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Gifts, Votives, and Sacred Things: Strategies, Not Entities

Abstract

This paper critically reviews definitions of concepts such as ‘votive’ and ‘altar’. Close analysis of the complex development of the objects and rituals designated by such terms can show two very different developments of concepts. In one case, it is public legal concerns that lead to the development of a specific terminological solution that remains open for further generalisation. In another case, different traditions of ritual action and etymologies are unified by drawing on previous Greek antiquarian discourse. It is in the history of the concept that terminological alternatives are identified. The article suggests focusing on identifying strategies of religious action as are hidden behind, or lost through, the use of terminological shorthand and basing comparison on these strategies rather than on a typology of rituals grounded in a language that is part of these strategies, rather than their precondition.

Keywords: *votum*, gifts, strategies, objects, rituals concepts, *sacer*, conscious standardisation, terminological shorthand, typology of rituals

1 Introduction

Historians of religion need technical terms. Such terms function as a shorthand. Terms like ‘sacrificial victim’, ‘temple’, or ‘votive’ imply complex rituals and complex ideas behind the rituals. Concepts that had once been established as standard in the phenomenology of religion, which allows the comparison of religious phenomena across cultures and times,¹ have more recently been shown to refer to anthropologically or culturally highly-loaded practices. Sacrifice, for instance, is not just about giving something valuable, or even living, to a deity but is, rather, an enterprise of classification, crea-

1 Hastings 1908; Wach 1962; Mensching 1959. Work on this article has benefitted from discussions within the International Graduate School “Resonant Self-World Relations in Ancient and Modern Socio-Religious Practices” at the Max-Weber-Kolleg in Erfurt and the University of Graz.

tion of social hierarchies, of performing violence, and justifying economic specialisation and long-distance trade.² The degree of complexity and the specific composition of pre-conscious behaviour, the beliefs involved, the intentions, and the function is highly variable between different cultural and historical contexts. This fact does not remove the possibility of comparison but it does render it much more difficult and challenging, requiring constant reflection on its terms and cultural presuppositions.³

For the Roman world, these complexities have cast into doubt the clear-cut concepts of ‘sacred law’ (*Sakralrecht* as understood by Pernice and Wissowa⁴) and have led to nuanced descriptions of sacrificial or votive rituals and their historical development.⁵ However, these nuances are easily lost once terms are used to interpret or classify material evidence, that is, archaeological findings. Here, contextualisation is sought by inserting the object into meaningful human actions, such as rituals. Hermeneutically, the stepwise classification proceeds from human action to religious action and from religious action to the type of relationship between the human agent and the divine addressee. The article on ‘dedications’, resp. ‘Greek dedications’, in the *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum* (*ThesCRA*) is a case in point. In his introductory sub-lemma, Robert Parker starts by defining dedication (along sacrifice and choruses) as one of ‘the three main ways in which Greeks sought to win the favour of the gods’ but quickly includes the benefits of the givers and the possibilities of self-display, often referred to by Greek authors.⁶ However, the body of the article in the sub-lemma ‘Greek votive objects’ focuses on ‘object or representation’, criticising an exclusive focus on ‘occasion’ but leading in the end to a focus on the divine addressee and fitting votives.⁷ This focus is shared by the article on Roman votives right from the start.⁸ Thus, ancient conceptualisations of religious practices involving objects are not used as starting points of analysis but, rather, as frames that limit fruitful questions and, thus, potentially exclude wider social and cognitive frames.⁹

2 See, for example, Hubert and Mauss 1964; Girard 1972; Turner 1976; Puhvel 1978; Detienne and Vernant 1979; Anonymous 1981; Vernant 1981; Scheid 1985; Hamerton-Kelly 1987; Jameson 1988; Gordon 1990; Wengrow 2010.

3 Smith 1994; Daniels 1995; King 1999; Detienne 2002; Michaels 2010b; Holdrege 2011; Calame and Lincoln 2012.

4 Pernice 1885; Wissowa 1912.

5 See, e. g., Scheid 1990; Derks and Jefferis 1998, 215–239; Lepetz and Van Andringa 2008.

6 Parker et al. 2004, 270.

7 Parker et al. 2004, 281 (Eugenia Vikela) and 316–318 (John Boardman).

8 Simon et al. 2004, in particular 328–330.

9 See, e. g., Wengrow 2008, Wengrow 2013.

I do not wish to ridicule the use of lemmata by lexica or the necessary arbitrariness of any classification. I would like to point out, however, that the approach just sketched clashes with important insights into the character of religious action and ritualisation. Such practices can, themselves, fruitfully be regarded as ways of shaping and interpreting situations and actions.¹⁰ Instead of criticising and replacing certain concepts of object-related terms, this article proposes to shift the focus of analysis of such artefacts from identifying the ritual that governs usages and meanings to reflecting on the strategy of invoking, modifying, and terminologically fixing such rituals. Thus, I claim that the questions that are answered by the classification and by the cultural contexts offered by such terms are too limited. The definitions provided by ancient authors and works, such as Varro's *De lingua latina*, Festus' lexicon, or Servius and *Servius auctus'* commentary on Vergil, stretching over roughly half a millennium, are themselves to be seen as terminological strategies that are in need of further research, as has been fruitfully shown for the concept of *religio*.¹¹

By mostly analysing material evidence that is preceding the antiquarian discourse by the ancient Latin authors just referred to, I try to minimise the antiquarian discourse's influence on the practices that I analyse and instead listen to the developing traditions and terminologies of these early practices. Not only can I not exclude the possibility that the antiquarian discourse itself draws on earlier concepts, I think it likely that it does. Nevertheless, the consequences of traditions of use and terms developed before our antiquarian sources remain relevant down into the imperial period and the Roman Empire, alongside that discourse. My examples are objects, usually artefacts, probably used in middle-Italian ritual practices of the sixth to second century.¹² The series starts with artefacts that might represent the religious actor, turns to attempts to make ritual working even beyond its actual performance and ends with linguistic redefinition of objects and discourses on problems of ritual action. My aim is *not* to prove the ancient or modern terminology to be wrong but, rather, to develop hypotheses about strategies of religious action that are hidden behind, or simply lost through, the usage of terminological shorthand. This is, admittedly, a limited aim that leaves aside pertinent cognitive or functional analyses. Due to my limited scope, the article

10 E. g., Bell 1992; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; argued for religion from different angles, e. g., McCutcheon 2007; Vries 2008; Engler 2011; Lichterman 2012.

