

Sanctuaries and Experience

Knowledge, Practice and Space in the Ancient World

Edited by Greg Woolf, Ilaria Bultrighini and
Camilla Norman

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*Knowledge, Practice and Space in
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Introduction

GREG WOOLF / ILARIA BULTRIGHINI /
CAMILLA NORMAN

Approaching Sanctuaries

Near the beginning of the project from which this volume has emerged, a group of researchers gathered together at the Max Weber Kolleg in Erfurt to discuss what use we should or could make of the concept of Sanctuary.¹ It included prehistorians and ancient historians, experts on the ancient Mediterranean and the Near East, archaeologists and specialists in religious studies. Our experiences and knowledge were different but our interests intersected. For two days we explored each others' starting points, and tried to find areas of agreement, or at least agreement over what we did not know.

The term Sanctuary itself, we found, has no canonical meaning in any of our disciplines. The English term is first attested in the fourteenth century CE, and it maps imperfectly onto cognate and non-cognate terms in various modern languages. Sanctuary, *sanctuaire*, *Heiligtum*, asylum and other such terms marked out a field of common interest, but they did not describe a single well-delineated category. There were also some specialised meanings that did not translate from one discipline to another. But there were points of broad agreement that can shape further discussion. We begin with three of these.

Firstly, these terms have in common that they describe institutions that are *anchored in space*. Most ancient peoples also had portable images of their gods, some even had portable altars or tabernacles, and sacred objects or books that could temporarily convert a given location into a focus of collective ritual action. There were also other sacred things like amulets and curse tablets that might be deployed in a variety of locations and situations. Sanctuary generally describes a fixed point in an inhabited human landscape, and often a place where that human landscape and a divine one are brought into a closer than usual relationship. These are what are sometimes called 'thin

1 At the meeting in 2015 we were particularly guided by presentations from Timothy Taylor (Vienna), Esther Eidinow (Bristol), Rubina Raja (Aarhus) and Cory Crawford (Ohio University). Thanks to all of them for getting us off to such a good start.

places' where worlds are made to touch, in what Rüpke in this volume terms focalisation. Very often the location of these places is 'explained' by narratives. Indigenous Australian tellings of the Dreamtime, Greek myths of the deeds of heroes, Hebrew stories of epiphanies to the patriarchs and Moses all localise moments of foundational significance in particular places. Quite likely many sanctuaries were places where those stories were developed and retold, pegs for collective memory and treasuries of *logoi* that were available to historians composing other kinds of narrative.² From the Hellenistic period on, there were pilgrimages too in which individual religious experience was formed and confirmed through personal encounters with places famous in myth.³ Journeys and narratives both established links between particular sacred places, generating sacred geographies that were experienced before they were ever mapped or described. Like other ancient geographies, these asserted the importance of synchronic relationships. Sanctuaries, severally and together, suppressed the distance of time, allowing the landscape to accumulate dense networks of religious significance.

Secondly, and as a consequence of the first point, these places were treated as *marked out as special*, separate from other lived environments. For Greeks this crystallised in the notion of a *temenos*, a space sharply delineated from the surrounding landscape but one that included much more than the temples which today are the more visible remains of many sanctuaries. Roman religious experts also established spaces – some permanent, some temporary – designated as *templa* – a term which again does not correspond to modern terms. Ditches and banks, often marked by bizarre structured deposits, marked out areas of many La Tène sites north of the Alps. How precisely the populations that built and used them understood the differences these boundaries established is now irrecoverable. What is clear is that sacralizing particular spaces was a very common means of creating a sanctuary in many ancient societies, but the ways in which this was understood and described varied considerably.

Sometimes the difference between sacred and non-sacred places was expressed in heightened senses of taboo, rules governing who might enter and who must not, and determining at what times access was permitted and to whom. Unexpiated pollution, foreignness, recent sexual activity, menstruation or the aftermath of childbirth, or simply a failure to perform the required preliminary purifications (which might include fasting, sacrifice, or prayer) all might prohibit or delay access. Many ancient Mediterranean sanctuaries were provided with washing facilities, as are mosques today, but at Eleusis would-be initiates prepared themselves with bathing in the sea and also sacrificed. Sanctuaries might be presented as dangerous places, especially for rule-breakers. But they were also on occasion places of refuge and asylum. Today the resonances of those terms probably mean more than their original religious connotations. The crea-

2 Orlin 2007; Bommas, Harrisson and Roy 2012; Dignas and Smith 2012; Cusumano *et al.* 2013. See also Eidinow this volume.

3 Hunt 1982; Frankfurter 1998; Elsner and Rutherford 2005.

tion of sanctuaries implies a sense of normal or profane space, just as a festival calendar brings into being days of normal work and routine.

A third commonality we identified was that sanctuaries were not simply places, but also spaces. From one perspective each sanctuary might be considered a point in the landscape, a point of contact between the ordinary and the sacred. But from another point of view sanctuaries were also bounded spaces, often subject to complex internal organization and zoning, spaces within which things happened that took place nowhere else, or where familiar activities acquired new and special significances. Communal dining is an obvious example of an activity that meant something different when it took place in a sanctuary. Ritualised commensality and/or drinking had many other functions in ancient societies from the overt equality of participants in Greek *symposia* and *syssitia* to the more hierarchical order of the Roman *cena* and distributions of food and wine by chieftains in European Iron Age sites.⁴ But dining within the sanctuary brought the gods to the banquets. On all this we could agree.

But we also found that Sanctuary is a fuzzy concept. Like any polythetic definition, ours draws attention to cases that resemble sanctuaries in some respects but not others. So at our scoping meeting in Erfurt we spent some time discussing cemeteries. These sites are typically clearly demarcated and, in some sense, special, they were often places within which certain activities were often proscribed and others required, and maybe even ‘thin places’ where contact with the dead might seem easier or a greater risk. Both sanctuaries and cemeteries were sites of particular ritual. Both might also be places of symbolic accumulation, spaces within which the living invested significant portions of their labour and wealth. Both kinds of spaces were closely integrated into the collective life of ancient communities. Many Greek sanctuaries were sites of mass gatherings during annual or penteteric festivals. The Roman festival of the *parentalia* might involve families eating a meal at a grave and sharing portions of it with deceased relatives. In a more sinister sense, graves were also one of the preferred spots at which to bury curse tablets. Yet despite these resemblances we were reluctant to consider cemeteries as sanctuaries. Perhaps it is the absence of the gods as opposed to ancestors, perhaps the highly specialised nature of communication that takes place there. Perhaps too the sense, in many of the cultures we knew about, that these things belonged to different realms. Roman augurs were forbidden to touch things to do with the dead. Many Mediterranean cultures located tombs away from the places where living mortals cohabited with the gods. The resemblance, or parallelism, between sanctuaries and cemeteries is real but there seemed some point in maintaining the distinction.

A second limiting case concerns those domestic residences in which cult regularly took place. At Çatal Hüyük in the Anatolian Neolithic, burials and signs of ritual activ-

4 Murray 1990; 2018; Slater 1991; Dietler 2010; Mastronuzzi *et al.* (this volume).

ity have regularly been found within houses.⁵ Serino's exploration in this volume of the sacred house at Himera shows a different way in which the domestic and the sacred could be combined. Household shrines are common in Roman houses, and there is a sense in which the *lararium* of a Roman mansion corresponds to a temple (as the *atrium* does to a *forum*), a place where images of gods were kept and occasionally worshipped. Yet it seems odd to treat part or all of a Roman house as a sanctuary: if we did we would have to count all those shrines at crossroads and rustic altars the same way.⁶ The concept of sanctuary would not mean much if it included everywhere that cult took place, because in ancient societies cult might take place almost anywhere.

These limiting cases indicate that our focus is on places considered as permanently special, rather than occasionally made so. Certainly, there are modes of ritual action that result in a sort of temporal sacralisation rather than a spatial one, and the same space may for a short time be treated as sacred, and then revert to mundane status. Many communal meals include a moment of ritual action such as the libation at a symposium, the glass left for Elijah at Seder, or the regular prayers of blessing and thanks that many Jews and Christians still say before meals. A public square might become the setting for a funeral or at least be closed to traders on a festive day. But these spaces are not pop-up sanctuaries, not even in the sense that Roman soldiers could build a turf altar and plant their standards in it as a focus of cult on the move. Sanctuaries did not last forever but they were built as if they would.

