome, cannot be overlooked, the schematic organization of Chapter 5 enhances data accessibility. It begins with a chronological classification (Tables 5.1–6), followed by an interpretation organized in four paragraphs: locations, categories of objects, recurring actions and circumstances/agents/divinities. In the last paragraph, Stassi (p. 348) emphasizes the limited insights provided by ancient sources regarding construction-related rituals, attributing this scarcity primarily to their secretive nature. While this explanation is plausible, it is important to recognize that Greco-Roman sources often emphasize customary rituals, such as sacrifice (Ekroth 2014), over occasional practices (see Timpano 2024).

In her conclusion (Chapter 6), Stassi emphasizes the importance of a contextual approach that integrates multiple indicators, rather than relying on a single indicator such as stratigraphic data. In highlighting the distinctive features of Roman/Latinal deposits, she identifies the burial of sacred objects, remains of sacrifices and discarded building materials as a common form of ritual disposal within the region. Finally, she suggests that expanding the geographical context and typology of Topographical Units to include private buildings would constitute a valuable direction for future research.

Two further chapters are separated from the main text. Chapter 7 features a series of tables that enhance the accessibility of the extensive dataset. Chapter 8 includes site plans and sections of buildings and structures, as well as photographs and drawings of artefacts, along with several images of deposits in situ. The volume concludes with an appendix of ancient texts.

Stassi's volume constitutes the first systematic investigation of construction-related rituals in Rome and Latium Vetus between the Orientalizing period and the early Imperial period. The reconsideration of socio-anthropological perspectives and the integration of rigorously re-examined archaeological material with evidence drawn from ancient sources significantly enhances the depth of Stassi's study. Arguably, the most distinctive aspect of the work lies in its capacity to establish a meaningful dialogue between diverse sources and disciplines. The study successfully fulfils its objectives: to identify patterns in the content and distribution of deposits, to assess their relationship with the types of buildings they are associated with, and to develop a systematic methodology for the socio-cultural context of Rome and Latium Vetus. Its originality, combined with a clearly defined methodology, establishes it as an essential resource for future research on the material dimension of ancient Roman religion, an increasingly prominent subject across various disciplines.

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