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Editorial

Abstract

'Religion in the Roman Empire' (RRE) intends to further new and integrative perspectives on religion in the Ancient World combining multidisciplinary methodologies. Starting from the notion of 'lived religion' it will offer a platform for recent and still incipient research to modify and cross the disciplinary boundaries between 'History of Religion', 'Archaeology', 'Anthropology', 'Classics', 'Ancient History', 'Jewish History', 'Rabbinics', 'New Testament', 'Early Christianity', 'Patristics', 'Coptic Studies', 'Gnostic and Manichaean Studies', 'Late Antiquity' and 'Oriental Languages'. We hope to stimulate the development of new approaches which can encompass the local and global trajectories of the pluralistic, multi-dimensional religions of antiquity.

A New Journal

'Religion in the Roman Empire' (RRE) intends to establish a new perspective on the religious history of Mediterranean antiquity, starting from the individual, spontaneous, short-lived or organised groups of 'lived' religion instead of simply presupposing the existence of neatly separated organised 'cults' and 'religions' and a too early 'parting of the ways' between such groups. By taking the modern notion of 'lived religion' as one of its starting points, research is invoked that analyses religious 'data' and interprets these as experiences and conceptions of, as well as practices addressed to, the divine, which are initiated, appropriated, expressed, and shared by individuals in diverse social spaces which may not have had an impact on or even contributed to transforming institutional frames. This initiation, expression, and appropriation of the practices and conceptions of lived religion can range through a spatial continuum, from the primary space of individuals in the family, domestic spaces of everyday production, to the shared space of public institutions and trans-local literary communication.

'Religion in the Roman Empire' intends to open and link different research fields, presenting new or revising well-known complexes of evidence in different parts and periods of the ancient to the late antique world. It will con-

centrate on the Roman imperial period without excluding earlier developments in the Western and Eastern parts of the ancient Mediterranean and adjacent areas. Hence, ‘Roman Empire’ denotes a point of focus, rather than a criterion for exclusion.

A New Focus

Religious traditions existed and influenced individual and group behaviour, but they were upheld and reworked in the constant interaction of individuals with the agents of traditions and providers of ritual services, ‘priests’, ‘holy men’ or professionals in the various fields. Such traditions formed a relevant part of the environment of religious action, but they should not be studied as isolated or even independent factors. Hence, the social, political and economic as well as cultural and inter-religious contexts of micro- and macro-religious phenomena deserve particular attention. Thus, we opt for the singular ‘religion’ rather than speaking of a plural of ‘religions’, which presupposes boundaries rather than investigating the evolution and enactment of such boundaries.

‘Religion in the Roman Empire’ is audacious in the sense that it intends to further innovative and integrative perspectives on religion in the Ancient World and to explore the new multidisciplinary methodologies required for this enterprise. In brief, perspectives like ‘lived ancient religion’ set out to replace the concepts of ‘cults’ and ‘religions’ as integrative frameworks in the description of the phenomena in the field of ‘religion’. Thus, it takes up recent and still incipient research to modify and cross disciplinary boundaries (e.g. between ‘History of Religion’, ‘Archaeology’, ‘Ancient History’, ‘Classics’, ‘Jewish Studies’) and specialised subfields (e.g. ‘New Testament’, ‘Early Christianity’, ‘Rabbinic Studies’, ‘Patristic Studies’, ‘Coptic Studies’, ‘Gnostic and Manichaean Studies’, ‘Oriental Languages’). We hope to stimulate the development of new approaches which can encompass the local and global trajectories of the pluralistic and multi-dimensional religions of antiquity.

From such novel starting points, *Religion in the Roman Empire* focuses on the everyday experience and those practices, expressions, and interactions related to ‘religion’. In this context ‘religion’ is understood as a spectrum of experiences, actions, beliefs and communications hinging on human communication with super-human or even transcendent agent(s), including but not limited to ‘gods’ and ‘God’, ‘demons’, ‘angels’, and ‘heroes’. Ritualisation and elaborate forms of representation are called upon for the success of com-

munication with these addressees. By refocusing on the individual and the situational – that is, on the intrinsic determinants of lived religion – it aims to bring the study of ancient Eurasian religion into a dialogue with global History of Religion as much as with more specialized research on particular regions, epochs, traditions or bodies of texts.