11 See, for example, Feil 1986; Rüpke 2007a; Casadio 2010; Barton and Boyarin 2016.

12 The case studies for this article are taken from my attempt at tracing historical transformations in Mediterranean religion in Rüpke 2016b.

will not discuss cases in detail but will engage in a broader review against a background of, and building upon, many piecemeal studies.

2 Bringing the agent centre-stage

Most of what constituted ritual during the mid-first millennium BCE, especially in the area of religious activity, lies beyond any possibility of reconstruction. This applies to words, more so to words formulated rhythmically, and most of all to melodic formulations, thus songs and music.¹³ Occasionally, a wind instrument deposited in a grave provides some indication of the importance of sound. The same stricture applies to smell, which is only rarely hinted at in imagery.¹⁴ Special types of movement, such as dancing or stamping, attracted the attention of the supernatural agents being addressed and marked out the special form taken by communication with these special agents. Such movements are documented only in late ritual-related references and images.¹⁵

I point to these irrecoverable elements of human performance in religious rituals, as the focus on ritual objects tends to reduce the basic three elements of religious communication to just two: the god and the message, leaving aside the human ‘sender’.¹⁶ Given the frequently elusive status of the divine addressee, several elements of the communication, and media in particular (that dominate the archaeological record due to their higher probability of long-term survival), *also* contribute to the construction of the ‘divine Other’ by the ritual agents.¹⁷ Marcel Mauss’ theory of the gift as an attempt to define the recipient in the latter’s relation to the donor offers a basis for this interpretation.¹⁸ Rarely, however, does such an attempt at defining one’s elusive partner limit the choice of the sender in a way that makes the object—deity relation unequivocal. From such a perspective, the divine addressee is usually construed as a receiver open to the specific communication and purpose that has been selected. The deity might even be represented as performing

13 On the central significance of music in ritual, see Michaels 2010a, 20–21; Howes 2011, 95.

14 Smell: Bradley 2015; Koloski-Ostrow 2015; see in general Haug and Kreuz 2016. On sound, see, for example, Meyer-Dietrich 2010; Hartnett 2016.

15 See Lacam 2011 for the Iguvine Tablets. Dance: Naerebout 2015.

16 For a simple model of religious communication see Mörth 1993, further developed by Rüpke 2001.

17 E. g., Malik, Rüpke and Wobbe 2007; Schörner and Šterbenc Erker 2008; Clarke 2012; Rüpke 2015a; Belayche and Pirenne-Delforge 2015.

18 Mauss 1925; developed by Sahlins 1972.

the very same religious act as the human, pouring a libation for instance, thus stressing reciprocity.¹⁹

Looking for the ‘occasion’, classificatory work has traditionally²⁰ even more frequently opted for a close relation between the object and the favour asked for or received, that is, the contents of the communication. Yet, it is not just a semantic element of that communication but the communication in all its locutionary and illocutionary aspects that is linked to the object employed in, and surviving, the temporary religious action. An object thus also refers to the sender’s piety vis-à-vis the divine, to the relation vis-à-vis those who profit from (or are victims of) the success of the religious communication, and to the status of this action with regard to present witnesses and later viewers. Despite their central economic role and their instrumental value in religious communication, animals were less frequently depicted than humans.²¹ The central role played by the human body in religious activity is shown by the artefacts brought to a site by human actors, objects they interacted with and finally left in place. It is this perspective that should bear on the naming of objects in religious actions, usually lumped together under the common name of ‘votives’.

2.1 Representations of the human body

As early as the beginning of the seventh century BCE, some inhabitants of Trestina, on the upper reaches of the Tiber, threw bronze figurines in human form into pits and shafts, as a means of communicating with the unseen.²² This practice was copied in the following century by quite a few individuals in northern Etruria, often in similarly small settlements remote from cities. As already implied in the introduction above, it is impossible to recover the meaning or specific intention of individual agents. Given the varieties of objects used in these depositions, there is no need to postulate some rule that made the bronze item necessary. However, there are reasons to think that, at least in these cases, the individuals concerned offered their figurines as representations of themselves as they wished to appear. The reason is that while agents occasionally marked their local status by means of weapons, this was more frequently accomplished by a precise representation of dress – of course, I presume that it is individuals or small groups who repre-

¹⁹ See Gordon 1990.

²⁰ Foundational: Rouse 1902.

²¹ Rüpke 2007b, 272 n. 11.

²² Romualdi 1990, concentrating especially on rural areas of northern Etruria (catalogue: 632–649).

sent themselves or a particular member of their group.²³ Such a strategy can also be found elsewhere. In Rome too, in the pits of Sant’Omobono, people deposited statuettes.²⁴ Even if these were only briefly visible to other human visitors, they might have been used to emphasise the donors’ lasting presence at special locations,²⁵ as is suggested by developments in other places.

This presence was expressed in life-size form at a few larger cult complexes. Evidently, such a strategy was still affordable and was even invited by the escalating interplay of initiative and imitation, if we accept competition as one of the driving forces of ritual development even beyond the necessity of making the deity aware of the relevance of one’s communication.²⁶ At Lavinium at the beginning of the fifth century, it was probably young women and men who established a tradition of having themselves represented as life-sized (or slightly smaller) clay figures, possibly in the context of local customs marking the end of childhood: a tradition pursued by subsequent generations into the second century BCE.²⁷ Individuals continued to produce splendid bronze figures in the second and perhaps the first century BCE, and to erect these in cult structures in northern Etruria in the context of religious communication.

If imitation and competition were driving forces behind the monumentalisation of bodily representation (a process known in archaic Greece, too),²⁸ economic constraints were one force that led people to look for alternative, that is cheaper, options. Perhaps already at the end of the sixth century BCE, simple clay heads (or racks bearing such heads?) were first being used in the Campetti district of Veii.²⁹ The practice was only haltingly imitated but became very popular from the end of the fifth century BCE. Ceramicists could cater to the new demand with a novel technology probably available in Italy from the end of the sixth century: the mass production of likenesses by the use of either a single or a dual matrix.³⁰ Throughout central Italy, especially at the larger cult locations, people were offered a supply of heads or – surely cheaper – half-reliefs of heads that they could use for religious communication.

