

BMCR

Bryn Mawr Classical Review

BMCR 2017.05.18

At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Early Roman Empire

Heidi Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Early Roman Empire*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. x, 262.

ISBN9780190267148 \$74.00.

Review by

Joseph E. Sanzo, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München. jsanzo@ucla.edu

Preview

Scholars over the past few decades have produced myriad studies devoted to “magical” and “divinatory” texts and rituals from the ancient world. Such works have bestowed upon the ancient actors operating within these overlapping domains a host of monikers, from the more traditional – and theologically laden – rubrics “magicians” and “diviners,” to general lexemes with less overtly negative connotations, such as “ritual experts/specialists” and “freelance experts.”¹

A modified version of this latter phrase (i.e., “freelance religious experts”) resides at the analytical and hermeneutical centers of Heidi Wendt’s fascinating monograph. For Wendt, this category denotes “self-authenticating” specialists, who did not derive their authority from existing institutions, but from the various skills and sources of knowledge that they possessed – or at least convinced their audiences that they possessed.

Wendt’s book consists of a robust introduction, five chapters, a conclusion, a fairly extensive bibliography, and a useful subject index. In the introduction, she outlines the basic theoretical parameters of the category “freelance religious expert/expertise” in dialogue with related terminology (e.g., religion, Judaism, and Christianity). She also provides a summary of the contents of the chapters that follow. Much of the information she presents in this introduction is nuanced later in the book.

The first three chapters establish the primary contours of the category “freelance religious expertise” and situate this rubric within its historical context. In Chapter 1, Wendt makes her case for the expanded influence of “freelance religious expertise”

in the early Roman Empire. She shows that a wide range of authors from the late republic and early imperial period (e.g., Tacitus, Cassius Dio, and Ulpian) grouped various independent experts, such as *magi* and *mathematici*, in lists of unsavory characters. Likewise, magistrates during this period seem to have deployed a similar range of tactics for managing – if often unsuccessfully – these specialists. For Wendt, such sources tacitly attest to an operative category of individual actors, who were classified according to administrative concerns, not the content of their practices. She argues that the increasing interest in this category of individuals corresponds to their increase in influence – and perhaps also in number – during the first centuries of the empire. She cites several well-attested shifts during this period in order to account for this increase: e.g., ruptures in the traditional cults; mass migrations; and high rates of manumission.

Chapter 2 highlights one of the principle traits of these specialists: their ability to present themselves as “ethnically coded.” This chapter focuses on Jewish – and to lesser extents – Egyptian and other “foreign” specialists, who capitalized on early imperial Roman fascination with “exotic” wisdom and practices. Eschewing outmoded notions, such as Jewish “proselytism,” Wendt postulates instead the existence of Judean “freelance religious experts,” who referenced “ethnically coded” texts and heroes (e.g., the Hebrew Bible and Moses) in order to gain audiences among Romans. Wendt concludes that, by attending to these specialists and their self-representations through ethnic coding, we not only discover additional evidence for a plurality of Judean religious expressions (comparable to Greek, Egyptian, and Persian traditions), but we also render explicable the complaints of Cicero, Tacitus, Juvenal, and their ilk about non-Judeans adopting ostensibly Judean practices.

In Chapter 3, Wendt investigates the intersecting worlds of *magi*, philosophers, and interpreters of sacred traditions. Analyzing a vast array of sources, including the Derveni papyrus (which offers a rare firsthand account), Wendt demonstrates that “writer intellectuals” combined well-established traditions of esoteric wisdom, ethnic coding, philosophy, and hermeneutics. Among other insights, she traces the transmission of sacred texts and heroes (e.g., Chaldean Oracles, the Judean scriptures, and Pythagoras) among these more “intellectual” freelance experts. She stresses that these sacred traditions functioned as sites for various discursive practices, such as allegorical exegesis, myth-making, and the creation of pseudepigraphic texts. Wendt then calls into question the heuristic utility of “magic,” promoting instead the taxonomic subordination of the practices and skills typically deemed “magical” under the “religion of freelance experts.”²

