

Brief Reviews

Serçe Limanı: An Eleventh-Century Shipwreck, vol. 1: *The Ship and Its Anchorage, Crew, and Passengers*. Edited by GEORGE F. BASS, SHEILA MATTHEWS, J. RICHARD STEFFY, and FREDERICK H. VAN DOORNINCK, JR. Ed Rachal Foundation Nautical Archaeology Series. College Station, Texas: TEXAS A&M UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2004. Pp. xvii + 558. \$125.

“And that was all of it: a little merchant vessel that was full and flat and simply built” (p. 154). Such is J. Richard Steffy’s summation of the small cargo vessel that sank off the coast of southwestern Turkey around 1025 C.E. Thanks to several tons of cullet recovered from the sunken site, it is now commonly referred to as the glass wreck. Whatever it is called, the resting place of this simple ship has revealed a wealth of information about eleventh-century commerce and daily life. The Institute of Nautical Archaeology has spent years excavating, preserving, and ultimately exhibiting (at the Museum in Bodrum, Turkey) the materials they removed from the seabed at Serçe Limanı (Sparrow harbor), and this book is the first of several planned volumes detailing and contextualizing their findings.

After a preface and brief introduction, volume one is structured in two main parts, each consisting of three sections. Part I, “The Ship, the Site and the Excavation,” contains the following sections: “The History of Serçe Limanı (chs. 2–4); “Discovery, Excavation, and Conservation (ch. 5); and “The Ship: Hull, Rigging, Anchors, and Ballast” (chs. 6–14). Part II, “Possessions and Victuals,” contains three sections: “Probable Personal Possessions of Crew and Passengers, excluding Ceramic Wares and Commercial Equipment” (chs. 15–24); “Victuals” (chs. 25–26); and the appendices. As is stated in the preface, this book is the beginning of the process of documenting the site. Future volumes will develop the mercantile aspects of the wreck (p. xii).

As the initial chapters point out, this shipwreck presented both challenges and opportunities to those excavating it. The challenges are clearly defined in the early pages; it is the opportunities that are worthy of highlighting in this review. As Bass indicates, everything brought on this ship was brought for a reason. Whether related to the sailing of the ship (such as the ballast or the rigging), the business of the ship (the cargo), or the belongings, professional or personal, of the crew and any passengers, there was a reason for each object. One of the goals of this volume is to uncover those reasons, with a special focus on ordinary objects and the material culture of daily life. The contributors give this material a thorough and detailed analysis. The book is thus an excellent reference compilation of many specialized ex-

cursuses, wherein the objects at hand are not only thoroughly explained and contextualized in terms of the wreck site, but also in terms of what is known about this sort of object in the wider scholarship. As a result, the book is not one to be read from start to finish, but rather to be read in parts. This is not a complaint. Individual readers will bring their own interests to the text, and those interested in the metallurgy of anchors in chapter 12 may skip over discussion of the dopp kit of a mariner found in chapter 16. The editorial team did not ignore what was not of interest to them. To their credit, there is no dismissive category of “miscellaneous” finds. While the book contains enough specialized nautical terminology to challenge even the most devoted reader of Patrick O’Brian’s Aubrey/Maturin series, there is a helpful glossary to help one along.

A bigger challenge also confronted those working on this volume—that of blazing new ground in the academy, not just in terms of new material but in challenges to existing paradigms of knowledge. Not only did the wreck contain both Islamic and Byzantine materials, specialists of which do not tend to overlap, but, as Bass writes:

To put our ship into an accurate historical context, to avoid misinterpretation of its artifacts and food remains, and to find more contemporary literary references to daily life in medieval Islam, I purposely gave a series of lectures on the shipwreck at a university with one of the world’s great departments of medieval Islamic studies. I wrote in advance to ask if I might meet with some of the faculty or students who could help us avoid publishing utter nonsense. . . . The chairman of the department answered: “I have to confess that we are all rank laymen in the field, staff and students alike, and really quite unable, unfortunately, to hold an intelligent discussion on the subject. . . . If there is anything we can do to help we shall of course be glad to do so, but our field lies mainly in language, literature, religion and history, and I do not know if this would be of any use to you.” No one from the department attended my lectures. Be tolerant, then, of mistakes made by those of us who wrote parts of this volume and the volumes that follow, but who were not formally trained in medieval Islamic literature, religion, and history. (p. xii)

In these days when medievalists of any stripe are oft seen as unimportant, when new academic positions are hard to create, and specialists in literature, religion, and history of the pre-modern Islamic world are often fighting rear-guard actions to fill positions once colleagues

retire, it is difficult to foresee new positions being devoted to the material culture of daily life. Thanks to the work of Bass and his colleagues, however, it will be easier to train such specialists now that this material is made accessible in this admirable volume.