23 Romualdi 1990, 626.

24 See Brocato and Terrenato 2012, 123.

25 See the discussion in Weiss 2015 on Egyptian material.

26 Richards 1975; Engels and Van Nuffelen 2014; Kong and Woods 2016; on relevance theory as applied to religious communication: Rüpke 2015b.

27 See Comella 2004, 332.

28 Franssen 2011.

29 Steingraber 1980, 224–226.

30 Hofter 2010, 70. Hand-fashioned heads and portraits: 72–73.

We must assume that large objects were ‘set up’ – the Greek technical term (*anathema*) for all such objects pointing to the openness of purpose and representation – in special locations in elaborate rituals that brought together several people who witnessed and remembered the association of initiator and artefact. The possibilities and constraints of the setting up, the intentions of the users, and the modes of production certainly interacted, facilitated current usage, or afforded new types of employment. Unlike figurines without a base, the smaller objects also reflected a more permanent visibility than would be allowed for by being thrown into a pit. Many of them were provided with rings at their base, by which they could be stood securely on podia or benches, in chests or showcases, or even on the ground if that was deemed appropriate. The half-reliefs, on the other hand, had provision for being hung.³¹

2.2 Agents

It is interesting to consider the economic dimension of these ritual practices.³² The rough and cheap mode of production of these objects was evidently accepted and was not a source of concern. The backs and edges remained unworked. After several hundred castings, the moulds were worn, or had faults that were only superficially retouched. The products remained unpainted and were almost always not inscribed: a lack of purchasing power was combined with a deficient level of literacy. Many were fashioned by the purchasers themselves, as needs dictated, while others were individually finished, after the manner of a portrait. Notwithstanding such differences, the message conveyed to gods and humans by displaying the head was of a similar nature. The cheap, mass-produced objects allowed many people to join in the elaboration and modification of the splendid architecture and decoration, which must have been a source of pride to the patrons of those places. What would be ‘flattened’ to the repetition of a standard ritual by just calling it ‘votive’, allowed people of lesser means to articulate their presence in a way comparable to the members of economic, military, or political elites who, by monumentalising places of worship, established themselves also as religious elites. Even if it cannot have escaped the notice of many of the actors that their heads would, at some point, be cleared away or taken down and then thrown into pits or shafts, in this way they appropriated these locations that were redolent of superhuman powers and human potentates, making them

³¹ Steingraber 1980, 234. On visibility and invisibility: Bagnasco Gianni 2005.

³² See in general Koch 2014.

part of their space and range of action in the nuanced and subversive way theorised by Michel de Certeau³³ – legitimated by the fact that their actions were religiously based.

Religious activity allowed the self-representation of some individuals through architectural splendour and, at the same time, represented an attempt to guide religious practices in particular directions. However, it also allowed others to appropriate the very same spaces by modifying elite practices and, in so doing, to claim recognition for their own concerns and desires. It is characteristic of de Certeau's concept of 'appropriation' that it leaves open whether such 'strategies' – a concept of similar status to that of de Certeau and used in the same manner here – were conscious, explicit rationales for the historic agents. Again, the individual minds of these agents of the past are inaccessible. The interplay of popular practice and monumentalisation that is visible in and around Veji, with its changing temporal priorities in the establishment of special places for religious communication, is an argument for a social interaction along these lines. Occasionally, evidence suggests that such appropriation was indeed seen as a potentially conflict-provoking action and, thus, needed to be justified. It is precisely in Rome and Latium that the backs of the clay heads of simple actors are often depicted as being covered, a ritual gesture later unanimously interpreted as indicating religious communication (*capite velato*).³⁴ As this was not deemed necessary by all those who brought these objects into sanctuaries, it is an indication that the objects in question were not just the currency of a rule-based quasi-contract between humans and deities.

On this basis, I suggest that we not read representations of humans or parts of humans just as 'gifts for the gods.' The presence of very diverse objects in special precincts was also part of the establishment of 'religion' as a field of social competition and cooperation that is not simply given and practiced. Clay heads vied with built structures in this way until the end of the second century BCE. Broad social strata and elites entered into an indirect trade-off in central Italy; the mass presence of objects originating from a multitude of hands had the effect not only of appropriating the religious infrastructure, but also of strengthening it by contributing crucially to the sacralisation of structures and precincts.³⁵ The character of religion as something special depends as much on claims as on recognition of such claims. Here, objects were a medium that served quite different purposes in many parts of Greece, while often undergoing similar processes of popularisation.

33 Certeau 1984, Certeau 2007; for antiquity see, for example, Maier 2013.

34 See Söderlind 2005, 362; Comella 2004, 333 and 337.

35 Rüpke 2013.

In Greece, however, gods, or gods and humans, were the main theme of clay reliefs.³⁶ The practices under consideration were above all local traditions of action that would spread only slowly or under specific conditions; the spread of certain inscriptional practices as hallmarks of Roman identities in the imperial period is a case in point.

2.3 Dynamics

A consideration of the ‘strategies’ of human social actors does not negate the ‘social life of things’.³⁷ It was not only heads that were depicted. If the head could stand *pars pro toto* for the whole person, as I have assumed, the same role might also have been assigned to other body parts. While such parts as eyes, feet, arms, and legs were still of a public nature, so to speak, the same could not be said of the external sexual organs, breasts and penises, and internal organs such as the lungs, intestines, or uterus. Anyone presenting the latter category of body parts, normally invisible under skin or vestments, within the public space of cult structures evidently understood such spaces primarily as settings for intimate communication with those that were to be addressed there, as well as one form of individual appropriation.

The precise content of such attempts at communication remained hidden to later observers. Was the intention to formulate and impress on the memory of the interlocutor quite specific concerns by means of quite specific objects? In addition to the senders of diverse social backgrounds and the producers of objects, a third group of human agents needs to enter into the analysis, just as it entered the field of religious communication. The practice was integrated into a medical discourse in which specialist suppliers provided ever more specific representations, perhaps as an element of a consultation or as a diagnostic offer that was by no means anatomically ‘objective’. Religious communication was optimised with regard to divine help, thereby establishing specialised institutions that would, in the long run, differentiate between medicine and ‘religion’. It was, perhaps, as a consequence of such a conversation and diagnosis that, in the third century BCE, a woman from Etruria commissioned a female torso showing, between small, taut breasts and thick folds of fabric over the thighs, a large, ovoid opening in the belly displaying the details of internal organs, including a loop of intestine at the lower extremity.³⁸ To classify such a body as ‘votive’ would reduce it to a

³⁶ On the contrast, see, in brief, Steingraber 1980, 251; on Greek clay reliefs up to the end of the fifth century BCE, see Comella 2002.

