

**Review of D. Lehoux, *What Did the Romans Know?* University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2012.**

By Karin Verelst\*

This book is a jewel. Not because of the evident relevance of its subject matter for historians of science, but because of the explicitly philosophical questions it raises, and its earnest attempts to answer them. Lehoux does not simply want to give us a description of the at first sight often weird ideas on nature that the Romans developed throughout the “classical” period (200 BC-100 AD). He wants us to understand why what we now might call Roman science makes perfect sense both practically and theoretically — from a Roman point of view.

How, indeed, can an utterly rational people like the Romans not only believe in, say, divination, but moreover claim that there is plenty of empirical evidence to support that belief? *This book (...) accordingly focuses on the twin strands of how facts come to be, and where they stand in relation to the larger world in which they find themselves. Because of its rather extreme foreignness, ancient science in general promises to be a fruitful ground in which to examine these foundational questions (...) History informs philosophy and philosophy history* (p. 2). An intricate tapestry of in depth historical research concerning Roman medicine, astronomy, judicial theory and theology, interwoven with philosophical questions regarding the nature of experience and argumentation arises, in which the ideas discussed are connected directly to our own scientific concerns and our deeply ingrained philosophical beliefs structuring them.

The author presents a refreshingly frank approach to the philosophical debates he engages in, and deliberately refuses to take the easy vantage point from which the historical data can be interpreted as witnesses to the evolution from a more primitive scientific stage towards our own more enlightened state. A nice example is the treatment Lehoux gives of the Roman concept of natural law, and the philosophical analysis of the concept ‘natural law’ as such, presented on that occasion. Common knowledge has it that the idea of natural law is an early modern invention, related to the rise of modern astronomy and physics. But Lehoux shows that, if we restrict ourselves to these two fields, many of the statements in the ancient sources are truly lawlike, even when not explicitly called ‘laws’. When we look into domains that are not scientific by present-day criteria (astrology, divination), laws also abound. A meticulous discussion about what makes some statement into a law follows, and in what respects modern natural laws are held to be different from ancient ones. Lehoux makes explicit the criteria used by different authors on the subject and sees if and how they apply to certain statements taken to be or not to be natural laws. He shows that the distinction in the end is always made by virtue of content, never merely by means of formal (“lexicographical or philological”) criteria alone. The careful and unbiased procedure offers something to the philosopher of science, in that it lays bare not only the Romans’, but also our own hidden assumptions governing the use of the ‘law’-concept (p. 61 sq.).

The first and the last chapters of the book address methodological and philosophical questions often passed over in silence by historians of science, to their own detriment, because their own understanding of the past is embedded in their present ways of understanding the world they live in (pp. 225-6). Lehoux introduces the post-Kuhnian

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term “worldmaking” in order to describe the relations between “facts” and the mental structures unifying them: “The contexts, I argue, are everything” (p. 9). He nevertheless strongly argues against a relativist position with respect to historiography. In a very subtle elaboration of arguments, the author explains why relativism is in the end ontologically untenable, while at the same time arguing for its epistemological usefulness. The position that ensues is in itself a worthy contribution to the ongoing debate.

The book is not an easy read, even though well written. Philosophers might stumble over Latin sources that are quoted abundantly. Methodological issues are sometimes dwelled upon at a length that might appal the more historically inclined reader. More seriously, it remains unclear why certain subjects are discussed in detail while others are not mentioned at all. Take, e.g., the crucial Roman link between the observer and the judicial witness to a court (cfr. Chapter 4). Lehoux recognises this link as rhetorical, but why does he not make the evident connection to the art of memory, in which not only both the visual and the mnemotechnical aspects of these two functions coincide, but which is itself a cornerstone of Roman scientific culture, as is clear from the works of two key authors — Cicero and Quintilian — to which Lehoux often refers? But nevertheless: strongly recommended.