Sanctuaries in Human History

If we take the long view, sanctuaries are very ancient indeed. Cave paintings and carved rock shelters are among the earlier traces of communal ritual action. The dating and identification of early rock art and cave art is evolving rapidly, and the famous examples identified in western Europe have now been joined by examples from Indonesia, Australasia and the Americas. If the dates from Africa are at the moment more recent this may well reflect the limits of current research. Some of the most recent finds are more than 50,000 years old, and a few may even have been made by other species of humans. The time taken to create some of these images strongly suggests they were intergenerational projects. This is certainly true for much larger structures created by late Pleistocene and early Holocene hunter-gatherers and farmers. It has recently been suggested that sites like these may have provided foci for periodic gatherings of populations that in other seasons of the year were more widely scattered.⁷ Shared sanctuaries seem, from the beginning, to have been linked to shared senses of belonging and

5 Hodder 2010.

6 Van Andringa 2009; Flower 2017.

7 Wengrow and Graeber 2015.

community, perhaps also of kinship. A new separation of the dead from the divine seems to be a feature of this period. A few late prehistoric sanctuaries incorporate human remains into their structures, but these cases seem to be exceptional.

It has sometimes been suggested that the great investment of energy – especially of human labour but also materials – in these early monuments is a sign of the growing organizational power of agricultural societies, perhaps a complement to collective labour needed for clearing land and farming it, and also that megalithic monuments reveal new relationships with the land formed by populations that were more sedentary.⁸ This is possible, although the link between monumentality and agriculture now seems more complex as we appreciate the scale of some hunter-gatherer sanctuaries, such as Göbekli Tepe in Turkey, and as the history of agriculture itself seems less continuous in some regions, such as the British Isles. What all these sanctuaries have in common is the very long timescale, measured in human lives, over which they were used. Many sanctuaries were constructed over multiple generations, to the extent that sanctuary building might be considered as a ritual process, rather than simply the provision of spaces to be devoted to ritual. Over even longer timescales many sanctuaries were extended, repurposed, modified and even occasionally removed and re-sited. Given the very great commitment of labour and materials to the construction of archaic temples around the Mediterranean it is striking how often they were rebuilt again and again, and not only after episodes of destruction and collapse. Roman period structures often stand on the sites of Greek or Etruscan sanctuaries, and the Hellenistic and early Roman periods were major periods of temple building in Egypt. Like Mediaeval cathedrals, the most important ancient sanctuaries often seem to have been works-in-progress. Few major sites experienced a single moment of sacralization or completion.

The first historical societies – those marked by new versions of social inequality, by writing and in most cases by urbanism too – found new uses for sanctuaries. Special places, marked out by clear boundaries, existed within the cities of Bronze Age Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica, and were at the heart of the Etruscan and Greek cities built in the Iron Age. Mediterraneanists have long appreciated how sanctuaries were developed to mark the centres and boundaries of emergent city states.⁹ Sanctuaries only grew in number and variety in the centuries of demographic and economic growth, and as political and commercial and cultural horizons expanded. The Mediterranean world of the Hellenistic and Roman period knew sanctuaries at the centre of cities and in their suburbs, both grand rural centres and a mass of tiny religious spaces inserted into tiny spaces in urban topography and rural landscapes. It also witnessed an increased specialization as some sanctuaries became oracles, healing sites or places associated with dangerous crossings of mountains or the sea. There were sanctuaries

8 Sherratt 1990.

9 de Polignac 1984, translated and updated as de Polignac 1995. See also Alcock and Osborne 1994.

controlled by states, some controlled by sacred councils like the Delphic Amphictyony, some dominated by landowners or priesthoods. Late antiquity is characterised by yet newer modes of control and by the breakdown of a broad consensus that any god might legitimately have a place dedicated to his or her worship. Yet even as public cults deprived of funding collapsed, and some temples were attacked and vandalised, the Mediterranean sprouted a new generation of religious sites at the tombs of the martyrs and other eminent topographies.¹⁰

Sanctuaries and Structures

Sanctuaries also present some archaeologically distinctive features. Most were sites of intensive investment of labour and materials: one result is that in many cases sanctuaries were the first places to be identified by archaeologists. Around the Archaic Mediterranean the first cities rarely had any other large buildings. The gods were typically the first to receive grand houses made of fine stone, and roofs as well. Even in the Roman Near East, religious architecture dominated many cityscapes. The boundaries of sacred spaces were often elaborately signalled, by walls, ditches, images and inscribed markers.

It was common for the organisation, location and orientation of sanctuaries to have a cosmological significance. Paleoastronomers have gathered many examples of monuments oriented in relation to the solar year. More mundanely the placing of images and structures within the sanctuary (and also rules about where different grades of humans might stand) often expressed hierarchies of importance.¹¹

Most sanctuaries in the Mediterranean and the Ancient Near East included a central structure described as the home or house of the god, equated in some sense with human habitations and royal palaces. Like a cult statue, this was held to accommodate a deity without completely containing him or her. The major temples were the focus of considerable symbolic action, from destructions to rebuilding and repurposing. Historical writing in Greek and Latin tends to focus on the temples, and to a lesser extent on the cult statues, rather than the sanctuary as a whole. The long and complex histories of sites like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the Temple of Artemis in Jerash, the Samaritan Temple on Mount Gerizim and the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitol in Rome all make this point very well.

But there was more to a sanctuary than the house of the main deity. There were often other shrines and usually a mass of ancillary buildings. There might be places to store or display offerings, treasuries like those set up at Delphi, and the *favissae* into which Romans sometimes cleared offerings they did not wish to retain or destroy, or

10 For an example of the process, Sweetman 2010; 2015.

11 Scheid 1999; Van Andringa 2012.

the *genizah* where Jewish sacred texts were deposited. Written testimony attests to a vast range of objects, images, documents, cash and relics that might be amassed in sanctuaries. Images of the gods are just one category here, although one that has received a great deal of attention.¹² Facilities for washing and dining have already been mentioned: there were also kitchens and sometimes fountains too. Some buildings have been identified as accommodation for pilgrims and/or temple slaves and full-time attendants. The interior organization of sanctuaries was often designed to shape the approaches, processions and exits of visitors, and the views and perhaps sounds and smells that would encounter them at each stage.

More generally sanctuaries can be thought of in relation to the idea of structured deposition, the careful arrangement of objects, sometimes including human and animal bodies, that have been transformed by ritual action. Ritual has often been characterised as action governed to a high degree by prescriptive norms and ritual action as marked by an intense attention to detail.¹³ This is reflected in the material traces of ritual in sanctuary archaeology, often sedimented over long periods of use. These traces naturally represent only the final chapter of complex cultural biographies, and it is the work of imagination as well as interpretation to reconstruct the lived experience of sanctuaries. How would we imagine the Second Temple of Jerusalem without the anecdotes about it included in the Gospels? Our testimony for the routine use of Greek and Roman sanctuaries is surprisingly scarce.¹⁴ This is one gap this book seeks in part to fill.

The Sanctuary Project

The work on which this volume draws was funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation through an Anneliese-Maier Research Prize awarded to Woolf on the nomination of Professor Jörg Rüpke. Its activities were directed by Woolf and Rüpke and took place at a variety of locations as well as the Institute of Classical Studies in London and the Max Weber Kolleg in Erfurt where they were respectively based. Other activities funded or partly funded through this prize include the doctoral thesis of Csaba Szabó on sanctuaries in Roman Dacia,¹⁵ postdoctoral fellowships for Bultrighini and Norman, a summer school in Erfurt, and the production of a new account of Roman religion edited by Rüpke and Woolf.¹⁶ The project also co-funded a number

12 Gordon 1979; Scheid 1995; Estienne 2010; Mylonopoulos 2010; Kiernan 2020; Arnhold and Sporn this volume.

13 Bell 1992; Boyer 1994; Liénard and Boyer 2006.

14 Veyne 1983; Dubourdieu 1997.

15 Now published as Szabó 2018 and Szabó 2015.

16 Rüpke and Woolf 2021.

of meetings and conferences with other research groups, the acts of one of which has been published as *Sensorium. The Senses in Roman Polytheism*.¹⁷ The editors are delighted to acknowledge with gratitude the support of the Humbolt Foundation and the stimulus it has given to debate in this broad field.

The focus of the project grew out of a desire by Rüpke and Woolf to explore some of the intersections between the former's work on Lived Ancient Religion, funded by the European Research Council, and the latter's interest in the materiality of ancient religion in the very long term. A central aim was to ask how sanctuaries formed human experience and religious knowledge in the ancient world, and to do so by establishing conversations between a range of different disciplines including prehistoric and classical archaeology, social anthropology and ancient history, art history, Jewish and early Christian studies, and the history of religions.

