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Authors: Rüpke, Jörg / Spickermann, Wolfgang

Title: "Religion and Literature"

Published in: Archiv für Religionsgeschichte: ARG
Berlin: de Gruyter

Volume: 11 (1)

Year: 2009

Pages: 121 - 122

ISSN: 1436-3038

Persistent Identifier: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110208962.2.121>

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Religion and Literature

Jörg RÜPKE, Wolfgang SPICKERMANN

History of religion has joined the religious category of the “religions of the book” from its beginnings. Thus, for religious traditions outside this category, complex literary texts which dealt with religion have, of course, always been used as “sources” for religion, but hardly been treated as systemic parts of “religion” in those cultures. For Greco-Roman antiquity, this classificatory separation had awkward consequences. Centuries before a codification of the canon, a book religion, Christianity, copied literary models from non-book religions (apart from remaining faithful to the collection of Tenakh) and tried to create poems of higher literary quality by combing or imitating verses from epics of a non-book tradition.¹ Things have changed. In “Literature and Religion at Rome”, Denis Feeney ascertained the place of literary, often poetic thematizing of religion as organic part and creative enlarging of Roman religion, even if heavily indebted to Greek precursors.² The initiative has been taken up by scholars on Greek religion; recently a volume dealt with the genesis of religious literature at Rome.³

The following group of six articles inserts itself into this line of research. The relationship of literary texts and ritual practices and the role of the texts in mediating the repository of literary traditions and contemporary thinking on religions remain central issues. Still, texts are and have to be used in order to reconstruct institutional features, ritual and performative aspects of these rituals. Yet, the texts are not approached as mirroring or representing this extra-textual reality, but as using such data as to reflect on wider cosmological or societal issues, to develop mythological themes, to connect different ritual and textual traditions and to finally reshape ritual practice and religious experience and identities in such practices. Not marginalized by central authoritative voices, the reinterpretation and reframing of traditional religious practices, the enlargement of the field of religion cannot be underrated. The distance between texts and rituals might vary largely, as the papers of Darja Šterbenc-Erker, Richard Gordon, and Virgilio Masciadri demonstrate, but they do interact, rituals are a primary incentive for literary reflection, and the dense web of connections

1 Cf. Rüpke 2005.

2 Feeney 1998; cf. Bendlin in Bendlin, Rüpke 2009 on the problem of any hellenocentric approach towards Latin literature.

3 Bierl 2007; Bendlin, Rüpke 2009.

produced by literary texts helped and help to articulate the – often prediscursive – dense web of connections on the ritual level (Masciadri).

There is a further aspect, only implicit so far. Four of the articles presented here resulted from the research programme “Roman Imperial and Provincial Religion” (SPP 1080 of the German Science Foundation)⁴. Here, the capacity of literary texts – disseminated by individual copies (in full or excerpts) – to create larger spaces of communication came into focus.⁵ The authors, belonging to the educated elite that was ever more extensively integrated into Roman provincial and central government, were aware of local religions and trans-local similarities and differences. Those analyzed in the contributions by Rüpke, Šterbenc-Erker, Spickermann, and Waldner (and the chapter by Richard Gordon underlines these findings), engaged in a discourse about decent forms of religion, possible genealogies and interdependencies, local originality and fraught. An intense interest in local specifics was combined with an ethnographic interest in others that consciously embraced the whole of the Roman empire. “Religion of empire” (*Reichsreligion*), then, is not a specific subset of religious practices with a political function for the empire, but intellectual constructs reflecting on religion *in* the empire.

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4 See Rüpke 2007 and Cancik, Rüpke 2009.

5 See Elm, Rüpke, Waldner 2005.