

A COMPANION TO THE  
**ARCHAEOLOGY  
OF RELIGION IN  
THE ANCIENT WORLD**

EDITED BY RUBINA RAJA  
AND JÖRG RÜPKE



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TO THE ARCHAEOLOGY  
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ANCIENT WORLD**

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Rubina Raja and Jörg Rüpke

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This edition first published 2015  
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*Registered Office*

John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

*Editorial Offices*

350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

A companion to the archaeology of religion in the ancient world / edited by Rubina Raja and Jörg Rüpke.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4443-5000-5 (cloth)

1. Archaeology and religion—Middle East. 2. Archaeology and religion—Greece. 3. Archaeology and religion—Rome. 4. Middle East—Antiquities. 5. Greece—Antiquities. 6. Rome—Antiquities.

I. Raja, Rubina, 1975– II. Rüpke, Jörg.

BL1060.C66 2015

200.93'09009—dc23

2014039728

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Banqueting tesseræ from Palmyra depicting a priest flanked by two bulls. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. © Rubina Raja

Set in 10/12.5pt Galliard by SPi Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India

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# Abbreviations

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|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| <b>A&amp;A</b> | Antike und Abendland   |
| <b>AE</b>      | L'Année Épigraphique   |
| <b>AJAH</b>    | American Journal of Ancient History  |
| <b>AJP</b>     | American Journal of Philology  |
| <b>AM</b>      | Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung   |
| <b>ANRW</b>    | Temporini, Hildegard and Wolfgang Haase, eds. 1972–. <i>Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt</i> , Berlin                            |
| <b>CIL</b>     | Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum   |
| <b>CIMRM</b>   | Vermaseren, Maarten J. 1956–60. <i>Corpus Inscriptionum et Monumentorum Religionis Mithriacae</i> , The Hague                              |
| <b>CP</b>      | Classical Philology  |
| <b>CQ</b>      | Classical Quarterly  |
| <b>CW</b>      | Classical World  |
| <b>EPRO</b>    | Etudes préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'empire romain   |
| <b>FGrHist</b> | Jacoby, Felix 1923–. <i>Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker</i> , Berlin   |
| <b>HABES</b>   | Heidelberger Althistorische Beiträge und Epigraphische Studien   |
| <b>HrwG</b>    | Hubert, Cancik, Burkhard Gladigow, and Karl-Heinz Kohl, eds. 1988–. <i>Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe</i> . Stuttgart. |
| <b>HTR</b>     | Harvard Theological Review   |
| <b>IG</b>      | Inscriptiones Graecae  |
| <b>IGUR</b>    | Moretti, Luigi 1968–90. <i>Inscriptiones Graecae Urbis Romae</i> , Rome  |
| <b>IKnidos</b> | Wolfgang Blümel, 1992–2010. <i>Die Inschriften von Knidos</i> , Bonn   |
| <b>ILLRP</b>   | Attilio Degraffi, 1957–63. <i>Inscriptiones Latinae Liberae Rei Publicae</i> , Florence  |
| <b>ILS</b>     | Dessau, Hermann, 1892–1916. <i>Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae</i> , Berlin   |
| <b>IMilet</b>  | Herrmann, Peter, Wolfgang Günther, and Norbert Ehrhardt, eds. 1997–2006. <i>Die Inschriften von Milet</i> , Berlin                         |
| <b>JdI</b>     | Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts   |
| <b>JRA</b>     | Journal of Roman Archaeology   |
| <b>JRS</b>     | Journal of Roman Studies   |

