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Narratives as a Lens into Lived Ancient Religion, Individual Agency and Collective Identity

The re-evaluation of 'narrative' in historiography, much furthered by the reflections of Paul Ricoeur,[1] has also led social sciences to turn to examination of narratives and narrative constructions of selves and collective identity. Narratives are a powerful instrument for the formation of groups; in a certain sense, social life is a narrative, as Margaret R. Somers has argued.[2] The very character of narrative emplotment renders persons, objects, and events narrated only meaningful by putting them into a temporal, spatial, and social network.[3] Narratives are however plentiful. The ontological narrative of the individual has to relate itself to the 'public' narratives of families, groups, and polities, thus accounting for a complex narrative identity, which is not the mechanical result of all the narrative vectors, but filtered through institutions and practices,[4] as has been shown by Esther Eidinow in her reconstruction of Greek religion as a network built not least on narrative.[5] As a result, narratives, the 'emplotment' of events, embedding them in time and space and personal relationships, are a major source of orientation for groups.[6] At the same time, they are crucial in the dialogical, the interpersonal constitution of 'agency'[7] and 'collective identities'.[8] The same holds true for religious agency and religious identities in particular. 'Religious' as used in this statement is understood as a spectrum of experiences, actions, beliefs, and communications hinging on human communication with superhuman or even transcendent agent(s), for the ancient Mediterranean usually (but not necessarily) conceptualised as 'gods'.[9]

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1 Ricoeur 1984–85.
2 Somers 1994, 614. Cf. Czarniawska 2004.
3 Ibid., 616.
4 Ibid., 618–619 and 625.
5 Eidinow 2011.
6 Rüsen 1996.
7 Emirbayer and Mische 1998
8 Ashmore, Deaux and McLaughlin-Volpe 2004.
9 Rüpke 2015b.

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Within the field of ancient religion, 'narratives' have frequently been narrowly understood as mythological narratives and interpreted as constituting the most important dimension of ancient 'belief systems', being slowly or aggressively supplemented or replaced by systematic philosophical thinking. This approach has produced valuable insights and a vast body of literature.[10] In a splendid volume, Judith Perkins and Ilaria Ramelli have elucidated the relationship of details of forms and motifs in religious narratives and religious action.[11]

It is with a view to such details that the contributions of this issue will focus on the role of narratives in the wider fields opened up by the aforementioned new directions in historical, social, and even psychological research. Such narratives can help individual actors to develop or strengthen competences in developing and stabilising routines that involve gods and thus further agency. As first person narratives are scarcely available for the period under consideration, the articles adduce material that has hitherto hardly been analysed with a view to a form of agency that is shaped by narrating about close interaction with deities, in everyday life as well as exceptional situations. Only briefly touching on the narrative constitution of identities of individuals, of groups and sub-groups by one's own and others' narratives, this issue employs a concept of narrative which opens up a broad range of generical realisation, of writing and orality, of solipsistic,[12] dialogical, face-to-face, and public primary as well as secondary, media-based, narration.

For the early Roman Empire, it is necessary to generalise two insights that are of particular importance for narratological approaches in History of Religion. First and foremost, if narrative is a transformation of religious practices into religious knowledge, analysis must not stop at content. Narrative is an attempt at and an indicator of communication, engaging, as pointed out above, in network formation beyond ritual.[13] The uniqueness of the transmitted text is often misleading. It is in itself already a retelling of a story and furthermore an invitation for future re-retelling. Likewise, a letter is not only the telling of a story to a distant addressee, but in many cases

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10 With a special interest in religion for instance Gladigow 1985; Bremmer and Horsfall 1987; Bremmer 1988; Henrichs 1988; Graf 1991, 1993; Bremmer 1998; Rüpke 1998; Lincoln 1999; Zanker 2004; Bierl, Lämmle and Wasselmann 2007; Duell and Walde 2009; Schenk 2010; Rüpke and Rüpke 2011; Feldt 2012; Bierl 2013; Bremmer 2013; Rüpke 2013b; Zgoll and Kratz 2013; Rüpke 2014.