³⁷ Appadurai 1986.

³⁸ Recke and Wamser-Krasznai 2008, cat. no. 25. I am grateful to Georgia Petridou (Liverpool) and her work for many valuable insights.

manifestation of a message in a preformatted religious communication and possibly cut off the many questions not answered by that classification.

3 Staying in touch

3.1 Perpetuating the communicative moment: Altars

One of the most popular artefacts used in religious communication took the form of ‘hearths’, not always miniature, which were used as early as the fifth century BCE, for example at Satricum.³⁹ Some actors were prepared to use such an *ara* in miniature form too and not solely when depositing it in a grave. Their intentions may have been various. By the duplication or even multiplication of existing hearths, donors also altered the religious infrastructure. In Italy, the establishment of new *arae* was one of the most frequent measures taken when further developing cult complexes;⁴⁰ judging from the expenses involved, the actors concerned may well have been among the wealthy in a given locality.

However, quite apart from this ‘appropriation’ of an existing religious location, the majority of ‘hearths’ addressed the act of special communication as a part of religious communication itself. In the donated object,⁴¹ the lasting presence of the unique ritual act appeared in a form that invited repetition and actualisation.⁴² At the same time, the actors involved no longer characterised themselves as domestic technicians preparing food but as being involved in the specific field of religious activity, in a way that is very closely related to the covered clay heads or legal formulas. In iconographic terms, the hearth, being also the scene of libations, took the long-term place in Rome that was occupied in many regions of Greece by the libation bowl, the *phiale*, as, for example, deposited in large numbers in clay form in Athens in the fifth century BCE.⁴³ Both the practices related to these instruments, acting at a hearth or pouring a libation from a bowl, could indicate a specifically religious virtue, ‘piety’. The Latin personification, *Pietas*, is plausibly represented on coins from the Late Republic onwards as a woman with covered head standing at a small altar, or pouring a libation from a bowl. The altars are tools, infrastructure and memory of religious performances.

³⁹ Edlund-Berry 2004, 369, no. 343: from Satricum in hour-glass form.

⁴⁰ See Nonnis 2003.

⁴¹ Comella 2005; de Hemmer Gudme 2012.

⁴² See Weiss 2015.

⁴³ On the (omphalos) bowl Boardman, Mannack and Wagner 2004, 305.

3.2 Opening options instead of documenting choices: Animals

Other people, too, used signs that were over-determined, as (probably) conventional meanings were given twists. Repeatedly, at more than one hundred places, all in central Italy, traditions or at least the options of erecting or depositing animal figures of bronze or clay were established.⁴⁴ Representations of pigs and cattle were used at Fregellae during the period from the fourth to the second century BCE, doves in particular at the Minerva complex at Lavinium and at the so-called Minerva Medica sanctuary in Rome, as well as cattle, a wild pig, a horse, a lion, and birds. Local traditions restricted what one could oneself properly repeat; in other instances, local diversity invited individual experimentation.

The most common animals consumed at meals in these places, such as sheep or chickens, were rarely used as figurines. The objects used could hardly represent the meat used on such occasions, often 'given' to the gods before being consumed for the most part by humans. What, then, did people believe they did, either intentionally or when they came to think about it long after their performance of something 'one does'? Again, using classifications framed in terms of 'occasions' or 'gifts' is a hindrance to more nuanced observations. Of course, some individuals might have associated such an object with a request for fertility or for the end of a pestilence on their own pasture. To others it may have been more important simply to use such miniatures to represent themselves as cattle-owners, as successful hunters (and keepers of hunting dogs), or as people who followed local religious practices (such as the killing of doves). Boasting may have been no more an element here than in representations of young or richly-adorned individuals – we need not assume that the representation of one's head or full body was meant to be accurate portraiture that was true to life. Only in the rarest of cases would a replica of a slaughtered animal have been deposited: a private feast of a thousand portions of beef (as provided by a single, full-grown animal) was certainly not a religious act that frequently, or even only occasionally, took place at locations possessing miniature representations of cattle or was in need of remembering such a festival in such a form.⁴⁵

Perhaps the practices described were oriented towards long-term religious communication and long-term acquisition of the active options that were facilitated by religious communication.⁴⁶ It might have been regarded

⁴⁴ Overview Edlund-Berry 2004, 369–370.

⁴⁵ On method-related problems of verification see, for example, Van Andringa and Lepetz 2003.

⁴⁶ Cf. Scheid 1990, 372 for the periodical rituals called *vota* of the Arvals during the imperial period.

as adequate to stay in a good relationship with unseen power-holders or those that were represented by statues. Such a motivation might have differed in comparison to the use of the Asclepius complexes, which, in any case, were not yet abundant in central Italy even in the third century BCE and were visited by many only in cases of specific medical needs.⁴⁷

3.3 Stabilising the addressee: Houses for the gods

As religious practices and ideas regarding the divine were modelled on social practices and relationships, for instance regarding inequalities and reciprocities, the construction of divine Others must have included reflections on which expectations were entertained by those addressed. Anyone interested in exhibiting an association with a deceased individual, a former chief or landowner or node in a long-distance network, and so drawing continued advantage from the respect due to that person, may have found, and perhaps even habitualised, constant opportunities for 'religion' in domestic shrines or visits paid to the tomb. Someone who wished to obtain support from a 'god' in repeated situations may have found, and perhaps even habitualised, opportunities for 'religion' by visiting a special place or nurturing a special relationship by frequent prayer. The tendency may have been even stronger where an individual had acquired particular social and religious exposure by having initiated a built structure. In all other instances, expectations on the part of deities or the ancestors for renewed worship (enjoyment, feeding, 'gifts') might simply be overlooked and repetitions forgotten: in much the same way as occurs today in comparable instances, in which only vague suppositions are present. But the assumption of the existence of such divine demands of caring or honouring increased with the degree to which those addressees were given form and a face by means of architecture, notable rituals, or images. It also increased among those who had established a more intimate relationship, perhaps through specific infirmities that were reminding them of the need of constant help. The fact that such images were present not only on the (roof-) tops of (and later also in) special houses (*aedes*), but also in smaller forms as domestic statuettes, busts or litters with symbols carried around in the streets, would have greatly furthered their plausibility and, hence, reality.⁴⁸ The increasing presence of such media, and, hence, specific forms of divine presence, were part of the social and mental environment and constraints of human agents opting for and entertaining religious strategies.

