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Time in Roman Religion: One Thousand Years of Religious History. Routledge studies in ancient history, 4

Gary Forsythe, *Time in Roman Religion: One Thousand Years of Religious History*.
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Review by

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Forsythe's book presents six studies of very different lengths, dealing with the Roman calendar and its technicalities. The short first chapter offers a "Preliminary Examination of the Roman Calendar" (1-18). This presents a brief account of the development of the calendar from the regal period, more precisely, the second half of the 7th century BC onwards (2). Change is addressed as being basically a phenomenon of "Hellenization" (6-8). The chapter is concluded by an overview of Roman festivals of the Republican period. Forsythe starts the description by the month of March, following Ovid's suggestion of an later addition of January and February.

The second chapter on "The After Days and Other Curiosities" (19-39) deals with beliefs about the qualification of days, as far as restriction in use on the basis of earlier negative experiences (defeats in battles in particular) are concerned. Forsythe critically discusses historiographic traditions about such days and demonstrates the extent to which such traditions could be modified in terms of dates involved. His discussion of several dates and the placing of new ritual obligations in the Augustan period leaves the degree of formalised decision open.

In chapter 3 the "Rites of the Argei," the throwing of straw puppets into the Tiber is discussed against older theories and interpreted as a transformation of a widespread vegetation ritual (40-48, see 48).

The "Origins and History of the Ludi Saeculares" form the object of chapter 4 (49-76). Forsythe reconstructs the development of this rite from 362 BC (55-6) far down into the imperial period. Against the backdrop of antiquarian speculations, the particular political and military constellations leading to the recurrent revivals of the rite are analyzed. More and more, the *ludi* were seen as festivals of Rome's rebirth (75-6).

Chapter 5 (77-112) goes beyond the urban focus and deals with the rite of the *taurobolium* (and *criobolium*), associated with the goddess Cybele or Magna Mater. The rites are interpreted within the paradigm of "mystery religion", that is, as individually organized rituals aiming at a person's salvation. Forsythe suggests that the actual dating of several instances might be due to an interest in the astrological coordination with the zodiacal signs of Aries, but discusses neither the problem of the alternative of lunar definitions of "being in Aries" nor that of the difference of calendrical months and (solar) zodiacal periods.

The last and longest chapter 6 postulates in dealing with the "Non-Christian Origins of Christmas" the modification of Jesus' birthday of 6th of January (as widely dated around 200, p. 123) to the 25th of December on the basis of a widespread cult of the sun (113-161).

Even if totally unconnected, the topics of the chapters could have made for interesting reading, if they reflected the state of the art. Unfortunately, Forsythe argues on the basis of research mostly predating the second half of the 1990s, sometimes even earlier. The first chapter is based on the classic study of the Roman Calendar by Agnes Kirsopp Michels of 1967, engaging with the rather unusual small study of Gerhard Radke of 1990, leaving out of account subsequent scholarship that has seriously modified these views (both that by Michel Humm and by myself).¹ The second chapter builds on my own study of the calendar of 1995, but apart from general praise in the first footnote does not engage with its arguments, frequently falling back onto the *communis opinio* of earlier scholarship and disregarding other recent work on the divinatory elements of the Roman calendar (e.g. Anthony Grafton, M. Swerdlow).² Chapter 3 stops dealing with ongoing research in 1981, chapter 4 in 1998, declaring the monograph on and edition of the Acts of the Secular Games of B. Schnegg-Köhler of 2002 as “unavailable”.³ For chapter 5, literature on the so-called mystery cults and Cybele after 1996 is restricted to the two more general books of Eric Orlin and H. Bowden, obviously added to the notes in a very late stage.⁴ Likewise, the intensive and highly controversial debates on the date of Christmas after 1982—including the discussion of the authenticity of the date in the medieval copies of Filocalus’ lists of martyrs and of Sol Invictus dating in reaction to the date of Christmas—are not taken into account.

Forsythe’s knowledge of the sources and older scholarship is undeniable. There is a lot of reliable information in the book. However, it is frequently out of touch with the scholarship of the last quarter of the century, into which only very occasional glimpses are given. Note 72 on p. 186 thus is characteristic of the approach as a whole: “I follow here the modern traditional historical interpretation ... This modern orthodoxy ... has, however, in recent decades been challenged by a revisionist interpretation, according to which paganism went out with an apathetic whimper rather than a combative bang. For this revisionist view see ... For discussion of these two competing interpretations with a vindication of the traditional view see ...” I do not think that it is as easy as that (and in most cases F. did not even take the trouble to be as conscious of later developments as here) to dismiss decades of scholarship. Consequently, it need not be the task of a review to map out in detail the changes in scholarship on this topic since Forsythe’s closure of his arguments.

Notes

1. Agnes Kirsopp Michels, *The Calendar of the Roman Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967); Gerhard Radke, *Fasti Romani: Betrachtungen zur Frühgeschichte des römischen Kalenders*, *Orbis antiquus* 31 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1990); Jörg Rüpke, *Kalender und Öffentlichkeit: Die Geschichte der Qualifikation und Repräsentation von Zeit im alten Rom*, *Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten* 40 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), now available in revised translation: *The Roman Calendar from Numa to Constantine: Time, History, and the Fasti*, translated by David M. Richardson (Boston: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Michel Humm, “Spazio Tempo Civici: Riforma delle Tribu e Riforma del calendario alla fine del quarto secolo a. C.,” in C. Bruun (ed.), *The Roman Middle Republic: Politics, Religion, and Historiography c. 400-133 B. C.* (Rome: Institutum Romanum, 2000), 91-119.

2. A.T. Grafton and N.M. Swerdlow, “Calendar Dates and Ominous Days in Ancient Historiography,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 51 (1988), 14-42; N.M. Swerdlow, *Ancient Astronomy and Celestial Divination* (Massachusetts, London: MIT Press, 1999).

3. Bärbel Schnegg-Köhler, *Die augusteischen Säkularspiele = Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 4 (2002).

4. Eric Orlin, *Foreign cults in Ancient Rome* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010); Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults of the Ancient World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).