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Religion in the Roman Empire
(Die Religionen Der Menschheit, 16.2), eds. Jörg Rüpke,
Greg Woolf, Stuttgart 2021, Kohlhammer Verlag, 324 p.

The synthesis edited by Jörg Rüpke and Greg Woolf and authored with seven further authors represents the latest volume in the famous Kohlhammer series on World Religions, one of the oldest and most prestigious series on history of religions in German *Religionswissenschaft*. The volume entitled Religion in the Roman Empire (and not „Roman religion” in the empire, which is a great difference as we will see) presents the major religious changes, transformations, and specificities of religious communication occurred in the first four centuries of our common era.

The book is the result of a fruitful and paradigmatic collaboration between the ERC Advanced Grant winner Jörg Rüpke and his team from Erfurt (Lived Ancient Religion project 2012-2017) and Greg Woolf, who had a research project focusing on sanctuaries and religious experience in the ancient world in the Max Weber Kolleg.¹ This book – as most of the volumes of the series – intends to be a companion, a synthesis and detailed introduction in the topic, addressing the greater public, students but also the specialists. The book proposes also a new methodological approach, well-known already in the previous, paradigmatic books on Lived Ancient Religion: the relativisation of ancient Roman religiosity, a special focus on individual religion, urban religion and citification of religion, and the appropriation of various religious ideas in the context of an empire.

The introduction by Jörg Rüpke and Greg Woolf also proposed a relativisation of the literary sources, interpreted here as a „momentary crystallization of discourse” and not as authoritative sources, as it was interpreted in the 19th century and early 20th century scholarship. The authors emphasize also, that the contemporary approaches of social sciences can open new doors in the research of ancient Roman religion too. The second part of the introduction is focusing on the problematic terminology of

¹ On the major results of the Lived Ancient Religion project see: J. Albrecht, Ch. Degelmann, V. Gasparini, R.L. Gordon, M. Patzelt, G. Petridou, R. Raja, A.K. Rieger, J. Rüpke, B. Sippel, E. Urciuoli, L. Weiss, *Religion in the making: the Lived Ancient Religion approach*, „Religion” 2018, 48/4, pp. 568-593; J. Rüpke, *Pantheon. A new history of Roman religion*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2018.

Religion in Roman antiquity: a notion which is reinvented by later historiography and highly influenced by monotheistic (mostly Judeo-Christian) traditions needs a redefinition. The authors argued that such a redefinition is possible if we focus on agencies (human and divine) and their role in religious communication. The lived ancient religion approach used in this book too is focusing on religious appropriations, individualisation and religious experiences which can be identified from texts and rarely, from material evidence too. The two editors argued, that due to the great number of authors, the book shows a methodological eclecticism, however some of the core elements of the lived ancient religion approach are omnipresent in the book. The editors argued, that „objects and well explored locales feature” offer more on religious experience than law or philosophical theology. This is already a strong methodological shift in contrast with the German traditions of Georg Wissowa, Kurt Latte and their contemporary followers, where Roman religion often interpreted only through literary sources and legal texts.

The next chapter examines a very interesting topic, which was rarely attested in Roman studies: the impact of the empire itself on religion. Miguel John Versluys and Greg Woolf argued, that the „empireness” of the Roman Empire „created a vessel within which religious change followed a distinctive course”. They exemplified this with the much-debated case of Decius’ edict on sacrifice, the person of the emperor, as religious symbol, but emphasized that there is no centralised pantheon or universal, religious rules of the empire. They even claim there were no Imperial Religion, no Reichsreligion and no Religionspolitik. This claim is however debatable when we take a closer look on to the cult of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, the Roman fasti or the legal state of priesthoods: the universal aspects of Roman religion are indeed, shaped by the empire, therefore instead of a deconstructive approach, a glocalist one might be much more useful.² Woolf and Versluys also emphasized the impact of mobilities and the economic networks, routes beyond the limits of the Roman Empire, which also shaped the religious market.

The following chapter authored by William Van Andringa is focusing on the city, as a field of religious action. Presenting his most well-researched case study, Pompeii, Andringa starts with the anecdotic and often sarcastic quotes of the literary sources on the omnipresence of divine agencies and sacralised places in the and private public sphere („there was not a corner without a chapel, a sanctuary or a temple” – Fronto, Ep. I.175). Andringa presents the temples and shrines of Pompeii as in a city tour,

² On glocality of Roman religion see: Cs. Szabó, *Roman religion in the Danubian provinces. Space sacralisation and religious communication during the Principate (1st-3rd century AD)*, Oxbow Books, Oxford 2022, pp. 20-22.

however argues, that divine agency is not present everywhere and the spatiality of religion had special, often local-specific rules and traditions. The chapter is focusing especially on the topography of sacralised spaces and spatiality of religion, however, does not present the various other aspects of urban religion and what is called today as citification.³ It is almost useless to mention, that the case well-researched case study of Pompeii does not always represents the best „prototype” for urban religion, if there can be such at all.

