
Book Reviews

Istvánovits, Eszter, and Valéria Kulcsár. *Sarmatians – History and Archaeology of a Forgotten People*. Mainz: Römisch-Germanisches Zentralmuseum, 2017. 501 pp, 329 ill. 978-3884672372. €90.

“Ethnic discourse” has frequently constituted a divisive element in the study of Late Antiquity, surpassing even the debates surrounding the “fall of Rome.” This book proves that close attention to groups of ancient people can also do the opposite: Istvánovits and Kulcsár forge connections among diverse geographic and temporal fields of research through their search for the Sarmatians.

The reader should note that the volume seeks actual Sarmatians insofar as archaeology can locate and describe them, not the Sarmatian as concept or literary phenomenon. Out of the many kinds of books about “barbarians,” the authors have crafted a kind of field guide to their subject as an elusive but important species, and the result is akin to a guided tour through an incredibly thorough and extensively illustrated museum of the Sarmatian. Istvánovits and Kulcsár begin with careful attention to the geography of the plains inhabited by the Sarmatians, stretching from Inner Asia at the junction of modern Russia, Mongolia, and China to the Carpathian Basin in Europe. The introduction to the steppes will be particularly valuable to late antique historians trained in the mindset of the Mediterranean; the delineation of the variety among different rivers, open land, and deserts reveals another ancient world that is often overlooked or condensed into a stereotype. The authors then trace the origins of the Sarmatians back to the Scythians and follow the Sarmatian expansion toward Europe, first around the Black Sea and then along the lower Danube and the modern Hungarian Plain. The latter half of the volume leans upon Roman history to provide its chronology, with sections devoted to the Sarmatians and the Dacian Wars, the Marcomannic-Sarmatian Wars, the effects of the Roman evacuation of the province of Dacia, the policies of Diocletian and Constantine, and the arrival of the Huns. This structure allows the reader to

readily consult the book for an alternative perspective on events best known from the late Roman side, e.g., the “Sarmatian civil war” that occurred during Constantine’s offensive against the Goths. The volume concludes by considering several afterlives of the Sarmatians, including the survival of the Alans, a group related to the Sarmatians; the persistence of Sarmatian culture through the medieval Hungarian conquest; and “Sarmatism,” the cult of assumed Sarmatian descent among noblemen in Poland.

Istvánovits and Kulcsár succeed in assembling a deeper story of the Sarmatians, giving this group a collective biography beyond their usual status as a barbarian enemy of the year on imperial victory inscriptions. A major strength of the book is its command of more than a century of scholarly literature, including the extensive Russian historiography of the Sarmatians that is unfamiliar to many American and European scholars. Making this research accessible to an Anglophone audience is a praiseworthy accomplishment in itself. Furthermore, the authors do not confine their historiographical insights to footnotes or the expansive bibliography; the chapters include charts that summarize the contrasts within important scholarly debates and classifications of artifacts. Students and non-archaeologists will applaud these helpful visual explanations of complex matters. As noted above, the volume interweaves its explanations with carefully chosen images. Almost every significant detail is illustrated, and often in color, with maps, photographs, and artists’ reconstructions. This exploration of what the authors call the unexpectedly colorful “ethnic tapestry” of the plains is thus comprehensively annotated and visually impressive.

To address the limitations of settlement archaeology, the authors enlist literary, epigraphic, and numismatic sources to develop the account of the Sarmatians that emerges from excavations, and here the late antique historian may notice some weaknesses in their approach. Excerpts from ancient authors sometimes lack important context, e.g., when Zosimus appears as a source for the reign of Constantine without mention of that historian’s own perspective or sources. The civil war setting for coins such as Constantine’s SARMATIA DEVICTA issue looms over their use as sources for Sarmatian history, as when Peter the Patrician claims in an anecdote omitted here that Licinius melted down Constantine’s coinage to suppress knowledge of his rival’s victory over the Sarmatians. While the book is at its best when archaeological finds such as legionary brick stamps can corroborate or correct chronological references or inferences from ancient authors, its extended quotations from historians such as Ammianus Marcellinus lack engagement with scholarly debates about purpose and credibility.

This book aims to be a comprehensive overview of the Sarmatians as a dynamic “conglomerate of peoples,” and its authors achieve their goal by finding continuity across millennia of history, thousands of miles of territory, and several shifts in material culture. Their generally judicious interpretation of archaeological evidence makes the case for the inclusion of the steppe and its inhabitants within the history of Late Antiquity. Along with books such as Hyun Jin Kim’s *The Huns, Rome and the Birth of Europe*, this book broadens our understanding of a wider late ancient world through the migration and settlement of peoples across Europe and Asia.

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Robert Chazan, *From Anti-Judaism to Anti-Semitism, Ancient and Medieval Christian Constructions of Jewish History*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 253 + xvi pp. ISBN 9781107152465. \$30.99 (paperback).

At the Council of Clermont in November 1095 Pope Urban II called the west to war. His speech was acerbic and vitriolic, religiously charged and filled with the alleged horrors suffered by Christians living in the east. It evoked in his audience a zeal and spirit that would be seen by later generations as the crusading ideal. However, it also exposed inherent political fragility, and deep seated racial biases, amongst elements of his audience, and upon those who took up the cross in the name of Christ. From April to July in 1096 the Ashkenazic Jews of Speyer, Worms and Mainz were targeted by elements of these Christian forces, facing either forced conversion or death. It is worryingly easy to see anti-Jewish sentiment in the central and later Middle Ages. But it is not enough simply to accept it, nor is it appropriate to simply see in medieval Christianity a consistent core of what would become anti-Semitism. The reality is of course much more complex and shifting than such a generalized image would dictate. Those in the People’s Crusade who attacked these Jewish communities were engaging with Christian rhetoric and teaching, but also were exposing inherent social and political fear and resentment. Those who were attacked turned to one another for help, but also looked to episcopal authority to curb the horrific violence of the armed pilgrims and the local townsfolk who stood with them.

A study that links the origins of anti-Jewish Christian sentiment to the manifestation of anti-Semitism in the modern period is both welcome