Review of Pagan priests, edited by M. Beard

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Reviewed by T. Corey Brennan, Bryn Mawr College.

Five of the nine essays in this volume concern the Roman Republic and Empire. Pagan Priests opens with Mary Beard's "Priesthood in the Roman Republic", followed by John North's "Diviners and Divination in Rome" (also Republican in focus). Three pieces by Richard Gordon on Roman Imperial religion close the work: "From Republic to Principate: Priesthood, Religion and Ideology"; "The Veil of Power: Emperors, Sacrificers and Benefactors"; and "Religion in the Roman Empire: The Civic Compromise and its Limits". Classical Athens, Ptolemaic Memphis, the Babylonian priesthood and Mycenaean Pylos each receive one chapter, sandwiched between the Roman bits. (Several of these chapters are reviewed by my colleagues below.) The editors have written a programmatic Introduction to the volume as well as short prefaces to each essay. The strong emphasis on Rome in *Pagan Priests* is explained in part by the nature of our sources (cf. p. 18), but surely also by the interests of the editors, who have established (or are establishing) solid reputations in the field of Roman religion. The views of John North on Roman Republican religion can be read in Cambridge Ancient History2 VII Part 2 (1989), those of Mary Beard in CAH2 IX (forthcoming). Soon there will be a Beard, North and Simon Price co-production entitled Roman Religion (to be published by Cambridge University Press).

The editors state that these papers do not pretend to offer a complete general theory of "pagan" priesthood, but rather constitute "an attempt to seek out common characteristics of priests in [various societies in the ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern worlds] and so to gain a better understanding of the nature of pagan priesthood as a whole" (p. 1). In this *Pagan Priests* succeeds to a large extent. The essays amply demonstrate that "pagan" religious duties, though highly specialized, were not normally assigned to professional full-time practitioners; and that in these societies there was a substantial overlap between the spheres of religion and politics. Priests and politicians often shared offices, and their respective areas of authority are not readily apparent. One must at times search hard to find what is it that priests do within an ancient society that makes them priests; and that is what Beard, North et al. mainly do in this volume.

It is useful to have a book which draws together such diverse and difficult material and then tries to make sense of it. But *Pagan Priests* is not without its failings. I am not happy with the editors' principle of selection, which is enunciated in their title. It is of course wildly anachronistic to categorize civilizations such as the Mycenaens by the Christian concept "pagan". "Pagan" is a teleological term, and (to my mind) not a valid way of deciding which societies previous to the rise of Christianity should be included or excluded in what is essentially a comparative work on ancient priest-systems. Jewish priests get only one and a half pages of attention in this book (pp. 244f). The editors, notwithstanding their excusatio (p. 14), by failing to include a chapter on Judaism have taken the Jewish priesthood out of its actual context and (by implication) have placed it into a context to which it does not belong, making their book poorer in
the process.

This is just the beginning. Despite a substantial Introduction and nine prefaces, it is difficult to ascertain what audience this book intends to reach (the editors do not tell us). One would think a general audience, to judge from the inclusion in the book of two clear charts, Beard's "Simplified Guide to Roman Republican priests" (pp. 20-21), and Gordon's "Roman Calendar" (pp. 186-187). But even with these aids, those with little or no knowledge of the complexities of Roman political and religious life will find *Pagan Priests* tough going. Although Greek is transliterated and Greek and Latin are translated, technical terms are explained, and much recourse is made to "comparative" material (especially in the three Gordon chapters), the Roman portions of *Pagan Priests* are far too impressionistic and unsystematic to serve as a genuine introduction to that culture's "priests". On the other hand, the specialist in Roman history (not to mention Roman religion) will find the essays of Beard and Gordon irritating for their not infrequent disregard of akribeia, especially in cases when an effective "rhetorical" point might be made. This feature should clearly emerge from my comments below.