11 Ramelli and Perkins 2015.

12 For Augustine's differentiated use of this form see Stock 2010, 230–231.

13 On the usefulness of the concept of network for the history of ancient religion see Eidinow 2011 and Collar 2007; Rüpke 2013a.

may also be an invitation for re-oralisation.[14] Thus it is involved in the construction and deconstruction of narrative schemes as in the care for the old or the establishment of new types of knowledge.

Formation of a network depends as much on consensus, on which the use of schemata and shared traditions can build, as on the delineations of relevant contexts for the We and Our past of the text. Such a We is not simply given, but maintained by and created through constant communication. The degree of explicitness and exclusivity may vary widely, depending on the choice of subject, the self-definition of the implicit or explicit narrator, the choice of literary convention (genre being itself a way of talking that is related to a specific social context) or the evaluations given. The implicit reader of fables is less narrowly defined than the implicit reader of a historical narrative or the fully 'connected' reader[15] of an Augustan commentary on contemporary rituals. The long history and broad diffusion of fables is testimony of that.[16]

How could the credibility of a text be enhanced within such a horizon? Awkward, that is, minimally counterintuitive elements strenghthen the memorability, even if not the credibility of a narrative.[17] For authors the possibilities to authenticate their stories are restricted. The determination of the coherence of a text participates in the processes of negotiating the coherence of culture at the same moment.[18] The notion of culture presupposed in my argument does not include a fixed system of norms and knowledge, against which a narrative could be judged. Instead, the narrative engages with a preceding discourse on norms and knowledge, reproducing, modifying or shattering previous consensual, hegemonic or conflicting positions.[19] Thus, strategies of authentication can be observed but hardly judged as to their efficacy. Extra-textual references strengthen the verifiability and probability of a narrative, but plausibility of a narrative claiming to be historical is achieved by internal coherence of the story told as much as by external coherence with general knowledge and grand narratives.[20] Indicating an author's correct name, the orthonym, is neither a necessary nor a necessarily successful strategy. Attributing the text to another or even a fictitious author, pseudepig-

14 See Becker 2012, 392 on 1 Thess 5.27, evidently, to thematise the public reading points to an anticipated problem. One can read 1 and 2 Thess as a diptychon addressing intra- and inter-group religious communication (cf. Becker 2009, 384, who tries to plot the complex relationship of 1 and 2 Thess differently).

15 For these concepts of readers see Rüpke 2015a.

16 See in general Dithmar 1995.

17 See e.g. Lawson 1990; McCauley 2002, 2012.

18 Koschorke 2012, 84.

19 Tambiah 1985; Archer 1996; Calame 2002; Latour 2005.

20 Verdoner 2011, 19.

raphy and pseudonym, are important mimetic strategies, claiming authority to the narrative's form and content rather than its author's personal authority, as Eve-Marie Becker has shown.[21] Images of authorship and norms governing authorship are related to changing networks and periods, too.[22]

As typical for 'Religion in the Roman Empire', this issue – based on a conference organized by the Max Weber Center's research group "Lived Ancient Religion"[23] hosted at Schloss Ettersburg in January 2014 and financed by the European Research Council – takes a fresh look at known material as well as new sources, and is interested in comparative exchange among and beyond Mediterranean traditions, bringing together scholars working in different fields and types of sources to propose and discuss methodological approaches that have proven or might prove helpful for elucidating the dimensions of 'lived ancient religions'.

The first paper, Harriet I. Flower on 'Sulla's Memoirs as an Account of Individual Religious Experience' takes a look at the role of narrative in offering a means to reflect and make public one's own religious experiences, thus contributing to a strand of ancient religious discourse that has not featured prominently in previous research on Roman religion. Sulla's memoirs were published shortly after his death in 78 BCE and seem to have been attractive to a wide audience. Although unfinished, they comprised 22 books, soon apparently available in both Latin and Greek versions. Few Romans had written autobiographical narratives before and these had tended to be brief; Sulla completely invented or at least re-invented the genre and created a horizon of expectations for later biographies down to Caesar and Augustus. The surviving fragments of Sulla's memoirs include several episodes of religious experience, some conforming to traditional Roman patterns but others attesting vivid and singular personal experiences, including dreams and visions. It was by selecting and articulating such instances that Sulla enhanced his agency by religious communication.

