

RESENHA

MORCILLO, MARTA GARCÍA. LAS VENTAS POR SUBASTA EN EL MUNDO ROMANO: LA ESFERA PRIVADA. Barcelona, Universidad de Barcelona, 2005, 372 pp. ISBN 8447530175.

Reviewed by **Pedro Paulo A. Funari***

This is the twentieth volume of the Collection Instrumenta (Col.lecció Instrumenta), published by the University of Barcelona since 1993 on archaeological and ancient history issues. It is by now an established scholarly series run by Professor José Remesal, comprising edited volumes and monographs, such as this volume, a PhD dissertation, supervised by the series editor and also by Jean Andreau and with the support of Géza Alföldy, among other leading classical scholars of our time. The result is a most comprehensive and updated discussion of auctioneering in the Roman world, as the author discusses a plethora of ancient sources – literary, legal, epigraphic, numismatic as well as papyri – and modern literature, as several hundred books and papers are referred to.

García starts by defining her subject – private auctions -, aiming at a sociological understanding of those activities. She goes back to the Greek and Hellenistic roots, discussing the Greek *prāsis*, *poléo*, *agorasmós*, among several technical terms. Turning then to the Roman world, García deals with military and public auctions at Rome. She studies all the Latin words and expressions linked to those activities: *ab hasta*, *sub hasta*, *uendere sub praecone*, *corona et hasta*, *subhastatio*, *bonorum section uel uenditio*. Private auction is approached first through the study of Plautus, Cato, followed by an analysis of each phase of auction as a three-action social practice: *proscriptio* (a public notice of sale), *licitatio* (a bidding), *addictio* (an assignment).

She continues studying banking and financial life, stressing the participation of private bakers at auction, paid with a fixed percentage of the total sum (*merces*). Particular attention is paid to the role of the herald (*praeco*), to his activities at private auctions, noting that there were no *kérukes* (heralds) in the Eastern part of the Roman Empire. Heralds represented a lord (*dominus*) or an official, as an officer of a private owner or of a magistrate (*apparitor*). Taxes on auctions are studied (*Quinta et uicesima uenaliū mancipiorum*), as well as regular markets (*nundinae*), comprising country deals. The architectural settings of auctions are dealt with, such as the *atria auctionaria*, but also *macella* (provision markets). Wine, animals, meat, textiles and several other commodities were sold at those auctions. Slave auction deserves a comprehensive study, in an

* Professor, Campinas State University, Brazil.

impressive mix of sources, from literary to archaeological and epigraphic. Auctions are related to economic conditions of people, to debts and poverty, and also to several legal ensuing issues. Artistic and luxury items were also sold through auctions, and she is keen to study them as social practices.

Auctions were used in the power struggles, as assets were confiscated and sold. García reaches the late period, particularly how the Christian literature portrays auctions. She concludes that both Pagan and Christian authors consider auctioneering a mean activity, linked to the most mundane and material world, as opposed to subtler and superior scholarly activities. However, García emphasises at page 204 that we have popular perceptions praising and honouring heralds, by heralds themselves, suggesting differences in perception within the Roman society. García deals with a whole series of issues and it is only possible in a review to discuss a few of them and even so briefly. A most important one is related to the trade importance of auctions in the Roman world (pp. 173-233) and this is so for several reasons. First, it had to do with the role of economic transactions in Ancient Times and García is keen to show how important they were. This monographic study contributes to challenge to interpretive models emphasising the supposedly primitive character of the ancient economy.

García discusses the periodicity of *nundinae* in big cities, such as Rome, Capua or Puteoli, and agrees with Saw and Andreau (p. 183) that they could not be only once a week or every eighth day. A possible solution to this problem is the existence of itinerant *nundinae* within each city, so that the street market took place once a week (or every eight days) in a different place, as is the case today in several countries. This would mean that the *atria auctionaria* were not so much specialised venues as any place used for auctions. Inscription CIL VI 9183, referring to the *argentarius Lucius Calpurnius Daphnus*, someone who worked at the *macellum magnum*, is complemented by an iconographic representation of fish auction, attesting to the importance of such activities for Roman staple supply. In the same direction, the famous *Oceanus Mosaic*, from a Roman villa at Bad Kreuznach (Mainz), witness the role of auctions in a remote city, Mogontiacum (Mainz), relating to fish-sauce. This and many other examples show the pivotal role of auctions for the Roman economy at a most local level and challenge thus the ubiquitous interpretations of Antiquity as marked by primitive economic exchanges.

García links those economic aspects of auctions to the socio-political context of the Roman world. She stresses the differences between private and public actors, even though there were cases of an in-between situation, as in the case of Cicero's *domus* at the Palatine. It is a well-known affair. The visual was a significant basis of thought and Cicero's *domus* acted as an intermediary between the politician and the public. The Roman populace organised their responses to the orator with reference to his house. One of Cicero's concerns as a homeowner was that, if the house was to be mediator between the individual and the community, then it had better be as visible as possible. This explains why Clodius, after the exile of Cicero in 58 BC, destroyed his

house at the Palatine and put Cicero's belongings to be sold by auction, even though no one accepted the offer to buy. This example is relevant for the discussion of auctions as part of power relations and also to acknowledge that there were assets beyond auctioneering, for different reasons, not least the subjective values associated with artefacts. This subjectivity is again clear in the case of art auctions, as suggests Cicero himself (VERRES, 2,4,7).

García's monograph is thus a most important contribution to the understanding not only of a rather neglected subject – auctions – but it also enables the reader to reconsider a whole series of issues relating to the Roman world and its study. First and foremost, it is clear that the use of material culture – be it sculpture, paintings or inscriptions – is essential for a comprehensive study of the ancient world. Then, a sociological approach is key to her interpretive proposals. We do need interpretive models to understand the ancient world, and our interpretations are tributary to those models. Last but not least, a command of the literature produced in different and often conflicting scholarly worlds is also essential not to simply reproduce interpretive trends. García uses German, Italian, French, English language studies, but also lesser known studies in Spanish, enabling her to use a peripheral outlook to produce innovative interpretive frameworks. Those lessons are useful for scholars everywhere. The reading of García's volume is thus a most recommend one.

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