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Intersecting religion and urbanity in late antiquity

1 Urban Religion: readdressing historical change in late antiquity

The period of Late Antiquity is characterised by dramatic and even contradicting developments, especially for the urban networks in the Mediterranean and beyond. On the one hand many prosperous cities downsized their earlier territory. The development in the Western part of the (former) Imperium Romanum could outrightly be called a period of de-urbanisation, impacting on the density and strength of the urban networks as much as on the fabric of individual cities from the late third century CE onwards (Osborne and Wallace-Hadrill 2013, 56 f.). Due to the invasion of the Vandals, the western part of Northern Africa witnessed a widespread desertion of cities in the fifth and sixth centuries CE (Leone 2007, 2013; summarily Osborne and Wallace-Hadrill 2013). On the other hand, and in particular in the Eastern part of the Mediterranean, several new cities emerged, and existing cities were expanded, even raised to the status of a capital city. The category of the urban, seen globally as the product of specific economic and social developments in the aftermath of the Neolithic revolution (Childe 1950) and regionally as the result of a specific Greco-Roman circum-Mediterranean offspring and conscious production of a dense network of interrelated and competing urban settlements (Cunliffe and Osborne 2005; Osborne 2005; Zuiderhoek 2017), changed significantly and in correlation to local developments. This happened much in continuity in the East and far into the Islamic period and the second millennium CE, much contrary to the forms of political power and the loci of cultural production in the West.

Unsurprisingly, these developments had tremendous effects on the religious sphere. Religious actions, communications, and identities offer tools for carving out social spaces and making or at least modifying urban space. Neither is religion specifically urban nor the city specifically religious. But historically, in many periods and cultures, the shape and development (including growth as much as decline) of cities – and, even more, the different urban spaces created by individuals and different social groups within such built environments – and the shape and development of religious practices and ideas have significantly in-
fluenced each other (Rau and Rüpke 2020). By stressing the translocal references inherent to religious communication and the, in that simple sense, transcendent character of human-divine-relationships in the – in evolutionary terms – rather recent, but decisively not just “contemporary” phenomenon of urban religion (Urciuoli and Rüpke 2018; Rüpke 2020), we can further ask about the role of religion in mediating between the local and the global: that is its interference with cities’ attempts to create lasting horizons and control access to them (Raja 2019; 2020). The role of religion in creating spatial, temporal and social order in cities has always been an important topic in archaeological research from ceremonial centres and cities of Meso- and South America to Near Eastern and ancient Mediterranean, but also Chinese, Indian and medieval European cities. Frequently and rather one-sidedly, such research has reduced religious practices and beliefs to mere instruments of rulers and administrators to establish or bolster their hold of power (Liverani 2013, 177; cf. Rüpke 2019). Yet, a growing number of inhabitants and the increased density of interaction within and between urban settlements seem to have prompted and enabled processes of institutionalisation and the formulation of norms and imaginaries. Referring to, and including, non-human agents in communication, and therefore enlarging the relevant environment beyond the unquestionably plausible environment inhabited by coexisting humans (Rüpke 2015, 348), seemed to have contributed to organising economic exchange and redistribution. Furthermore, it has been functional in defining property rights as well as rights of political participation, for instance in ancient Rome (Rüpke 2018b). Vice versa, citizenship could regulate access to gods, as shown by the choice of words like “synagogue” and ekklesia, which refer first of all to voting assemblies (cf. Urciuoli 2013). Historical research has reconstructed such functions in many instances. In general, however, the analytical perspective was rather oriented from top-down processes when focussing on architecture or urban planning for instance.

The urban religion approach (Becci, Burchardt and Casanova 2013; Day 2014; Knott, Krech and Meyer 2016; Day 2017; Garbin and Strhan 2017; Burchardt and Westendorp 2018; Lanz 2018; Rüpke 2020), which is evolving in the disciplines of sociology and anthropology for modern-day India, Africa, the US or South-America, offers a different perspective: religions and cities are entangled and impact in a dialectical way on each other on every social level, even the micro-level. The newest research stresses especially the power of individual actors, or minority groups in transforming the city, even if it is only on an ephemeral basis (Hill 2013; Low 2013; Urry 2013; Walkowitz 2013).

