Valentino Gasparini, Maik Patzelt, Rubina Raja, Anna-Katharina Rieger, Jörg Rüpke, Emiliano Rubens Urciuoli

Pursuing lived ancient religion

“Lived ancient religion” is a new approach to the religious practices, ideas, and institutions of the distant past. The notion of “lived religion”, as it has been applied to recent phenomena that go beyond orthodox beliefs and religious organizations, cannot be transferred directly to a study of ancient religions because its methodology, inspired above all by anthropology and empirical sociology, requires some form of direct access to the living of the religion. This departure is implied by the oxymoronic form of “lived ancient religion”, which juxtaposes the living of religion with an only incompletely accessible past in which the subjects of study are no longer living. What might have been deplored as a loss, has turned out to be a gain, allowing for a significant expansion of the concept. While still invoking “lived religion” as it is understood in modern contexts,¹ “lived ancient religion” is neither restricted to “everyday religion” nor focused on subjective experiences. Rather, the focus on the ancient world, the past, the already lived experiences and events, provides the opportunity to study lived religion with a renewed and revitalized focus. This approach overcomes the dichotomy of official and institutionalized religion on the one hand and “lived religion” on the other. Rather, taking the perspective on individual appropriations to its extremes, it also allows studying institutions as sedimented forms of lived religion. Thus, as “lived *ancient* religion” a framework to analyze religious change is given, religion in the making even on a large scale (see Albrecht et al. 2018).

As is indicated by the subtitle of the foundational project, “Questioning ‘cults’ and ‘polis religion’”, “lived ancient religion” shares a critical impetus with the study of contemporary “lived religion”. Yet given the very different degrees of coherence and embeddedness of religious practices in ancient Mediterranean societies, and in the Roman Empire in particular, our project (2012–2017) aimed at a much broader re-description of ancient “religion” (Rüpke 2012). Fundamentally, it questioned the implicit assumption that all inhabitants of the *Imperium Romanum* were equally religious. Likewise, the tendency to focus upon civic, that is collective, institutionalized religious practices was questioned, as such a focus has led to the production of a series of sub-categories (“oriental cults”, “votive religion”, “funerary rites”) in order to save those phenomena whose relation to civic practice is indeterminate. This shift in focus was

---

¹ E.g. Ammerman 1997; Hall 1997; Orsi 1997; Bergmann 2008; McGuire 2008.

necessary because, in terms of quantity, these phenomena are the subject of the majority of our ancient evidence and not just some small, hard to reconcile, subset. Finally, the project criticized the descriptive reproduction of disciplinary boundaries and the practice of treating “pagan” religion, Judaism, and Christianity as though they each had existed historically in separate worlds.

From a methodological perspective, the project focused on four different social and communicative spaces, from the domestic over associations, public sanctuaries and literary communication. Building on recent research of the relationship between religious institutions and individualization (briefly Fuchs and Rüpke 2015; Fuchs et al. 2018) made it possible to focus on the connections between social structures and individual agents, with the help of four key notions: appropriation, agency, situational meaning, and mediality (Raja and Rüpke 2015a).

Appropriation denotes the situational adaptation and deployment of existing practices and techniques, institutions, norms, and media in order to suit the contingent needs and aims of the individual or group (Raja and Rüpke 2015a; Arnhold and Rüpke 2016; Rüpke 2016c). The idea of religious agency, which grew out of an interest in the ascription of agency and a focus on competences, was used to underline the priority of personal engagement, knowledge, and skill in providing services of all kinds, including public and private performances, authorship, teaching, and networking, whether on an occasional or a professional basis (Gordon 2005; Hüskens 2009; Petridou 2013; Raja 2016). Instead of concentrating on professional religious roles (priests), this broader notion of “religious agency” functions as a perspective that replaces the narrow focus on the political elite of civic religion, widening and underlining the impact that studies of ancient material can have on discussions of religion in the context of modern societies. In speaking of the situational construction of meaning, we have assumed that religious meanings were not generated by worldviews, but by the complex interplay of interests, beliefs, and satisfactions in specific situations (Raja and Weiss 2015; 2016). Finally, the focus on communication (both vertical and horizontal) mandates a specific concern with the roles of material culture, embodiment, and group-styles in the construction of religious experience, in short, what we have called mediality.² Insofar as communication requires materiality, this amounts to a demand for a new approach in the archaeology of religion (the “archaeology of religious experience”, Raja and Rüpke 2015b). Inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology,³ we have focused on the role of bodily movements, actions, and gestures in conveying

---

² Malik, Rüpke and Wobbe 2007; Meyer 2008; Hjarvard 2011; Lövheim 2011.