⁴⁷ Bodel 2009, 18; Rüpke 2009b, 36.

⁴⁸ Madigan 2013; Estienne 2014.

The *votum*, the Italian ‘vow’, was a result rather than a precondition of this. To reconstruct its development helps to show the implications and the limits of the historical concept and its use as a nearly all-embracing generic term.

4 Writing and labelling

The woman from Etruria, and many others, accompanied the placing of specific artefacts in specific places with words. Perhaps some were precise petitions, others might have been less precise or were no petitions at all, but thanksgiving on behalf of a cure received or administered, or perhaps acknowledging the end of an apprenticeship, just as adolescents left symbols of childhood. While the media used did not reproduce the content of communications, they were not without influence on it. The heads mentioned above might have provided the impetus for bringing problems relating to particular body parts into the range of usual meanings of such objects. Despite the fact that I have interpreted later reception as a testimony to earlier interpretations held by at least a minority, I have to admit that misunderstandings could be productive as well. In a thought experiment that supplements the lack of direct evidence with the product of our historical imagination, the substitution of heads by other aching body parts has rested on a misapprehension, as the clay heads did not refer to head pains. Yet this would have been a productive misapprehension of the kind that readily accompanies learning processes that move from observation to imitation, such as were characteristic of religious communication in general.

The application of writing, a cultural technique developed in other, above all urban, contexts, offered even more daring inventions. To give just one example, a banqueting utensil in traditional use became the vehicle of a promise (or curse) regarding the love matters of a man at the Roman Quirinal who called himself (or was called) *Duenos* (‘the good’). There was, evidently, a discrepancy between the object, a *kernos* which connected three small vessels for food in a ring, and *Duenos*’ own intention, namely entering into contracting or cursing. It was this discrepancy that moved him to reach for his stylus and produce one of the earliest Latin inscriptions, thus ascribing new meaning to the object.⁴⁹

The monumentalisations of the sixth century BCE, expressing and furthering social differentiation, created new opportunities for display and

⁴⁹ *CIL* 12.4 = *ILS* 8743 = *ILLRP* 2 and most recently *AE* 1992, 75; 1994, 102 and 1995, 89. The interpretation of the text is notoriously difficult.

entailed associated demands. The monumentalised contexts also prompted the use of new objects, and especially the production of long-lasting baked goods in the form of clay slices and rolls.⁵⁰ Nourishment that was unsuitable for humans defined the addressees as entities who appreciated such tokens or, perhaps better, indications that the relationship between sender and addressees should be thought of in terms of feeding. In searching for meaning here, an accompanying text would be very happily received, even if it was as mysterious as the Duenos inscription.

4.1 Donum

Contemporaries must have shared this feeling. The use in religious communication of bronze ingots (*aes rude*), a form of weighable money preceding the introduction of bronze and silver weights and finally coins, triggered this as early as the sixth century BCE.⁵¹ It was the habit, in case of doubt, to inscribe these particular objects with the words *donom*, subsequently *donum* or *donum dedit*, ‘he/she presented this as a gift’, the oldest formula to be found in appreciable numbers. I will briefly analyse this concept before I turn to two other strategies of labelling and the concepts implied by these: *votum* and *sacer*.

Perhaps it was the lack of visible consumption (by drowning, draining, disappearing in a pit, burning or consumption performed by others on behalf of the gods), despite the fact of the possibility of consumption due to its exchange value, that demanded an explanation, a statement of a transaction performed, not rejected. Labelling what rested untouched as ‘gift’, as something that had left the hands of the sender and somehow (and irrevocably) reached the receiver. Here we witness the development of an explicit concept, starting from very special circumstances but open to generalisation. Lucius Salvios Seios, son of Lucius, inscribed it on a stele at Samnite Superaequum in the third century BCE, combined with the Sabelline-Oscan formula ‘upon receiving favours’ (*brat datas*).⁵²

At the beginning of the same century at the latest, Orceria, probably the wife of one Numerius, wrote *donom dedi* on a bronze tablet at Praeneste, describing the recipient in the triple form typical of central Italy as Fortuna, daughter to Jupiter, Primigenia.⁵³ Formalised language, redolent of

⁵⁰ See Edlund-Berry 2004, 372.

⁵¹ As evidenced in Edlund-Berry 2004, 375.

⁵² *ILLRP* 143 = *AE* 1922, 97; in Latin *parata data*, presumably relating to the donor, not the deity.

⁵³ *ILLRP* 101 = *CIL* 14.2863 = *ILS* 3684.

legal transactions, was used to ritualise religious communication. If religious transfers of property were as threatened as other economic transactions by jealous observers, more powerful people, and last but not least thieves, the defensive use of the head covering, as hypothesised above, was replaced by the transposition of legal formulas, that is formulas trying to bind everybody, or at least all members of the polity.

4.2 Votum

Plautus, the writer of comedies and producer of performances, and after him Titinius, were able to address this theme with terminological precision at the turn of the third century BCE: their characters wished to ‘fulfil’ a *votum*, or ‘vow’ or were ‘condemned’ to it and so obliged to its fulfilment.⁵⁴ The language was not ancient. It is absent from older inscriptions – admittedly an *argumentum e silentio*, but not a daring one if we take the traceable popularisation into account. It does not appear in inscriptions prior to the third and second centuries BCE. The juridical precision of the subject matter and the language to which it gave rise suggest that the problem of how to make sure that a promise to a god was kept, was conceived of and resolved in situations where the bounds of the dialectical space that pertained between individual humans and deities were exceeded, that is to say where demands on the public purse were involved.⁵⁵ This assumes a developed state system, which did not exist in sixth- and fifth-century central Italy and was not achieved in Rome until the second half of the fourth century BCE.

