

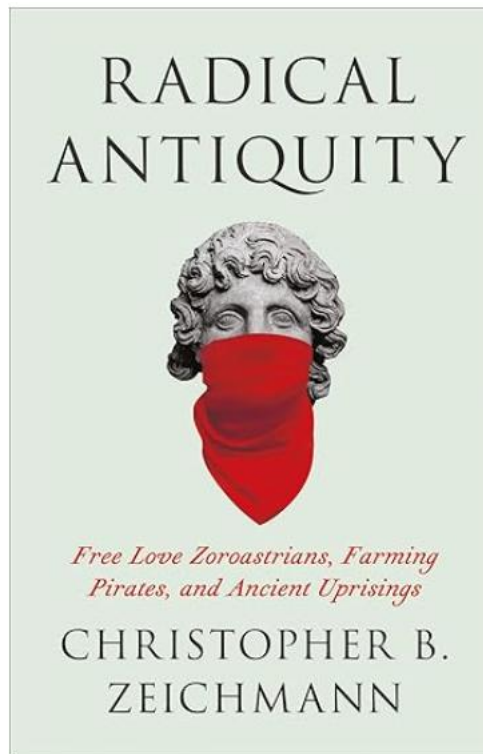
Radical Antiquity: Free Love Zoroastrians, Farming Pirates, and Ancient Uprisings

Christopher B. Zeichmann

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Gramsci (1971) wrote about the importance of studying the history of the subaltern classes of the world, since most existing histories, being constructed so to speak by the victors, tends to silence or distort their voices. Since then, of course, the study of history has been revitalized and we not only know more about the poor and downtrodden people of the past but we also appreciate more how important their contributions to society and their lives in their own right. Christopher Zeichmann's *Radical Antiquity* continues in this vein with an attempt to reassess various sets of people in the past whose attempts to live their lives according to their own beliefs has represented a threat to ruling elites who, to nullify that threat, have misrepresented what they were aiming to do. This is his main thesis and it is presented and supported by a number of case studies which are based on existing scholarly work and radical re-readings of official or at least widely accepted reports. This is combined with an easy-to-read writing style and the decision to keep the fifty plus pages of notes tucked away at the end. The result is appealing.

The case studies are divided between chapter length studies and shorter efforts, which are called interludes. The chapters cover Spartacus and the slave community, the Therapeutae and Essenes, Cynic philosophers, Mazdakites, the Circumcellions and Cilician pirates. The interludes have the region of Phrygia, the Sámi people and the fall of Rome in Britannia. If the main body of the book concentrates on the Mediterranean

region (albeit with some notable exceptions), then this is perhaps explained by the fact that the author teaches both history and religious studies at Toronto Metropolitan University and, hence, would be expected to be familiar with the world of the bible. His other books would support this view and two are noted on the back cover: *The Roman Army and the New Testament* (2018) and *Queer Readings of the Centurion at Capernaum* (2022).

If the book has a fault, it is that many of the individual studies can suffer from a reductionist view that they are all manifestations of the principles outlined by James C. Scott in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2011). Indeed, this connection is made explicit in the first interlude on Phrygia, in which Zeichmann questions whether communities of people living there could be classified as Anatolian Anarcho-Primitivists (pp.75-84). Scott characterized the supposed state of Zomia, based on upland Southeast Asia, as remote from lowland attempts at dominance, a place of refuge for those seeking to escape the latter and a place where people had their own way of doing things that enabled them to fend off attempts by outsiders to assimilate them within imperial borders, as the Wa people, for example, were able to escape becoming part of the British Empire. Zeichmann describes the Phrygians as living on a plateau, accepting people who had fled adjoining oppressive polities and "... they actively impeded the efforts of the occupying power to integrate the region into their own networks of power (p.77)." This is quite a strong argument but it could also be made for people of unorthodox religious, political or philosophical beliefs who took refuge in the desert and the democratic nature of life on a pirate ship or the rebel slaves of the Servile Wars. One might also refer to Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* (1959), which made the case that opposition to centralized power was an antecedent to organized labour and revolutionary politics. Given the extent to which contemporaneous or subsequent authors were willing to pour opprobrium upon these groups, then they were certainly seen as dangerous by elites. In Zeichmann's telling, although this aspect of his argument is a little less well supported, his communities were closer in spirit to Gramsci than Hobsbawm in that they had their own ideologies that were quite coherent and were not hampered by a lack of a broader understanding of their own positions.

This book is full of delightful facts that were new to me at least and I particularly enjoyed learning about the women who would marry a village and what their lives were like. I am willing to accept the overarching premise of the author and recognize the work as a valuable addition to the study of history from below.

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