Rarely and never comparatively has the interrelationship of city, religion and the global been thoroughly historicised and investigated with a view to other social differences of gender and age, social position and literacy, rural and trans-
regional relationships. Therefore, in our new approach that is building on a cooperation with the The Danish National Research Foundation's Centre of Excellence for Urban Network Evolutions (UrbNet), directed and represented by Rubina Raja, in the scope of the DFG-funded Humanities Centre for Advanced Studies “Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal formations” we ask: how is religion used by different agents to appropriate (and that is to say, also craft) urban space? How do religious practices and imaginaries produce a transcending global that is different from other projections of the trans-urban? How does this specific religious agency shape and change urban space over time? And how does the urban context change different or even competing practices of religious communication and the ensuing forms of sacralisation? These are questions that need to be tackled. In a historical perspective these processes have hardly been investigated. At the heart of our approach is not a harmonizing view but a rather conflicting one of socially embedded agents who need to come to grips with their city, to endure and also to sustain, fight or transcend it. We do not suppose an easy evolutionary path but rather assume high variability in the relationship of developments in religious practices in cities, and the development of cities comprising agents using religious practices in different phases of the history of religion. Thus, we will go well beyond approaches that focus on competition of religious groups in claiming public space, or research that is interested above all in the role of religion for minorities (immigrants for example) joining the urban fabric as sketched above.

Within the wider framework of such a larger comparative approach, this volume zooms in on the historical context of the advanced imperial and late antique broader Mediterranean space (2nd–8th centuries CE). Thus, it is not the periods of classical monumentalisation of cities like Athens, Antioch or Rome, which define our chronological framework. Instead we focus on cities such as Edessa, crisis management in Carthage or new foundations in Roman and Byzantine Syria, but also on the foundation and growth of Constantinople. We focus on periods of sustained change and ever new appropriation by ever different agents within clearly articulated and monumentalised built environments. Expertise and social trust are invoked within urban spaces that are consciously embedded in much larger political, military and imaginary frameworks.

It is individuals making urban space and the processes of groupings following on or directed against such built environments and social interaction as informed by them that take centre-stage. The chapters are looking for archaeological evidence not only of new structures, but of rebuilding, of creating coherent or dis-coherent urban spaces by patterns of movements or marking in religious terms. They are looking for textual evidence for such strategies, but also for imaginations of urban spaces, ritual practices, religious narratives or norms of
re-interpreting and transcending them by relocating the urban in global hori-
zons, whether formulated as universal norms or global geographies.

The case studies presented here from different angles question many of the
(mostly implicit) hypotheses that are frequently entertained when thinking about
religion in the city. First, we need to think about cities always in the plural. This
is particularly important in two respects. The term city, in particular as used in
European traditions and its exported terminologies, is a highly loaded and nor-
mative term (see Weber 1922 and the reception of the chapter on “city”, Weber
1958). This is certainly an ancient Mediterranean heritage, starting from philo-
sophical concepts of the polis and its presence in political discourses, taken
over and modified by the Latin term urbs and its Roman use and diffusion as
a tool of dominion. Later European variants, even if built on very different
types of cities, inscribe themselves into this tradition: Stadtluft macht frei, that
is, living within the confines of city walls is liberating (for an overview
see Russo 2016).

The highly different realities of cities do not live up to the singular of the nor-
mative concept. The cities reviewed in the following were old capitals or admin-
istrative centres, recently expanded villages or foundations due to military or dy-
nastic reasons. Some were growing, others in decline or struggling to upkeep
built environments. The sample reminds us that cities can and sometimes do
fail. Many of the present metropolitan centres were insignificant a few centuries
(if not shorter) before ancient capitals were moved and deserted in many instan-
ces. This is easily overlooked when a normative concept of cities as the better
places for life is treated as a descriptive one. This normative discourse itself is
part of ‘urbanity’, the specific way of living in cities and thinking about city –
or cities (Rau 2014; Raja and Sindbæk 2018). Here a second aspect comes to
the fore. Cities do not always, probably even rarely, regard themselves as the
axis mundi, as a certain line of research in the nexus of the urban and religion
supposes (see e.g. Rykwert 1976, built above all on ancient Chinese discourse, cf.
Steinhardt 2013). Frequent is the orientation at larger centres within one’s own
network of cities. Such cities, Babylon, Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, but also new
foundations like Alexandria or Constantinople, were regarded as model cities,
within their narrower or wider networks, offering features or standards for emu-
lation or even competition. Yet even in such a city, the idea that one is living in
just one case of a kind, in a concrete version of the type of built environment
called city, might be present. In such imaginations of urbanity, religious practi-
ces – prayer as well as pilgrimage – and ideas – the Holy Land, the Eternal City –
were not just inviting us to think in a specific way beyond the walls – to repeat a
very basic notion of transcendence – but frequently referring to and focusing on
specific places and above all cities in a distance (see Rüpke 2016). Many cities in
many urban networks were competing, vying for the benevolence of an emperor or defending respectively struggling for regional priority, with regard to economic attraction or administration of water.