We are given insight into this process by a bronze plate from Falerii Novi, newly founded after 241 BCE. The wording, in local script but in the regional variant of Latin,⁵⁶ is important. The local praetor was concerned to establish, down to the last detail, that the religious act he had undertaken had its origin in an order of the local Senate:

Menerva sacru / La. Cotena La. f. pretod de / zenatuo sententiad vootum / dedet cuando datu rected / cuncaptum.

‘Sacred to Minerva. Lars Cotena son of Lars, praetor, issued a vow by a decision of the Senate. When it was issued, it was correctly formulated.’⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Plautus, *Rudens* 60; Titinius, *Comicorum Romanorum Fragmenta* 153.

⁵⁵ Scheid 1981 has masterfully described the development of the situation that arose in Rome.

⁵⁶ Adams 2007, 101–107.

⁵⁷ *ILLRP* 238 = *ILS* 3124 = *AE* 1998, 506 (my translation). There is discussion as to whether the second ‘issued’ refers to the formulation of the vow or indicates its realisation (thus an abbreviated form of *donom dedit*; see Wachter 1987, 450–452). However, a correct formulation is necessary only for the prior contractual basis; the delivery speaks for itself.

So as to treat this new institution correctly in respect of the language used, he has gone so far as to indicate even the length of the vowel in *votum* by doubling it.

The cultured brothers Marcus and Publius Vertuleius addressed the new institution around the mid-second century BCE near Sora in Latium, in one of the earliest private inscriptions to mention a *votum*. Here too it is a question of the distance in time between the father's assumption of the obligation, in a desperate situation at the same location, and its fulfilment, undertaken by the sons by means of a tithe in the form of a sumptuous meal for Hercules Maximus. However, they cannot resist adding that they beg Hercules, as he has once obliged them, to condemn them frequently; that is to say condemn them to fulfil a *votum*:

*M(arcus) P(ublius) Vertuleieis / C(ai) f(ili) quod re sua difeident asper(a) / aflecta parens timens / heic vovit voto hoc / soluto [d]ecuma facta / poloucta leibereis luben/tes donu(m) danunt / Herculei Maxsume / merito semol te / orant se voti crebro / condemnes.*⁵⁸

'Marcus and Publius Vertuleius, sons of Gaius. That which, despairing for his shattered affairs, squalid, fearful, the father vowed here, the sons – when this vow was fulfilled by means of the tenth set aside and offered as a banquet – happily give as a gift to Hercules especially meritorious. Together they pray that you frequently condemn them (to the fulfilment) of a vow.' (Transl. Meyer, *Legitimacy*, 2004, 53; modified).

The concluding joke – to ask for multiple sentencing – at the same time refers to the problem thrown up by the juridification of religious communication. Whereas both, request and thanks, had actually been embedded in a more comprehensive communication that had at least been intended to be enduring, in the context of the *votum* institution they became discrete events. The asymmetry of the relationship came to an end with the resolution of the obligation entered into. What I have called institutionalisation above is visible from the double-layered communication. The vow is resolved by a banquet (or presentation of food) of fixed value (*votum* – *polucluctum*); this whole procedure is occasion for a 'gift' and further communication (*donum* – *orare*).

There appear to have been only two or three opportunities for *vovere* in Rome itself up to the Second Punic War at the end of the third century BCE: at the departure of a commander to the war (*vota nuncupare*), at the construction of temples, and upon the announcement of 'great games' (*ludi magni*). According to Livy's account, narratives of other, more individual *vota* do not appear until the end of the Second Punic War. On the basis of his text, it was not until 200 BCE that questions appear to have been asked as

⁵⁸ ILLRP 136 = CIL 10.5708 = ILS 3411.

to how the body politic could be bound to a regular act of religious communication by means of *vota*, and how *vota* in general could be detached from concrete causes (and resources). The ('great') votive games were counted as periodically recurring events, and linked to a consul's immediately preceding 'five-year vow'.⁵⁹ The comedies quoted at the beginning were pieces contemporary with these developments. Their wording does not refer to age-old religious norms but to debates that were not kept secret in the senate.

To briefly draw a preliminary conclusion to this sub-chapter, the *votum* was not the epitome of Roman piety but, rather, a strategy of committing to religious communication substantial resources that were subject to a social disposition, thus shielding these resources from other human demands. In order to deal with questions of how those hundred cattle, promised by a Scipio in Spain⁶⁰ but to be slaughtered in Rome, were to be paid for, by the end of the third century BCE a ritual institution had been developed. This development occurred against a background of increasing statehood in Latium, and perhaps directly in Rome, which, while clearly covering that ground, at the same time offered a solution for particular problems of normal religious communication. Even though the *votum* created some new problems, and might give rise to ridicule, it quickly became popular. Already under the Republic, its use had become so formalised that, in Rimini, Pupius Salvius was able to assume that the abbreviation for *votum solvit lubens merito* in his inscription⁶¹ was comprehensible:

V S L M

'He gladly fulfils the vow as merited by the god.'

Compared to the indication of the pronunciation by a double O in writing, the use of an abbreviation for a whole sentence presupposes widespread knowledge and epigraphic usage of the formula. The insertion of one's own communication – from subject through message to addressee –, and one's own permanent setting up of an object, into a well-established formula might have produced certainty in the face of religious uncertainty, as well as social control. In the following section I propose to read a term in Latin religious language in a similar way, not as a fixed precondition but as a strategy of religious communication and the use of objects.

⁵⁹ Livy 31.9.9–10.

⁶⁰ Livy 28.38.8.

⁶¹ *ILLRP* 241.

4.3 Sacer

Ager emps et termnas oht C. V. Vistinie, Ner. T. Babr., maronatei Vois. Ner. Propartie, T. V. Voisiener; sacre stahu.

