

Book Reviews



Elena Isayev, *Migration, Mobility and Place in Ancient Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); 502 pp., €115.45, ISBN 978-1107130616.

Reviewed by: Lien Foubert , *Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands*

During the past twenty years, in particular, ever since Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell published *The Corrupting Sea* in 2000, scholarly research on Antiquity has seen an increase in studies that focus on processes of connectivity in the Mediterranean. Rarely has it been done in such an articulate, multidisciplinary, convincing and thought-provoking manner as in Elena Isayev's *Migration, Mobility and Place in Ancient Italy*. Using a diverse collection of source material – such as literary texts, wall paintings, inscriptions, pottery, architectural remains, ethnographic parallels – and a transdisciplinary set of concepts and theoretical frameworks – including, but not solely, notions of identity and belonging, cultural encounters, network theory, life cycle and decision-making processes – the book aims to illustrate that in Mediterranean communities, a mobile and not a sedentary lifestyle was the norm. Isayev focuses in particular on Central and Southern Italy in the first Millennium BCE. The book deals with how mobility was made possible (esp. chapter 3), why individuals and groups decided to move around (chapters 2 to 5), the impact of these mobilities on societal change (chapters 3 and 4, as well as 9 to 11), but also how mobility to, in and from the Italian peninsula is and was perceived and framed by ancient (chapters 6 to 8) and modern (chapters 1 and 2) authors.

This book demonstrates that most categories of mobility (e.g. migration or colonisation) and the theoretical frameworks that go with it were minted and developed in relation to other historical circumstances than those of the ancient world. As the author explains in Part I, these categories were often conceptualised in the context of nation state discourses on citizenship and identity formation. Using a term like “migration” to characterise movement in Antiquity, therefore, privileges some narratives over other and might not always be applicable to the circumstances that are being studied. Although Isayev still uses the same categories in the book's 12 chapters (including introduction and conclusion), making it at times difficult for the reader to remember the warnings in the introduction and to envisage its repercussions on the author's interpretation of the ancient source material, she argues that instead of applying such generalising categories on the Italian peninsula in the first Millennium BCE, the emphasis

should lie more on the specifics of a particular historical period, the peculiarities of a region, the diversity of movement and among the movers. After all, sometimes mobility was closed and linear (i.e. moving from one home to another), but it was also ephemeral, cyclical and meandering. Likewise, movers sometimes operated *en masse*, but they moved also, and perhaps even more often, in an individual capacity.

The common thread of Parts II and III of the book is that of a Mediterranean society that is used to a cosmopolitan environment. An archaeological examination of the co-presence of objects and people from different cultural backgrounds in one place (Part II) as well as a literary analysis of attestations of mobility in the *Comedies* of Plautus and the *Histories* of Polybius (chosen as “early witnesses” of movement on the Italian peninsula, Part III) make clear that movement came from all layers of society and was considered to be omnipresent. Being “foreign”, therefore, was not what distinguished one from his or her “other”. What mattered more, so Isayev argues, was one’s social and civic status, being rich or poor, a citizen or non-citizen, a woman or man, young or old, a merchant or farmer, and so on.

The final chapters of the book (Part IV) examine the transformation of an Italian peninsula, in which diversity characterised its communities to one in which Rome and Roman citizenship were central. Isayev sees the war of 91 BCE between Rome and her supporters on one side and the Italian allies on the other as a turning point. Prior to this so-called Social War, different localities operated alongside Rome, “without necessarily drawing their identity from any single one” (p. 311). Rome’s victory made Rome the central hub of power, imposing its model of power distribution on the entire Italian peninsula, leading in the end to “a place-specific belonging”, a widely shared sense of Rome as *patria* (fatherland), visible in inscriptions set up by Italian elites everywhere as well as in literary texts such as those of Cicero and Livy by the end of the first century BCE.

This short review does not do justice to the scholarly merits of *Migration, Mobility and Place in Ancient Italy*. The text is accompanied by black-and-white and colour plates of high quality, as well as detailed maps, appendices to support the literary analysis of Part IV, an extensive bibliography and a general index. More importantly, Elena Isayev’s study discusses fundamental issues on attitudes to human movement and opens up new perspectives on the study of place and identity formation in every historical period. It should be incorporated in every state of modern scholarship as one of the key studies in Mediterranean History, alongside Fernand Braudel and the already mentioned Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell.

ORCID iD

Lien Foubert  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8124-8988>