If we need to think about cities in the plural, we also need to pay attention to the very different kinds of people living in the city at the same time. Sometimes a basic differentiation of visitors, immigrants and inhabitants might be helpful, but many of those present only temporarily interrupt their migrant status or stop involuntarily, for a year, for life or some generations (for a useful typology see Tacoma 2016). A steady influx from the rural environs, whether seasonal for certain phases of life or permanent, is one source. A smaller number of people come from afar (and even other cities) is another one. An astonishing number of visitors, merchants, family, students or artisans stayed for longer, but not forever. Slavery adds another feature to the balance sheet. “To the present day, cities remain confection of movers” (Clark 2013, 18).

With a view to urban complexity, religion is not only nice to think with, but offers a battleground. Homogenisation of the heterogeneity and diversity of life in the city is a central administrative aim, whether followed by some imperial representative, local elite or bishop – or against one or more of those. Ruling the urban plebs is of particular importance (Le Galès 2013; Simone 2013; cf. Gruber 2016). In all these constellations religion comes in, whether as a centralising resource for political or ecclesiastical authorities (a classical focus of the study of religion in and of cities, as pointed out before) or as a means of stabilising or tolerating social differences. Drawing a dividing line between public and private in the form of eruvim, defining Jewish neighbourhoods for purposes of the Sabbath, or establishing ambivalent spaces like bathes – as analysed for Rome here – is pursued by or questioned by religious communication (e.g. Klein 2006; Fonrobert 2020). Such a diversity of urban religion is not identical with differences between religions – but urban diversity seems to draw further boundaries (Rüpke 2018a). Such boundary work might take very different forms, for instance philosophy and different ‘schools’ of reasoning or the establishment of religious authority. Boundaries could also be created by means of prophecy and based on critique of social or political practices (e.g. Schott 2005; Tiersch 2008; Hezser 2013; Alciati 2018; Bremmer 2018) as well as by establishing stable groups of followers. Social movements might be instigated by religious agents. At times, such urban religion might even take the shape of the “fundamentalist city” (for this notion see AlSayyad 2010; for intra-urban religious conflict see Bremmer 2014 and Mayer 2018). Religious action might be invited into large open spaces, laid out for such purposes as fora, circi, theatri or monumentalised (and roofed) as basilicae, or be performed in nearly invisible space, in houses or only temporarily used space. Religious practices and ideas can become “citified” (Urciuoli),
as it will be shown. ‘Urban religion’ is not any specific form, but the ever-changing contingent outcome of a religious placemaking (Lätzer-Lasar) that is not a solely top-down process, but rather a process integrating all social levels of urban actors, as well as objects (buildings, infrastructures) and imagined spaces of urbanity, which leads into the development of specific ways of urban life and urban sets of minds.

