

What is particularly valuable about the book is the very attempt to map less well-explored areas of Stoic concern and the clear way in which practical ethics is related at every point to the basic physical and ethical doctrines of the Stoa. The author has digested well the Senecan arguments for understanding Stoic precepts in the light of the basic doctrines. She deserves to inspire further discussion in this vein.

Miriam Griffin

Somerville College, Oxford

Elizabeth A. Meyer, *Legitimacy and Law in the Roman World: Tabulae in Roman Belief and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xvi + 353 pp. ISBN 0-521-49701-9.

Scholars have traditionally focused on the *what* and the *why* of Roman law, but the last decade has witnessed an increasing interest in *how* the law was made and applied, e.g. O.F. Robinson, *The Sources of Roman Law* (1997) and Jill Harries, *Law and Empire in Late Antiquity* (1999). The present volume places itself in this tradition of focusing on the everyday workings of the legal institutions. Indeed, it takes us one step further by studying the tangible tools of Roman law themselves: the *tabulae* or sets of tablets used by Romans for recording contracts, wills and grants as well as for many other, more mundane, purposes. With *tabulae* as her point of departure, the author provides us with a refreshingly new perspective on the Roman legal system and attempts to bridge 'the chasm between the study of Roman history and the study of Roman law' (Introduction, 3).

The main section of the book falls in two distinct parts. The first, 'The world of belief' (9-120) opens with a very brief survey of 'Greek' (i.e., Athenian and Hellenistic) legal documents, how they were used and how they were perceived. The absence of a formulaic language for legal documents and the need for external proof of their veracity (e.g., by registration with a notary) are among many indications that Greek legal documents did not possess a special status or credibility *per se*.

Romans, on the other hand, assumed that legal documents were of a fundamentally different nature from other types of text (ch. 2) and recorded legal texts in archaizing, repetitive and formulaic language setting them apart from everyday Latin (ch. 3), a distinction that was even apparent when reading such texts aloud (ch. 4). According to Meyer what set them apart was not, however, content or language but the medium on which they were recorded: *tabulae* (ch. 5, 'Tablets and efficacy').

The second part of the book (121-293) is devoted to the artefacts themselves and their practical functions. The best evidence for the chronology and development of wooden *tabulae* comes from Pompeii and Herculaneum, and in chapter 6 Meyer traces the typological evolution of Campanian *tabulae* from two tablets joined to form a diptych and bound with a sealed string (ca. 15 CE) through several stages to the triptych form of the mid-first century. By a decree of the senate passed in 61 or 62 CE, tablets were henceforth to be pierced (*pertusae*): the string not only passed around the triptych, but through the document itself. Like earlier changes to the physical format of *tabulae*, this latest innovation was obviously intended to enhance their credibility and prevent forgery.

Chapter 7 traces the parallel development of *tabulae* in the Roman provinces and describes their eastern counterpart, the papyrus double-document used extensively in Egypt and occasionally in other provinces of the Levant. Chapters on the use of tables in the courtroom (ch. 8) and in Imperial lawmaking and administration follow (ch. 9). The Conclusion (294-8) discusses the place of *tabulae* in the evolution of Roman legal theory. The Roman legal document was, and remained, the recorded *proof* of a transaction, but Meyer argues that in practice, *tabulae*

developed into a legal instrument that was a close precursor of the modern ‘dispositive’ legal document.

Throughout the book, Meyer consistently emphasizes the importance of the *tabula* (of wood or more rarely, bronze) as a special format that renders a text trustworthy and legitimate; to use her favourite expression, ‘efficacious’. The medium is the message. But can we be certain that all Romans shared this quasi-fetichistic view that texts enshrined in *tabulae* had a special status guaranteed by ritual and belief?

The rapid typological evolution of the Campanian *tabula* over a period of only fifty years is evidence of widespread concern that texts in *tabulae* were far from sacrosanct and easily forged. Suetonius (*Nero*, 17) explicitly states that the reform of 61-62 was directed *adversus falsarios*. It is worth noting that only two extant sources (the other being the third-century *Sententiae* of the jurist Paulus) mention this decree. It was promulgated by the Senate (as we know from Paulus) and thus of marginal relevance to Suetonius’ biography of the emperor. Tacitus does not mention the decree in his narrative of the year 61, though this is more detailed than Suetonius’ account and more focused on the activities of the Senate. Nonetheless, Suetonius has singled it out for mention — probably because his professional experience as Imperial secretary *ab epistulis* had taught him that tampering with the content of *tabulae* was widespread.

The social dimension is curiously absent from this study, though it might have helped elucidate this ambivalence vis-à-vis *tabulae*. Meyer assumes the existence of a single ‘Roman’ attitude to *tabulae*, but ninety-five percent of our legal sources reflect the views of the elite. Even if one does not share Ross’ view that law is in the last analysis ‘the common ideology of judges’, Roman law and all the trappings of its application, *tabulae* included, clearly reflect elite ideology (let us not forget that in the early Republic, making and administering the law was a patrician prerogative) and by and large served to protect the property and prerogatives of equestrians and senators. Consequently, the elite was forced to maintain the notion that the testimony of *tabulae* was in a class by itself — at least publicly. In the seclusion of Cicero’s villa or Suetonius’ chancery, they may have voiced their doubts. A useful comparison is the place of sworn testimony in modern jurisprudence. In a secularised world, most defendants will gladly perjure themselves to avoid a jail sentence, yet in many legal systems, testimony under oath retains a special status.

