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Jörg Rüpke

Discourses and Narratives, Experiences and Identities

This is the first ‘open issue’ of *Religion in the Roman Empire* and the journal is grateful for so many authors having accepted and thus made *RRE* into a platform for debating new and cross-disciplinary approaches. Despite their diverse backgrounds¹ the role of discourses and narratives in lived ancient religion is a common feature of all contributions in this issue. It is experiences and identities that are shaped by narratives in many different forms, be it historiography or gossip, and narratives, above all public narratives, are shaped by experiences and identities. Ancient intellectuals were aware of this mutual dependency, as some of the articles will show.

In ‘Shaping Identity by Writing History: Earliest Christianity in its Making’, Eve-Marie Becker analyses the contribution of three gospel narratives (Mark, Luke, Matthew) to the formation of what she calls a literary identity. In form and interest this is historiographical writing, the character of which is stressed by the ‘Acts of the Apostles’, which she attributes to the same author Luke. Taking up earlier narrative strands, the text helps its readers to create a specific memory and thus further a specific identity. Closer analysis brings out the characteristics of this identity. In imitation (*qua* gospel) and variation (a plurality of gospels and a certain clustering among them) this identity is bounded as well as contested by different authors. At the same time, in the development of an open-ended narrative, in which the appearance of Jesus after Easter starts rather than closes an ongoing history, a certain openness is achieved that might defy a narrow delineation of identities. Even if the size of the audiences affected by this literary identity cannot be ascertained, its availability, one could argue, changes the field of religious phenomena in the imperial period.

Jörg Rüpke explores the role of such and other texts in not only creating collective identities in individual recipients, but in building stable groups.

1 A number of the texts build on papers that were delivered at a conference on narrative and religion; some of the papers of this conference have already been published in Issue 1.3 (2015).

‘The Role of Texts in Processes of Religious Grouping during the Principate’ critically reviews above all claims about stable groups as producers or recipients of a serial production of texts. The perspective of lived religion enables us to focus on the very different strategies from authorship to pseudepigraphy, and the very different situations of intended or factual audiences and collaboration or competition between producers of texts. Here, texts and the reading of texts can allow for the saliency of identities that do not necessarily come to the fore in many other instances.

It is a very different group of texts and a different period, but a comparable interest in the relationship between texts, authors, readers and re-readers that is the object of Luise Marion Frenkel’s analysis of ‘Individual Christian Voices in the Narratives of Late-Antique Acclamations’, for instance literary narratives, but also inscriptions and graffiti referring to ecclesiastical councils. These narratives, whatever their historical basis, are the result of a complex interplay of very different agents, from commissioners to authors, artisans, and readers or illiterate viewers. Based on their own notions, interests and earlier narratives, they all took part in shaping the genesis as well as the whole process of reception. And yet the single narrative must be seen as an individual product.

Then the focus moves from groups to individuals. In ‘Negotiating the Temple-Script: Women’s Narratives among the “Confession-Texts” of Western Asia Minor’ Richard Gordon analyses the so-called confession steles by identifying their social script, results of pressures from the social world, and their ‘temple-script’, resulting from the pressure of temple personnel and pressure ascribed to the gods. It was the case of serious, long-term illness, where these pressures found their starting points and plausibility. The article takes special note of the role of women, roughly a quarter of the authors, who seemed to use this medium in particular in order to resolve family conflicts and who quite frequently seemed to escape the usual scripts. To opt for a stela meant to end gossip and social pressure resulting from prolonged illness and the like; to opt for a long text increased the ability to formulate one’s own position rather than simply taking over the temple-script.

Jonas Grethlein tackles the relationship between narrative and experience in his chapter on ‘Lucian’s response to Augustine: Conversion and Narrative in *Confessions* and *Nigrinus*’. The chronological absurdity of the headline drives home Grethlein’s point: These texts should not be seen in isolation, that is, as the outcome of some individual theorising, but against an institutional background of experiences of a restructuring of one’s relation to the world in its different, and above all divine, respects that are articulated in narratives that inspire the interpretation of experiences as being religious

conversion experiences. The texts' relationship to this background might, however, be very different. Here, Augustine tries to identify the formative language of his own experience in biblical narratives, whereas Lucian brings out the gap between narrative and experience. A short glance at the Renaissance author Petrarch's narrative of an experience deemed to forbid communicative sharing throws the problem into sharper relief. In all three cases the high degree of reflection on the entanglement of experience and narrative is significant.

In the concluding article, 'Phikola, a Mysterious Goddess at Phlya', M. David Litwa analyses mystery cult traditions of Phlya in Attica. It is the search for the referent that is driving discourses about mysteries and the author consciously shares his sources' concern about these referents. But it is not an original referent the article is primarily interested in. What rather comes out in the analysis are the practices of identifications, associations, and speculation. These were informed by very different functions of such discourses, demonstrating superior knowledge, exegetical expertise or even denouncing opponents. Interpretations were shaped by these communicative purposes and ever more open for new hermeneutic approaches. Historically as well as by Litwa, textual evidence is combined with the interpretation of paintings. Forgotten meaning is an invitation to allegory. One author used a particular painting for explaining and sacralising his own theology by giving it an Orphic origin; the author of the 'Refutations of all Heresies' was interested in proving that his opponents' ideas, being derived from Greek philosophers, astrologers, and creators of mystery cults, were thereby illegitimate. Thus old practices and narratives became part of the lived religion of early Christian intellectuals in the late second and early third centuries CE.

This being the fifth issue of *Religion in the Roman Empire*, I should like to use the opportunity to thank all the reviewers on behalf of the editorial board. Their priceless labour is not only behind the selection process defining the articles that are to be published. Their careful reading, corrections, suggestions, and challenges are also of much help for the authors to improve arguments or make them more accessible. Thank you so much.