

Hope, Bowen, and the other contributors to the volume are often too modest when describing the impact of their work at Kellis. This site informs not only our understanding of Roman and late antique Dakhleh but also of regions and cultures well beyond its reaches. Kellis has much to tell us about themes that continue to impact people across the globe, such as changes in religious beliefs and practices, strategies for adapting to changing environmental pressures, and the challenges of coping with the absence of adult men for extended periods of time.

The book is well illustrated, including photographs, maps, plans, and charts, many of them in full color. Additional illustrations were meant to be available online, though I could not access these using the web address provided. Specialists in the study of Egypt and Late Antiquity will find the chapters of the book accessible. While the chapters are well written, undergraduates, entry-level graduate students, and scholars working further afield may struggle with some of the content without additional scaffolding. I hope that they make the effort since Kellis and these experts have much to teach us, specialists and nonspecialists alike.

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Laura S. Lieber, *Staging the Sacred: Theatricality and Performance in Late Antique Liturgical Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. 424 pp. ISBN: 9780190065461 (hardcover). \$137.00.

Laura S. Lieber's *Staging the Sacred* is a pioneering book in several respects. First, it is a study with the rare focus of liturgical poetry, particularly hymnody. Second, it approaches its subject—the question of the experience of late antique liturgical poetry's performance—through a comparison of Jewish, Christian, and Samaritan traditions that is masterful, effective, and unprecedented in its scope. Most radically, Lieber's book "constitutes an appeal to . . . the imaginations of those who composed, performed, and beheld these texts in antiquity, but also the imaginations of those who read them in the present" (396). Given the erudite and myriad skills (linguistic, papyrological, paleographical, archaeological) required to be a historian of premodernity, seldom do we scholars allow ourselves to deal in educated speculation. Lieber's work demonstrates why scholarly imagination is so

crucial: rather than requiring a sacrifice of erudition, she proves that engaging in imaginative exercises can breathe new life into old material.

Lieber begins by clarifying several key matters of context. First, she argues that theater and public spectacle (mime, pantomime, oratory, games, etc.) were ubiquitous features of public life in Late Antiquity, and that Christian, Samaritan, and Jewish rituals alike drew from these features, thereby inadvertently blurring the line between “secular” and “religious” genres of performance. Thus, Basil of Seleucia, for instance, boldly pronounced the church a “theater”; likewise, purpose-built secular performance sites deeply influenced the structures of synagogues, as is evident from both texts and archaeology. Authors thus employed theatrical tools and performative strategies in their writings, knowing that educated and uneducated audiences alike would intuitively understand them, as theatricality was part of “the air they rarely realized they breathed” (5). To Lieber, the composition of the liturgical poetry of Jews, Christians, and Samaritans reflects their authors’ corresponding eyes toward performance, whether they composed in Hebrew, Greek, Syriac, or Jewish Palestinian Aramaic. To Lieber, no matter what your religion was, theatricality was fundamental to your experience as a late antique person, and thus it infused these contexts equally.

Lieber’s focus on the theatricality of “the liturgical canon” (392) brings a fresh reading to texts so often eschewed by scholars as being less serious than patristic or rabbinic prose works, or as impenetrable because of their poetic form. Lieber scrutinizes liturgical poetry for latent indications of “enactive reading” (314); in this way, *Staging the Sacred* recovers “traces” of embodied repertoire, to use Diana Taylor’s nomenclature (293). Lieber, more specifically, finds spatial and sensory invocations and observes moments of ekphrasis, character development, and narrative invention, compression, expansion, and ellipses within this poetry; she often dives into extensive, close readings of particular strophes, prayers, or hymns from the three different traditions. An exemplary moment is when she describes the *deixis*, the gestural specification, of the word *this* throughout these corpora, as in “*This* is my body,” or “*This* is the Torah which Moses set before the children of Israel,” or “*This* is the bitter herb” (353). To Lieber, even the most seemingly mundane verbal elements reveal the fundamental theatricality of poetic recitation.

Some of Lieber’s analyses, however, still leave us (or at least this medievalist) wanting more. For example, her brief section on “embodied gender” (236–37) suggests that late antique people performed female voices for their

emotionality, and then she analyzes corresponding emotional valences of gesture. There is a rich scholarly historiography of late antique emotion, gesture, and gender that Lieber could have drawn on to expand these tantalizing arguments. Moreover, since she is interested in the diachronic legacy of late antique ideas (in her conclusion especially), expanding these two overlapping sections on gender and gesture would be useful in connecting to the work of Caroline Walker Bynum on *ethopoeia* and medieval women's voices, and even to that of Judith Butler on gender and performance. In another example, Lieber discounts the performed, polemical orations against theatricality delivered by Chrysostom and Tertullian, arguing that, despite their protestations, liturgy remained fundamentally theatrical. But what of Chrysostom and Tertullian's anti-Jewish claims that synagogues were hotbeds of theatricality, and churches were not? This distinction could have been a fruitful avenue of inquiry for complicating our understanding of late antique theatricalities and their legacy.