³ See e.g. Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1999; Reynolds 2004; Silver 2011; Morgan 2015.

culturally-coded meanings and emotions. “Lived ancient religion” emphasizes the social context of religious action and, specifically, the group-styles in specific cultural contexts, such as the family, neighborhoods, and associations (Lichterman et al. 2017). From this perspective, public cult appears less as a set of ideals, and more as a scheme for ordering priorities and distinctions, the effect of which is to outline (rather than define) an imagined community. Religious change starts from domestic and individual practices, not from the competition of groups and cities. The challenge that has been addressed in the project is to observe, describe, and analyze such changes and their underlying patterns through the use of material and written evidence from antiquity.

The main thrust of the lived ancient religion approach is to resist the easy reification of “religion” in order to emphasize its ceaseless construction through individual action within the loose parameters provided by traditions and institutions (summarized as a new introduction to Roman religion in Rüpke 2016b). That is, to view religion as a precarious practice, whose referents (“gods”) and communicative strategies are constantly in need of investment-labor of different kinds in order to maintain their plausibility, as formulated by Richard Gordon (see Albrecht et al. 2018). The paradigm of “lived ancient religion” provides the stimulus to integrate “the” evidence on a new basis, invoke new types of evidence, challenge existing classifications of material, and focus on neglected types of religious action. The long-term aim from the beginning of the project was to provide new narratives of religious change in the Roman Empire, for instance by relating change to religious innovation across social groups and individuals.⁴ Looking at lived ancient religion opens a window into the day-to-day workings of long-term changes in religions that are never fixed but always traditions in the making.

For this reason, the present volume attempts to leave behind chronological as well as disciplinary comfort zones. Following several conferences and more than a hundred publications,⁵ the project ended with a final conference held at Eisenach in April 2017. Many of the revised contributions to that conference are included in this volume, all of which deliberately apply the “lived ancient religion” approach to new fields and new foci. These contributions are organized in four parts with different perspectives, which are developed in their respective introductions. “Experiencing the religious” is the first part of

---

⁴ Rüpke 2016a; 2018a; 2018b; Raja 2015.

⁵ Several of the conferences are published in the journal *Religion in the Roman Empire* from 2015 onwards (see the overviews by Feldmeier et al. 2015; Raja and Rüpke 2015a; Raja and Weiss 2015; Rüpke and Degelmann 2015; Lichterman et al. 2017), but see also Petridou, Gordon and Rüpke 2017.

the volume. Although experience is a central aspect of religious life, it is still an under-researched topic in the field of religious studies and especially in the history of ancient religion. In the light of recent approaches, such as those of Matthias Jung and Ann Taves (Jung 2006; Taves 2009), we understand (religious) experience as the product of a wide range of sensory stimuli, effects, and inner feelings that are articulated by subjects or interpreted by observers as religious experience. The production of such stimuli is as interesting as the spatial, temporal, and discursive contexts that favor the interpretation of a given phenomenon as “religious”. Individual experiences could thus be a result of passive participation in any ritual, such as in public sacrifices or in processions. These have recently been theorized as “emotional communities” (Chaniotis 2013a; 2013b). Alternatively, they can be conceptualized as resulting from individual and deliberate attempts at stimulation. The empirical evidence required can be found by examining ritualized patterns and spatial arrangements, as well as first person reports or literary narratives, which cast light on this point of view. Different questions help to bring to the fore experiences which underlie religious action and identify the discourses about the dangers or values of true or false religious experiences. In what contexts do we find reference to specifically religious experience? How can we detect religious experience and techniques toward them in our sources and how does this affect our overall view of religiosity, religious belief, and religious practice? How did people try to communicate, commemorate and contour their experiences through the channels available to them, such as the re-use of mythical narratives or the setting up of material objects? How did architectural spaces and objects allow for or stimulate religious experiences? How did certain persons or groups try to control the articulation and interpretation of experience?