In the two remaining chapters, Wendt shifts her analytical emphasis to case studies of ostensibly “Christian” “intellectuals,” whom, she argues, can be usefully understood within the context of “freelance religious expertise.” Chapter 4 focu

on the Apostle Paul. Wendt aligns our extant knowledge of Paul with the characteristics of “freelance experts” explicated in earlier chapters (e.g., the nature of his punishment, his allegorical interpretive method [including what Wendt calls “literary divination”], his claim to possess mysteries, his appropriation of philosophical ideas, and the services he provides [e.g., healing, prophecy, and spiritual discernment]). With this identification in place, Wendt then reorients interpretations of the historical Paul and the Pauline corpus. For instance, she usefully disassociates Paul’s rivals from anachronistic notions of “church” and doctrinal disputes, and instead understands these characters as rival “freelance religious experts.” Paul emerges from this chapter, therefore, as an individual who must utilize his skills adroitly in various domains (e.g., scriptural interpretation, philosophical wisdom, and ethnic coding) in order to achieve success over his rivals. Wendt, however, qualifies this association, noting that Paul appears to be unique in his interest in creating assemblies. She also cautions that the association with freelance experts should not imply that Paul was a “charlatan.”

Chapter 5 reorients discussions of “Christian” origins, diversity, and rivalry around her model of “freelance religious expertise.” Wendt argues that the second-century C.E. “writer intellectuals” at the center of early “Christian” controversies (e.g., Marcion, Justin, Valentinus, and Irenaeus) seemed to have operated within a robust network of specialists. Rather than emanating from – or conflicting with – a single “Christianity,” these specialists worked within a competitive context, in which they produced writings and founded communities that supported their interests (typically at the expense of their rivals). Wendt argues that this model complements the work of several scholars (especially Karen King, Daniel Boyarin, and Kendra Eshleman), who have called into question the very notion of discrete religious “communities” during this period (e.g., “Judaism,” “Christianity,” and “Gnosticism”). Wendt’s approach to Christian origins thus disassociates diversity and conflict from anachronistic notions of “religions” (or “religious communities”) and aligns them instead with individual agents.

In the conclusion to the book, Wendt provides a brief summary of her argument, a short discussion of the material evidence (e.g., amulets and *defixiones*) that attests to less “intellectual” or “philosophical” specialists, and a substantive criticism of the “religious marketplace” model.

Wendt has produced a valuable and well-written monograph, which explicates an important dimension – or cluster of dimensions – of ancient Mediterranean life. What emerges from her synthetic study is a compelling portrait of a complex and competitive world of ancient religious experts, imbued with “exotic” associations, and operating outside or on the margins of established institutions. Throughout the book, she demonstrates her impressive knowledge of religious studies, early imperial history and literature, and relevant scholarship (especially in the

anglophone tradition). It is also safe to say that Wendt has usefully developed the category “freelance expert” well beyond her predecessors in the field. Toward that end, Wendt not only defends her usage of the category, but she also successfully integrates it into her analysis. The rubric “freelance religious expert” – especially her insertion of the adjective “religious” – is central to her attempt to recalibrate scholarly taxonomies, so that the diverse items classed under our redescriptive categories “magic” and “divination” can be situated firmly within the broader world of ancient Mediterranean religion (specifically the “religion of freelance experts”). At the same time, her attribution of this label also to traditionally “religious” actors – perhaps, most notably, the Apostle Paul – recontextualizes such figures within a competitive world of ancient experts, who vied for social, political, and even economic capital. In short, this category allows her to postulate a unique theory of religious transformation in the early Roman Empire, reinterpret familiar texts and contexts, and redraw various categories (e.g., magic, religion, astrology, Judaism, and Christianity) that have played seminal roles in the study of antiquity.

Such a synthetic study will inevitably elicit scholarly disagreements with particular points or emphases. In my estimation, Wendt’s alignment of the phrase “literary divination” with Paul’s hermeneutical method not only pushes the evidence too far, but it also comes dangerously close to reifying the very facile constructs that she is attempting to reconfigure (esp. “magic” and its cognates).