Lived Ancient Religion arose in part from a dissatisfaction with accounts of ancient religion that focused on political institutions and prescriptive norms. In the ancient Mediterranean these approaches are sometimes termed *polis*-religion or public religion and have a long historiography. Rüpke and Woolf had both been involved in a critique of this perspective.¹⁸ Lived Ancient Religion offered a means of decentring the state, and exploring a much wider range of cognitive, literary and social engagements with ritual, especially those of individual agents.¹⁹ Julia Kindt says more about this context to the Sanctuary Project in her closing chapter.

Sanctuaries seemed a good point at which to explore these intersections since they were a common – perhaps universal – product of human societies, making them a good terrain for comparison. As sites of material accumulation and symbolic investment they also featured prominently in the archaeological record of many societies. Because they contain much of the early evidence for the cognitive activities of anatomically modern humans they had been central to recent debates on the archaeology of mind. For practical reasons, and to ensure a good fit with the Lived Ancient Religion project, we concentrated on the societies of the Mediterranean world and the Ancient Near East during the first and last millennia (BCE and CE), but looked more widely for inspiration.

Sanctuaries already had a place in the history of religions, even if only a few studies, such as Jonathan Z. Smith's classic study 'To take place', have set them in the centre of the enquiry.²⁰ Sanctuaries were commonly understood as places that were permanently special, even when no rituals were taking place. Epigraphic evidence in particular

17 Alvar Nuño, Alvar Ezquerro and Woolf 2021, based on a conference held at Universidad Carlos III in Madrid. We were also pleased to work with the CURERE network led by Dr Katell Berthelot (CNRS, Aix) and Jonathan Price (Tel Aviv), with whom we ran a joint meeting in Manchester.

18 Rüpke 2011; 2013; Woolf 1997; 2013; Rüpke and Woolf 2013. For other important critiques see Gordon 1990; Kindt 2009. For a response see Scheid 2016.

19 Rüpke 2016; Gasparini *et al.* 2020.

20 Smith 1987.

reveals several ways in which they were integrated into the lives of private individuals. Worshippers visited sanctuaries to make gifts in the hope of eliciting reciprocal help from deities; they might encounter those deities at a sanctuary in dreams, prophesies or theophanies; and they often sought cures or guidance from oracles. Petridou's chapter on Aristides brings out the potential complexity and nuance of these experiences which in his case combined physical sensations with a wider knowledge of Athenian as well as Pergamene traditions. None of this negates the significance of state action and communal decision-making in setting up, establishing and managing sanctuaries (indeed Petridou shows how aspects of this were appropriated by Aristides in reaching his own highly individualized understanding of his situation). Some rulers and states even sent embassies to oracles and most celebrated those of their citizens who were victorious in sacred games. But it is also clear from finds at Dodona and elsewhere that sanctuaries also catered to the needs and desires of individuals. Lived ancient religion was lived, at least in part, in a world structured by sanctuaries. Sanctuaries, conversely, provided resources that individuals might deploy in their own religious projects and to shape their own experiences of the divine.

The sanctuaries of the ancient Mediterranean world had already received a good deal of attention from archaeologists when the Project began. But the majority of these studies were focused on temple architecture and on the artworks and other votive material recovered in the great excavations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As some of the contributions to this volume show, current research agenda are very different. But only a few studies treated the emergence of sanctuaries in broader social perspective.²¹

The Sanctuary Project set out to build on studies of this kind but to focus instead on religious action. We were inspired by a range of approaches including a new cognitive archaeology pioneered in relation to prehistoric sites of cult,²² new research into object agency and the impact of material culture in forming human experience,²³ and work on the interplay of images and worshippers in ancient religion.²⁴ During the course of the project much more has appeared on Roman material culture and ancient religion, but little could be incorporated into the original research design.²⁵

21 Among them de Polignac 1984; Coarelli 1987; Morgan 1990. More recently there has been much new work of very high quality including Derks 1998; Van Andringa 2000; Stek 2009; 2015; Moser and Feldman 2014.

22 Mithen 1996; Lewis-Williams 2002.

23 Gell 1998; Osborne and Tanner 2006; Garrow and Gosden 2012; Chua and Elliot 2013.

24 Gordon 1979; Elsner 2007; Van Andringa 2012. See now in addition Kiernan 2020.

25 Versluys 2014; Van Oyen and Pitts 2017; Graham 2021 and the work of the Baron Thyssen Centre for the Study of Ancient Material Religion at the Open University.

Experiential Approaches to Ancient Ritual

Reconstructing the experience of ancient worshippers demands both imagination and restraint. Imagination is necessary because of the inaccessibility of the *qualia* of others' religious experience even today, let alone in the face of the severe evidential difficulties we face in dealing with the ancient world. Restraint is needed because the temptation to flesh out the evidence with speculation or inappropriate analogy is so strong.

One powerful tool has been the careful examination of that handful of testimony dealing with the experience of visiting ancient sanctuaries. The notion of *theoria* brings together religious travel and the experience of viewing objects and events of religious experience.²⁶ Literary transformation of that experience takes the form of *ekphrasis*, the representation in text of experiences that included visual, auditory and other sensory components.²⁷ Pausanias is far and away our best witness of this kind from any period of the pre-Christian Mediterranean, and he appears in several chapters in this volume. Recent work has made the most of his narrated explorations of holy spaces in the Roman province of Achaëa.²⁸ Franchi's chapter in this volume includes an elegant exposition of how this works in relation to Delphi. The results are revealing not only about the nature of the sites and monuments visible and visitable in the second century CE but also about the specificity of Pausanias' religious, literary and cultural perspective. Pausanias' subjectivity included participation in a contemporary view of the Greek past in the Roman present, and also a provincial and Asian take on Old Greece. His narration of visits was also highly selective in what he decides to report of all that he must have seen. All representation is selective of course. But it is also true that writing about religion is often itself a religious activity. Recognising Pausanias' subjectivity makes his account more valuable rather than less, as it reminds us of how religious experience varies with the individual. Where we can compare ancient responses to the same set of monuments, we rarely find them coinciding exactly. This applies both to the monuments of the city of Rome and to individual sanctuaries like that at the source of the Clitumnus.²⁹ Every experience and every narration of it is different.

Yet subjectivity does not operate without parameters. Some of those parameters were set by the character and formation of our ancient witnesses, their physical capacities to see, hear and feel and the presuppositions which they brought to those experiences when they interpreted them. Other parameters were set by the nature of the sensory world through which they moved, a world that was often carefully designed and managed by those who built and managed sanctuaries. Religious experience emerged

26 Rutherford 2000; 2007; 2013.

27 Elsner 1995; 2007.

28 Elsner 1992; Alcock, Cherry and Elsner 2001; Hutton 2005; Prezler 2007; Pirenne-Delforge 2008. See also Bultrighini and Franchi in this volume.

29 On Rome, Edwards 1996; Scheid 1996; on the Clitumnus, Dubourdieu 1997.

from the interplay between what participants brought to the occasion and what they found had been prepared for them there.

A growing body of archaeological and historical work is now investigating the *sensescapes* of ancient societies and exploring within them the interaction of spaces and individuals and the interplay of human and material agency.³⁰

One approach is to consider the impact on human participants of objects acting *en masse*. The combined effect has been termed a *sensorium* “which is socially and culturally created; which depends on subtle interactions between people and things”.³¹ Also relevant is the notion of an *objectscape* meaning a universe of characteristic artefacts through which human agents move.³² Both human dispositions and the material artefacts involved are culturally formed, and there are long recursive cycles at play, as when musical instruments are geared to the auditory capacities of humans and the acoustic properties of particular spaces, while humans in turn learn how to listen to and for particular sounds and sound sequences. Ritual is a special realm for the exploration of these effects, because of the heightened significance of slight variations to performance and routine and because of the elements of repetition involved in much ritual.

Ancient sanctuaries were packed full of objects as Sporn illustrates in her contribution. These might include images of the gods of various kinds, anatomical votives, inscriptions commemorating cures or oracles, short texts of the kind posted at the source of the Clitumnus, and votive altars which in the sanctuaries of Rome’s northern provinces often recorded the favourable responses of deities to vows made by worshippers.³³ At the most basic level these objects often provided physical guarantees of the power of the gods, and their receptiveness to prayer. But *en masse* these objects were also an incitement to imitation, leading to great collections of material of whatever kind was locally deemed most appropriate. The Daunian ritual system described by Norman in this volume provides an interesting exploration of this. The agency of human worshippers and that of the objects they left behind together fuelled the reproduction of cultic activity and perhaps too a sense of participation in a long and well-established set of relationships between gods and humans.