“A ‘thing’ called body: expressing religion bodily” is the title of the second part of the volume. This part focuses on the use, reuse, abuse, and misuse of bodies, bones, bodily remains, body parts, anatomical votives, amulets, and saintly relics in Classical and Late Antiquity. Methodologically speaking, it aims to connect some of the theoretical parameters of the “lived ancient religion” project with a reapplication and semantic expansion of Bill Brown’s “Thing Theory” (Brown 2003) to cover not only objects, but also bodies, body-parts and remains, bodily extensions (prostheses) and body-modifications. In Brown’s view, material artifacts become “things”, when they stop working for us and when they are removed from their natural/original environment and situated in new contexts of meaning. This view dovetails nicely with the emphasis of a lived ancient religion approach to the situational meaning of material artifacts in religious contexts. The notion of “embodiment” links materiality with corporeal experience, two notions central to the contemporary anthropology of religion. Such an approach

allows us to palpate the bodies of our scholarly interest and take their “vital signs”. In other words, it enables us to revisit and look afresh at the synchronic practices (pilgrimage, agonistic performance, medical *agōnes*, dedication, healing rituals, prayer, divination, magic rituals, worship of saintly relics) which enlivened and literally “breathed life” into these bodies in their original contexts, as well as casting new light on our conceptualizations of this.

The third part of the volume is dedicated to “Lived places: from individual appropriation of space to locational group-styles”. The aim here is to investigate the methods employed by individual religious specialists or groups to inscribe individual acts of devotion and communication with “not unquestionably plausible supernatural agents” (Rüpke 2015) in shared sacred spaces. However, the focus is *not* on the obvious candidates, temples, and individual dedications or votive offerings. Since the emphasis of the “lived ancient religion” project is on individual appropriation and modification of (mainly public) norms in the religious field, including rituals, objects and spaces, this part focusses on micro-strategies of sacralization. The aim is to go beyond the religious actions themselves and their immediate apprehension, and ask how they were remembered, memorialized, contested, and prolonged in various media (including architecture) over time. We understand such reception and commemoration as critical to the construction of sacred space, time, and even experience for those coming after, whether helped in their understanding by religious specialists or not. Individual practice so mediated and re-presented could thus be transformed into patterns, inspiration, or constraint for later religious action, both at the original site and elsewhere. The contributions to this part are driven by questions such as: What were the motivations to give individual innovations a more permanent form? What can be said about the agents or guiding spirits of such moves? Why were some successful, others not? How were initial sacralizations modified by subsequent appropriations? How were religious spaces modified and how were the various competing claims negotiated? The focus will be as much on archaeological evidence as on literary and juridical text, narrating, reflecting, or regulating such practices, their conditions and consequences.

“Switching the code: meaning-making beyond established religious frameworks” is the heading of the fourth part of the volume. Phenomena of religious inventiveness are anything but a yardstick of modernization. Throughout ancient and late antique Mediterranean societies, a whole variety of motives prompted individuals to creatively adapt existing signs, beliefs, settings, and practices for their own personal ends, serving to re-key or displace them. Such creativity is not a prerogative of a political elite or of religious specialists. By different means, even “weak” individuals could recast aspects of a religious *habitus* and thus engage agentially with their structuring religious environments by appropriating

religious signs to one's own ends, transposing existing meanings into different settings, and reshaping established patterns of action so that they appear quite new. By focusing explicitly on such strategies, these contributions aim to reconsider the techniques and procedures by which non-discursive practices, discourses, and writings were performed, controlled, and reproduced in religious settings and/or for theological purposes. That is, these papers aim to look at the techniques and procedures not as powerful acts but, rather, as initially constrained and consumption-oriented practices that allow "consumers" to leave their mark on them in the process of reception. It also aims to raise the question of how these strategies fare over time, as they encounter resistance and attract polemics. We can see here a range of possibilities, from the establishment of new norms and group-generating processes to reactions to stigmatization as well as cunning attempts at the spread of false beliefs about what is the case.

