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Review of: Aetna And The Moon: Explaining Nature In Ancient Greece And Rome by Liba Taub

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Aetna and the Moon: Explaining Nature in Ancient Greece and Rome by Liba Taub
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not definitive. Instead, it seems that the generality of the content of these sources is sufficient to explain their independent emergence and flourishing in different traditions, without the need to connect them.

Lehoux’s work is divided into two sections. Part 1, entitled “Parapegmata and Astrometeorology,” roughly a quarter of the work, contains his introductory and interpretative work. The more substantial Part 2, entitled “Sources,” includes a catalogue of extant parapegmata, presenting the actual texts and their translations, with accompanying visual documentation where appropriate. It is this section that is a particularly significant contribution to the field, as it contains a near-complete presentation of the various sources known today. Over eighty extant parapegmata are included, grouped according to a seven-fold classification (p. 147): astrometeorological, astrological, astronomical, other, reports of, related texts and instruments, and dubious. This classification is deliberately distinct from earlier groupings, such as those made by Rehm (1949) and Degrassi (1963). Lehoux does not distinguish between the inscriptional and the literary, and as a natural consequence he groups according to application rather than by morphology. The work concludes with two useful appendices (containing authorities and cross-references), a comprehensive bibliography, and a useful index of astrometeorological features.

Lehoux’s prose is colorful, and he darts effortlessly between the modern and the antique. He peppers his discussion with personal anecdotes and contemporary references (noticeably often Canadian): a description of Canadian national radio’s annual interview with a notorious Saskatchewan farmer; the pile of Old Farmer’s Almanacs stacked on the bookshelf of his wife’s grandmother, Mary McLeod; Dutch birthday calendars; or the quintessential verse “Monday’s child...” These inclusions are complemented by creative section headings: one of the more playful is “The Rain in Attica Falls Mainly under Sagitta” (Ch. 1). In addition, Lehoux’s epigraphs, ranging from Chaucer to Kepler to Pynchon, reveal that this subject is one that has been much on the author’s mind. Through these touches, Lehoux shares something of the enthusiasm and grip of this arcane subject. His engagement reveals a sincere determination to convey something of the vitality and passion with which this tradition was pursued in early times.

Lehoux’s contribution will no doubt stimulate further research in this area. More comparison and investigation will develop our understanding of the trajectories of this tradition and its nature of its intercultural interactions. Given the incidence of such literature in early cultures, he regards parapegmata as a cultural phenomenon. Lehoux is ambitious in his aims; he does not just concentrate on the Greek and Roman traditions but widens his search to consider how these cultures possibly interacted with and were influenced by other traditions. Given Lehoux’s cultural sweep, the reader is left wondering about other traditions in early times that it might have been useful to cover. In particular, the early Indian tradition may contain relevant material. For example, the sixth-century Indian scholar Varāhamihira compiled a large work entitled the Brhatsamhitā, which contains sections with related themes dealing with weather and solar and stellar positions. Another text, referred to by the general appellation the Gargasamhitā, may be a further profitable source.

All in all, Lehoux’s overriding theme is to show that the development of and cross-cultural currents in astrometeorology move differently from those in astrology and astronomy and that this may be easily explained. It may simply be a question of the setting in which these traditions were practiced. They weren’t maintained by professional intellectuals but, rather, by individuals such as farmers and sailors whose influence on the intellectual culture was ultimately less noted. Indeed, this point is hugely relevant to the history of science: various astral traditions have different intellectual trajectories. In the case of astrometeorology, the substance of this tradition is utterly localized—weather patterns hold only for particular geographical regions and have little meaning beyond them; civic events, rituals, and festivals differ from culture to culture. In contrast, the traditions of astronomy, divination, and mathematics embody more universal (or at least easily adapted) and transferable knowledge. This may suffice to explain the distinction. Indeed, in the spirit of the book—right back at you, Lehoux: “In Hertford, Hereford, Hampshire, hurricanes hardly ever happen,” but what would those who live in the Mexican Gulf react?

