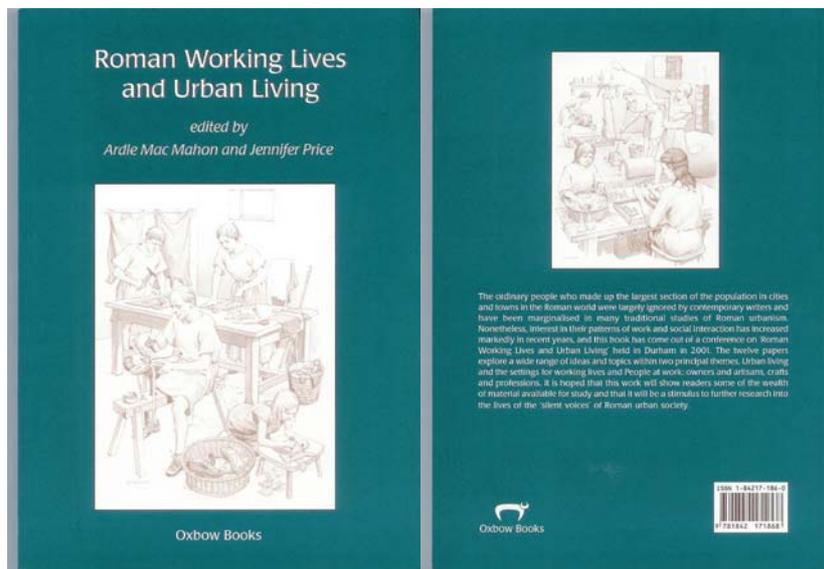


MacMahon, A. & J. Price. Eds. 2005. Roman working lives and urban living. – Oxford, Oxbow Books

Book review by J.A.S.M. Bosman



This volume originated in the conference ‘Roman working lives and urban living’ held at the university of Durham in July 2001 and contains twelve papers on the subject. The conference was held in order to discuss a subject that, in my opinion, has gotten less attention than it should have in the past: the lives of ‘ordinary’ people. The whole volume is a great joy to read not in the least because the central task of archaeology is just that: finding out more about the lives of common people. Almost all the papers were clearly written and easy to read and understand. They give great insight into what common people did, how they earned their living and how they traded. Especially good is that wherever possible, information from Roman Britain itself is used. If there is difficulty finding information in Britain the situation in the Mediterranean is considered and/or included in the data on Roman Britain. In this way even the most obscure subjects are within reach.

This becomes immediately clear in the first paper, which discusses ritual and the articulation of urban space (Simon Esmonde Cleary, p. 1–18). As it is extremely difficult to find information on this subject in Roman Britain, Cleary looks at the situation in the provinces where they do have pictorial and written evidence. After he has done this, he translates the results to the situation in Roman Britain. This works very well because Cleary takes examples from many different places and takes into account the differences between the Mediterranean and the northern provinces. Although the article offers great insight into the use of urban space in Roman Britain, Cleary unfortunately does not succeed in going beyond the obvious.

The article by Dominic Perring (p. 18–29) sheds light on the interrelation between domestic architecture and social discourse. His article investigates the importance, especially to the elite, of domestic architecture in stressing the social status and education level of the owner. Janet DeLaine wrote an article about the commercial landscape of Ostia (p. 29–48), revealing how trade in Ostia and the Mediterranean operated. Ostia was a very important harbour, presenting a perfect chance to investigate the kinds of trade possible in the Roman world. She argues that Ostia must have had a substantial number of permanent and temporary inhabitants and lots of visitors. The needs of these people encouraged other commercial activities. DeLaine investigates these with great accuracy. She identifies four means or places that bring buyers and negotiators together: fixed commercial outlets, mobile venues such as markets, places for storage and sale, and auction places. In investigating these places, she concludes that they were often used for different kinds of trade and were thus multifunctional. I guess this will not have been very different in the rest of the empire.

The next paper takes us back to Roman Britain: Ardle MacMahon looks at shops and workshops (p. 48–70). Aided by examples of various Roman cities, MacMahon investigates what shops and workshops looked like and sold, in short: how they functioned. He states that there are many differences between the various (work)shops, because of the diversity of what was sold or made. There are also many similarities though. For example the appearance of doorways: practically all doorways were very wide in order to maximize the chance of getting the client’s attention and accessibility. Another feature he investigates further are counters. Although depictions show us that they must have been a common feature of *tabernae*, not many of them have been found. The obvious assumption is that they must have been of a perishable material.

To complement his data MacMahon investigates the *taberna* counters of Pompeii and Herculaneum in his next paper (p. 70–88). Fortunately this second article is much more readable than his first, which was very theoretical. The main subject of the article is: how did *taberna* counters function in antiquity and what did they look like? The examples make clear that they could be made of different materials, depending on the wealth and social status of the owner.