★

With the conclusion of the project, we wish to thank the European Research Council for its generous "Advanced Grant" within the 7th Framework Programme (2011–16, contract no. 295555), which financed the preceding research of the editors as much as the conference itself and its Open Access publication. Ursula Birtel-Koltes had been most helpful throughout the project; we wish to thank her for her continuous, efficient and friendly support. Thanks go also to the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies of the University of Erfurt, which hosted the project from 2012 to 2017, and its directors Wolfgang Spickermann and Hartmut Rosa as well as its general secretary Bettina Hollstein. In addition, we were repeatedly guests at Aarhus University and from 2015 at the Danish National Research Foundation's centre of excellence for Urban Network Evolutions (also Aarhus University) and enjoyed the hospitality immensely. The team at Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, was helpful in every respect in the final phase of publication.

Bibliography

- Albrecht, Janico et al. 2018. "Remaking Religion: The Lived Ancient Religion Approach", *Religion* 48. 1–26. DOI: 10.1080/0048721X.2018.1450305.
- Ammerman, Nancy T. 1997. "Golden Rule Christianity: Lived Religion in the American Mainstream." In *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall. Princeton. 196–216.
- Arnhold, Marlis; Rüpke, Jörg 2016. "Appropriating and Shaping Religious Practices in the Roman Republic." In *Politische Kultur und soziale Struktur der Römischen Republik: Bilanzen und Perspektiven*, ed. Matthias Haake, Ann-Cathrin Harders. Stuttgart. 413–428.

- Bergmann, Sigurd 2008. "Lived Religion in Lived Space." In *Lived Religion: Conceptual, Empirical And Practical-Theological Approaches*, ed. Heinz Streib, Astrid Dinter, Kerstin Söderblom. Leiden/Boston. 197–209.
- Brown, Bill 2003. *A Sense of Things*. Chicago.
- Chaniotis, Angelos 2013a. *Unveiling Emotions: Sources and Methods for the Study of Emotions in the Greek World*. Stuttgart.
- Chaniotis, Angelos (ed.) 2013b. *Emotions in Greece and Rome: Texts, Images, Material Culture*. Unveiling Emotions 2. Stuttgart.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L.; Dreyfus, Stuart E. 1999. "The Challenge of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Embodiment for Cognitive Science." In *Perspectives on Embodiment: The Intersections of Nature and Culture*, ed. Gail Weiss, Honi Fern Haber. New York. 103–120.
- Feldmeier, Reinhard et al. 2015. "Editorial", *Religion in the Roman Empire* 1.1. 1–7.
- Fuchs, Martin; Rüpke, Jörg 2015. "Religious Individualization in Historical Perspective", *Religion* 45.3. 323–329.
- Fuchs, Martin et al. (eds) 2018. *Religious Individualisation: Historical Dimensions and Comparative Perspectives*. Berlin.
- Gordon, Richard 2005. "Competence and 'Felicity Conditions' in Two Sets of North African Curse-Tablets (DTAud nos. 275–85; 286–98)", *MNH* 5. 61–86.
- Hall, David D. 1997. *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*. Princeton. vii–xiii.
- Hjarvard, Stig 2011. "The Mediatisation of Religion: Theorising Religion, Media and Social Change", *Culture and Religion* 12.2. 119–135.
- Hüsken, Ute 2009. "Ritual Competence as Embodied Knowledge." In *The Body in India: Ritual, Transgression, Performativity*, ed. Axel Michaels, Christoph Wulf. Berlin. 200–220.
- Jung, Matthias 2006. "Making Life Explicit – The Symbolic Pregnancy of Religious Experience", *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 82. 16–23.
- Lichterman, Paul et al. 2017. "Grouping Together in Lived Ancient Religion: Individual Interacting and the Formation of Groups", *Religion in the Roman Empire* 3.1. 3–10.
- Lövheim, Mia 2011. "Mediatisation of Religion: A Critical Appraisal", *Culture and Religion* 12.2. 153–166.
- Malik, Jamal; Rüpke, Jörg; Wobbe, Theresa (eds) 2007. *Religion und Medien. Vom Kultbild zum Internetritual*. Vorlesungen des Interdisziplinären Forums Religion der Universität Erfurt. Münster.
- McGuire, Meredith B. 2008. *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*. Oxford.
- Meyer, Birgit 2008. "Media and the Senses in the Making of Religious Experience: An Introduction", *Material Religion* 4. 124–135.
- Morgan, David 2015. "Religion and Embodiment in the Study of Material Culture", *Oxford Research Encyclopedias: Religion*. 1–20 [online].
- Orsi, Robert A. 1997. "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion." In *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall. Princeton. 3–21.
- Petridou, Georgia 2013. "'Blessed Is He, Who Has Seen': The Power of Ritual Viewing and Ritual Framing in Eleusis", *Helios* 40.1–2. 309–343.
- Petridou, Georgia; Gordon, Richard; Rüpke, Jörg (eds) 2017. *Beyond Priesthood: Religious Entrepreneurs and Innovators in the Roman Empire*. Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten. Berlin.
- Raja, Rubina 2015. "Cultic Dining and Religious Patterns in Palmyra: The Case of the Palmyrene Banqueting Tesseræ." In *Antike.Architektur.Geschichte. Festschrift für Inge*