The chapter o Rubina Raja and Anna-Katharina Rieger is focusing on sanctuaries, as places of communication, knowledge, and memory. The chapter is focusing on some of the monumental, public sanctuaries of the Near East (Gerasa, Baalbek) and shortly mentions Rome too, although the bibliographic references for this are often too general (for example, on page 64, footnote nr. 21). The authors emphasized, that although the archaeological evidence of sanctuaries and their materiality is abundant and constantly growing, our knowledge on the local and everyday rituals within the sacred spaces are still hard to reconstruct and each case needs a local, individual approach. The subchapter has no chronological order: it presents a thematic order of space sacralisation. It begins with the impact of large sanctuaries in urban environments, the foundation of new sacralised spaces (sanctuaries, temples), the role of pre-Roman traditions and religious continuations, the isolation, seasonality and connectivity of rural (or non-urban) sanctuaries, the dialogue of imperial cult with other divine agencies and the role of religious specialists in these spaces. The chapter also presents those particular case studies (temple scripts, confession texts, divinations), where religious experiences within a sanctuary are experienced by the ancient Romans and the role of preserving memory and knowledge (religious and often, administrative, scientific, artistic) in sacralised spaces. The chapter of Raja and Rieger presents the numerous functions of sanctuaries in the Roman world with a large variety of examples (mostly from the Western provinces and the Near East). The abundance of the examples might be a hard read for those who are not familiar with the archaeology of Roman religion.

The chapter of Georgia Petridou and Jörg Rüpke entitled „people and competencies” presents a well-organised summary of a topic, which preoccupied the works of Rüpke and Petridou for many years, resulting numerous books and edited volumes on priests and religious specialists. The chapter presents the various forms and roles of religious specialists: public priests, diviners, oracular officials, religious innovators, small group religion entrepreneurs, early Christian priests and the impact of philosophers on Roman religion. The chapter ends with a short discussion on setting borders

³ E. Urciuoli, *Citification of Religion: A Proposal for the Historical Study of Urban Religion*, “Religion and Urbanity Online”, <https://doi.org/10.1515/urbrel.12124596> (27.12.2022).

to religious experts and the issue of illegality (mostly magicians). The authors rightly argued that the Latin notion of *sacerdos* („who renders sacred”) emphasized the role of expertise and experience, therefore the notion of religious specialists or experts are more correct than priesthood, which should be used only for the public magistrates with religious functions. In contrast with the previous chapters, this one is dominated by the abundance of textual sources (Valerius Maximus, Cicero, Aelius Aristides, Lucian, Pliny, epigraphic evidence).

The chapter of Heidi Wendt is focusing on the divine agency in religious communication: the gods and other divine beings. This chapter comes as an important addition to the critiques of Rüpke’s latest monumental companion on Roman Religion, where the divine agency was marginally presented, as one reviewer stated⁴. Wendt’s long and useful introduction on the notion and nature of religion in the Roman world shows also, how difficult is to speak about this, abstract feature of religious communication. Divinities (divine beings) are presented here in their personal, individual eclecticism from public spaces to individual „pantheons”. As recent studies emphasized, naming and representing divine beings were essential to shape and constantly transform their nature, however these aspects (epithets, theonyms and divine figures) are missing from this chapter.⁵

Richard Gordon’s chapter entitled „managing problems: choices and solutions” deals with an even more abstract, unusual issue in religious communication: individual strategies and investments as a response to contingent threats to the physical and social integrity of the Roman individuals and families. Religion here is a strategy and ritualisation, a habitus of everyday, social life where the human body and social status is under constant danger. Gordon presents first the so-called „mainstream options”, making a clear, legal division between the possibilities of the individual. He emphasizes the role of healing waters and therapeutic dreams, oracle shrines in Italy and the East in the context of ancient medicine, epidemics and the sick body, as religious agent. Gordon presents many examples on the ritualisation of Roman healthcare, divination but also the role of funerary monuments (*monumentum, sepulcrum*). In contrast with mainstream options, Romans often – if not most usually – used alternative religious strategies, such as magic, the help of minor ritual specialists listed by

⁴ J. Rüpke, *Pantheon...* (2018). For the review see: J. Bremmer, *Review of Jörg Rüpke, Pantheon, Munich: Beck, 2016*, “Religion in the Roman Empire” 2018, 4/1, pp. 107-112.

⁵ J. Bremmer, *The Agency of Greek and Roman Statues: from Homer to Constantine*, “Opuscula” 2013, 6, pp. 7-21; S. Estienne, *Images*, [in:] *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World*. eds. R. Raja, J. Rüpke, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester 2015, pp. 379-388; C. Bonnet, M. Bianco, Th. Galoppin, É. Guillon, A. Laurent, S. Lebreton, F. Porzia, *Les dénominations des dieux nous offrent comme autant d’images dessinées (Julien, Lettres 89b, 291 b). Repenser le binôme théonyme-épithète*, “Studi e materiali di storia delle religioni” 2018, 84/2, pp. 567-592.

