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STEFANIE LENK, **Roman Identity and Lived Religion: Baptismal Art in Late Antiquity** (Greek Culture in the Roman World). Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2025. Pp. xxxi + 248, illus. ISBN 9781009408653 (bound): £90.00; 9781009408646 (paper).

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Contributing to a productive trajectory in late antique studies, Stefanie Lenk draws upon ancient material culture and modern identity theory to nuance narratives of religious change. Through a series of case studies, L. argues that the incorporation of traditional Roman iconography in early Christian baptisteries supports 'the growing conviction that late antique Christian identities were multi-faceted, bound to local Roman tradition, and could deviate from official Christian doctrine' (7). Rejecting the tired pagan-Christian binary, L. considers how the lived religion of fifth- and sixth-century Christians conflicted with the orthodoxy championed in surviving ecclesiastical texts. Her study challenges the uncritical application of traditional methods and encourages a deeper appreciation for the complexity of negotiating identities, past and present.

L. bookends her study with an unorthodox discussion of East German identity in the modern unified nation. It's a surprising framework but also refreshing and effective, serving to question 'the neat separation between biographies and regime' (xxi). A more traditional historiography follows, situating her work within the material turn of late antique studies as a means of exploring 'non-elitist, local, and individual perspectives' (3). L. rightly proclaims the fruit of this approach in analysing early Christian funerary art found in sites beyond ecclesiastical control (see Éric Rebillard's *Christians and Their Many Identities*, 2012). But the application of this methodology to baptisteries proves more challenging. These sites were designed, of course, for sanctioned rituals and resonated with liturgies carefully crafted by the same ecclesiastical authorities she seeks to decentralise.

The baptistery's pivotal role in proclaiming Christian orthodoxy is precisely why L. finds the frequent appearance of Roman iconography so interesting. In select baptisteries, she suggests, the use of Roman motifs might reveal that local Christians retained and even celebrated Greco-Roman culture as an integral part of what it meant for them to be Christian. She does not propose a wholesale reinterpretation of baptismal iconography, but rather identifies occasional examples where the material evidence provides a needed 'counterbalance [to] the prevalent vision of what the rite of baptism and decorations of baptisteries were meant to achieve' (7).

The first chapter explores the baptistery at Cuicul in ancient Numidia, noting the lack of explicitly Christian motifs, the site's proximity to a Roman bath complex, and the incorporation of a donor inscription alluding to the imperial cult. For L., this evidence suggests that the local church 'presented itself as heir to the socio-economic and political power held by the Roman aristocracy' (76). She concludes that 'becoming a faithful "Catholic" in Cuicul meant affirming Roman traditions', though she admits there 'cannot be certainty on this point' (78).

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A substantial second chapter examines three baptisteries from Roman North Africa and Iberia, concluding that the iconographic programmes at these sites 'affirm an inclusive vision of Christianness by acknowledging Roman culture as a part of Christian identity' (153). The first case considers a chariot motif in the baptistery at Henchir el Koucha near Carthage as evidence that baptismal decoration unintentionally compromised official doctrine. While the ecclesiastical patrons may have intended to symbolise spiritual victory, the chariot motif carried cultural memories that subtly encouraged Roman customs, thereby undermining the more exclusive or hierarchical approach to religious identity found in orthodox liturgies. L. takes the material evidence seriously and refuses to leap to familiar allegorical interpretations, and yet it is entirely possible that the inclusion of Roman iconography complemented liturgical efforts to gradually replace these cultural connotations with a distinctively Christian interpretative framework.

The second case study argues that the appearance of Bellerophon in the mosaics of Myrtilis Iulia is further evidence of this subversive integration, but L. admits that the site in question cannot be confirmed as a baptistery. The third study returns to sound archaeological footing to argue that marine motifs in the baptistery at Milreu reveal locals were 'demonstrably keen to integrate their pre-Christian heritage into the self-image of the community' (152). Here, too, L. offers sufficient evidence to trouble traditional interpretations but, as she acknowledges, not enough to present a compelling case for the intentional celebration of Roman culture.

Ch. 3 considers the personification of the river Jordan in the famous cupola mosaics of the Neonian and Arian baptisteries of Ravenna. While ecclesiastical patrons at both sites embraced this motif, the Arian programme enlarges and foregrounds the river god. L. argues that this change indicates a startling shift away from subtle syncretism toward a deliberate aligning of Christian and Roman culture. L.'s careful attention to the material evidence is admirable, but her assertion that the patrons were 'commenting on the relationship between Christianity and classical antiquity' remains little more than a 'suspicion' (193).

L.'s coda underscores the fluidity of religious identities. Her application of this methodology to late antique baptisteries is a welcome effort to trouble the still waters of traditional historical narratives that often rely heavily upon the surviving texts of ecclesiastical elites. Yet the latter loom large in the background of L.'s work. Bishops and clergy commissioned and controlled these baptisteries, utilising Roman iconography in ways consistent with the reframing of cultural practices in their liturgies and sermons. From seascapes to shepherds, familiar Roman motifs were gradually imbued with new Christian significance precisely through their incorporation into liturgical sites that proclaimed an ideal if not yet fully realised Christian identity. Accounting for this ambiguity in the visual evidence, L.'s monograph extends our understanding of late antique identities as complex, navigating multiple social, cultural, ethnic and religious commitments in ways that defy straightforward classification.

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