Spaces no less than artefacts shaped the experience of worshippers. Ancients were well aware of how the spaces created for worship impinged on the experience of visitors. Vitruvius’ *On Architecture* described the acoustics of theatres. Lucian’s *Alexander* described the stage management of religious spectacle in a manner which was intended to be believable whether or not it was in fact true. Gamelin and Sassu provide compelling accounts of how this worked in Egyptian and Greek contexts respectively. The high investment of energy in the construction of sanctuaries and the objects within

30 Gosden 2001; 2005; Grand-Clément 2011; Betts 2013; Hamilakis 2014; Bradley 2015.

31 Gosden 2001.

32 Pitts 2018; Pitts and Versluys 2021.

33 Veyne 1983; Derks 1995; Scheid 2006; Schultz 2006, chapter 3; Arnhold this volume.

them reflect a special concern to engender particular sensory experiences on the part of participants. Researchers are increasingly aware of the acoustic properties of particular materials and designs and the reflective properties of certain colours and costumes, and the way in which sensory stimuli were marshalled to have particular effects on visitors and participants.

This is easiest to illustrate from the handful of large sanctuaries supplied with ample epigraphic and literary testimony. The Forum of Augustus in Rome, for example, enclosed visitors in a total sensory environment from within which little else could have been seen or heard. Their attention was directed on a gallery of exemplary images which had particular relevance to the ceremonies for which the structure was designed, including decision making on matters of war and peace and coming of age rituals for aristocratic male youth.³⁴ In the same way the architecture of the Telesterion at Eleusis, where initiations took place, created conditions of temporary sensory deprivation up until the moment of revelation.

Yet even smaller complexes were carefully designed with the reactions of worshippers in mind. Gallo-Roman temples were often centrally located in an enclosure facing the formal entrance, and some were equipped with ambulatory galleries allowing participants to move around the central cella and view the cult statue within. Subsidiary images were placed in a subordinate position along the route to be followed.³⁵ The classical design of Mithraic 'caves' also excluded distractions, and made use of variations of light and dark to focus attention of participants and diners on the cult image at the opposite end to the entrance.

Meanwhile processions were organised to take in a series of monuments and vistas within sacred cityscapes: a fund established at Ephesus by the Roman period noble Salutaris designated in precise detail how people and objects should move through the sacred spaces of the city.³⁶ Triumphal routes in Rome seem to have been more variable, indeed the design of a particular route for a particular triumph formed a part of the preparatory phase of each ritual performance.³⁷ Theatres, circuses, and especially elevated temples like those of the acropolis in Athens and the capitol at Rome were co-opted for such events. Many ancient cities and some large sanctuaries had a sacred way, and in some cases, this seems to have affected the orientation of statues, inscriptions and new religious structure. Effects of this kind are explored by several contributions to this volume.³⁸ Repeated use of a sacralised cityscape for rituals of this kind contributed to an element of time-compression. Rituals performed annually, or every four years or even at irregular intervals such as imperial funerals or triumphs, culminated

34 Woolf 2015.

35 Van Andringa 2000; Kiernan 2020.

36 Rogers 1991.

37 Beard 2007.

38 E.g., the chapters by Franchi, Gamelin and Sassu.

in a sense of the eternity and stability of cult. Ancient commentators found it easy to write about what *always* occurred at the Panathenaic procession, at the *ludi Romani*, during the *Lupercalia* and so on. Experience too has different temporal components, from the immediate and intense effect of participation in mass ritual to the longer lasting sense that some places had a permanent religious air, or that certain ceremonies through repetition ensure the stability of the social order bending linear time back to a cyclical movement.³⁹

The religious topography of cities was not only activated by collective public ceremony: Rieger's contribution to this volume uses the case of Pompeii to illustrate how religious experience might form part of the everyday lived experience of a Roman city, and Steinhauer's chapter on the experience of migrant women on Delos shows how sanctuaries might create neutral spaces for particular constituents of the urban population. The arrival of new people and new gods also forms a key part of the accounts of the creation of new sanctuary spaces presented by Bultrighini and Szabó.

The implications of all this new work on experience and sensation are just now beginning to be explored.⁴⁰ One promising field is the exploration of how different senses interact. A sudden sound – a trumpet for example – can attract the gaze of a crowd. Particular rhythms and smells – the sound of rattles, the scent of incense – can trigger particular states of mind. Some of these effects can take place anywhere, but sanctuaries are privileged stages for their deployment because their spaces can assemble worshippers in particular places, direct their attention in particular directions and sometimes even exclude distracting sights and sounds by their design. Senses also sort participants by their access to the main event. At a major Roman sacrifice the brilliant white costumes of the priests and the gilded horns of the victims were visible from afar, the flute music audible to a smaller group, and the smells and cries of the animal were restricted to very few.

We may add just one further complexity to this picture of religious experience emerging from the interaction of spaces, objects, and participants. Most ancient rituals were collective acts: it follows that part of the environment of each worshipper was formed by the mass of other worshippers around her or him. The effect of mass participation in heightening some experiences and filtering out others has been intensely studied by social psychologists, and their results have already had an impact on the study of ancient ritual.⁴¹ Repeated sensory stimuli – whether familiar images or prayers or movement along familiar routes – interacted with trained bodies and trained minds to produce characteristic responses. But individuals did not respond entirely autonomously. Participants took cues (negative and positive) from those around them, giving rise to phenomena like synchronised reactions to sudden events. This phenomenon

39 Woolf 2020.

40 Moser 2019; Alvar Nuño, Alvar Ezquerro and Woolf 2021.

41 Burkert 1987 and more explicitly Fagan 2011.

allows us to form a bridge between the methodological individualism that emphasises the freedom of each person to decide who and how to worship, and the undoubted facts of communal ritual. Citizens, like objects, acted *en masse*.

The chapters that follow draw on ideas like these to approach religious experience in a variety of ways. It was not our intention to produce a single unitary theory of how sanctuaries participate in forming experience. Our choice of participants and examples was designed to bring out the variety of forms religious experience took. By now the variety and complexity of these recursive relations between physical structures and human users and material culture and religious understandings should be clear. Instead, we present a series of parallel case studies, each offering a distinct viewpoint from which to consider how sanctuaries and religious experience might be connected.

The constituent chapters are not easily divisible into studies focused on spaces, artefacts or participants. Most papers combine all elements, even if they have different starting points. So Dalglish begins from temple structures and moves via ritual and iconography to a sort of lay theology of the evolving deity of Baalbek, while Arnold and Sporn begin from the images found in sanctuaries and show what is revealed by their location in sanctuary space. Some chapters focus on particular sites, for instance at Himera, Despotiko and Rome. Others start from complex webs of relationships, such as the contributions of Eidinow and Petridou. We did not succeed in identifying any great trends over the long period considered, except for the multiplication and diversification of sanctuaries and the accumulation of artefacts within them. The chapters are arranged in roughly chronological order, offering glimpses of entangled webs of worshippers, objects and sanctuaries from their Archaic origins until what Alvar and López-Gómez term the first slump in temple building. At the head of the collection we have set Rüpke's masterful theoretical analysis of the problem, and our one Bronze Age contribution, that of Gamelin on Ancient Egypt.

Reading these essays together, some sense emerges of the complexities of the relationships we set out to investigate, and also of the value of connecting Lived Ancient Religion to its material context and instruments. But we have gratefully left the last word to Julia Kindt.

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Sacralization and Focalization*

Agentic Perspectives on Sanctuaries

JÖRG RÜPKE

Concepts like ‘sacred space’ or ‘sanctuaries’ frequently go along with notions of clearly delimited space. Boundary stones or hedges, in the classical Mediterranean world and its subsequent religious traditions, but also in many other regions and periods of global history walls or full-scale three-dimensional architecture enclose a space of specific quality and constitute borders between sacred and profane – *pro-fanus*, literally ‘before the sanctuary’, as Varronian etymology in his ‘On Latin language’ has it.¹ And yet, even Latin language is not as simple as that. This ‘profane’ is related to and defined by the *fanum*, the sacred space proper. Cato the Elder uses *profanare* in the sense of presenting of agricultural products to the gods.² An early Latin author of comedies, Novius, probably writing at the end of the second century BCE, agrees on such a use, but locates the presentation of food on tables (*mensae*) in *aede*, in the house or temple.³ *Profanum* is not the opposite of *sacrum*, but a *sacrum* that has changed status. The divine share given, the rest of what might belong to the gods in its totality, as the gods are causal for agricultural produce or mercantile profit, is now open to human use. Small changes, not only by ritual manipulation, but also by intent or contingencies like death, trigger enormous effects in perspective, as we can see from the metaphorical use of ‘profane’ in Latin language.⁴ Whether something is ‘just neutral’ or ‘now profane’ is a matter of looking, not of crossing visible borderlines.

