CONCEPTS OF SPACE IN ANTIQUITY

ROSSI (C.) *Egypt, Greece, and Rome. A History of Space and Places*. Pp. xiv + 130, figs, maps. London and New York: Routledge, 2022. Cased, £44.99, US$59.95. ISBN: 978-1-032-18599-6.
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R.'s thought-provoking discussion of ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman modes of interaction with space appears in Routledge's *Focus* series. This experimental series aims to publish short works (no more than 50,000 words) in a rapid timeframe, with an advertised time of 10–12 weeks between submission and publication. The present monograph highlights both the potential and the drawbacks of such an approach. The book presents a stimulating overview of a broad field, with a refreshingly big picture approach that could be harder to maintain in a longer, more detail-oriented work. On the other hand, while Routledge indicates that *Focus* books receive its 'usual high standards of peer review', the book suffers from structural issues and a lack of clarity about its central contributions that might have been remedied through a more traditional review and editorial process.

The book's central argument is that these three ancient civilisations developed different ways of thinking about and existing within geographical space, as a consequence of the different spatial contexts in which they emerged. In brief, R. argues that Egyptian culture understood the Nile Valley as its irreplaceable central point. Egyptian spatial thought was built around specific geographical binaries (desert/river, upper Egypt/lower Egypt, west bank/east bank) that meant this culture could only make conceptual sense along the river. Thus, while Egyptian history saw constant efforts to unite the peoples of the Nile into a single polity, attempts to expand the Egyptian world beyond the Valley were few and half-hearted. Greek civilisation, in contrast, developed a spatial model that was infinitely exportable. Because ancient Greece, from an early stage, was structured around a multitude of independent *poleis* linked together by sea routes, the Greek world could and did expand ever further from its geographical origins, resulting in a Mediterranean basin populated by 'inter-dependent dots' (p. 121) located anywhere that maritime technology was able to reach. The Roman spatial model was also constantly expanding, but differed due to its centralising focus, in contrast to the decentralised Greek network. The structure by which Rome consolidated the Italian peninsula, consisting of a network of roads centred upon Rome, was gradually expanded to cover Europe and the Mediterranean. Ultimately, the entire *imperium Romanum* was interconnected by means of complex, carefully planned land and sea routes. Over time, R. argues, the shapers of this network placed limits on its expansion, particularly at points, like the Sahara, where physical barriers made the development of robust connections challenging. R. describes these contrasting conceptual geographies as a 'mega-place' (Egypt), a 'para-place' (Greece) and a 'meta-place' (Rome).

The primary contribution of the book is that it makes explicit certain conclusions about these civilisations' spatial models that are often only implied in scholarship, and places them into a comparative, transhistorical structure. At one level, the specific ideas raised about each civilisation are unlikely to be surprising to specialists. The central concepts – that Egyptian culture was focused on the rhythms and structures of the Nile, that Greece consisted of a network of *poleis* sharing connections across the sea and that the Roman empire was integrated and maintained through a connective tissue of transport routes – are very much in line with the scholarship of recent decades. Readers will particularly detect the influence of P. Horden and N. Purcell's *The Corrupting Sea* (2000), I. Malkin's *A Small Greek World* (2011) and C. Nicolet's *Space, Geography, and Politics* (1991) as well as a range of recent

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scholarship on ancient geography, hodology and connectivity. The sources used to reach these conclusions are also largely familiar: the Narmer palette, 'frogs around a pond' (Pl. *Phd.* 109b), the Greek *periploi*, the *Tabula Peutingeriana* and other standard material on ancient spatial thought are all discussed. But this branch of scholarship has not frequently attempted to compare the conceptual geographies of these civilisations and to characterise and account for the differences between them. It is here that the value of R.'s work lies. Readers are invited to observe these civilisations' development from a bird's-eye view and to consider whether their geographical settings created particular *formae mentis* (p. 122) that gave a unique shape to the unfolding of their histories. The book is deliberately brief (p. 2), operating at a high level of generality, and so many exceptions or counterarguments could be raised. To take one example, since R.'s archaeological work is based at Kharga Oasis in Egypt's Western Desert, it would be worth considering how the oases – which were long-lived outposts of Egyptian culture despite being many days' journey from the Nile – might push against R.'s Nilocentric model of Egyptian space. There is also little consideration of how each civilisation's model might have changed over time. But the work's brevity is often a strength, allowing it to maintain its focus on big picture trends and comparisons. The book offers a compact, provocative perspective on how ancient geographical conceptions manifested themselves in physical space.

However, the book's effectiveness is undermined at times by issues of structure and clarity. The introduction is focused entirely on different scales of spatial understanding, pointing to the gap between geographical/cartographic perspectives on the world ('detached and dematerialised') and experiential, emplaced perspectives ('subjective [and] practicality-bound'; p. 4). While the interaction between these scales forms part of R.'s methodological approach, it is not the book's primary subject, and so the introduction sits oddly with the main content of the work. The introduction might instead have focused on the book's central contribution, its comparison of the three civilisations' modes of conceptualising and occupying space. The 'mega-place'/'para-place'/'meta-place' framework, which appears for the first time on the book's penultimate page (p. 123), would be particularly helpful for readers trying to follow the argument about each civilisation. This is especially true because the main chapters tend to bury their arguments, making readers work hard to find the thread. Chapters do not have their own introductions and are divided into sections and subsections with obscure titles: the Egypt chapter, for example, consists of three sections titled 'Places and cycles', 'Water and sand' and 'Division and unification'. Within individual sections, a lack of signposting means that it is not always clear what the point is and where the argument is going; readers must often reread sections and chapters to determine the overall takeaways. This task is made harder by many tangents of uncertain relevance (e.g. pp. 14, 42–3, 56–7) and substantial passages of basic background information (e.g. pp. 31–2, 67–8, 87–9) that seem unnecessary in a book aimed at specialists (p. 2). While these flaws do not affect the validity of the book's argument, they frequently make that argument difficult to locate and comprehend.

Nonetheless, the book offers readers a compelling big picture theory about how and why these civilisations took the physical shapes they did. While it will raise many questions and potentially objections, its willingness to range across a wide territory and venture broad conclusions is welcome. Specialists in ancient space and geography will find it a provocative, if sometimes frustrating, contribution. In addition, individual chapters could be assigned to graduate students and advanced undergraduates looking for an overview of, and key sources and scholarship for, these civilisations' conceptual geographies.

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