
Review

The Republican Aventine and Rome's Social Order, by Lisa Marie Mignone, 2016. Ann Arbor (MI): University of Michigan Press; ISBN 978-0-472-11988-2 hardback \$70.00; 264pp., 12 figures, 2 tables

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Dogmatic and oft-repeated interpretations of Roman antiquity are of late experiencing a round of needed reassessment. Some of these paradigmatic readings are so common that they are simply accepted as immutable, universal facts. Lisa Marie Mignone does Roman studies a great service by challenging one such dogmatic reading of the Republican city of Rome, namely the characterization of the Aventine Hill as a 'plebeian district'. Mignone's bold book aims to assess the evidence and thought processes that led to the characterization of the Aventine as a working-class neighbourhood, as well as to attempt to contextualize the reading of the Aventine better in both modern socio-political ideation and current scholarship.

Mignone's investigation of the Aventine and its characterization begins by confronting the standard treatise on the southernmost of Rome's hills (Merlin 1906). The argument that proceeds from there is largely negative, in that the author aims to disprove Merlin's reading of the Aventine by assembling a range of evidence that demonstrates that the idea of an urban district that is strictly segregated in socio-economic terms is not tenable. Mignone introduces the Aventine Hill (pp. 3–6) in order to situate it topographically with respect to the city of Rome. The introduction also gives the reader a preview of topics on which the author will expand further, namely the nature of the 'plebeian Aventine' construct (pp. 6–10) and the problematic issue of using the term plebeian to describe a district of an urban centre (pp. 11–13).

If the Aventine is known in the popular consciousness, it is likely due to its long connection to the so-called 'secession of the plebs' (*secessio plebis*), a political phenomenon of the fifth through third centuries BC that might be described as a general strike of sorts, in which the working-class Romans quit the city *en masse*, leaving aristocratic patricians to their own devices. In carrying out these secessions, the plebeians sought better conditions for themselves, including better legal terms for the plebeians and access to magistracies (p. 17). In chapter 1, Mignone examines the secessions themselves from a literary point of view. The spatial dynamics of these secessions represent a key

aspect of this discussion, since the plebs were thought to physically quit the city (*urbs*) of Rome and go elsewhere. Where, in fact, they went proves to be critical to Mignone's discussion of the nature of the Aventine. The first secession (in 494 BC) has the plebs removing to the *Mons Sacer* [Sacred Mountain], returning only after an aristocrat named Menenius Agrippa negotiates with the patricians on their behalf. The most likely location of the *Mons Sacer* is a hill along the course of the Anio river, some three miles from the centre of Rome. While most of the textual sources situate this event on that hill, other versions—notably that of Piso—locate these events on the Aventine Hill (p. 21). This seems to be a mistake, but one that nonetheless has had its implications. The second secession (449 BC) saw the plebs quit Rome and march to the *Mons Sacer*, only then to march through the city again en route to the Aventine Hill, thereby occupying it. Mignone reminds the reader that the first-century BC readership of the historian Livy's telling of this event would be quite familiar with the martial history of the Porta Collina, through which the plebs would have marched on their way to the Aventine (pp. 29–30). With the resolution of the second secession, the reintegration of the plebs into Roman society is significant and brings about a strong connection between the plebs and the Aventine itself, at least within the minds of ancient authors (p. 32). This strong link does not survive close analysis, however, as it seems that much stronger associations could be drawn between plebeian secession and other hills—namely the *Mons Sacer* and the Janiculum Hill (p. 35). Mignone even allows that, given available sources, historians may have played a role in overemphasizing the plebeian nature of the Aventine (p. 38) and that ancient authors like Livy himself may have been aware that it was Piso who authored the myth of plebeian secession to the Aventine (p. 43). Since Late Republican authors provide the textual accounts of earlier Republican history, it is of interest that their awareness of contemporary events also colours their interpretation of the past. For instance, the flight of Gaius Gracchus to the Aventine in 121 BC represents a significant event in the tradition of the Aventine as a landscape of resistance, since it occurs closer to the time of late Republican historians like Livy.