Iulius Pollux and numerous other, often archaeological sources (*defixiones*). As one of the foremost specialists in recent studies of Roman magic, Gordon presents a large variety of literary and archaeological sources of ancient magic in the context of this new, methodological approach.

Greg Woolf and Miguel John Versluys has another chapter in the book on artefacts and material religion. In the introduction of the chapter, they are analysing the material evidence of religion from the pre-Roman period, although the short subchapter does not allow them to present a comprehensive analysis of this important topic. They emphasize, that radical changes might occur rarely in Roman history, which affected the religious thought of communities, but in most cases the transformation is slow and produces appropriations. The authors present the notion of religious objectscape, as a “repertoire of material culture available at a certain site in a certain period” used in religious communication as “*agents provocateurs*”. They are analysing the cognitive impact of the automata objects, the revolutionary results of Hellenistic, moving divinities, which gave a radically new dimension to the objectscape of religion. The chapter shortly presents the impact of wood, terracotta, marble and lead objects used in religious communication. The authors emphasized the importance of well-documented sanctuaries, which are essential to understand the impact of materiality of religion.

Georgia Petridou and Jörg Rüpke’s second chapter is focusing on the impact of textual production on the organisation and proliferation of religious knowledge in the Roman Empire. The chapter deals with the important role of Roman calendars and their glocality (centralised and localised versions) in time-systematisation and appropriation. The authors presented also the importance of urban laws and intellectual discussions on the notion of *religio* and *religiones*, especially in the textual productions from the end of the Republic. Rüpke and Petridou argues, that the Augustan revolution accelerated the role of the textual sources. Literary works, such as Virgil’s corpus served also as an important agency. The authors argued, that the 2nd century AD represents a period of intense religious experimentation, where not only the epigraphic habit exploded, producing thousands of short – but often, exceptionally long, narrative inscriptions (oracle-inscriptions) – but also the Second Sophism and the early Christian movement produced in this period significant works (Lucian, Plutarch, Justin Martyr, Tatian). Petridou and Rüpke shortly discuss also the often controversial, religious and also erotic nature of early Christian hagiographies and the formation of the saints.

The last chapter of the book is a welcomed one and a rarity in religious studies especially, focusing on the economic impact of Roman religion. The authors – Richard Gordon, Rubina Raja and Anna-Katharina Rieger – presented the wider, macro-economic and demographic context of the Roman Empire, citing the latest

results on Roman demography, climate change and economic studies. They argue that the emergence of a new, rich middle class in the Roman society after the Punic wars (*honestiores*⁶) consisted around 1,5% of the society (215-290.000 households) and they produced most of the materiality of Roman religion (sacralised spaces, objects, epigraphic, textual narratives). The authors used exceptional cases of literary and epigraphic sources, where the financial aspects of temple building, and restoration-projects are mentioned (*Res gestae* 19.1-2). The financial aspects and overlapping of public and private in religious economy can be only presumed based on few case studies from Pompeii, Rome (CIL VI 6820)⁷ and Egypt. The chapter also explores the role of workshops and production of religious souvenirs and *instrumenta* and the economic impact of pilgrimages too, making this chapter an indispensable source for further studies on economy of Roman religion. The book ends with a useful index of names, places and keywords.

The book edited by Jörg Rüpke and Greg Woolf authored with seven other archaeologists and historians of antiquity is a very dense, abundant synthesis on several, often unusual and rarely analysed aspects of Roman religion in a vaguely defined period (approx. 2nd century BC – 4th century AD). It is probably the first synthesis of Roman religion, which is using abundantly the literary, epigraphic, and archaeological sources equally and examines not only public, civic religion, but religious individualisation, local appropriations, economy, spatiality, textual and material narratives and alternative choices and strategies, such as magic or funeral representations. The impact of the Lived Ancient Religion approach on this book is obvious and of course, intentional. This makes the book also a general synthesis which unites methods from religious studies, cultural anthropology, social theory with the sources of classical archaeology and *Altertumwissenschaft*. The impact of Archaic Roman religion, the interaction between polytheism and early Christianity and the materiality of the Danubian provinces are rarely cited in this volume.

Although it meant to be an introduction to the general public, the abundance of the sources (often mentioned shortly, in footnotes), the large variety and complexity of geographic and chronological dimensions makes the book probably a hard reading for the general public or even for undergraduate students. The quality of the book is exceptional, the photos – although black and white and usually small – are well edited with visible details. It will be certainly, a good introduction and useful collection of primary and secondary sources (exceptional bibliography) for researchers and students especially.

⁶ The chapter does not cite the seminal work of Géza Alföldy on social history of Rome.

⁷ The authors confused photo nr. 24 and 25 in the text on page 269.

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