Lieber boldly argues, moreover, that it is the very theatricality of liturgical poetry that propels the intensifying popularity and contagion of these religions in Late Antiquity (17, 50, 323). Yet she doesn't detail precisely how this appeal might have worked on the public. This is largely because her book actually refrains from imagining the experience of the audience, instead dwelling on the performative intentions of the author or the experience of the performer. She defines *theatricality* as the dynamic between performer and audience, and the "author's evident awareness of audience engagement in a public venue" (10), where "the space between the pulpit (the *bimah*, the ambo) collapses, and the congregation in some sense steps onto the stage" (111). But Lieber never addresses this "feedback loop" between author, actor, and audience from the audience's perspective. The reception of performance, to Lieber, is only understood through the author's intentions.

Efforts to imagine the audience's experience would necessarily be speculative—there are, of course, no personal diaries or video recordings from Late Antiquity. But Lieber's silence on the subject seems to come from the fact that she cannot break from the fetters of her texts. She repeatedly acknowledges that scripts "represent a starting point in the theatrical experience, not culmination" (385). Even so, the words of texts dominate her analysis. No images are reproduced in her book, even though Lieber assures us that certain textual descriptions are "crystalized" in visual art (196). Likewise, there is little acknowledgment that some of the poetic texts might

have been sung, expressed in melodic sound.¹ Moreover, there is no exploration of the material transmission of these texts, what ancient or medieval manuscripts' design, punctuation, or use might indicate about their performance or oral vs. written nature. Though spaces are analyzed, Lieber does not describe the movements of bodies through space past artworks or mosaic floors, possibly smelling scents and/or singing songs all the while.² Asking for performance-as-research might be too much for a historian trained in text study, but some compilation of the audience's cumulative extra-textual experience could have been helpful.

Another obstacle to Lieber's imaginings of late antique experience might be that she often uses misplaced anachronisms to bolster her speculations. It is not that Lieber does not know that performances are contextually dependent; she astutely points out that our modern notion of performance—in the concert hall, the theater, or the academic lecture hall—enforces a decorum that stifles acclamatory impulses (317n76). Indeed, her observation that moderns prefer our audiences passive goes a long way in explaining what late antique performance was *not*, which is fantastic. Yet, contradictorily, Lieber nevertheless assumes that we can use other modern understandings—contemporary cross-cultural business communication through gesture (289), or modern call-and-response songs (315), or the reception of a Eugene O'Neill play by a 1988 Chicago theater critic (346)—to comprehend premodern perceptions of performance. If the premodern audience was active and the modern audience is passive, their perceptions cannot be identical.

Lieber does great work detailing late antique ideas on mime and pantomime (309–13), arts that we very rarely witness in the modern era. How might those have affected premodern audiences, or performative style, or expressions of text through movement? Lieber cites William B. Worthren's *The Idea of the Actor* (231) to explain how liturgical poets would script character, but character in a premodern landscape—mediated by masks and filled with choruses and allegorical personifications—greatly differs from Worthren's more contemporary notions. Lieber entitles a chapter "Method Acting" (230–89), a term that not only remains undefined in her book but

1. A great recent example of work that takes sound into account is Kim Haines-Eitzen, *Sonorous Desert: What Deep Listening Taught Early Christian Monks—and What It Can Teach Us* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

2. Two great examples of such interdisciplinary study are Jonathan S. Abel and Bissera Pentcheva's "Icons of Sound" website, <https://ccrma.stanford.edu/groups/iconsofsound>, and Bissera Pentcheva's "Enchanted Images" website, <https://enchantedimages.stanford.edu>.

also is unacknowledged as a fundamentally modern theatrical technique (where a passive audience watches Stanislavskian/Strasbergian actors create a realistic world played on a proscenium).³ Lieber only briefly mentions the Greek notion that actors were “hypocrites” (*hypokrite*). This, too, would have been a tremendous idea to unpack, to better consider whether late antique people perceived performers as truth-tellers, or charlatans, or mystics, or something else entirely.

Regardless of these omissions, Lieber’s book inaugurates a new era in the study of late antique hymnography. She has gotten the conversation started, taking Jewish, Christian, and Samaritan hymns out of their confessional and textual silos and enlivening our understanding of what the “fully-engaging experiences, inseparable from . . . performance” (348) of this liturgical poetry might have been. Scholars: let’s follow the trail Lieber has blazed.

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Robert Wiśniewski, *Christian Divination in Late Antiquity*. Translated by Damian Jasiński. Social Worlds of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam Press, 2020. 288 pp. ISBN: 9789462988705 (hardcover), ISBN: 9789048541010 (ebook). €129,00, €128,99.

Robert Wiśniewski’s *Christian Divination in Late Antiquity* is a compelling analysis of the methods by which late antique Christians sought to know the future in the fourth through the sixth centuries. Following an introduction and a chapter on the historical and legal contexts for the emergence of Christian divinatory practices, each of the remaining six chapters is devoted to a distinct type of prognostication: prophecy, bibliomancy, how-to manuals, lots, interrogation of demoniacs, and incubation. Each chapter lays out evidence to support Wiśniewski’s two major theses. First, he gives the lie to the dominant view “that Christian divinatory practices were based on the commonly known and readily accessible pagan models” (251). Christian foretelling was not simply a reshuffling of pagan usage; one did not grow directly from the other. Second, Wiśniewski examines the “remarkably close

3. See, for instance, Isaac Butler, *The Method: How the Twentieth Century Learned to Act* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022).