Where the subject of the first part of the book was ‘Urban living and the settings for working lives’, the subject of the second section is ‘People at work: owners and artisans, crafts and professions’. This section begins with two articles describing the situation in the Mediterranean. The first article, by Damian Robinson, is about the social organisation of trade and industry in first-century Pompeii (p. 88–106). Robinson tries to determine who were involved in trade: the aristocracy or an independent middleclass of tradesmen. He does so by investigating three different trade categories: textile, baking and the ‘hospitality industry’. The size and distance to wealthy estates suggest that half of the textile and baking industries are large companies serving the aristocracy and half are small artisans independent from aristocracy. For the third category, the hospitality industry, the situation is somewhat more complex. Looking at size and location, Robinson finds that there are far more independent companies than companies dependent on the aristocracy. This does not necessarily mean that the situation is different from the first two categories. It seems logical that if an aristocrat was involved in the hospitality business, he did his utmost to hide it, because involvement in that business was morally or socially unacceptable.

Shawn Graham’s article deals with the role of the Tiber as infrastructure (p. 106–125). Graham begins by stating that the growth of Rome was dependent on its ability to successfully exploit the resources of its immediate hinterland (p. 106). For that the Tiber must have been very important. For his investigation he takes one of the most important industries, the building industry. To gain an insight into the situation, Graham compares the role of the Tiber for the building industry in Roman times to the role of the Ottawa valley for the timber industry in the 19th century. Looking at written sources the process of consolidating the control over the Tiber valley seems very similar to that of the Ottawa valley. At first there are many small companies involved in the timber industry, later only the larger ones survive because of the funds that are needed to respond properly to the demands of the market. The same seems to be true for the building industry in Roman times.

The next three papers take us back to Roman Britain. They deal with the shopkeepers and crafts-workers of Roman London (Jenny Hall, p. 125–145), pottery in Romano-British life (Jeremy Evans, p. 145–167) and glass working and glassworkers in cities and towns (Jennifer Price, p. 167–191). As becomes clear from its title, the article of Jenny Hall deals with London. Roman London gives the best insight into the subject because it was a large Romanised city. We would therefore expect a lot of different trades and products. Furthermore the damp conditions guaranteed extremely good preservation of the remains, offering excellent conditions for investigation. The article may thus be seen as an overview of what kind of crafts were available or practiced in Roman Britain and where they were located. She finds evidence for a lot of different crafts. From her investigation it becomes apparent that the town can be divided into residential, commercial and industrial areas. Often people practicing the same craft lived in the same area; shopkeepers on the other hand are more difficult to locate. In the 3rd and 4th century the situation changed. As London became a smaller community, there was less need for commercial activity. The large manufacturing areas in different parts of the town disappeared and the craftsmen moved to the former residential quarters.

The article of Jeremy Evans is dedicated to Roman pottery. In the article the author states, using an overwhelming lot of data, that the pottery assemblage of a city is different from that of the surrounding countryside. This suggests that the city was used as a retail centre for pottery and was possibly functioning as a market economy. Unfortunately the article itself is hard to read for one who is not a specialist in Roman pottery.

The article about Roman glass is more readable. It tries to give an insight into the different aspects of Roman glass, resulting in a useful article about its production and use. Price argues that glass was widely distributed throughout the Roman empire for many reasons. One of these is symbolic: glass is used because it is Roman. Other reasons are more practical: there are more possible shapes, glass does not absorb its contents and does not affect the taste of its content. The raw materials were probably gathered from a small number of sites and then transported to workshops that were located close to the market. These workshops also used recycled glass. The situation is somewhat different for high quality products. These were produced at a limited number of places and then transported to the market.

The last two articles return to the Mediterranean. The first deals with specialisation and agricultural production in Pompeii from the 6th century BC to the eruption of the Vesuvius (Marina Ciaraldi, p. 191–202). She states that producing medicine in the countryside seems logical because medicinal plants are readily available and there is more knowledge about the different plants and their properties in the countryside. This was probably also the case for other specialised trades. Ciaraldi states that from the 6th century BC onwards there is a shift of agricultural processes from the town to the surrounding countryside. This process is accompanied by greater specialisation, using more plant species. These changes in the production and consumption of food must,

according to Ciaraldi, have been paralleled by changes in the social organisation of the town with its effects on the organisation of the surrounding countryside.

Ralph Jackson's paper describes the role of doctors in the city (p. 202–221). This is a very readable article. Jackson begins by claiming that there were many so called *medici* or *iatroi* in the Roman world in its heyday. They were very diverse in their skills and practice because there was no formal training apart from being apprentice to another doctor. Most physicians were Greeks or from the Greek speaking parts of the world. Because of the increasing Hellenisation of Roman society, physicians were therefore also valued as learned companions. Judging from the archaeological record, *i.e.* the finds of medical instruments, most were expected to deal with any eventuality but there is also proof of specialisation. A healer's primary role was to visit and minister the sick. Good etiquette was very important because the first act of a doctor was to reassure his patient. When the patient was calm he was examined. The principal role of healers was –and is– to recognise and describe a disease, to explain it to their patient, and to help them to get well or to feel better. The individual approach was essential.

As you may have understood from this review I am very enthusiastic about this volume. The book is worthwhile and a great joy to read. It also offers a great deal of useful information.

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