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Rubina Raja, Jörg Rüpke

Introduction: Urban Archaeology

In our *Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World*,¹ we brought together a larger number of archaeologists and historians of religion to develop the outlines of an archaeology of religious experience, as we labelled the new emphasis.² The approach is based on the theoretical considerations and methodological tools developed in the framework of ‘Lived Ancient Religion.’³ On that basis as well as on the basis of the work done within the framework of the Centre for Urban Network Evolutions since 2015 and in cooperation with the Erfurt research group ‘Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formations’, we organised a workshop in Copenhagen in spring 2019 to add spatial considerations to this enterprise – a long-standing intention from our side. Given the central importance of cities as motors of religious change in the ancient Mediterranean world,⁴ we do not ignore, but also do not foreground experiences of empire but rather those which take place behind the city walls. Thus, we shifted the focus to urban religion.

The background to our approach is the application of the concept of contemporary urban religion to ancient religious practices and ancient concepts and functions of cities on the one hand and the archaeological interest in overcoming the concept of ‘site’ as something pragmatically or historically given on the other hand. Instead of inquiring into ‘the religion of such and such a place’, ‘the pantheon of X’ or ‘cults in Y’, we are interested in how religious practices in fact articulate or shape urban space and urban movements, both broadly speaking and in detail, beyond major sanctuaries and procession routes, how they help to open up or keep open urban space to inter-urban flows of goods and people or how they help to articulate specific urban atmospheres or identities as seen or created by particular groups of inhabitants. The articles that have come out of our workshop, three of which form this first thematic issue, offer case studies that focus on

1 Raja and Rüpke 2015c.

2 Raja and Rüpke 2015a.

3 Raja and Rüpke 2015b; Albrecht et al. 2018.

4 E. g., Rüpke 2018; Raja 2019.

very different strategies and mechanisms across the ancient Mediterranean. Their focus ranges from top-down centralised activities by power holders to bottom-up trajectories of competing groups or individuals, immigrants as well as ephemeral visitors or stakeholders from the region and even the intervention of specifically religious claim-makers and the establishment of religious institutions and authorities.

Why do we need a term like urban religion for such an enterprise? The emphasis of the articles is not on religion in the city, but on the mutual shaping of the physical urban space and urban ways of life on the one hand and religious practices and ideas on the other. The focus is on change, on factoring in religion for urbanism and urbanism for religious transformations. The focus is also on material culture and the possibilities to trace such changes through material culture. Taken together, the articles intend to invite a closer cooperation between archaeologists and historians of ancient cities and historians of religion.

‘Polis’ and ‘civic religion’ have long monopolised the views on ancient religious practices and beliefs. By stressing the political units and related structures and identities, they have either naturalised or minimised rather than critically engaged with urban conditions of life and those practices and discourses that differentiated towns and cities from non-urban forms of settlements. The recently developed concept of urban religion, taken from the analyses of specifically urban forms of contemporary religion,⁵ offers an alternative approach.⁶ Its focus is on religious change under urban conditions, it is neither about religion *in* the city nor religion *of* the city. It is interested in how religious actors changed their conceptions of the divine addressees, the short- and long-term visibility of their religious actions, the range of media and urban technologies from writing to art and architecture employed, how religious roles were developed or repositioned in the complex and heterarchical societies of these cities. Last but not least, the very question of how religious performances and discourses helped to attribute an urban character to their space of action is of interest.⁷ Unlike the focus on the political entity and its elite and hierarchy, the range of relevant actors, performances, and infrastructures is massively enlarged, thus integrating a lot of evidence that has either remained out of focus or been qualified as irrelevant replicas or modifications.

Focusing on the performance of the urban and the ups and downs of urbanisation processes also transcends the narrow focus on a single polity. It

5 E. g., Garbin and Strhan 2017; Lanz 2019.

6 Urciuoli and Rüpke 2018; Rüpke 2020.

7 Rau and Rüpke 2020.

is the very essence of the urban as a form of living in settlement hierarchies where the point of highest density and exclusivist notions of an *urbanitas* that is so distinctive and different from the ‘rural’ is at the same time an open hub and a node in an urban network that typically privileges long-distant exchange with other specialised regions and actors over the fundamental day-to-day exchange with, and exploitation of, the immediate hinterland.⁸ Thus, archaeology of urban religion surprisingly looks at the rural, the natural, the distant within urban space, looks at the city gates more intensively than at the city walls. As a consequence, our focus is not one Rome, the metropolis, even if Rome figures prominently in several accounts. Most, or nearly all, cities are part of urban networks that are related to an even larger, in some respect more important, or in a generalised manner, more powerful city. ‘Urbanity’, as we understand it, is constantly challenged in all the places where its practices and discourses create *urban* settlements to navigate between such realities of power and dependency and local pride by abstracting and applying what is regarded as urban.

Attestation of such mediation in texts is very welcome but rare, as the contributions demonstrate. Yet archaeology is not an ancillary discipline to that endeavour. It is the built-up reality of urban space (whether in wood or stone), it is the fight for visibility (and occasionally invisibility), the offensive and defensive occupation of space in trace-leaving ephemerality or establishing permanent presence that informs and secures urban life and urban experiences. It is an archaeology of experience, of the temporary, repeated, and oppressive, but also an archaeology of movements and networks that is fundamental here.⁹ Urban religion demands an urban archaeology and *vice versa*.¹⁰

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⁸ Cf. Raja 2012.

⁹ Cf. Woolf 2012; Raja and Sindbæk 2018.

¹⁰ Raja and Sindbæk 2020.

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Rubina Raja

Aarhus University

orcid.org/0000-0002-1387-874X

Jörg Rüpke

Max-Weber-Kolleg, Universität Erfurt

orcid.org/0000-002-4173-9587