2 Overview of the volume

Even in focusing on the interdependency of city and religion and the many different forms it can take, the textual analyses and the archaeological case studies presented in this volume reflect the shared awareness that ‘city’ and ‘religion’ are vastly unevenly distributed (re-)sources. The history of cities has often been conceptualised as change of rulers or of ideological regimes and resulting in internal changes. The history of religions, instead, has been seen as diffusion (or contraction) of rather stable beliefs that constitute the very identity and continuity of the subject. Engaging in relating city and religion needs to take the very different traditions of conceptualising the two poles into consideration. Therefore, the authors did not start from shared concepts of ‘city’ or ‘religion’, but rather from the shared perspective of urban religion as a lens into historical change in late antiquity. It turned out that this approach offered a view right into the centre of late ancient change – and a new perspective onto the mutual constitution as mutual critique of the urban and the religious

Emiliano Rubens Urciuoli sets the stage in a treatment of one of the most influential texts for European urbanism, Augustine’s “City of God”. Under the headline of “A tale of no cities” he is scrutinising the text for treatment of city-spaces. Astonishingly, the result is largely negative. This is not questioning Urciuoli’s starting point, namely the assumption that the City of God itself is the quintessential product of an urban religion, authored by a city-based religious authority, using and targeting the very urban institutions and media he is relying upon in order to “claim, contest, and patrol urban spaces vis-à-vis intra- and inter-religious competitors.” Yet, Augustine’s analysis of cult relics, the material expressions of polytheism, and theatres and all kinds of spectacles, did not lead, as Urciuoli is able to show, to any appreciation of their specific urban qualities. Augustine sticks to a degree of generality that does not go beyond appreciating such cities’ principle of unity, sustaining life by cooperation and possibly peace. In contrast, the heavenly city is not a perfection of such qualities, but its very difference: the end of all labour and performances.
In his chapter “The children of Cain”, Clifford Ando sticks to the same author. He deals with a text, written in Northern Africa at the beginning of the fifth century, Augustine’s *Ennarrationes in psalmos*. Augustine, he claims, performed a violent misreading of the narrative of Cain and Abel. This radical interpretation allowed him to represent the twin brothers as the founders of two communities of very different norms and sentiments. Thus, he could circumvent the fixing of urbanism on the figure of Cain. And yet, the possibility for a positive evaluation of urbanism thus opened was not brought to work. In the historical of a widespread questioning of urban resilience, Augustine opted for the radical distinction of urban cities as sites of temptation, prefigured by Babylon, with the heavenly city of God, which is lacking any terrestrial precursor.

Textual analysis is also the hallmark of Teresa Morgan’s chapter “Faith and the city in the fourth century”. On a broader textual basis, the chapter demonstrates how the idea “that church buildings, places of pilgrimage, and certain other spaces have the ability to create, alter and increase belief” was developed after the Constantinian restitution and sponsoring of buildings after 313. The material production went hand in hand with the widespread expectation and experience that architecture can replace experiences produced by preachers or healers. It is stone that gives proof of the truth of the sacred texts and enables the encounter with the divine. In certain places, Jerusalem above all, this general principle is heightened with the narrative assurance of historical authenticity.

Heidi Wendt goes back a few steps and sets early Christian literature within a wider urban framework. Her chapter “Intellectualizing religion in the cities of the Roman Empire” examines these texts as indicators of a larger change towards intellectualisation as strategies of creating religious authority and group profiles. The spatial precondition is the direct encounter and cross-reference to intellectual rivals drawing on similar literary resources. Again, it is the urban technique of writing and the proliferation and accessibility of such skills and book production that form the basis of these strategies, shared across a broad range of sets of beliefs and group boundaries.

The analyses of literary texts and their urban ecology is followed by chapters focusing on specific sites, urban settlements around the Mediterranean. Lara Weiss makes a start in a chapter that offers a methodological tool across periods; her example, Egyptian Memphis and its necropolis Saqqara, is not meant as a case-study for late antiquity. The chapter “The city of the dead or: the making of a cultural geography” presents a conceptual approach. Using a ‘lived ancient religion’ turned into a ‘walking dead’ approach, she is criticising the widespread focus on the presentation and representation of the tomb owner. She does so by turning to the larger spatial context and the practices of a landscape that comprises the city of the living and its extra-urban places of activity. It is the agency
informed by practices, traditions and the spatial conditions that needs to be placed at the centre of analyses.