The most provocative Roman essay in *Pagan Priests* is probably Mary B[ead]'s "Priesthood in the Roman Republic", and to this I shall devote most of my attention. B. seeks to demonstrate that there was a complex diffusion of "priestly" responsibility in Rome, which mirrored the wide diffusion of power in the political system. Religious authority was spread within the remarkably diverse priestly organization as a whole; and (as is well known) the Roman magistrates, the People, and the Senate all had their powers in the sphere of religion. Priests such as the pontifices and augures had the requisite specialist knowledge, but in relation to the Senate (which made all the final decisions, in issues sacred and profane) were not perceived as powerful: religious authority had been diffused as widely as possible among the various priesthoods. The Senate's supremacy in religious matters thus could not be challenged by the priestly organization, and was never challenged by the People or the magistrates: "individual magistrates lacked the authoritative religious control of the Senate and also its permanent status: holding office for just one year at a time, they found a permanence of religious authority only through their shared membership of the Senate." Only with Augustus was official religious power clearly defined and located.

I am not entirely convinced by B.'s general picture, particularly as regards her hypothesis of the priests' lack of real power. It is true that Republican priests had no decision-making powers. In Livy, however, there are numerous instances of a group of priests advising such-and-such, and their advice obviously was implemented, with no mention of a senatus consultum: that a SC would be passed in accordance with their findings is taken for granted by Livy (or his source) (e.g. XXXI 12.9; XXXIV 55.3; XXXVI 37.4-6, etc.). (I should note that the Senate's disregard of the augurs' opinion regarding the leges Iulias in 57 B.C. -- Cic. Dom. 40 and discussed by North in pp. 52f. of this volume -- was quite antithetical to the practice of the classical res publica.) The "diversity" of Republican priesthoods increased, rather than diminished, the power of Republican priests.

I am still less impressed by some of the particulars of B.'s argument. For example, B. (on pp. 24-25) makes much of the restrictions imposed on the flamen Dialis which "made a concurrent political career practically impossible." She concludes "how, for example, could he fulfill the military obligations traditionally expected of a Roman magistrate, when the taboos of his priesthood prevented him from even seeing a force under arms?" But Beard neglects to mention that our best-known flamen Dialis, C.
Valerius Flaccus, as praetor in 183 was allotted the provincia peregrina, and was as such a potential military commander (she certainly knows of this man -- cf. p. 23). On the next page we are told that the salii "were allowed (but not forced) to give up their office if they obtained a major magistracy" (p. 24). Not so in the Republic: the point of the piece of evidence adduced by Beard for this statement (Val. Max. I 1.9) is simply that the magistrate in question had a vacatio from the duty (officium) of carrying the ancilia in procession by virtue of his praetorship. (That he did not have a vacatio from the priesthood is confirmed by Polybius XXI 13.12.)

Emphasis is placed throughout B.'s chapter on "the uncertainty of the grouping and hierarchizing of priesthoods" (p. 47; cf. her discussion at 44ff.). I agree that this is a real problem, and ancient views on priestly hierarchy must be treated with a great deal of caution (see E. Badian's remarks in PBSR 52 (1984) 57ff.). Yet it does seem that we have a few promising pieces of evidence, for example Festus s.v. ordo sacerdotum (198 L), which at least shows the ancient and ceremonial ordo, if not the hierarchy of actual priestly power, and the wellknown conflicts between the pontifex maximus and individual flamines recorded for the years 242, 189 and 131 (the principal sources being Livy XXXVII 51.1-2 and Cic. Phil. 11.18). It is unfortunate that none of these passages receives a mention in Pagan Priests. And I am puzzled why B. would assert that with Augustus (pontifex maximus starting in 12 B.C.) "for the first time priestly knowledge had been brought together with executive power" (p. 48). It might be inferred from this statement that in the Republic e.g. no pontifex maximus had ever reached the consulship (there were six such cases in the period 218-49). In particular, one might adduce M. Aemilius Lepidus, who while pontifex maximus was elected censor for 179, cos. II for 175, and was princeps senatus from 179 on. (For the extraordinary cumulation of political and religious power by the Aemilii in the middle Republic, see Muenzer, Roemische Adelsparteien, esp. pp. 170ff.)