‘Land bought and marked out in the *uhturship* of C. Vestinius son of V. and Ner. Babrius son of T. [in community X], in the *maronship* of Vols. Propertius son of Ner. and T. Volsinius son of V. [in community Y]. I (the stone) stand as sacred (marker?).’⁶²

With this stone, inscribed in Latin script but in the Umbrian language, and dating from the first quarter of the first century BCE, the named magistrates marked a point at which land ownership in one community came up against the border of the neighbouring community. *Sacre*, Latin *sacer*, indicates the status of the stone; this can refer only to its immovability and its status as shared public property: for this reason, the name of the individual landowner was expressly not mentioned. There is no doubt that the term has its origin in the sphere of religious communication in the broadest sense. In addition to *donum*, it is *sacrum* that is written on objects with increasing frequency everywhere in the Imperial Age, the two terms often occurring in combination. It came naturally to anyone able to classify every item of property – slaves included – to see neutral ground as a divine possession.⁶³ Legal classification, however, first seen formulated in textbooks of the second century CE,⁶⁴ was one thing, an attempt to squeeze the gods into a schema confined even by its authors to within the borders of Roman territory in its narrowest sense, above all the city and its immediate Latin environs. What did it mean for a Jupiter to possess a sanctuary at Gubbio for example?⁶⁵

The position according to the laws of property was then, as it is now, just one perspective among many, inculcated or initiated as it may have been with warnings not to disturb the place, the archaic *lapis niger* on the Forum Romanum⁶⁶ being a first instance of this practice. In reality, the will to permanently keep out of circulation objects that had been transferred to superhuman agents was restricted; if need be (a need determined by the individual thief or a local political power-holder), such objects were re-utilized.⁶⁷ As we have seen, anyone who found it incumbent on him or her to upgrade a complex also did so without hesitating to encroach upon the existing assets. It was precisely such construction projects, intensity of use, and depositing of objects that contributed to the process of sacralisation, determining both

⁶² *CIL* 11.5389; translation based on Langslow 2012, 304.

⁶³ See Rüpke 2006.

⁶⁴ Gaius, *Institutions* 2.3–9.

⁶⁵ Cf. Lacam 2010, 215.

⁶⁶ Coarelli 1977.

⁶⁷ Aberson 2009.

the focus and the extent of complexes that either remained undefined by boundary stones or walls, or received that provision very late. The application of *sacer* to artefacts and spaces was, as much as the usage of *donum* or *votum*, not just a spelling out of what was the case in a pre-established cognitive system but the use of situational (and in the long run or sometimes fairly quickly) habitualised strategies of defending, which bolstered the setting-up of artefacts in accessible spaces and helped make them last.

5 Ritualisation

We can now come to a first conclusion. All of the pits, objects, and structures discussed formed part of strategies for separating action as *religious* communication from other forms of action which did not ascribe relevance to any divine addressees (whether gods or ancestors). To this extent, it was the objects and the related religious practices that gave the divine a concrete, located presence.⁶⁸ Here, religion turns out to be a spatial practice that established and reshaped space, thus sacralising it and attracting further practices to these ‘sacred spaces’, ‘sanctuaries’, which evidently had proven useful in making religious communication successful.

I will come back to the establishment, and even monumentalisation, of space but need first to address a different aspect of the spatial character of religious practice. Religious practice in the Roman period was not restricted to pre-established sanctuaries. Regardless of distance, the divine (at least in some forms) could be invoked everywhere. Even without the associations of a specific sacralised space, communicative action could be established as religious by other means of ritualisation. The use of incense, sourced from the eastern Mediterranean, where it was already an imported product, was one preferred way in which the desire for distinction, the wish to stand out socially, was combined with the desire for sacralisation. Its ‘discovery’ was itself a feature of the ‘orientalising period’, an entire complex of innovations and imports derived from long-distance and overseas contacts. The necessary devices were copied from Phoenician models and reproduced primarily in local bronze-work. The forms thus arrived at underwent further development in the fifth and subsequent centuries, to culminate in a simplified standard form of incense burner.⁶⁹ The association of incense and libation – *ture et vino* – became a dual marker designating activities as

⁶⁸ For an overview, see Belayche and Pirenne-Delforge 2015; Elsner 2012, 15 on the theological proportionality of material culture.

⁶⁹ Bubheimer-Erhart 2004, 58.

sacred; the round Etruscan incense *pyxis* or the rectangular Roman *acerra* became accessories that marked out an individual as the temporary bearer of a religious role.⁷⁰

Since the two-handled pitcher-form of the *olla* or *urna* was ill-suited for pouring, it was frequently replaced by the three-handled Greek *hydria*; however, the more cumbersome ancient form was long used in the cult in central Italy and by Rome's Vestal Virgins even into the Imperial Age. The Vestals, being highly visible in the middle of Rome, also used archaic forms of banqueting utensils and storage vessels.⁷¹ In certain ritual contexts, their costume involved bronze fibulae of a kind known from as early as the La Tène period in central Europe.⁷²

Anyone who made his actions special in such a way, while speaking to divine addressees and signifying relevance to them, at the same time addressed himself, assuring himself of his own significance.⁷³ Both elements of such a conversation must also have been meant for a further audience of fellow human beings. In inscribing objects intended for religious communication, whether in temples or tombs, early users of first the Greek, and later the Etruscan and Latin scripts, took advantage of the possibility inherent in all three scripts of reproducing the very sounds of words using phonetic symbols for both consonants and vowels. Donors and objects were thus able to 'speak', but only if they could hope for the cooperation of readers in responding to the challenge implicit to the phonetic signs, and reading them aloud, as was normal in Antiquity.⁷⁴ The famous early-fifth-century BCE inscription

[---]iei steterai Popliosio Valesiosio suodales Mamartei

'... as companions of Poplius Valesius, erected this for Mars'

from Satricum⁷⁵ was intended to be declaimed and must have been aimed at such an audience.

An audience is more self-evident still for other forms of ritualisation. Why should aristocrats stage chariot races or gladiatorial contests if they had no spectators for them? The element of sacralisation, the reference to the dead or to gods, which gave the event its particular relevance, and thus presum-

70 Krauskopf 2009, 506; here also on 'urns'.

71 Argento, Cherubini and Gusberti 2010, 83. In the case of particular forms, this does not exclude the converse process by which forms used in a sacral context might be adopted into household use (see Argento, Cherubini and Gusberti 2010, 84).

72 Argento, Cherubini and Gusberti 2010, 92.

73 See Rüpke 2016a, 110–114.

74 Stähli 2014, 135–136 (for Greece).

75 See Stibbe and Colonna 1980; Versnel 1982; Prosdocimi 1994.

ably also assured it a still larger audience, is more problematic in this case. Even if individual competitors may have invoked named deities on such occasions, sacralisation was more distinctly recognisable and impressive if the entire event exhibited such a reference.