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|----------------|--|
| <b>LSAM</b>    | Franciszek Sokolowski, 1955. <i>Lois sacrées de l'Asie Mineure</i> , Paris                     |
| <b>LSG</b>     | Franciszek Sokolowski, 1969. <i>Lois sacrées des cités grecques</i> , Paris                    |
| <b>LSS</b>     | Franciszek Sokolowski, 1962. <i>Lois sacrées des cités grecques: Supplément</i> , Paris        |
| <b>LTUR</b>    | Eva M. Steinby ed. 2002. <i>Lexicon Topographicum Urbis Romae</i> , Rome                       |
| <b>MEFRA</b>   | Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome, Antiquité   |
| <b>NP</b>      | Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider, eds. 1996–2003. <i>Der Neue Pauly</i> . Stuttgart.        |
| <b>PawB</b>    | Potsdamer altertumswissenschaftliche Beiträge  |
| <b>PCPhS</b>   | Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society  |
| <b>QS</b>      | Quaderni di storia   |
| <b>RG-RW</b>   | Religions in the Graeco-Roman World  |
| <b>RH</b>      | Revue historique   |
| <b>RM</b>      | Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Römische Abteilung                       |
| <b>RhMus</b>   | Rheinisches Museum für Philologie  |
| <b>RICIS</b>   | Laurent Bricault, 2005. <i>Recueil des inscriptions concernant les cultes isiaques</i> , Paris |
| <b>SEG</b>     | Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum  |
| <b>SIRIS</b>   | Ladislav Vidman, 1969. <i>Sylloge Inscriptionum Religionum Isidis et Sarapidis</i> , Berlin    |
| <b>ThesCRA</b> | Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum  |
| <b>WUNT</b>    | Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament   |
| <b>YCS</b>     | Yale Classical Studies   |
| <b>ZPE</b>     | Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik   |





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## CHAPTER 1

# Archaeology of Religion, Material Religion, and the Ancient World

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*Rubina Raja and Jörg Rüpke*

### Problems of an Archaeology of Religion

What was it like to enter a sacred cave? Ruth Whitehouse undertook it to reconstruct such an experience for the Grotta di Porto Badisco, a cave in the Southeast of Italy intensively painted in the fifth or fourth millennium BCE:

Thresholds are of great importance in rites of passage and the caves offer a series of natural thresholds from one zone to another, with the most significant being the cave entrance, where one turns one's back on light and the familiar world and climbs into a dark unknown reality. As individuals bend, twist and wriggle along the dark corridors of the cave, listening to the strange cave sounds, feeling the rock pressing into them, the sharp wetness of the stalactites, the yielding softness of areas of silt deposits, the sudden release of constriction as they move into a chamber large enough to stand up in, they learn through their bodies of the importance of the experience they are undergoing and its transformative nature. (Whitehouse 2001: 166)

Whitehouse is quite aware of the difficulties of reconstructing emotional experiences from archaeological material, pointing not only to cultural mediation, but also to the “impact of individual personality and biography on bodily behaviour” (161). Similar insights can lead to very different conclusions, as a second and everyday example may teach us:

The three ways our bodies determine what shows up in our world—innate structures, general acquired skills, and specific cultural skills—can be contrasted by considering how each contributes to the fact that to Western human beings a chair affords sitting. Because we have the sort of bodies that get tired and that bend backwards the knees, chairs can show up for us—but not for flamingos, say—as affording sitting. But chairs can only solicit sitting once

we have learned to sit. Finally, only because we Western Europeans are brought up in a culture where one sits on chairs, do chairs solicit us to sit on them. Chairs would not solicit sitting in traditional Japan. (Dreyfus and Dreyfus 1999: 104)

A certain reluctance to delve into such problems and perhaps a feeling that religion loses in importance anyhow has for most of the twentieth century kept attempts at an archaeology of religion at bay. But things have shifted significantly. Today, archaeology data pertaining to religion and ritual actions are taken as seriously in Religious Studies and History of Religion as religion is taken seriously within Archaeology. This is as much driven by professional research as by public demand. Caves, or more generally, sites taken as religious sites by local users and likewise by foreign visitors feature high on the list of touristic top locations. Religion fascinates in this rapidly-changing world where distant regions of the world are much more closely connected, but where cultures, traditions and religions still are very different and practiced differently from region to region and even within regions. Chairs, on the other hand, and objects of routine or occasional religious usage demand explanation and justification in museums and expositions or in religious display. Here, archaeological and religious historical research meet, even if they have two very different lines of ancestry in scholarship.