B. is not at all convincing in her lengthy discussion of "mediation" between gods and men in Rome (pp. 28-34). Wissowa, in his Religion und Kultus der Roemer (1912), had shown conclusively that Roman priests did not act as the representatives of the gods on earth and were not defined as "mediators". B. uses Wissowa's finding as a point of departure for her own view: the Senate was "the body which formed the focus of communication between gods and men" (p. 33); "the Senate, not the 'priests', largely fulfilled that mediating function commonly regarded as distinctively priestly" (p. 34).

Here we see B. unfortunately imposing a modern concept on an ancient society which did not share all our categories. The business of priests in Republican Rome was to give advice on religious matters (especially to magistrates and the Senate); the business of the Republican Senate was to make decisions; the business of a higher magistrate was to implement those decisions si ei e republica fideque sua videretur (FIRA 2 32), thereby giving them the force of law. The Senate was not competent to judge on the facts of religious matters: how then can it be said to "mediate" between men and gods? B. (inter alia) argues that the Senate demonstrated its "control in defining the correct relations between gods and men" when it judged the validity of Clodius' dedication and consecration of Cicero's house in 57 B.C. (p. 32, esp. n. 38). In one of the passages B. cites (but does not quote) for her view, M. Lucullus (cos. 73 and a pontifex) is asked in the Senate whether Cicero's house could be restored to him, and he replies religionis iudices pontifices fuisse, legis [es]se senatum; se et collegas suos de religione statuisse, in senatu de lege staturos cum senatu (Cic. ad Att. 4.2.4). Jerzy Linderski has in fact given us a masterly exposition of this passage in his crucial article "The Augural Law": "the collegium pontificum had just passed the decree that Clodius' dedication and consecration of Cicero's house was invalid from the point of view of the pontifical law,
and that the house might be restored to Cicero without sacrilege (sine religione). Whether the house should be restored to Cicero was an altogether different question. It was a question of the law, and not of the religio. It was to be decided by the Senate, the judge of the law" (ANRW II 16.3 (1986) 2 161f). This passage (and Linderski's interpretation) must be faced squarely if one is going to talk about the Senate as a "mediating" body. Though several interesting problems are raised in B.'s other arguments for senatorial "mediation", particularly the irrelevancy of the taking of auspices for its meetings, her explanations do not convince. For B., the fact that the Senate did not meet auspico suggests that the Senate "could not be seen as in an improper relationship with the gods" (pp. 32f.). Perhaps in one of B.'s forthcoming works we will get a more systematic approach to this problem.

In a more satisfying essay, "Diviners and Divination at Rome", John N[orth] argues that in the Republic, priestly groups were always more concerned with the question of ritual action (as a means of averting danger) than the question of prophecy. N. complements B.'s arguments by focussing on the diversity of divinatory rituals in the Roman Republic, and emphasizes that these were widely disseminated amongst a number of priesthoods: the augures, the XVviri sacris faciundis and two separate groups both known as haruspices each had its own specialized fields of expertise. N. rightly stresses that Republican priestly bodies acted only in an advisory capacity to magistrates and the Senate. N. concludes in a most perceptive passage (p. 70) that "Roman divination ... is the expression in the religious sphere of some of the dominant characteristics of Roman republicanism: there is an avoidance of the concentration of too much power in any individual; a tendency for decisions and actions to operate through groups or through changing individuals; a reluctance to recognize the special or charismatic qualities of special human beings." This is a generalization worth remembering.

On to the Empire. The first of Richard G[ordon]'s three essays, "From Republic to Principate", is his least satisfactory. Here G. argues (if I understand him correctly) that the numerous epigraphic calendars surviving from the late Republic and early Empire are evidence for a social change. These calendars are not "due to a new interest in practical information" (p. 185), but rather should be seen as part of a conscious attempt by the ruling elite to institutionalize unintelligibility, "one which transformed an originally common cognitive project into an essentially arbitrary set of rules whose primary effect was to perpetuate elite control over the system" (p.191). There is a simpler explanation: starting with Sulla (the ludi victoriae Sullanae) and continuing with Caesar and Augustus, new holidays were foisted upon the calendar, and hence new calendars were needed. Moreover, it is entirely unclear what period of Roman history G. is thinking of when he speaks of "the development of literacy among the political elite of Rome" and "the growing significance of writing in Roman religion" (p. 191). If G. envisions this development occurring in the time of the Tarquins, I might be inclined to agree with him; but if he means the first century B.C. (as he seems to), his argument must be rejected out of hand.