If religious practices were part of strategies of articulation and the demanding of respect on the part of the less well-off, as argued for on the basis of the terracotta heads above, such practices were also further developed by those who commanded much larger resources. Religious communication could be used to increase visibility, whether on a temporary or permanent basis. Choice of location for one's own performance and for leaving (more or less) permanent traces of that performance was one option, from praying on the Capitol in Rome near the Temple of Jupiter to the construction of an entire complex, as at Olympia on the Peloponnese. The involvement of statues in rituals was another option, in which case the former had to be fetched in procession from the temples. As well as contests, funerary paintings from as early as the sixth and perhaps even the seventh century BCE attest to parades and processions (that is, passing by and heading towards, as the terms stress) in Etruscan cities. In various locations these rituals feature in the repertoire of motifs designed for the representation of aristocratic prestige. Two-wheeled chariots, as used in races and processions, characteristically appear in rooftop terracotta friezes and no doubt relate to a broad reality in Italy;⁷⁶ they can be found in Rome in clearly sacralised form from the end of the sixth century BCE onwards.⁷⁷ Watching such spectacles, hearing the clatter of hooves and armour, smelling the sweat of horses and contestants, or the oil they wore, perhaps even running with them: all this turned mere observers and spectators into participants in the ritual.⁷⁸ And it made the aristocratic activity of 'play' (*ludi*), recast as religious communication, into something more, namely public action. The same did not apply to every activity. The aristocratic enactment of the hunt, prevalent in Antiquity and into the present day, and staged on an immense scale in the Early Modern Period, while the subject of images and narratives, was seldom sacralised until Roman organisational and architectural skills allowed it to be relocated to the amphitheatre (*venatio*).⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Full accounts in Winter 2010, 128 and Lubtchansky 2010, 166.

⁷⁷ Coarelli 2005; Rüpke 2012, 19 with reference to the Tomba delle Bighe (Tarquinia) and the Tomba della Scimmia (Chiusi), as well as amphorae from Ponti di Micali (Bruni 2004, no. 29).

⁷⁸ Huet 2015.

⁷⁹ For an overview: Toner 2014. For a comparative treatment of the hunt, and deer hunting in particular, see Sykes et al. 2014.

Religious communication was not only a spatial but also a temporal practice. In a comparable way of what specific places ‘afforded’ and how they were used, specific times and dates – night or dawn, equinoxes or solstices, agricultural or economic events or rhythms – were used to add further meaning to religious action and thus offered convenient opportunities to stage religious practices. In a dense urban calendar, however, also the opposed process of preferring new, alternative dates to gain distinction and specific attention can be observed.⁸⁰

The ritualisation and sacralisation of activities had implications that needed to be catered for.⁸¹ The actors’ roles and codes of propriety could be affected. From participants and competitors, aristocrats became organisers and financiers; or, worse still, the victorious horse in the *October equus* race in Rome was killed and the winner of the Capitoline race had to drink absinth.⁸² Such excesses perhaps tended to be omitted in the case of less exposed roles. Dancing may have been a frequent element but we have only indirect means of knowing its status.⁸³ It was not only children who rode on the swings at the *feriae latinae*, the holidays that brought Latins from outlying towns to Alba.⁸⁴

6 Consequences in terminology

This article began with a critique of a terminological practice in Classical Archaeology and History of Greco-Roman Religion which interprets artefacts by attributing them to rituals designated by terms found in ancient terminology. By focusing on the human agents, the shortcomings of such an approach (despite the many fruitful studies in the character, complexity, and change of such rituals) have been pointed out. Paying tribute to the complex process of individual selection, use, modification, misinterpretation, and innovation of actions and tools that had previously been used by others in religious actions, has thrown light on the ‘strategic’ character of religious action. Ritualisation and sacralisation, employing *religious* communication and the situational shaping of *that* communication according to the situation is a conscious choice in the face of non-religious forms of action (or not acting at all). If religious action is fundamentally a complex communicative act, its many facets cannot be captured by terms that were themselves employed

⁸⁰ See Rüpke 1995, 512–513.

⁸¹ Bell 1992; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994.

⁸² Rüpke 2009a; absinth: Plin. *HN* 27.45 (see Malavolta 1996, 261).

⁸³ Wheeler 1982; Lonsdale 1993; Connelly 2011; Naerebout 2015 (on the archaeology).

⁸⁴ Festus p. 212.15–214.3 Lindsay; see also Pasqualini 1996, 225–226; Kyle 1998, 36–37.

due to the strategic reasoning of those who coined or used them, as we have seen in the case of the *votum*. Terms like ‘votives’, ‘altars’, ‘gifts’, and ‘vows’ or ‘games’ suggest a predefined set of religious practices, a tool-box neatly classified by our historical subjects that is easily applicable for our descriptions. This is not the case if we focus on the agents.

I am not denying processes of habituation, as has been stressed time and again. Indeed, some of these terms, such as (probably) *votum*, *ludi*, *donum*, and *sacer*, reflect processes of conscious standardisation. They later aimed at bolstering or justifying certain practices and protecting the setting-up of the very objects of the archaeological record. The choice of words would not have been self-understood and accepted without such terminological labour. As such, the terms were taken up, even enthusiastically embraced, by contemporaries or later users due to the fact that they enabled the determination of vague ideas and unstable practices.

It is a consequence of my approach that I do not offer any alternative terminology. Instead, a number of hypotheses about strategies of religious action that are hidden behind, or simply lost through, the usage of terminological shorthand have been developed. In each of the cases presented, substantial resources were probably committed to religious communication even beyond what was destroyed or distributed during the ritual action proper. Bound to a place (usually, but not necessarily, the spot of the ritual action), they made the ephemeral communication last with a view to *all* possible audiences. Artefacts were shaped by, and combined with, the languages of iconography and writing. Words made claims and shaped discourses *in addition to* rituals, rather than merely reproducing them. In so doing, they shielded resources from alternative uses and focused resources on purposes achievable only by establishing this action as *religious* action. Thus, the examples presented invite us to use artefacts, from miniatures to architectural complexes, as lenses through which we can view religious strategies and build up comparisons of such strategies. The language that is part of these strategies, rather than their precondition, does not offer a typology that is ready to use.

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