The functional approach within processual archaeology left many questions relating to religion unanswered. Too often, “religion” served as a final interpretive resort once instrumental, and thus rational, explanations had not led to any result. When one was not able to explain an archaeological phenomenon, it was often labelled dissatisfactorily “cultic”. Here, post-processual archaeology, in particular since the 1990s, has opened up new paths. Archaeological data might be used in order to reconstruct rituals and inquire about ideology or belief systems underlying social action. Descriptive accounts of “Christian” or “Islamic Archaeology” or “Archaeology of the Holy Land” have been supplemented and supplanted by “Archaeology of Belief”, “Archaeology of Cult” or “Archaeology of Religion”. These archaeologies are still characterized by a big divide (Petts 2011: 40–50). They flourish for illiterate societies, in particular prehistoric cultures. In contrast, “world religions” are seen as being characterized by textual traditions. Addressing material culture, archaeology is not seen as getting to the heart of such religions, but rather as an expression of already-existing and well-defined ideologies. Archaeology is often reduced to and taken for face value. Functional and spatial analysis, analysis of cult images to explain perceptions of deities as well as interpretation of votives as payment for participation in religious rituals have dominated the field of archaeology and historical disciplines using archaeological sources to illustrate points. Thus, the archaeology of belief is reduced to verify dogmatics, important notions of the belief system, in everyday religious cultures, even if they do not any longer restrict themselves to “high culture” like “Christian art” (e.g., Insoll 2001; Steadman 2009). Reconstructing collective systems of symbols (to follow the definition of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973: 90)) is seen as a substitute for a textual theology.

The primacy of belief against practice and institution has a complicated history in Western scholarship, crossing confessional polemics of Protestant and Catholics with colonial issues of hierarchizing Western and non-Western religion (if present at all in the discourse) (briefly, Orsi 2011). Without denying the importance of discourse and systematic reflection on and in texts, it is not only the material dimension of religious



**Figure 1.1** Relief from the Nationalmuseum, Copenhagen, depicting sacrificial scene. The gods are shown larger than the human beings, who are sacrificing. Photo by Rubina Raja.

practice *and* belief which has been underrated. It is above all the local, situational, and individual dimension of religion which has been neglected (balanced: Culley 2008: 67–70). The primacy given to the systematic and the dogmatic is a normative decision. It is a decision to describe religion, as it should be rather than as it is.

There are two ways out of the problem. One group of researchers opts for a scientific approach. They base their claims on cognitive studies and attempt to reach firm ground by starting from “conceptual metaphors” of self and superhuman powers supposedly grounded in universal ways of perception and an evolutionary theory of religion (Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2004; Whitehouse and Martin 2004; several contributions in Whitley and Hays-Gilpin 2008; based on, e.g., Boyer 1994; Whitehouse and McCauley 2005). This way will not be followed in this Companion. Instead, we opt for a cultural and historical approach, lived religion.

## Lived Ancient Religion

The concept of “lived religion” has been developed for the description and analysis of contemporary religion, countering the stress on institutionalized religion and its norms (McGuire 2008). Here, it is proposed to employ this concept within the field of archaeology of religion also for past cultures as “lived ancient religion” (see Rüpke 2011). In its application to contemporary social analysis, the concept of lived religion does not address how individuals replicate a set of religious practices and beliefs preconfigured by an institutionalized official religion within their biography – or, conversely, opt out of adhering to tradition. Of course, considering the relationship of individuals to

tradition, such an assumption could in principle work in a religiously pluralistic and a mono-confessional society. Instead, “lived ancient religion” focuses on the actual everyday experience, on practices, expressions, and interactions that could be related to “religion”. Such “religion” is understood as a spectrum of experiences, actions, and beliefs and communications hinging on human communication with super-human or even transcendent agent(s), for many, but not all societies conceptualized as “gods”. Material symbols, elaborate forms of representation, and ritualization (Bell 1992) are called upon for the success of communication with these addressees. By including such a spectrum of human ways of communicating with super-human or transcendent agents along with an analysis of the role of material culture in this spectrum, a new way of approaching archaeological material is opened.