New Perspectives

When concentrating on practices, relevant evidence is not limited to texts preserving autobiographical experiences and expressions. Most of the evidence at our disposal is best interpreted neither as ‘authentic’ individual expression nor as institutional ‘survival’, but as media, rhetoric and representation – i. e. as cultural work created in interaction. Scattered evidence needs to be contextualised and interpreted by relating it to individual agents, such as Roman magistrates and immigrants, archiereis and astrologers, female land holders and dependent workers. It must furthermore be related to these agents’ use of space and time, their forming of social coalitions, their negotiation with religious specialists or ‘providers’ and their attempts to ‘make sense’ of religion in a situational manner and thus render it effective. In terms of the material and disciplinary expertise involved, the journal welcomes texts reconstructed on the basis of a long manuscript tradition, epigraphic evidence and archaeological remains from material vestiges of rituals, small-scale votives and instruments, up to architectural complexes as well as meta-data created by serialisation or statistical analysis. Thus, historical, literary, archaeological and comparative studies are welcome, as long as they offer innovative and convincing steps towards the proposed reconfiguration of our knowledge of the areas noted above.

Within the field of archaeology there has been a growing focus on the material culture of religion for a number of years. The methodological and theoretical directions which such research has taken have been manifold, attesting to the fact that archaeological material and contexts (or the lack of it) still provide challenges and may offer different perspectives on religion and religious practice. ‘Religion in the Roman Empire’s’ focus on lived religion is intended to add a further perspective to archaeological research within the field of religion and ritual and other devotional practices. We want to stimulate debate and discussions about how archaeology and archaeological research may complement and question the ways in which religious experiences and life are approached in current and previous scholarship. This may include the revision of past contributions in the light of

new material and the presentation of new archaeological material affording new insights into religion in the ancient world or paving new ways of seeing old material.

Religion in prehistory has been highly theorized. Although often criticized for assuming a pervasive visibility of ritual, prehistory is unashamed of its assumption that lives were profoundly influenced and shaped by shared repeated actions which reinforced notions of the group and referred to some sense of alterity. The 'material turn' and the concepts of agency and objects are fully engaged in this theoretical framework. RRE intends to carry over these fruitful approaches into the study of subsequent periods, which, in spite of generally acknowledging the pervasive significance of religion, is often caught up with inadequate notions of sacred and secular, distinctions between public festivals and private expressions of belief, and, in some instances, remains caught in civic models of religion. A consistent and determined approach to find ways of describing both the deep and the superficial interactions between individual experience and the religious structures of their worlds has the potential to offer a much richer and more nuanced account of ancient religions, with a broad impact on understanding literature, archaeology, ancient economies and the anthropology of antiquity.

Reciprocal Contextualization

Research on ancient Judaism has long been pursued in relative isolation from the study of the Roman imperial contexts that shaped so much of ancient Jewish history and literature. Just as Classicists have tended to dismiss Jews as an atypical provincial Roman population, so scholars of Jewish history and literature have tended to presume their isolation from the surrounding local and imperial cultures, particularly when studying Rabbinic and other materials written in Hebrew. The Roman Empire looms large in Jewish history as an agent for the catastrophic changes in the wake of the failures of the revolts of the first and second centuries CE. Until recently, however, little was done to try to understand the Roman contexts of Judaism, then or thereafter. However, many lines of specialised research have begun to show the value of more integrative approaches – whether by re-reading Josephus in relation to Roman historiography, by considering late antique Rabbis as provincial sub-elites, by culling Hekhalot literature for echoes of colonial mimicry and resistance, by looking to documentary and inscriptional data to reconsider ancient Jewish identities, or by revisiting synagogue art and architecture in relation to the broader cultural trends concur-

rent with the Empire's Christianization. Given the range of Jewish literature composed under Roman rule – spanning not just the writings of Philo and Josephus but also some Dead Sea Scrolls and so-called 'pseudepigrapha' as well as early Rabbinic literature, piyyutim, and perhaps also some Hekhalot materials – there may be much to be gained from experimenting with a re-orientation that reads other sources from similarly integrative perspectives, or indeed asking how Jews and Judaism may have participated in the very making of 'religion' in the Roman Empire. At the very least, attention to the Roman imperial context of much of ancient Jewish life and literature may help to facilitate fresh approaches to ancient Jewish history, bridging the pre-70 and post-70 periods but also integrating material culture and different Jewish literary corpora created under Roman rule.