Equally disappointing is the sub-chapter which follows the calendar section, "Religion and ideology". Here G. argues that following the Hannibalic War, the Romans' "uncontrolled imperialism" [sic] led to the development of "ideological representations whose function was to sublimate the interests of the dominant land-owning elite (above all as organized institutionally in the senate) into a justificatory set of ideals" (p. 192). (As evidence for this "ideological production" in the middle Republic G. points toward the late evidence of Horace's Roman Odes and Aeneid VIII!) G. also states that concomitant with the elites' drawing an ideological "veil" over their imperialism was a new insistence on their fixing (even in minute detail) the forms of religious practice. (I
personally do not see in the preservation of priestly carmina, etc. much more than the simple force of tradition at work here.) In this chapter there are a few simple yet consequential mistakes which should have caught the eye of the editors. Two examples: imperium is defined simply as "formal magisterial power" (p. 182; that is in fact a definition more appropriate to potestas); and "elections for priesthoods from 17 of the tribes under the Lex Labiena of 63 B.C. probably continued under Augustus" (p. 220; surely "by 17 of the tribes").

I am less competent to judge G.'s other two pieces in this volume, which treat aspects of Imperial religion, and thus I shall offer only short summaries. In his essay, "The Veil of Power", it is argued that in the Empire there was a fusion of the religious system with the socio-political system, best seen in the person of the emperor himself. G. is particularly impressed by the predominance of the Roman emperor in iconographic representations of sacrifice (examples are adduced from Augustus to Galerius). On the basis of these historical reliefs, G. contends that the emperor's role as sacrificer and his role as euergetes provided a model for the elite more generally, both in Rome and in the provinces. The emperor's euergetism was copied by local elite throughout the empire, and when exercised by these provincials served to naturalize the inequalities of the social system in each of their communities: their gifts served to objectify the power relations between them and their own social subordinates. G.'s third and last essay, "Religion in the Roman Empire", is concerned with the problems the Romans faced in attempting to impose on the varied communities of the empire their own religious organization. There is some tentative exploration of opposition or alternatives to the dominant religious system. G. claims that refusal of sacrifice (seen in Mithraic asceticism as well as Christianity) was the most uncompromising possible rejection of the Roman model of religion.

A few last points about Pagan Priests. I was amused by B. and G.'s use of the figura etymologica: "the pontifices provided precisely that link, a bridge between the central power of the senate and the individual citizens as they lived their lives." (B., p. 39); later we read that the pontiffs provide a "crucial bridge between the public world and the private world through their supervision of funerary and tomb law" (G., p. 181). I am glad that neither of these statements is actually offered as an etymology for pontifex (literally,"bridge builder"). I think that the Romans' original reason for the designation (whatever it was) cannot have been to denote a builder of a metaphorical bridge. Pagan Priests has an Index, but it is haphazard. Most -- but not all -- Roman names are listed (unfortunately) by cognomina; and there are more references in the text to e.g. C. Iulius Caesar than the Index would reveal. There are thirty-odd photos and illustrations, mostly good.