More generally, while one might get the impression from the first few pages that Wendt will examine all “freelance religious experts,” it quickly becomes evident that she sets her gaze on one particular class of experts (i.e., “writer-intellectuals”). This restriction of the book’s analytical scope somewhat undermines the general theory of “freelance religious expertise” that she is ultimately promoting. In this vein, her study would have benefited from a more sustained treatment of the material record. To be sure, she mentions the so-called “Greek Magical Papyri” (PGM) several times in passing. She also devotes a considerable amount of space to the Derveni papyrus (Chapter 3) and helpfully discusses an inscription from Delos, IG XI.4 1299 (Chapter 2); however, these latter artifacts were by no means representative of the vast majority of specialists in antiquity – a point she duly concedes (145).

A more substantive analysis of handbooks of spells, such as the PGM, and applied ritual objects, such as amulets and *defixiones*, would have oriented her study around a larger group of experts and could have nuanced some of her key concepts. For instance, scholarship on the PGM and applied ritual devices from late antiquity has demonstrated the complex and fluctuating nature of what Wendt calls “ethnic coding” – especially ostensibly “Jewish” codes – in late ancient Egyptian ritual practice.³ This firsthand evidence challenges the facile application of analytical constructs, such as “exoticism” and “foreignness,” to the practices of at least so

specialists who were not “writer intellectuals.” In addition, Wendt mentions on several occasions the existence of networks or groups of experts. The material record offers additional evidence for such networks. Inscribed amuletic gems and *defixiones* passed through several stages of production (e.g., the cutting of the object, the inscribing of the image [if applicable], the inscribing of the words, and the performance of the ritual). As scholars have noted, these stages probably often involved multiple actors – presumably “religious” experts and “non-religious” experts – operating in close relation to one another.⁴

These relatively minor criticisms, however, should not detract from the importance of Wendt’s volume for subsequent research. Wendt ought to be congratulated for providing a viable alternative to the “religions” model that has for too long dominated scholarship of the early Roman Empire.

Notes

1. E.g., D. Collins, *Magic in the Ancient Greek World* (Malden, 2008); D. Frankfurter, “Dynamics of Ritual Expertise in Antiquity and Beyond: Towards a New Taxonomy of ‘Magicians,’” in *Magic and Ritual in the Ancient World*, ed. P. A. Mirecki and M. W. Meyer (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 159–78; S. I. Johnston, *Ancient Greek Divination* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2008), 109–43.

2. For the subordination of “magic” under “religion,” see also e.g., D. Aune, “Magic in Early Christianity,” in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, pt. II. 23.2, ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1980), 1507–57, at 1516.

3. E.g., L. LiDonnici, “‘According to the Jews’: Identified (and Identifying) ‘Jewish’ Elements in the *Greek Magical Papyri*,” in *Heavenly Tablets: Interpretation, Identity and Tradition in Ancient Judaism*, ed. L. LiDonnici and A. Lieber (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 87–108. Concerning the dynamics of “exoticism,” “foreignness,” and related concepts in late antique “Christian” ritual practice, see R. Boustán and J. E. Sanzo, “Christian Magicians, Jewish Magical Idioms, and the Shared Magical Culture of Late Antiquity,” *HTR* 110.2 (2017): 217–40. Of course, this latter article appeared too late for inclusion into Wendt’s book.

4. Á. M. Nagy, “Engineering Ancient Amulets: Magical Gems of the Roman Imperial Period,” in *The Materiality of Magic*, ed. D. Boschung and J. N. Bremmer (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015), 205–40, at 211; D. Ogden, “Binding Spells: Curse Tablets and Voodoo Dolls in the Greek and Roman Worlds,” in *The Athlone History of Witchcraft and Magic in Europe*, ed. B. Ankarloo and S. Clark, vol. 2: *Ancient Greece and Rome* (London: The Athlone Press, 1999), 1–90, at 5560.