I do not deny that among Romans a concept of sacredness, *sacer*, was widespread that was focussing of issues of property, defining sacredness as property of the gods

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1 Varro, *ling.* 6.54.

2 Cato, *agr.* 50.2; 132.2

3 Nov. *com.* fr. 14.

4 See e. g., Plaut. *Mer.* 362; Ov. *am.* 3.9.19.

that was excluded from any further economic exchange.⁵ In this chapter, however, I will argue that details of Roman practice and concepts on the one side and taking into account recent perspectives on space, which force us to not any longer see space just as mappable or conceived space, but as lived space that is produced in social interaction and produces social interaction, invites us to take a new look at the widespread phenomenon of the use of altars. For that I will start from the notion of religious communication. From the perspective of agents successful ritual action depends on a temporal and spatial framing that helps to qualify communicative action addressed to divine agents and to make it successful in terms of eliciting positive divine response. Places laden with memories of previous religious actions and even set aside for religious actions in processes that I call sacralization seem to have been very important in these respects. Not only spaces and their limits, but also foci, points and objects marking the centre of gravity of such actions come under scrutiny as defining elements of sanctuaries. For the circum-Mediterranean and post-ancient European world, altars take pride of place. Altars are usually seen as places of sacrifice and pivotal sacred spaces in ancient religions. The wide variety of architecturally designed, organic or even of temporary altars problematizes such an interpretation. What do heaps of ashes, large platforms and monumental or miniaturised cubes share? Even more, how does this go together with movable altars? Here I suggest dropping such an essentialist approach. Against the background of performance and resonance theory, I suggest we ask how the use and *mise-en-scène* of altars help to focus the attention of participants and affords memorable experiences deemed ‘religious’ for the agents.

Religious Communication

For the study of the ancient Mediterranean world I have suggested that we should theorise religion as communication with special agents (sometimes including objects) – frequently conceptualised as god or gods, but in the period under consideration also ancestors or demons. These agents are accorded agency in a not unquestionably plausible way. Communication with or concerning such ‘divine’ agents might reinforce or reduce human agency, create or modify social relationships and change power relationships.⁶ Religious agency, hence, is a) the agency attributed to such non-human or in this regard supra-human agents, and b) the agency of human instigators of such communication. I am quite aware that there is a lot of phenomenologically comparable ritual action that does not assume the inclusion of such non-human agents. However, I deliberately restrict my definition to studying the consequences of the invention of

5 See e. g., Rüpke 2006a; but see for the limits, Rüpke 2019.

6 Rüpke 2015; 2021a.

that type of agency, which I will call 'divine agency' (religious agency type A) in order to differentiate it from human religious agency (type B). In the eyes of contemporaries the latter type of agency derives from the former, it might consequently be attributed to the one (respectively those) who took a primary role in the communication (whether conceptualised as 'mediators', 'saints' or just 'pious' and exemplary). In the long run, this could lead to processes of institutionalization of religious authority in the form of a specific role for religious specialists in communication with the divine⁷ – or challenge any such claims. Even in the short run, such religious agency could also be attributed and arrogated by further participants or the peers, family, followers or contacts of the primary group. It might also be used in a reversed manner, by negating the power, legitimacy, honesty or piety of those excluded from the temporary or lasting relationship established in the initial or repeated act of communication.

It is the enlargement of the dyadic to a triadic model of communication that takes an audience into account. Here, plausibility comes into play. Plausibility is a rhetorical category, tying the success of communication to an approving audience.⁸ However, I suggest turning to semiotics for a more detailed description of what is going on. So far, I have deliberately avoided talking about media of communication and the use of signs, not least in order to start from a simple model, where the addresser's own body and speech constitute the most basic form of what needs to be conceived of as symbolic communication. Again, I am aware that historically, ritual behaviour might well precede language.⁹

I will put off further details regarding signs for the moment, but of course admit that my initial dyad already has a triadic structure, including – to use Charles S. Peirce's terms – the sign proper (*representamen*), the interpretant and the object represented.¹⁰ The interpretant is not simply the religious agent speaking, but her or his conception of the sign. This conception includes, in Peirce's pragmatic turn, all the possible practical effects of the sign, and thus ties in with the concept of this person's religious agency. The semiotic perspective and semiosis, that is, the creation of a chain of meaningful signs, do not stop here. The process of interpretation continues, as the interpretation is an interpretation for an audience now itself engaging in interpretation of the semiotic complex put before its eyes and ears.

The attribution of meaning as well as the imagining of effects do not come from nothing, but are drawing on previous experiences, shared meanings and imaginings, and shared strategies of interpretation.¹¹ Even if limitless in principle, the probable

7 See Rüpke 1996; 2006b.

8 Rüpke 2015.

9 See Bellah 2011: 134–135.

10 See Peirce 1986; 1991. I am grateful to Anders Klostergaard Petersen to referring me to Peirce on multiple occasions.

11 For the latter see Fish 1995.

range of interpretations is thus restricted, without excluding creativity.¹² There is no zero point in an encounter between a user and a sign. Any articulation of this encounter – or more precisely of the experience, in which such a sign is involved – is already participating in language and shared meaning thus conveyed.¹³ This is not to advocate a culturalist approach. Linguistic research has demonstrated the quickly changing character as well as the interpersonal and inter-group differences of language. The varieties of often implicit meaning or meaning communicated in form of narratives or images go far beyond the clear-cult dichotomies favoured in structuralist interpretations or the systematization attempted by indigenous or academic ‘intellectuals’.

Evidently, I conflate the perspectives of articulation – focusing on the initiator – and interpretation – focusing on the audience – with the specific character of religious communication in mind. Religious communication is communication with divine agents that are not undeniably relevant. As it is the very communication that brings the divine agents into situational relevance and thus situational existence, the pragmatic efficiency and the plausibility of such communication is stressed for the agent herself or himself as well as for the audience by the intensive use of media. In fact, the very act of communication and the massiveness of the media involved advance the existence of the otherwise invisible addressees.¹⁴ The media-intensity of religious communication is not the least reason for its presence in archaeological records from different regions and periods. Altars within, outside of or instead of further architecture take an important place here, as we will see.

Before I turn to what is usually all subsumed under the heading of ‘altar’, I have to supplement the theoretical basis developed so far by two further concepts, relevance and sacralization. Relevance theory as developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, presupposing the encoding and decoding activities implied in the elementary use of language, integrated the complexities of human communication in a model that is based on the assumption that ‘human cognition is relevance-oriented’.¹⁵ One acts on the most relevant stimuli of the environment. The same holds true for communication. In communication the communicator’s informative intention to make his assumptions manifest or more manifest to an audience goes together with the need to make this informative intention mutually understood. This could be insured by stimuli which make this intention clear; this latter aspect is called ‘ostensive-inferential communication’. As a result of communication the mutual cognitive environment changes.¹⁶ Given the many stimuli for the potential audience, the ostensive stimuli must raise the expectation of optimal relevance of the ensuing communication. The gestures, music, and

12 Joas 1996.

13 See Jung 2005.

14 See Rüpke 2007.

15 Sperber and Wilson 1987: 700.

16 Sperber and Wilson 1987: 699.

objects usually involved in religious action provide ample evidence. That is to say, the effort necessary to process the information (used in the broadest possible sense) must seem worthwhile for the audience. The communicator must produce the most relevant information she or he is willing and able to produce.¹⁷ The selection of a particular time or place produces a massive pre-selection of the audience and a sort of priming that raises expectations also in terms of relevance and focuses attention.

The material presence of media in religious communication acts as a further stimulus and enlarges the dyadic perspective of human-divine communication to secondary addressees, audiences and witnesses, connoisseurs and tourists. The choice of media or 'stimuli' constitutes such circles. Thus, spoken prayer and written curse, burning incense at a domestic hearth and public processions constitute very different publics.¹⁸ Thus spatial conditions, the size of a space and the type of enclosure give very different access to different groups of participants. Thus, material objects can focus attention and mark out different type of actors even before any action. A flute-player is a flute-player, but the empty-handed man close to a big stone on a place is certainly more important than any more distant empty-handed person. Certain forms of communication with the divine might even be monopolised: Communication cannot be interpreted without regard to power and social inequalities.