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With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Edited by JANE DAMMEN MCAULIFFE, BARRY D. WALFISH, and JOSEPH W. GOERING. Oxford: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2003. Pp. xvii + 488.

The phenomenon of interpretation—conveniently labeled “exegesis” in this volume, although not without risking the misconception of harmonization, as if the diverse types of literature discussed here belonged to a single genre—is a central tenet of the three monotheistic traditions. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam model their beliefs and *religia* on their own amalgamation of sacred texts, canonized over time as “Scripture” and inscribed with authoritative, perpetual, and divine status. The central incentives for those who engaged over the centuries in explicating these texts were vitality and relevance. Commentators of far-apart generations, distant geographic locales, and variegated hermeneutical prepositions and literary methodologies, all confronted this challenge, producing in the process one of the richest corpora of interpretative literature.

The current volume gathers twenty-six studies, originally delivered at a 1997 conference in Toronto, on the medieval realm of biblical interpretation. It is not a book for beginners. The editors provide short introductions to each of the religions (chapters 1, 12, and 20) but these are slim, unequal in value, and too often miss the mark. The introduction to Christian interpretation, for example, does not include in its discussion of the so-called Patristic period even a slight hint as to the rich exegetical traditions that lay outside the perimeter of the Graeco-Roman languages. Syriac, Coptic, and Armenian and others are all left out, thus undermining the introductory value of the essay. The author also asserts that “One of the unusual characteristics of the early Christian communities is their insistence, seemingly from the outset, on the importance of unity” (p. 198). He seems to buy into the image that the objects of his research wished to create, rather than dissect and understand what was likely a more complex reality.

The utmost accomplishment of the book is the contributions themselves, many of which are scholarly gems to which a short review can never do justice. In a broad sweep the authors transport us to the far-flung corners

of medieval commentary and their authors’ multiple genres of exegesis—the literary, the philosophical, the theological, the mystical, the allegorical, and so forth. Many of the articles focus on a certain persona, analyzing the cultural circumstances in which he (there appear to have been no female commentators in this period, at least not as represented in this book) operated, teasing out neglected aspects of his project, and shedding light on the cross-fertilization between the seemingly estranged religious traditions.

One cannot praise highly enough the intellectual agenda behind such a research endeavor. Many recent scholars have recognized the necessity to transcend the walls that have separated the various religions over the centuries and to study them together, not only as comparative objects but rather as cultural entities with shared foundations and substance. The implementation of such projects has proved a difficult task, which only accentuates the achievement of the current volume. Readers will also be grateful to the editors for supplying two detailed indexes of sources and topics, each very helpful for navigating the rich array of subjects, people, and texts covered in this tome.

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Die Griechen und das antike Israel. Edited by STEFAN ALKIER and MARKUS WITTE. Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, vol. 201. Freiburg: ACADEMIC PRESS, 2004. Pp. x + 199, illus. FS60.

The momentous events that transpired in the Near East in the centuries following the campaigns of the Macedonian king Alexander in the fourth century B.C.E. and their far-reaching impact on the essence of Western civilization have attracted the attention of scholars from the very beginning of academic historical inquiry. The inception of Christianity, a religious tradition that combined Semitic wisdom in Greek guise, and its ascent to the world’s helm highlighted the magnitude of the cultural transformations—normally termed “Hellenism”—that took shape in the eastern regions of the Mediterranean.

The roots of these changes clearly go back to the arrival of the Greeks in the days of Alexander. Not denying the impact of military conquests on cultural engineering (a topic that seems never to lose steam), scholars have pondered whether elements of Greek life took residence in the Middle East prior to the days of Alexander. The pendulum on this question has swung from the nineteenth-century romantic view that credited any change to political and military developments, thus associating the origins of the Greek presence in the East

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