It is important to keep in mind that such practices are not entirely subjective. For the purposes of historical research, the existence of religious norms, of exemplary official practices, of control mechanisms and enforcement should be taken into account. It is precisely such institutions and norms that tend to predominate in the surviving evidence. The term “appropriation”, taken from the French historian Michel De Certeau (1984), plays a key role here. The specific forms of religion-as-lived are barely comprehensible in the absence of specific modes of individual appropriation (to the point of radical asceticism and martyrdom), cultural techniques such as the reading and interpretation of mythical or philosophical texts, rituals, pilgrimages and prayer, and the various media of representation of deities in and out of sanctuaries. The notion of agency is implicit in the notion of appropriation. The methodology suggested by “lived ancient religion” offers a frame for a description of the formative influence of professional providers, of philosophical thinking and intellectual reflections in literary or reconstructed oral form, of social networks and socialization, of lavish performances in public spaces or performances run by associations with recourse to individual conduct in rituals and religious context.

However, the analysis does not merely describe the contrast between norms and practices or the influence of one on the other. What is more, even the intersubjective dimension of religious communication can be accessed through the records of the individuals by enquiring into their communication, their juxtaposition, their sharing of experiences and meaning, their specific usage and selection of culturally available concepts and vocabulary. Thus, meanings constructed by situations rather than coherent individual worldviews should and will be identified. Logical coherence is secondary to the effectiveness of religious practices for the purposes desired (“practical coherence” *pace* McGuire). Instead of aiming at reconstructing a system of belief, lived religion offers the possibility of viewing religion and religious practice as a part of everyday life in Antiquity and discuss in which ways effectiveness was most successfully achieved.

## Material Religion

If lived religion is an import into archaeology from religious studies, it is not the only one. “Visible” and finally “material religion” have been perspectives developed within a discipline, which had been dominated by philological approaches (Kippenberg 1990; Lubtchansky and Pouzadoux 2008; Uehlinger 2006; Boivin 2009). Fundamental is the



**Figure 1.2** Tondo from the Arch of Constantine in Rome depicting a statue of a god. An altar is placed in front of the statue base. Photo by Jörg Rüpke.

notion that the very construction of gods as super-symbols and communication with them as well as communication among humans and a whole range of related religious practices is not only using, but is shaped by, the very material and sensory basis to these activities. In the course of thinking about the social conditions of ascribing individual agency and about the networks in which individuals are acting, the analogical concept of the agency of things has been developed and also introduced into the field of religion (Latour 1993, 2005; Droogan 2013: 151). “A monument in the landscape, such as a temple, is at once a real solid material thing, a social agent, a support for ideology and a contested site of varying narratives of mythology” (Droogan 2013: 166). Things are not any longer seen as being determined by stable (even if perhaps unavailable to the researcher) meanings, but as elements which are culturally and situationally activated (Morgan 2010: 2011; Raja 2013). By being visible they elicit response (Gaskell 2011: 40).

The material dimension includes the spatial. Archaeologist David Clarke had sketched three levels of spatial dimension which could be easily referred to religious sites: the micro-level of objects and their immediate spatial contexts (often irretrievably lost); the semi-micro level of sites; and the macro-level of spatial relationships between sites (Clarke 1977: 11–7). Space is highly differentiated, being made at times or permanently “sacred” in various degrees, it is moving between actors and related to different areas of cultural activities, political as well as social. As such, space is productive, of meaning, of relationships, of roles (see Tweed 2011 and Chapter 23, this volume).