Paying attention to the conditions and side products of religious communication necessitates a further concept. I propose to use 'sacralising' as referring to actions and processes that include elements of the situation – objects, space, time – into the act of communication and ascribe meaning to them. Sunrise or the day of the full moon are thus marked as specifically conducive, a hot spring or the top of a hill or a tomb are places of more successful communication; a torch, an animal killed, a valuable dress or a block of stone might support the formulation and conveying of one's message. As we have already seen, in such a manner the initiators of religious communication make their communicational intention more relevant to the addressees and their communication as a whole more relevant to any audience and perhaps the whole local group. They are heard by the gods and seen by their fellow humans.

Such sacralization is an ephemeral action. It is temporary sacralization. An object or a place is used for religious communication and subjected to specific interpretations, maybe even rules of behaviour for the duration of the communication (which would usually take the form of a ritual, but I shall try to avoid the introduction of a further concept right now). In most cases such a temporary sacralization would not leave any permanent traces. Nor would such a place strengthen the character of any future action as 'religious', unless great efforts are made to re-activate the former ascription of

17 Wilson and Sperber 2002: 257 f.

18 For the dimensions of the concept 'public' in a history of religion perspective, see Gladigow 1995; Rüpke 1995: 605–628; Rau and Schwerhoff 2004; Fine 2010; Mullaney, Vanhaelen and Ward 2010; Wolson and Yachnin 2010; Rüpke 2019.

a special character by way of remembrance of a former instance or a conscious full re-enactment of that former religious action. Sacralization need, however, not encompass the whole site. It could focus on single, even small objects that happen to be available or are consciously introduced into or produced within the situation. ‘Gifts’ or ‘tokens’ referring to the communicants involved or the message to be transferred are widespread. Particular dress or objects attached to the body – festive garments, crowns, ornaments, again also of temporary character like colours – are in use.

The preceding reflections also help us to more fully grasp the implication of the Peircian chain of interpretations. Such processes of interpretation have a temporal extension. Sacralised objects, but also places or times would already create presuppositions for the processes of interpretation that develop within the communicative action. Re-use or the addition of new objects into the process of framing could strengthen and would intensify the religious character. Sacralization is a matter of quantity and scale.

The construction of a theoretical framework for dealing with sanctuaries and altars started from the notion of religious communication and relevance with regard to agency and contents and added the concept of sacralization in order to refer to the spatial and temporal context of such ritual action. It is now time to switch from horizons to *foci*, to employ one of the Latin terms for speaking about altars.

Providing Focus

How could religious communication provide the necessary stimuli for the divine addressees and gain sufficient attention? Obviously, all sensorial dimensions were used to make a difference regarding inter-human communication, starting with the body itself and its movements and utterances, singing instead of just talking, dancing instead of just standing.¹⁹ Smell – perfumes, burnt flesh, incense, to name just a few top ingredients – has been given more attention in research just recently.²⁰ My interest here, however, is on viewing and visibility. If we disregard processions²¹ and concentrate on static arrangements, raising the position of the actor(s) or their tools and objects on the one hand and illumination or, more precisely, fire, on the other hand are primary.²² The latter can also be combined with movements (in the form of torches²³); during darkness, it is indispensable. Even in its ‘static’ form of a fire fixed in a place, the flames

19 For Rome (and more general) see Patzelt 2018.

20 Borgeaud 2012; Petridou 2013; Bradley 2015; Morgan 2015.

21 Guettel Cole 1993; MacCormack 2000; Bruni 2004; Bernstein 2007; Favro and Johanson 2010; Rüpke 2012; Chaniotis 2013; Madigan 2013; Estienne 2014; Luginbühl 2015; Stavrianopoulou 2015; Latham 2016.

22 For Greece: Furley 1988.

23 See e.g., Wörrle 1988; Sterbenc Erker 2013; Bremmer 2014. Cf. the Hindu ritual of *dipajvalana* (including praying for a steady flame throughout the ritual).

provide movement. Unpredictable, but also manipulable, they were given attention in many ritual settings (pyromancy).²⁴

Raising up the addressant or the objects extended to the addressees was a central strategy, too, to provide a focus for the diverse audiences respectively addressees. It is probably the one that left the most durable and visible traces. Such platforms or tables – poles just marking the position of the main actor or main object were not employed²⁵ – are referred to as ‘altars’ in modern research, which conflates different phenomena, but a conflation already foreshadowed by ancient associations and phenomenological assimilations.

For early Iron Age Central Italy we can follow some of the developments.²⁶ Interesting evidence is provided by cemeteries and religious communication addressed towards the ontological continuum of the dead and the gods. The family groups involved with the necropolis at Cerveteri provided the tops of their great *tumulus* graves with accessible surfaces. In the 7th century BCE, these platforms took a carefully flattened form. Ramps were constructed to enable them to be accessed, while at the same time care was taken to emphasize the character of these ramps as bridges overleaping the boundary between the tombs and the network of paths.²⁷ These ramps were not used exclusively during the burial ceremony.²⁸ The custodians of *tumulus 2 della Capanna*, constructed at Cerveteri at the beginning of the 7th century BCE, constructed a new ramp in the second half of the 6th century. In later tomb structures, the ramp was replaced by a set of steps. These were also associated with 5th-century ‘cube tombs’. *Tumulus* graves in Tarquinia were also provided with steps. In the Monterozzi necropolis there, these did not lead onto the platform, but merely enabled the platform to be used as a gigantic table top by someone standing on the top step. These configurations were also used repeatedly in cemeteries during subsequent centuries, with many variations, and depicted in images of the period recording actions by both men and women.²⁹

In Pisa, a bronze dagger and a trident were left behind on top of the tomb before the surface was covered in after being used once. The woman depicted on a stele at Marzabotto is smelling a flower. Common to both ritual configurations was a pronounced aesthetic dimension, that involved the actors in intense processes of seeing and smelling. At the same time, the elevated position made these acts visible to the audience. The actors displayed the fact that they were communicating with special addressees here. Who these were, whether the dead or the gods, the human actors could elucidate by oral means, in spoken or sung texts; the structure itself remains silent with regard

24 Briefly Burkert 2005: 7; Ustinova 2013.

25 But confer the use of trees in sanctuaries: Sinn 2005b.

26 For the following I use the findings presented in Rüpke 2018b.

27 Thus Prayon 2010: 75.

28 Unlike, e.g., in Pisa; see Prayon 2010: 76.

29 Prayon 2010: 78–81.

to a closer identification of the addressees. The designers of the structures appear to have consciously avoided any optical association with the entrance to the tomb; ramp and entrance did not as a rule coincide.³⁰ In many cases, anyone seeking horizontal proximity to the buried person, and desiring a table-like platform for such communication, could use for that purpose small blocks placed at the entrance or in a vestibule. A vertical relationship with 'not indisputably plausible actors' (whether downwards in the direction of the dead or upwards and away from them) was occasionally evoked by a stele on the platform. However, the clearly demarcated upper surface represented either by a platform capable of accommodating religious actors or by the smaller, 'table-top' model provided distinctive identification and referred to 'special' addressees. In assembling or presenting something there, actors clearly aligned themselves and the objects taken along with their production of relevance in religious communication.

Other strategies might have been known from Greek practices in the mainland, occasionally transferred also to Italy, but they evidently did not elicit substantial reception. This is true for the monumental ash altars that grew high with the number of burnt animal sacrifices offered, as in Olympia. But it is also true for the long altar tables, which at Isthmia near Corinth for instance could reach 30 metres in length in the 7th century BCE.³¹ The erection of monumental surfaces of this kind appears not to have inspired imitation in Etruria. One of the few exceptions, although much smaller than the Greek examples, is the archaic feature in the podium of the later 'Temple of the winged horses' in Tarquinia, probably erected in the same century.³² As in the case of the later *Ara maxima* of Hercules in Rome, these altars took the form of large platforms (and the term *ara* was also current in this sense in the language of Late Republican architects³³).