- Nielsen zum 65. Geburtstag, ed. Stephan Faust, Martina Seifert, Leon Ziemer. Gateways. Hamburger Beiträge zur Archäologie und Kulturgeschichte des antiken Mittelmeerraumes 3. Aachen. 181–200.
- Raja, Rubina 2016. “In and Out of Contexts: Explaining Religious Complexity through the Banqueting Tesserae from Palmyra”, *Religion in the Roman Empire* 2.3. 340–371.
- Raja, Rubina; Rüpke, Jörg 2015a. “Appropriating Religion: Methodological Issues in Testing the ‘Lived Ancient Religion’ Approach”, *Religion in the Roman Empire* 1.1. 11–19.
- Raja, Rubina; Rüpke, Jörg (eds) 2015b. *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World*. Boston.
- Raja, Rubina; Weiss, Lara 2015. “The Role of Objects: Meaning, Situations and Interaction”, *Religion in the Roman Empire* 1.2. 137–147.
- Raja, Rubina; Weiss, Lara 2016. “The Significance of Objects: Considerations on Agency and Context”, *Religion in the Roman Empire* 2.3. 297–306.
- Reynolds, Jack 2004. *Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: Intertwining Embodiment and Alterity*. Series in Continental Thought. Athens, OH.
- Rüpke, Jörg 2012. “Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning ‘Cults’ and ‘Polis Religion’”, *Mythos ns* 5 (2011). 191–204.
- Rüpke, Jörg 2015. “Religious Agency, Identity, and Communication: Reflecting on History and Theory of Religion”, *Religion* 45.3. 344–366.
- Rüpke, Jörg 2016a. *Pantheon: Geschichte der antiken Religionen*. Historische Bibliothek der Gerda-Henkel-Stiftung. München.
- Rüpke, Jörg 2016b. *On Roman Religion: Lived Religion and the Individual in Ancient Rome*. Townsend Lectures/Cornell Studies in Classical Philology. Ithaca, NY.
- Rüpke, Jörg 2016c. “Individual Appropriation of Sacred Space.” In *Espaces sacrés dans la Méditerranée antique: Actes du colloque des 13 et 14 octobre 2011, Université de Poitiers*, ed. Yves Lafond, Vincent Michel. Rennes. 69–80.
- Rüpke, Jörg 2018a. *Pantheon: A New History of Roman Religion*. Princeton.
- Rüpke, Jörg 2018b. *Pantheon: Una nuova storia della religione romana*. Torino.
- Rüpke, Jörg; Degelmann, Christoph 2015. “Narratives as a Lens into Lived Ancient Religion, Individual Agency and Collective Identity”, *Religion in the Roman Empire* 1.3. 289–296.
- Silver, Daniel 2011. “The Moodiness of Action”, *Sociological Theory* 29.3. 199–222.
- Taves, Ann 2009. *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things*. Princeton, NJ.