

Introduction to the Roundtable: Daryn Lehoux’s “What Did the Romans Know? An Inquiry into Science and Worldmaking.”

Daryn Lehoux’s “What Did the Romans Know? An Inquiry Into Science and Worldmaking” (2012) is a slim volume, but it is in no way thin. A work in the history and philosophy of science, Lehoux offers a set of historical studies of select Roman scientific problems and texts (by such figures as Cicero, Lucretius, Ptolemy, and Galen) from the first century BCE to the second century CE with the aim of illuminating “the historical, intellectual, and experiential context of fact-making.” This focus on fact-making, on the “domains in which observation is [. . .] situated, understood, and processed,” is important because “that is where the world we perceive gets put together as a coherent whole” (Lehoux 2012, 2). Lehoux’s wager is that by studying ancient Roman scientific texts and even or rather especially those claims and observations that seem the most strange and foreign to us today – “How *do* we take seriously all those silly monsters, the dog-headed people, the spontaneous generation, the three-foot-long grasshoppers, the astrology, the divination?” he asks (Lehoux 2012, 14) – we can productively examine anew foundational questions in the history and philosophy of sciences.

Each of the three Academic Roundtable participants – Elizabeth Hamm (Saint Mary’s College of California), Courtney Roby (Cornell University), and Jacqueline Feke (University of Chicago) – hone in on some significant feature or features of the dense terrain Lehoux maps. Hamm offers a critical survey of Lehoux’s various studies and the major philosophical themes that weave through them. Among other observations, Roby introduces the voice of Rom Harré into the discussion Lehoux opens in order to foreground the role of taxonomy in scientific model-building practices. Feke, with her own interests and expertise in the work of the mathematician Ptolemy in mind, examines three elements of Lehoux’s argument: his proof of the existence of the concept of natural law in the Roman period (centuries before its hypothesized genesis); his discussion of the way Ptolemy’s epistemology responds to skeptical challenges; and, his own response to skeptical challenges (his advocacy of a pragmatic theory of truth and a coherence-based epistemology).

Work Cited

Lehoux, Daryn. 2012. *What Did the Romans Know? An Inquiry into Science and Worldmaking*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.