Clemency Montelle


This short and engaging book is based on a series of three lectures that Liba Taub gave at
Oregon State University in the spring of 2007. Taub’s principal theme is the relationship of mythos and logos (approximately, “myth” and “reason”) in ancient understandings of nature. As she shows, this relationship was more complicated and of longer duration than one might imagine from the common story, which situated the emergence of philosophy, as of science, in the displacement of myth by rational explanation. Along the way, she has a good deal to say about the multiple genres that were available to an ancient writer for communicating science and the ways in which an author’s choice of genre might facilitate the exploration of the mythos/logos duality.

The first chapter discusses a range of genres, including published lectures, treatises, problem texts, letters, introductory teaching texts, and commentaries. Some of these have dropped out of use as common modes for doing or communicating science (the letter intended for wide distribution, the problem text, the commentary), while others are with us still. Much historiography of science has concentrated on the high road of the treatise, perhaps because it is a genre that moderns are comfortable with. Taub does a nice job of explaining the characteristics and uses of each genre and provides some detailed ancient examples. Historians of ancient science will not find much that is new to them in this chapter, but it is a good introduction for those who might be new to the study of ancient science.

Taub warms to her real subjects in the second and third chapters, which are devoted to the Aetna, an anonymous Latin poem about the volcano, and to Plutarch’s Greek dialogue On the Face on the Moon (hence the title of the book). As she points out, the Aetna has usually been studied by classicists, only rarely by historians of science. For Taub, the poem’s interest lies in the way it complicates the simple story “that in the Greco-Roman world poetry and mythology were rejected in favor of philosophy as a way to explain the world” (p. 32). At first, the common story seems reasonable, for the author of the Aetna castigates the poets for their extravagant fictions and their use of gods as explanation—their claims that Aetna is the home of a god and that the fire gushing out is Vulcan’s fire. For, the poet observes, “No craft so paltry have the gods” (p. 33). And yet the writer has chosen poetry as his medium for investigating and explaining nature and even ends the poem with a moral tale about the gods. Clearly, the situation is more complicated and more interesting than it seemed at first sight. Ranging from ancient critics of the poets, most famously Plato, to the most notable examples of ancient science in poetic form (Aratus, Lucretius, Manilius), Taub folds back layer after layer. The careful reader of Aetna and the Moon is likely to come away with a much richer understanding and appreciation of the roles of verse, myth, and religion in the ancients’ view of nature. One particularly intriguing aspect of Aetna is the long passage urging human beings not simply to gaze at the world but actively to seek understanding—to grasp the proof of things and search into doubtful causes” (p. 47).

Taub then turns to dialogue, a genre that naturally emphasizes inquiry. One of the challenges of Plutarch’s On the Face on the Moon is its form, that of a dialogue within a dialogue, in which the contents of an earlier conversation are recalled. Another is the contrast between the main body of the text, in which astronomers such as Aristarchus and philosophers such as Clearchus are cited by name and their views of lunar matters discussed, and the final mythic section. The interlocutors stop their walk, sit down on benches, and hear a story about the moon as resting place for the human soul when it is deprived of a body. Taub naturally turns to Plato’s Timaeus, the classical prototype of a dialogue using myth to construct a rational explanation of the cosmos. While Aetna and the Moon is ostensibly aimed at a nonspecialist audience, even specialists in ancient science and rhetoric are likely to come away with fresh insights. The turns of the argument are often arresting, and the use made of widely ranging scholarship is both graceful and timely.

James Evans


When I first began to question the divine authority of my master of acupuncture in the late 1970s, it was to the Huangdi nei jing (Yellow Emperor’s Inner Canon) that I turned to find an authentic source and commentary on what I was being taught. The Yellow Emperor is the most famous patron of classical medicine, one of the legendary culture bringers of a golden age in prehistory. If I imagined that I would find clarity in that ancient work attributed to him, I was to be deeply disappointed. In translation the writings appeared often repetitive, frequently contradictory, and rarely very systematic in setting out a coherent argument, despite the popular