Focusing on 3rd century Rome, Michele Renee Salzman offers a clear example of how and to what extent pre-existing topographical factors in the historical space of a metropolis can influence the planning strategies of the mightiest among the urban actors, i.e., the ruling emperor. Aurelian’s enforced ‘materialisation’ of his reformed version of the cult of Sol Invictus in the Campus Agrippae had a massive impact on the topography of devotion in Rome. However, the choice of the location was driven by his intent to capitalise on the different emplaced memories and topographical associations inherent in that area of the city via a building and organisational strategy that entailed a twofold achievement: on the one hand, stressing the continuity of this reformulated cult with the religious interests and ritual traditions of different categories of prior Sol devotees (military and non-elites); on the other, enlarging the pool of adherents by potentially including all levels of Roman society, and especially engaging those elite groups who had initially resisted his power seizure (senators).

Paroma Chatterjee meticulously describes in her chapter “City of prophecies: Constantinople in late antique and medieval sources” the various cultural strategies with which the Byzantine intellectuals, but also the inhabitants of Constantinople in general dealt with pagan statues in the orthodox Christian city of the late antique and medieval period. By synoptically evaluating two ancient texts, such as the travelogue Parastaseis Syntomoi Chronikai and the Patria, a patriotic account of the legendary foundation of the city, in combination with and contrast to archaeological evidences, she comes to the conclusion that intellectuals rather ridiculed the statues and pagan deities in order to desacralise the objects, still standing in public, while the population of the city inscribed the statues in their physical and mental city-map as part of the urban landscape, both significant reasons why the statues actually survived this long period of disruption and iconoclasm.

Hartmut Leppin engages with the topic of fundamentalist cities and analyses in his chapter “Creating a city of believers: Rabbula of Edessa” a city at the Eastern borders of the Empire in the early fifth century. But he is neither interested nor able to show that bishop Rabbula established such a regime, but in the motives of his rigorist interpretation of the office of a Christian bishop by the time and the motives to even radicalise these failing attempts in the biography written after his death. Dealing with the complexities of religious beliefs in a city even largely Christianised, the attempt was built on practices rather than beliefs. Rabbula tried to outflank other aristocrats not by his orthodoxy, but by his super-asceticism, including financial support of the poor. Even if not successful in the long run, the visibility of these practices won him some approval and in-
dicates ways of communication in urban space that are not adequately represented in other literary sources.

Michael Blömer discusses the same region, the Roman East and the same period, the fifth century. It is not the radicalisation, but the attempt at religious homogenisation and economic success by means of new foundations that is thematised in his chapter “Sacred spaces and new cities in the Byzantine East”. His case studies comprise Sergiopolis/Rusafa, Anastasiopolis/Dara, and Martyropolis/Mayyāfāriqīn, cities dedicated to protect the Eastern border, but enjoying the full range of urban characteristics like churches as central foci, colonnaded streets for civic pride, and substantial water supply. Each urban biography, however, was very different. At least for the first and the third example a strategy can be plausibly reconstructed that tried to ensure mercantile success by creating religiously attractive places. Imperial investment itself was as much a precondition as a result of such attractivity. Even more fundamental, however, was the very idea of an urbanity that took its pride in monumentality. Religion made it work.

Finally, Dirk Steuernagel’s close-up analysis of “Roman baths as locations of religious practice” takes a comparative approach and starts from the well-accepted observation that baths were important social spaces across the Imperium Romanum and in particular in the examples focused upon in Asia minor. Building even on earlier traditions of athletics in the Hellenistic gymasia and body-centred practices in healing sanctuaries, baths offered spaces for a wide range of social encounters and religious activities. Decorations in bathing areas proper as well as in the increasing recreational space could help to produce religious atmospheres. However, as Steuernagel is able to show, they never gained a religiously specific profile, but religious semantics and activities just partook in general social exchange. Temples, theatres, and circuses kept their proper place. Only occasionally, they served as locations for individual or small group activities that could not fall back on other established locations; such a privatisation of the communal space for the veneration of Mithras or God must thus be regarded as an exception rather than the rule. As such they did not discourage people of very different allegiances to use the same spaces.

Taken together, the chapters underline the dynamics of the mutual shaping of urban space and religious ideas and practices. The specific forms resulting from this entanglement have to be seen against the background of a long and diverse Mediterranean history. Regional traditions are as much part of it as are visions of what a settlement called urban, what a ‘city’ should be. Here the establishment of religious authority found its limits – and found a fruitful field for innovation at the same time.

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