Material religion and archaeology of religion have integrated theorizing on the body. They have taken the body as an extremely productive metaphor, in particular in the imaginative realm of religion (e.g., Douglas 1973). But starting from the French anthropologist Michel Foucault, they have also taken the body as a place for practices on



**Figure 1.3** Relief from Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, depicting an epiphany scene. Photo by Jörg Rüpke.

and with the body (Couzens Hoy 1999; Zito 2011). Embodiment and experience have developed into key concepts in this area. On that basis, Rüpke (2015) suggests to conceptualize religion as the enlargement of the situationally relevant environment beyond the immediately plausible social environment of co-existing human beings (and frequently also animals). This enlargement is practiced in thereby specifically religious forms of agential action, communication, and formulation of collective and self-identity. What might qualify as “not immediately plausible” is different from culture to culture and even situation to situation and defies universal generalization.

## Archaeology of the Ancient World

Archaeology and History of Religion are characterized by their preferences of generalizations of a middle range. It is necessary to theorize, but it is with reference to definable bodies of evidence, for periods and regions of material culture and religious practice, that theorizing is called for. Thus, this Companion is not a handbook for world archaeology (cf. Insoll 2011). The necessity to address the new and growing field of archaeology of religion in the open, but comprehensive format of a Companion is met by a structure touching upon a wide range of themes from a topical approach. This volume aims to give an overview over the extensive amount of topics relating to the archaeology of religion, in particular in the Greco-Roman world. The chapters take their point of departure in concepts, aspects and the empirical material relating to central themes within the archaeology of religion.

For the ancient world, “archaeology of religion” has established itself as a field of interdisciplinary research that presupposes basic methodology on the part of the archaeologists



**Figure 1.4** Altar depicting hands signifying worship, prayer or votive to the god who is not named. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. Photo by Rubina Raja.

and basic knowledge of the history of religion on the part of ancient historians and scholars of religion during the past decade. As a consequence, a Companion could neither aim to explain archaeological methodology using religion as an example nor to explain the structure of ancient religions concentrating on the relevant archaeological sources. The interest and the difficulties of the field lie in the interpretive problems, i.e., when scholars of various disciplines attempt to relate archaeological evidence to social actions and structures that are specific by being classified as or seen through the lenses of “religion”. This companion to the archaeology of religion does not aim at reifying religion, but at understanding the role of objects in cultural practices of constructing religion and encountering and appropriating such a “religion” as objectified representations of the sacred. The concept of “archaeology of religious experience” (which avoids a too-pervasively constructivist perspective) seems to catch this perspective. It serves as a thread pervading all the chapters as an interpretive perspective, that is, a pervasive *problem* of interpretation. Thus, it is not used to exclude any material from consideration or any interpretive perspective (like ritual, organization, gender, power) that proves more fruitful in a given case.

In terms of geographical and chronological range, the chapters cover the whole Mediterranean area including distant Roman provinces, but not systematically from the archaic period down to late antiquity, insofar as Jewish and Christian material is covered as well. At the center stands the aim to cover a wide range of topics, which cannot be covered as comprehensively throughout all periods, but which give crucial and important insight into these topics and offers methodological approaches to the material,

which can be applied in other connections as well. So treatment of material on the color scheme of the Arch of Titus (Fine) may help us to conceptualize in which ways color impacted the ancient viewer in other situations. The treatment of the northern provinces (Woolf) will encourage us to think differently about the eastern and western provinces and give possible other ways of viewing the available archaeological sources.

The chapters are focused on problems of reconstructing religion in the sense of experiences, actions, structures, occasionally beliefs, and offer exemplary case studies and discuss their generalization, thereby employing material from all over the ancient world. However, the Companion is not exhaustive and does not claim to cover all aspects or regions which are relevant.

## The Structure of the Companion

The Companion, comprising in total 35 contributions, is structured around the following themes: Archaeology of ritual; Embodiment; Experiences; Creating spaces of experiences; Designing and appropriating sacred space; Sharing public space; Expressiveness; Agents and Transformations. These themes allow for exploration of a wide range of material covering a wide geographical scope as well as a wide chronological span.

The volume aims at developing an appreciation of the different dimensions of religiosity in antiquity as well as room for reflection on the relationship of material evidence and religious practices and beliefs in different perspectives. Furthermore, it relates



**Figure 1.5** Funerary portrait of priest from Palmyra. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. Photo by Rubina Raja.



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