T. Corey Brennan

Pagan Priests, Chapter 3: "Priests and Power in Classical Athens," by Robert Garland. The concerns of this brief (seventeen pages) chapter are much broader and more general than its title suggests. Those expecting detailed analysis of the role of the hiereus/-eia in Athenian life (hardly an unreasonable expectation in consulting a book titled Pagan Priests) will be disappointed to discover a scant four pages devoted to this topic, necessarily providing scope for no more than a cursory summary of the most conspicuous basic features of the Greek priesthood ("gentile"/clan-determined side-by-side with "democratic"/lot-determined offices, life-time side-by-side with annual tenures, limitation of hieratic status to specific cult site, combination of liturgical with administrative responsibilities) and familiar points of contrast with modern concepts of clergyman (lack of spiritual, "pastoral" and basic rites de passage (birth, marriage,
death) responsibilities.) The exclusive focus on priests of public cult in this initial subsection, understandable, perhaps, given the brevity of the treatment, leaves unstated one of the most distinctive features of the Greek priesthood, i.e., that any Greek with a knife and suitable victim at hand could assume de facto hieratic status at will in rituals of private sacrifice.

G., in fact, as he makes clear at the start of the chapter, and in the "Power" element of his title, is primarily concerned not with the cultic activities of Athenian priests and the other familiar functionaries in the world of Greek religion (exegetai, chresmologoi/manteis and oracles), for the basic roles of which he proceeds to give equally brief and basic summaries in the sections of the chapter which follow, but rather with questions of the degree of authority exercised by each category in addressing issues arising in the religious life of Classical Athens: 1) Who spoke most decisively on issues involving state religion? 2) Who controlled the religious life of the individual? 3) Who was empowered to introduce innovations in public cults? 4) What was the force of interventions by seers and oracles in the life of the community? 5) What were the channels of mediation between gods and men? Generally cautious and unsurprising answers to these questions are provided at the conclusion of each of the chapter's subsections. A priest was more than "purely routine state official" in his role as mediator with the divine but had no spiritual authority of the kinds exercised by modern "pastors". (p. 81) The exegetai had a significant role as "an advisory body," but possessed no "powers of enforcement" in public or private spheres. (p. 82) The influence of Chresmologoi / manteis "was evidently considerable in both the public and private domains," as shown by the career of the famous Lampon and the plays of Aristophanes. (p. 85) Oracles clearly had an important role in advising the states which consulted them on religious matters and in ratifying contemplated cult innovations, but their authority on these issues was anything but supreme, being 1) diffused among a number of competing oracular shrines; 2) exercised, except on rare occasions, only by invitation, and 3) generally limited to simple consent to action, "leaving complex, technical details to the state concerned." (p. 90)

It is this overriding concern with the issue of religious authority, the "politics," as it were, of Athenian religion, which differentiates G.'s effort to instruct us in matters of Greek religion from those, e.g., of Burkert in the relevant subsections of his Greek Religion and of Parke, Flaceliere and Fontenrose in their much more extensive discussions of Greek oracles. Thus we find a subsection on the demos included among those devoted to the specifically "religious" institutions already mentioned. Here the inapplicability of the modern "church vs. state" dichotomy to Classical Athens is clearly demonstrated by listing three clear examples of state control of cultic matters: 1) the necessity for the ekklesia to approve by vote the introduction of new public cults; 2) the "overriding authority" of the demos in all matters involving the finances of state cults; and 3) the state's appointed role to prosecute "most crimes of a religious nature." (pp. 85-6) These functions, coupled with the familiar ritual preliminaries to political assemblies at Athens (purification and prayer), lead G. to present the demos as "a focus of communication between men and gods." (p. 87) Whether this sense of religious mission was in fact shared by the Athenians convened by conspicuously secular political officials to determine largely political, military, and financial matters would appear to be dubious in the extreme. Certainly no one would suggest that the genuflections to religious tradition conventionally made by the legislative assemblies of our own country constitute reliable proof that the participants share a sense of mediating with the divine in carrying out their work.

