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Review Article

Small Finds and Ancient Social Practices in the North-West Provinces of the Roman Empire. Edited by S. Hoss and A. Whitmore. Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2016. Pp. 173, illus. Price: £38.00. ISBN 9781785702563.

The study of small finds is still sometimes overlooked in both Roman studies and archaeology more broadly in favour of larger-scale archaeological remains and evidence from literary sources.

However, this edited volume succeeds in demonstrating that critical analyses of artefacts can reveal unique information about life in the Roman period, especially relating to ritual activity and personal behaviours that are more difficult to discern from other sources of evidence in the Northern provinces.

Certain chapters throughout this book stand out in their innovative approaches to the material evidence. Parker's discussion of jet *gorgoneia* (Ch. 9) is enhanced by his commentary on the pendants' wear patterns, while Kostner's work on socks (Ch. 3) expertly combines archaeological evidence with visual and textual sources to bring to light an understudied set of artefacts. Vejby's discussion (Ch. 6) of the transformation of ordinary, utilitarian items into ritual artefacts through their deposition context is fascinating and provides a framework for the discussion of similar finds elsewhere in the Empire. However, there is an unevenness of depth to the collection of papers; for example, the work by Burandt (Ch. 1) on the relationship between hobnail patterns and shoe style appears brief in comparison to the lengthy and detailed discussion provided by Birley (Ch. 12) on the intra- and extra-mural activities at Vindolanda, or Whitmore's explanation (Ch. 11) of methodological issues of context relating to cloth-working in bath-houses. This likely stems from the development of the chapters from conference papers, as the book originated as a session at the 2014 Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference. In fact, the topics under discussion have much in common with earlier TRAC publications, with a familiar focus on artefacts groups such as brooches (Ch. 5) and shoes (Ch. 1), and issues such as artefacts and gender (Chs 9, 11, 12) (cf. L. Allason-Jones 'Sexing Small Finds' and van Driel Murray 'Gender in Question', both in P. Rush (ed.) *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference: 2nd Conference Proceedings* (1995), 22–32 and 3–21). It is therefore somewhat surprising that the individual chapters are not more theoretical in their approach; instead the application of theory is implicit and based on its role in the development

of social practices as an area of study, as succinctly outlined in the introductory chapter by the editors Hoss and Whitmore.

The book consists of 11 main chapters organised into three different themes: small finds, the body and identity (Part 1); religion and ritual in the North-Western provinces (Part 2); and artefacts, behaviours and spaces (Part 3). Generally, the papers fit together well within their respective themes, with the first in particular forming an engaging and cohesive section on the material culture of personal appearance. The following two sections do not manage this to quite the same degree; for example Klenner's work (Ch. 10) on the use of pottery in the cult of Mithras has as much in common with religion and ritual (Part 2) as with behaviours and spaces (Part 3). As a result, this volume would perhaps benefit from a brief concluding chapter highlighting similarities or differences in evidence or approach, bringing the book together as a complete work as well as acknowledging the polyvalent nature of artefacts. However such criticism misses the fundamental drive of this work – to disseminate valuable new research in an important area of scholarship. This book does not seek to be an overview of Roman social practices or a definitive guide to the pertinent material remains. Instead, through a series of what are essentially research case-studies, it reports on the current state of Roman small finds archaeology and reflects the piecemeal nature of archaeological research. As such, the real strength of this book lies in the amount of data each chapter contains. As well as tables of measurements, distribution maps and references to open-access databases such as Arachne, the book is replete with detailed drawings and photographs. Combined with the relatively accessible price of £38, it represents a great source of comparative material for anyone researching Roman portable material culture.

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