Another aspect of the social dimension is that a significant proportion of civil conflicts may have been settled out of court by arbitration because the parties wanted to avoid, or could not afford, the expense of advocates and court fees. What was the place of *tabulae* in an arbitration process; did they enjoy an exalted status similar to that in a proper court? Meyer correctly identifies curse-tablets (*defixiones*) as a useful source for popular perceptions of legal language and formulae, though her discussion of this aspect is dispersed over several sections throughout the volume (28-9, 54-6, 104-7); a separate chapter devoted to a deeper analysis of this phenomenon would have been more helpful. The choice of examples is somewhat haphazard and surprisingly does not include the rich collection of more than a dozen leaden curse-tablets found in the sanctuary of Apollo at Kourion and now in the British Museum (Mitford, *Inscriptions of Kourion*, 127-40, 142). These texts, in which various litigants curse their opponents in court and even the governor of the province (presumably in his capacity as judge), are among the few preserved *defixiones* that link the world of magic directly to the world of the courtroom.

There are some other omissions and misinterpretations. On p. 26 we learn that the praetor’s edict was written on whitened tablets (*alba*) and in the accompanying note 25, ‘imperial parallels’ are enumerated; these include edicts *strictu sensu* but also emperors’ secret use of *tabulae* to list their intended victims, with a reference, inter alia, to the biography of Commodus in the *Historia Augusta* — somewhat superfluous, since *HA* is not the primary source for this anecdote. On p. 25, Meyer discusses the use of linen books in early Rome, giving Claudian (*Gothic War*, 232) as a reference for Sibylline books on linen. Writing around 400 CE, Claudian is a dubious source for the appearance of the original Sibylline books, which were burned in 83 BCE. He may have been

referring to a later copy, but the word *carbassus* — the usual meaning of which is ‘garment’, ‘sail’ or ‘curtain’ — suggests that his mental picture of a ‘linen book’ is far from clear. Of greater interest in this context, but not cited by Meyer, is the claim in the opening chapter of the *Historia Augusta*’s biography of Aurelian that its author has consulted ‘linen books’ containing the diary of this late third century emperor. Like many of the purported ‘source references’ in the *HA*, the linen diaries of Aurelian may well be fictitious. Yet the author-forger of the *HA* presumably wanted to be believed and would hardly have claimed to consult linen documents from the reign of Aurelian if linen had been out of use as a writing material for centuries.

Despite such minor quibbles, there is no doubt that this erudite and original study has taken us a long step towards a better understanding of *tabulae* as artefacts and symbols, and also shown how the ‘hands-on’ approach to Roman law provides not only new insights, but exciting new questions.

Tønnes Bekker-Nielsen

University of Southern Denmark, Esbjerg

Roger S. Bagnall, *Later Roman Egypt: Society, Religion, Economy and Administration* (Variorum Collected Studies Series: CS758), Hampshire, UK: Ashgate 2003. pp. xii + 318; 3 b&w illustrations. ISBN 0-86078-899-7.

Most readers will be familiar with the format of the Variorum series. Eminent scholars select sets of their articles on related themes. They explain their choices in a preface, add an index, and perhaps some pages of updating. The articles are reprinted as published; they are not repaginated, but are assigned Roman numerals that then serve as running headers. The collections are always useful, especially when they include articles from publications difficult of access, but the format makes them also slightly difficult to use and cite. This type of production is economical, but given the special nature of the volumes, prices still tend to be high.

In this volume, Bagnall (henceforth B.) selects twenty-four pieces organized into four sections as identified in the sub-title (slightly more fulsomely in the table of contents). They range in length from several pages to the low 20’s. The oldest date to 1977, the latest to 1997. Most of the articles (there is one extended review) ‘were written during the long gestation period of *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton 1993) and treat in more depth topics discussed in that book’ (author’s preface). In many ways this volume serves as a companion to *ELA*, as it has come to be known. I have read most of the pieces before, some several times; it is a pleasure to turn to them again.

Society: In **I** B. holds that it cannot be proven that slavery in Egypt was less important in the fourth century CE and beyond than it had been before. The seeming drop in numbers is a figment of imagination caused by a massive shift in the character of the papyrological documentation. **II**, a review article, is a detailed summary and critique of Joëlle Beaucamp’s massive, 2-volume *Le statut de la femme à Byzance (4e-7e siècle)*. **III**, opening as a meditation on *P.Kellis I 8 (362)*, asks why males are overrepresented in the census returns while women are overrepresented in documents about slaves. Part of the answer seems to lie in the differential exposure of female children, which had a significant demographic impact. B. sees here a commerce in babies, with villagers taking up exposed city babies, raising them, and then selling them back to city dwellers as domestic slaves. It is a grim scenario trenchantly at odds with the advancing legal amelioration of women’s condition. **IV** is probably the most erudite of all the pieces, and one with the most current relevance. B., paying special attention to the laws and practicalities of late antique divorce, in a discussion bookended by *P.Oxy. L 3581*, argues against sweeping assertions based on assumptions of Christian influence on late imperial legislation. **V** is an exploratory discussion on violence in Roman Egypt against a background of anthropological literature, holding to the notion that appeal to government intervention by victims was a last resort; informal interventions were