Ancient Judaism thus provides an opportunity for an enriching reciprocal study of religion in the Roman Empire. At first sight, Judaism was a pre-Roman ethnic practice transformed into a naturalized part of the Roman landscape. Details, however, matter. We are unusually well-informed about the paradoxical impact of Roman rule. On the one hand, the impact on the Jews' 'great tradition' is sweeping – the center annihilated, the practice which made Judaism most at home in the Mediterranean religious environment, animal sacrifice, ended. On the other hand, we witness concurrently the massive elaboration of an ostensibly traditional but in fact largely novel system of religious law and thought by a new clerisy. Despite its novelty, there is little that is decisively 'Roman' about Rabbinic law and literature: Roman rule thus generated a religious system whose complexity and strangeness is barely adumbrated in the archaeological record. Consequently, Judaism may well serve to remind us of how little we know about other forms of Roman imperial religious expressions and practices.

The field of New Testament interpretation has undergone a double paradigm shift in the last decades which immediately puts the topics of 'Religion in the Roman Empire' into the centre of attention: On the one hand, the diachronic orientation which dominated the scholarly exegesis for almost a century was more and more complemented and partly even replaced by a synchronic one which led to renewed interest in cultural and religious contexts. On the other hand, the predominant concentration on (mostly Palestinian) Judaism as the 'root' or 'native soil' of Early Christianity was complemented by a new awareness of the importance of Hellenistic culture in all its aspects for Palestinian Judaism and therefore also for the emerging Christian movement from its very beginning. Topics to be discussed in such an interdisciplinary cooperation include 'Religion and Ethics', 'Prayer', 'Cult' (and its transformation and spiritualisation), 'God(s)', 'Mediators',

‘Power and Religion’, ‘*paideia* and Piety’ (focusing on philosophers, orators, Rabbis, teachers as new religious authorities) and ‘Food and Religion’. Even from within the exegetical discipline, the field has considerably broadened and ‘Religion in the Roman Empire’ intends to be instrumental in this development.

The study of early Christianity has often focussed on patristic, apostolic, apocryphal, and apologetic literature that has been preserved and promoted by a Christianity that had already become the state religion of the Roman Empire in late antiquity. Hence, it often suffers from methodological circularity, namely the anachronistically presupposed canonical sources and, based on them, its methodological framework, hardly recognizing that both are only the results and not the norms of the development they are supposed to investigate. While this framework identifies Christianity with the political, cultural and institutional units it is operating in – conceptualized as Roman, Western or Eastern Christianity etc. – it presupposes ascriptions of religious and collective identities as well as fixed structures of Christian life (baptism, the Eucharist and the weekly and annual rites) which need to be questioned rather than taken for granted.

Therefore ‘Religion in the Roman Empire’ welcomes studies of early Christian materials in the broader context of the religiously pluralistic ancient Roman world. All aspects of early Christianity may be considered, including New Testament, apocryphal, or patristic literature; archaeological or papyrological materials; and area studies such as Syriac or Coptic Christianity. Topics could include investigations that engage Christian materials in discussions of wider thematic or material issues, such as lived religion, religion and violence, space and place, ritual, gender studies, women’s studies, masculinity studies, social grouping, group styles, boundary setting strategies (such as ‘orthodoxy and heresy’), scriptural practices, the new materialism, religious mediation, agency, and the new philology, among others. A goal is to encourage analyses that cross or redefine disciplinary boundaries and invite an engagement with lived ancient religion within wider contemporary discussions in the fields of religious studies, social science, and the humanities broadly conceived.

Invitation

Most issues of ‘Religion in the Roman Empire’ will focus on a particular theme that serves to bring together scholars working in different fields and with different types of sources in order to propose and discuss methodologi-

cal approaches, material evidence or social and historiographic models that interpret religious 'data' within frameworks which are no longer defined by the clear-cut container concepts of 'cults', ethnic or 'polis religions', or the distinction of orthodox and heretical groups figuring in traditional accounts of the ancient history of religion.

'Religion in the Roman Empire' will concentrate on original research articles, but we also invite review articles covering a wider field of recent research or intensively engaging with new stimulating monographs. Thematic issues will bring together specialized articles, but occasional open issues will also encourage continuous submissions of articles to the editors. Articles will undergo double blind peer review.

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