In sum, G.'s chapter has nothing new to offer on the subject of the nature and function of Greek priests per se. The reasonable but hardly startling conclusion to which the
argument of his chapter leads is that religious authority in Classical Athens was "shared out among a number of of groups comprising amateurs as well as experts, priests as well as 'laity'." (p. 90) The hypothesis finally proposed on the basis of this conclusion -- that "the diffusion of religious authority in Classical Athens mirrors the diffusion of political authority in the same period" (p. 91) -- will undoubtedly be of interest to students of Athenian constitutional history, but its relevance to the titular focus of this collection of essays on "pagan priests" seems peripheral at best. The equally uncertain relevance of the chapter's three illustrations (woman with oinochoe and incense burner at private altar, presentation of peplos on the Parthenon frieze, and two maenads (?) honoring image of Dionysus) is oddly twice acknowledged by the author himself in the captions provided: "On the left, a woman, perhaps a priestess..." (frieze, Fig. 8, p.79); "The woman is playing, in our terms, a priestly role, although there is no way of knowing whether she is technically a priestess..." (altar scene, Fig. 7, p. 76). Certainly less equivocal representations of priests in action are readily at hand in the rich repertory of sacrificial scenes surviving from the works of Greek vase painters. (Figure 1 in the English edition of Burkert's Homo Necans provides an excellent example.)

Gregory W. Dickerson


Three types of texts are examined (with 11 sample tablets reproduced in the Appendix): (1) offerings to named deities (Tn316, Es644, -646, -650, -703, Un718); (2) commodities for religious functions (Un219, Fn187); and (3) miscellaneous cult-personnel (Ae303, Ep539, -704).

(1) Though given pride of place, the calendar of offerings (Tn316) says nothing of cult-personnel except in so far as the men and women offered are to serve as such rather than as victims. Less uncertain as cult-personnel are the three entities in the Es tablets who are paralleled with Poseidon but are given far smaller amounts of seed-wheat. That those making the offering, however, are of a lower social position than the recipients, as Hooker asserts, is doubtful, since neither group has more than one e-qe-ta (comes or count).

Poseidon provides the context also for offerings of comestibles by individuals and groups to or for the mysterious o-wi-de-tai (sheep-flayer?) who as cult-personnel may use them personally or in Poseidon's worship. Un6 might have been included here since in addition to its offering to Poseidon (lost) and an offering of cows, ewes, boars and sows to one of the goddesses listed on Tn316 (pe-re-*82), it has obvious cult-personnel on its reverse: a priestess (i-je-re-ja) and a key-bearer (ka-ra-wi-po-ro).

(2) Neither of the two tablets cited as listing commodities for religious functions is very enlightening about cult-personnel: Un219's unknown commodities and mixture of human titles with divine names, both in the dative case, is matched by Fn187's list of dative divine names or human titles and allative place-names, each with amount of barley and sometimes figs or flour. What is one to make of it when the "cult-attendants of Poseidon" (po-si-da-i-je-u-si) all together get the same amount of barley as each of the four heralds (ka-ru-ke) get separately, while the Potnia of Hupo (u-po-jo-po-ti-ni-ja) gets almost four times as much and figs as well?

Omitted from this group, because no cult-personnel are mentioned, are the Fr tablets
dispensing oil to various divinities. But two ceremonies (re-ke-e-to-ro-te-ri-jo and to-no-e-ke-te-ri-jo, couch-spreading and throne-holding) for which oil is supplied must have involved officiants. And if the double dative construction may be so interpreted, ministrants of various sorts do appear: (Fr1219) wa-no-so-i po-se-da-o-ne -- to the two queens for Poseidon; (Fr1220) di-pi-si-jo-i wa-na-ka-te -- to "the thirsty ones" for the king.

3. Miscellaneous texts include two of those that mention individual priests, two priestesses, one key-bearer and slaves either of the god or of a priestess. Most of these are involved in land-holding where they play a major part, on one occasion being at odds with the civil authorities. Missing here are the Aq tablets, of which 218 lists two priests and 64's heading has been plausibly read as [i-je]-re-wi-jo-te (serving as priests). Mentioned only in passing is Ed317 where a priestess and a man identified elsewhere as a priest bracket the key-bearer and a count (eqe-ta), thus suggesting the possible cult connections of both middle terms.

The chapter provides a very useful introduction to a subject which could have benefited from more extensive treatment. Minor points: only two of the names on Es644 are in the genitive case (p. 161); the addition of the fourteenth name on Es650 is not inexplicable (p. 162; see Myc. Stud. 1964, 37-51).

Mabel L. Lang