The second chapter focuses on the *Lex Icilia de Aventino*, a Roman law of 456 BC. This law, promulgated by one Lucius Icilius, aimed to create land parcels on the Aventine that were assigned to plebeians, at least according to the ancient sources. This narrative, preserved in the text of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, is central to the notion of a plebeian Aventine (p. 51). Mignone analyses this law in the context of Roman land confiscation and later Republican laws. The fifth-century BC law and its details may well

be unknowable, but Mignone argues against the validity of the notion that the *Lex Icilia* converted the Aventine into a plebeian district.

The third and fourth chapters move away from the early Republic to the final two centuries of the first millennium BC. A combination of literary, epigraphic and archaeological evidence is examined, with the goal being to argue that the Aventine was not homogeneous at all, but rather a heterogeneous urban district. Chapter 3 focuses on famous residents of the Aventine, including the poet Ennius as well as the family of the Sulpicii Galbae. The analysis here is strong and the interweaving of evidence is cleverly done, in that it paints a picture of the later Republican Aventine that helps us envision its realities. The available sources suggest a close integration of various socio-economic groups on the Aventine. In chapter 4, Mignone addresses the archaeological remains of domestic architecture on the Republican Aventine and in the city of Rome more broadly. Of particular interest is the Roman *domus* located at Largo Arrigo VII that is commonly referred to as the 'Casa Bellezza'. Of this ancient structure, parts of the crypto-porticus survive and they are indicative of what was once a substantial structure with high-quality decorations of the first century BC. The fact that this well-appointed house is located on the Aventine furthers Mignone's argument that the hill is not an exclusively plebeian district and that its socio-economy was heterogeneous. Indeed, the review of the orbit of Republican elites combined with the presentation of elite domestic architecture makes this point quite strongly.

In chapter 5 the difficult issue of Rome's urban organization—or lack thereof—is addressed with respect to the Aventine Hill. This discussion ranges from the lamentations of ancient authors who objected to Rome's seemingly disorganised layout to a review of twentieth-century city planning models. Since Mignone is interested in demonstrating heterogeneity in urban layouts, the layout of Pompeii is used as a surrogate for Republican Rome. This comparison demonstrates that Pompeii exhibits a decided admixture of elite and non-elite establishments within its urban fabric, and Mignone reminds us that Scipio Africanus himself had a butcher's shop at his front door (Livy 1982, 44.16.10). The imperial evidence of the Regionary Catalogues and the Severan Marble Plan are discussed, demonstrating further how fragmented the archaeological record of Republican Rome actually is. The question of how a peaceful balance was maintained in an ancient city like Rome is addressed and the 'integration of elite and non-elite' offers the potential for fruitful future studies that aim to contextualize the sociology and planning of the ancient city (p. 179). In the epilogue, the Aventine Hill is framed as a touchstone of resistance within the context of modern dissident movements. This includes the self-styled fourteenth-century tribune of Rome Cola di Rienzo, Simon Bolivar,

French revolutionaries of the nineteenth century and opponents of Benito Mussolini in 1924. In the case of Bolivar it is indeed interesting that willful disregard of the historical sources led scholars 'to insert the Aventine into the cultural topography of Latin American liberation' (p. 196). This wish to render the Aventine as the archetypal plebeian landscape is indeed strong and cuts across many temporal and cultural boundaries. As Emilio Gabba noted (1981, 13), places and monuments assume a legitimizing valence in legendary and historical events narrated by historians like Livy and clearly these assumed meanings are long-lived.

Mignone's monograph on the Aventine Hill is thought-provoking and examines a range of source material. The author arrives early at the notion that Merlin's characterization of the Aventine as the Roman plebeian district par excellence should be rejected by scholarship and that more contextualized readings of the Aventine Hill (and Republican Rome) should be sought. The case studies that are offered in support of this claim are effective and it seems that the notion of the Aventine as the 'plebeian hill' ought to be banished from our discourse and be taught instead as an artefact of how we study ancient Rome. Mignone's work performs an even greater service, not only in reexamining dogmatic notions of ancient Rome, but also prodding us to offer more nuanced and holistic readings of the ancient city as a whole. The author's critiques of the state of scholarship with respect to the remains of domestic architecture in the Republican city is but one area where more work must be done. In a recent review Mary Beard noted that the field of Roman topography 'can seem narrowly arcane'—a fair point about a field that has its beginnings in the Italian Renaissance (Beard 2017, 18). Lisa Mignone shows us that Roman topography is indeed still relevant for those who wish to understand the city of Rome and the wide array of diverse and heterogeneous people who lived in it.

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