Altars in Use

In the subsequent period, actors erected and used small-scale structures, capable of being configured both to drain away fluids used for libations and to accommodate a small fire. In both round and square versions, and later on frequently miniaturized, they often had a large base and top, but sometimes a slightly concave, in some cases extremely constricted body,³⁴ suggestive of an egg timer. The term used for those structures – *āsa* or with rhotacism, *āra*³⁵ – had widespread currency in Italic languages. We have no

30 Prayon 2010: 78–79.

31 Sinn 2005a: 15–16.

32 Colonna 1985: 23; for details Bonghi Jovino and Bagnasco Gianni 2012: 31.

33 See already Cato, *On agriculture* 18,6.

34 Overview in Comella 2005; Marcattili 2005; Menichetti 2005.

35 See Macrobian *Sat.* 3.2.8. Here Varro's etymology is pointing to the *ansa* ('handle') used for sacrificial vessels.

testimony to inform us how people in the 7th, 6th or 5th centuries BCE understood the term, but, etymologically, it belonged unambiguously to the field of ashes and fire, and may long have been understood in the sense of ‘hearth’ (a fireplace used for processes of drying).³⁶ The later concern to restrict the term to its religious connotation gave rise in Latin to the bold neologism *focus* for the domestic hearth.³⁷ In Greek language, the range of meaning is comparable. *Eschára* as well as *hestía* refer to domestic fireplaces (‘hearth’) as well as ritual structures. Only *bômos* developed from the notion of platform to ‘altar’ – a structure typically put up on a platform to ensure visibility of both the fire, objects and the actors around it.

Etymologically, *altaria* (‘altar’) belongs to the same field, as it is related to ‘inflare’ (*adolere*).³⁸ Widespread, however, is a popular etymology as *alta ara*, ‘high altar’, focusing on differences in the direction of addressing deities:

Altaria ab altitudine sunt dicta, quod antiqui diis superis in aedificiis a terra exaltatis sacra faciebant; diis terrestribus in terra, diis infernalibus in effossa terra (Paul. Fest. 27.1–3L, drawing on Varro, *Ant. rer. div. fr.* 65 Cardauns, cf. Serv. auct. *ecl.* 5.66: *Varro diis superis altaria, terrestribus aras, inferis focos dicari adfirmat*).

Altars are called from their height, because the ancients performed rituals for the celestial (‘the upper’) gods in temples erected on the earth, to the terrestrial gods³⁹ on the earth and to the gods of the netherworld in holes dug into the earth.

In the Varronian history of Roman religion⁴⁰ all altars were temporary structures, improvised from grass sods.⁴¹ The constant element, necessary for all public and private ‘full’ ritual, *sacra*, is the fireplace, the *focus*. Fire provides focalization.

And yet, the stele-like instrument in religious communication is present in many forms, and at most moments (and some always) without fire. It was used as an unmistakable sign of communication with a presence that was not otherwise immediately obvious to the eye, whether it be of ‘gods’ or of the ‘dead’. A flame or a libation would indicate its temporary extensified use: the shape of its upper surface invited just this mode of activation. Even in this respect, however, the object was not merely an instrument to be used, but, with its decoration depicting ritual procedures and other instruments and materials being used in those procedures, it was itself an act of religious communication and ritual continually in progress. It could be still further activated

36 See Bomhard and Kerns 1994: 530, no. 381. Thus, also the similarly sounding Hittite term for a hearth.

37 Cf. Matasović 2010 for the unusual formation, which uses an expression from the semantic field of “fire” for “hearth”, whereas usually we find a generalization in the other direction.

38 Paul. Fest. 5.14; Ernout and Meillet 1959: 36.

39 Described as ‘intermediary’ or ‘middle’ gods in Serv. auct. *Aen.* 3.134 (*deorum ... medioximorum*).

40 See Rüpke 2014a.

41 Varro, *Ant. rer. div. fr.* 38 Cardauns.

with a minimum of effort, by the placing of a lamp, and a minimum of speech or song. More might of course be done: baked items of various forms, aspect, taste, and smell were widely used, as were flowers.

The usage of altars was widespread. In its decorative, often also richly decorated, form slender Italic altars, and perhaps their portable and collapsible equivalent in bronze, tripods, had their places in gardens⁴² as in permanent sanctuaries. At Puteoli in Campania the rental of an altar and a hall (*chalcidium*) were part of the full set of services offered by a monopolistic franchise for funerals.⁴³ Altars were also central to the cult of the *lares*. They typically figure between the two youths identified with these gods in Pompeian houses. Frequently, they were just murals, often located in kitchens. The hard workers here had before their eyes a festive ritual, the quintessence of non-work. The image was 'activated' in many ways. An architectural frame, or niche – the most minimal way to sacralize a space in a house with stone walls⁴⁴ – accentuated the painting, which was neither the background for a cult location fronting it nor the focus for a cult: it already represented that cult; it was not the potential addressees that were central here, but the very medium of religious communication, the 'altar'. The image of the cult perpetuated the action,⁴⁵ but could also be still further activated by those present, most obviously in a rather dark internal room by being lit: the domestics brought the representation of a fire on the painted altar to life with a little lamp, bringing the figures into motion in the play of light and shadow. The painting further encouraged them to pour a small libation; this at least is the stereotypical activity of many of the youths featured (and at the same time an indication of typical festive celebration). Finally, the hearth as the biggest fire in the room might have been used metonymically to receive small offerings of food. Altars both great and small and increasing numbers of lamps as offerings continued to play a large role in the Imperial Age, to the detriment of depositions.⁴⁶

The presence of altars was not restricted to such intimate contexts. On coins from the Late Republic onwards *Pietas* is plausibly represented as a woman with covered head standing at a small altar, or pouring a libation from a bowl. When Plautus in his comedy *Asinaria* has his characters argue about which of the traditional gods' name they should use to address their benefactor, they were in agreement that offerings before a statue and an altar would constitute him a god.⁴⁷ It was not some specific ritual procedure that demanded the vertically oriented structure, offering a small, sometimes

42 Dräger 1994.

43 For the text and the further contexts see Bodel 2004; Libitina 2004; Schruppf 2006; Castagnetti 2012.

44 See Weiss 2009 on Egypt in the Roman period; a full account in Weiss 2015a. On Pompeian niches, especially in workspaces: Kastenmeier 2007.

45 On the concept Weiss 2015b.

46 Exemplary: Scapaticci 2010, esp. 107.

47 Plautus, *Asinaria* 711–718.

not even usable surface. Instead, such ‘altars’ provided a focus for establishing a communicative relationship that pointed beyond the immediate present and the local situation. It provided, what Hartmut Rosa has called a ‘vertical self-world relationship’.⁴⁸ For ancient Italy, and by all probability for the wider classical Mediterranean world, it provided a specifically ‘religious’ relationship that reminded observers of actors beyond the visible social context. Sending flames and smoke upwards or pouring liquids downwards beyond pragmatic usage underlined that message.

Reasons of Success

The widespread miniaturization of altars, their depictions, and also the multiplication in form of series of nearly identical altars, added year by year,⁴⁹ means that we cannot understand altars mainly in terms of religious or even sacrificial infrastructure. Why, then, I would like to ask by way of conclusion, was this religious sign so successful, that is, widespread and manifold?

Against the background of the reflections at the beginning of the chapter, the proliferation itself seems to have been a self-accelerating process. The establishment of a stable tradition allowed its easy use and left space for variations in form and the addition of a nearly unlimited variety in terms of texts and images on the fronts and sides of altars made of stone, metal or just depicted. The prominent presence in sanctuaries would have enabled the new producer taking a likewise prominent stance and arrogating the role of a religious provider.

In religious communication, however, there is more to the altar than its ‘official’ usage and the recommendation thus given. The altar’s central ‘instrumental’ role in religious communication was an important part of the construction of the divine.⁵⁰ Its very durability and the possibility to repeat the ritual act stressed the permanency of the addressees. At the same time, the primary self-reference of the sign ‘altar’ on the act of ritual communication⁵¹ rather than on specifics of the divine addressee allowed for a very fluid definition of this partner. In competition with images the altar lacked in precision but allowed at the same time different addressees as well as combinations or even complex grouping of such addressees, whether in a tomb or in a sanctuary, thus providing coverage even of changing constellations. In comparison to the advanced anthropomorphization of the divine presupposed in the Greco-Roman production of images, altars offered a low threshold for taking over central Mediterranean religious practices and their permanent signs even in the provincial periphery of the Roman

48 Rosa 2016.

49 See Rüpke 2014b on the phenomenon.

50 Cf. Rüpke 2010; Belayche and Pirenne-Delforge 2015.

51 Rüpke 2018a; 2021b.

empire, as it is attested in the widespread presence in the monumental and epigraphic record. Images might, but need not be added, whether separately or as part of the altar. The same holds true with regard to practices performed with, at or in the presence of an altar. With an altar, the focus is on translatable religion.