In her 'Emplotting the Divine: Epiphanic Narratives as Means of Enhancing Agency', Georgia Petridou analyses cases that are chronologically later but structurally similar. According to the evidence, divine epiphanies took place in the dreams of a very small minority consisting of the local religious or civic authorities, a handful of privileged individuals who happened to

21 Becker 2009, 377–378.

22 See e. g. for Krueger 2004 for late antiquity.

23 Financed by an ERC Advanced grant within the Framework Program 2008–13 of the European Union under contract no. 295555. I am in particular grateful to Christopher Degelmann, who took most of the organisational burden, and Ursula Birtel-Koltes for caring for the administrative issues in the background.

have the power to deliver the community out of imminent danger. Of the narratives mentioned here only a very small minority involved an epiphany that took place in the waking reality or the dreams of a whole community. Collective dream-visions like the one of Athena of Ilion, who appeared looking tattered in the dreams of many, did exist, but they were the exception. Petridou argues that this divine eclecticism reflects the pre-existing power structures of the community. Power is given to powerful individuals. Divine epiphanies granted their perceivers the license to intervene and dictate a certain course of political or religious action. Whether perceived by members of the local socio-political elite or members of the priestly personnel, or even by a larger proportion of the population, epiphanies were treasured by their perceivers, who were quick to emplot these elusive moments of divine proximity in everlasting narratives and commemorate them on durable materials such as stone or marble. These epiphanic inscriptions decorated the walls of buildings where the heart of civic life beat, such as the agora, the nearby buildings and the temple of a city's tutelary deity.

In a subsequent period, rabbinic writing performs the construction of a religious identity, a new sense of self – an arena of cultural formation which Peter Brown and Michel Foucault have set as central to understanding the imperial world of late antiquity. The Talmud, as argued by Simon Goldhill in 'Lived Experience, History, and Narrative Form in the Rabbinical Writings', was a manual for the conceptualisation of lived experience. It projected and demanded a view of the world. It did so in part through its unique narrative form. As such, it offers the unparalleled testimony of a defeated national group reforming its community in interaction and often fierce and fearful contention with and gestures of separation from dominant Greco-Roman culture, and from other Jews more assimilated to that dominant culture. Rabbinical writings, their unparalleled textuality, provided thus the most telling documents of the social construction of subjectivity through narrative form.

The following paper turns to interactions that rely even more on communication beyond reading and address religious experiences and identities beyond the individual actor. The narrative genre of fables as analysed by Theresa Morgan in 'Living with the Gods in Fables of the Early Roman Empire' portrays dynamic and colourful relationships between gods and mortals. Their interactions are religious, in the sense that they are typically mediated through prayers, ritual acts, and religious experiences such as dreams, but they are nearly always individual, private, and informal rather than linked to cults, festivals, or other forms of communal religion. Some fables thereby offer a window into aspects of ancient religious thinking that

are difficult to access through other surviving sources. Others show divine-human negotiations (for instance, about which god should be approached in a given situation) similar to those we encounter in other sources, but from an unusual perspective – that of the god or hero him- or herself, or of a sub-elite human agent.

'Narratives of Monastic Genealogy in Coptic Funerary Inscriptions' are the topic of Malcolm Choat, who addresses monastic funerary and commemorative texts extant in the form of stelae or paintings. A subset of these present a type of 'monastic genealogy', beginning with divine figures, then proceeding though patriarchs, prophets, and apostles to famous monks, before mentioning the monk in whose memory the inscription is. By constructing a monastic genealogy and emplotting themselves within it, the deceased are thereby placed in a lineage within a wider narrative of monasticism. But it was not only beyond the individual, but also beyond the local identity that such narratives operated, creating relationships between different monasteries and delineating a narrative that encompasses Egyptian monasticism as a whole.

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