Review Article

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Santangelo, F.

Finding its place among the growing list of recent titles on ancient divination, this work comprehensively highlights the key aspects of divination and prediction in the Roman Republic through to the early Principate. Santangelo (S.) sets out with the aim of exploring the interrelation of divination with politics and culture in the Roman Republic, including the developments in practice throughout the second and first centuries BC to the impact of the Augustan regime.¹ This is not limited to historical examples; valuable discussion of how these concepts are constructed in the literature is a significant component of his argument. True to his working hypothesis, that “divination must be studied in association with the broader problem of how prediction was culturally constructed” (p. 6), S. explores the reactions to and redefinitions of prediction as a ‘successful’ and ‘diverse’ practice throughout the final two centuries of the Roman Republic.

The book is divided into twelve chapters of varying length with frequent sub-headings, plus an introduction, afterword, appendix and concise glossary of key Latin terms. The chapters are arranged consecutively by theme, and

¹ All dates are BC unless otherwise stated.
with a rough adherence to chronology overall. While the order is continuous, the chapters are well-defined and accessible as units in themselves for specific consultation: the expanse of material that S. covers encourages selective reading.

The introduction (“The power of signs”, pp. 1-9) opens with four late republican divinatory examples—the blowing of a trumpet in 88, a prodigy interpreted by the haruspices at the request of the Senate; a thunderbolt striking the Temple of Jupiter on the Alban Mount in 56, and the resultant actions of the quindecimuiiri sacris faciundis; the abandoned consular election of Dolabella in 44; and Augustus’ handling of the Sibylline Books—that highlight the main focuses of this book: “the plurality and diversity of the forms of divination that were available, on both the public and private levels, in late republican Rome; the tight integration of the political and religious dimensions; the political and intellectual issues raised by the control of the sources of divination in Rome and the competition for it” (p. 4). These examples are a reliable taster, and, significantly, they offer an accessible and practical starting point for the reader. A well-developed definition of divination in terms of communication between gods and men, and the position of religion within the Roman republican system follow. Nonetheless, for the reader less familiar with this field, the introduction would have benefited from brief discussion of the limitations and natural constraints on this area of research.

Chapter 1, “The De divinatione in context” (pp. 10-36), argues for a reassessment of Cicero’s treatise which takes into account not only its historical setting, but also its position as the second component of a trilogy with De natura deorum and De fato. S. acknowledges the numerous interpretative difficulties and demonstrates that the De divinatione provides useful evidence on religious practice and divination—or at least the political and intellectual discussions surrounding them—in late republican Rome. He concludes that Cicero intended to provide a comprehensive examination of a matter of public significance, divinatio, directly aimed at an elite audience and with a clear message that superstition must be overcome through attention to religio. While this is a logical starting point, as this dialogue is crucial to the overall argument, it is not until the end of Chapter 1 that S. makes clear how it fits within the wider context of the book. A sense of the overall argument is not provided at the outset, making it difficult for the reader to be aware of his ultimate purpose. It is not until p. 35 that S. lists a clear outline.

Chapter 2, “The terms of the debate” (pp. 37-68), examines the relevant terminology in republican sources with particular emphasis on first century authors, especially Cicero. S. draws out the dichotomy between the terms superstition and religio, and divinatio and prudentia, highlighting the differences in