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How Does Architecture Help One Feel Part of the Divine World?*

Looking for Movements and Perceptions in Egyptian Temples

THOMAS GAMELIN

Some stelae, statues, and texts provide information about the lives, families, and duties of priests in ancient Egypt. These textual and visual sources offer insights into the views of priests, the intellectual training they received, and how they spent their days. Biographies carved on these monuments sometimes mention how priests were glad to be in the temple and, above all, their delight whenever they saw the god's statue.¹ Hieroglyphic texts such as the 'Instructions to the Clergy' (or 'Recommendations to the Priests')² describe the values and behaviour priests had to adopt inside the sacred buildings: they had to be pure, they had to keep secret what was happening inside the temples, they were not allowed to utter falsehoods or steal sacred objects, and running or screaming was forbidden. We can thus imagine the peaceful atmosphere within temples.

Some texts contain precious information on how the main parts of the rituals were carried out; however, we do not have all the detail necessary to fully restore the gestures and movements which were performed during these ceremonies.³ Some rituals are depicted on temple walls: in cases where inscriptions explained the objectives of the ceremony, the accompanying image was only a 'snapshot' in which the performer was frozen forever. The image provides an overview (which is rarely clear) of what was done in reality during a ceremony that stretched several minutes and included a series of actions; rather than a relief, only photographs in burst mode could have detailed

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1 Frood 2013. See also Luiselli 2020.

2 Leroux 2018.

3 Current research focuses on the role of musical instruments in Egyptian rituals and seeks to reconstruct ancient Egyptian music: see Elwart and Emerit 2019.

faithfully a religious performance.⁴ As an example, in order to soothe a dangerous goddess, the king had to perform a ritual dance: the visual representation of this action shows him holding one arm up and the opposite leg raised as well (and knee bent).⁵ The actual dance was undoubtedly more complex but the texts associated to this image do not describe it. In some cases, temple reliefs seem to show a specific posture, which unfortunately we are not able to explain. For instance, in depictions of *Iunmutef* standing and looking to the left, his right arm is stretched forward whereas his left arm is along his body (clutching his leopard skin garment); when he is represented looking to the right, it is still his right arm that is stretched forward (and his left hand is holding the ceremonial clothing). These two representations break the symmetry, so loved by the Egyptians, where two images of *Iunmutef* are carved face to face on the same relief: it would be more natural for the left figure to have his left arm stretched (fig. 1).⁶ This suggests that *Iunmutef*'s right arm was the limb involved in the performance of the ritual. To my knowledge, there is no text providing an explanation as to why the right arm was used rather than the left arm. Without any clarification from the Egyptians themselves, the rationale may be lost forever.⁷

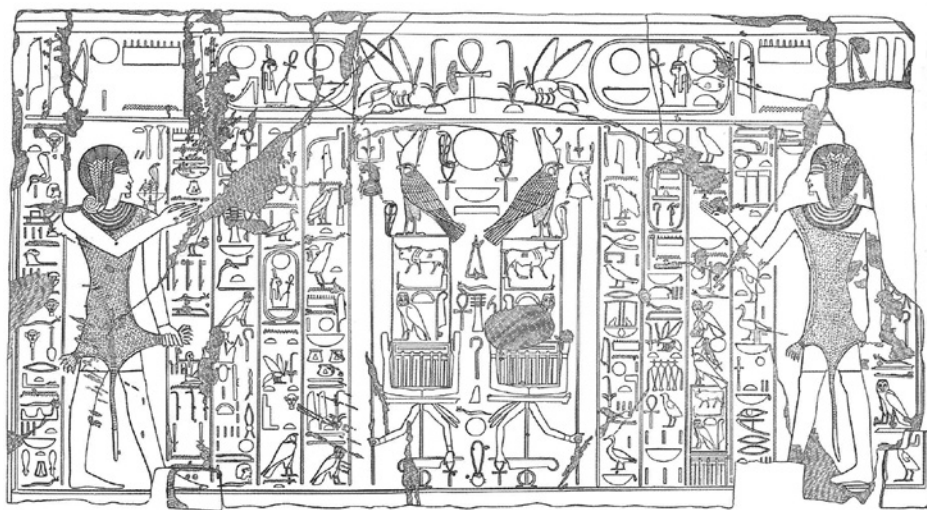


Figure 1 The god *Iunmutef* represented twice on the same relief; contrary to an usual practice in Egyptian art, the symmetry here is broken (Clère *et al.* 1975: fig. 7. © CNRS-CFEETK)

4 Papyri rarely help us analyse the elements of a ritual gesture, Martzolf 2014: 26. For a first approach to ritual movement see Eaton 2013: 125–160.

5 Ali Mohamed 2010.

6 Gamelin 2014: 313–314.

7 We may assume that the right hand was more important (and purer) than the left hand in some ancient cultures.

In this paper, I suggest a different approach to the study of the performance of rituals by Egyptian priests. I propose that we combine the analysis of texts and reliefs with that of temple architecture and its impact on the movements of priests: the general atmosphere within sacred buildings undoubtedly affected priests' feelings during religious ceremonies.

The Temple as a God's House

a. A pylon promising a separate world

Like in other Mediterranean cultures, temples in ancient Egypt were regarded as special places. A god lived in them, and the temple was, according to Egyptian vocabulary, *hwt-netjer*, 'the house of god',⁸ which made these buildings remarkable places in the landscape.⁹

Ancient books, whether mythological¹⁰ or not¹¹, gave Egyptian architects information on the ideal way to build a perfect temple. Being gods' houses, temples had to be perfect. Studies of temple architecture led Egyptologists to distinguish four main parts in a typical sacred building: a naos (= composed of chapels where deities were venerated and other rooms that were used to prepare the liturgical kit for the cult, such as the liquid used for libations or the incense), a pronaos (= hypostyle hall), a courtyard, and a pylon (= the main gateway to a temple: a high central door flanked by two trapezoidal towers).¹² Following an Egyptian concept, the building was constructed from the perspective of its owner, i. e. the deity, who dwelt in its deepest place, i. e. the naos. To make my arguments clearer, we will begin our journey from the opposite side, i. e. starting from the pylon (fig. 2).

8 For the link between temples and Egyptian houses, see Baumann 2017.

9 On the importance of the choice of temple site, see Gabolde 2012–2013.

10 According to a text carved on a wall of the house of the god Horus at Edfu (see below), this temple was built by following a model that was detailed in a (now lost) book written by Imhotep (Wildung 1977: 145). Imhotep is well known in Egyptian history as he was vizier of king Djoser (Old Kingdom, 2300 years before the Ptolemaic period) and architect of the first pyramid in Egyptian history (the step pyramid at Saqqara, near Cairo). For this invention, he was deified and became a god in charge of sciences like medicine and architecture (Cortegiani 2007: 231–234).

11 E. g. the *Book of the Temple*, on which see Quack 2003: 13–15.

12 Wilkinson 2000: 24–25.



Figure 2 Pylon of the Temple of Ramesses III (New Kingdom, twelfth century BCE) in Medinet Habu (west bank of Thebes) (author's own photograph)

As we can see from the temple of Medinet Habu, a pylon is a monumental entrance made up of two main parts: a very high central door flanked by two towers.¹³ The door is crowned by a relief carved on a lintel and representing the sun, while the towers are often engraved with a message addressed to prospective attackers, which warns that the king shall harshly punish any enemies who dare approach the temple. But from an Egyptian point of view, the entrance also symbolises a hieroglyph, which would have been readable even for the illiterate population: the two towers represent the two mountains between which the sun rises/sets on the horizon, which explains why the image of the sun is placed above the central door. In addition to being a gate protecting the temple, the pylon acts as an artificial horizon, turning the building into a special place.¹⁴ At dawn, the sun rises above the eastern horizon, providing light, energy, and heat to the country. Beyond this horizon, before his awakening, the sun god was in the Underworld. The horizon is thus a border between two worlds (the one of the living and the one of the dead), in the same way as the pylon (as an artificial horizon) operates as a border between the world of men (outside the temple) and the house of deities (inside the temple). As a priest passed through the central doorway, he knew he was entering a separate world: this first part of the temple architecture gave visitors the feeling that they had left their daily life and were about to reach a divine universe.

Studies in Egyptology debate whether or not worshippers (those who were not members of the clergy) had the right to pass through the pylon. Ancient texts are not clear in this respect. We know that worshippers could not enter the building (i. e. the

¹³ Monnier 2013: 151–153.

¹⁴ The whole temple can also be seen as an horizon, Gabolde 2009: 290–295.