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ON RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES THAT SHOULD NOT HAPPEN IN SANCTUARIES

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1 EXPERIENCE

I would like to point to observations regarding the presentation of cult images in temples that focus on a lively and overwhelming appearance in a rather intimate space¹ in Hellenistic Italy. For the Imperial period, perhaps already Augustan times, Heron of Alexandria describes a wide range of devices to create emotionally intensive and surprising confrontation with the god in the temple by means of mirrors.² In his *Pneumatika* the following mechanisms are described: figures around an altar that move and make libations, whenever incense is burnt on the altar (1.12); a trumpet sounding upon the opening of temple doors (1.17); sprinkling of water on – a separate rite – moving wheels (1.32, in Egyptian temples); temple doors opening and closing on the lighting and extinguishing of the fire on the altar in front of the temple in different technical variants (1.38–39). In the second book a transparent altar, made of glass or horn, is described, in the interior of which figures could be seen moving once the fire was lit (1.3). Finally, an even more complex arrangement of figures performing libations and a hissing serpent around an altar (2.21) is mentioned. It should be pointed out, too, that the automaton described in the *Automatopoiêtikê* of Heron (2.21) indicates not a theatre (with which we are familiar from modern apparatuses of the previous centuries), but a ritual scene around an altar in front of a temple.

Even without mechanisation, architectural arrangements could enable intensive experiences. Spectacular encounters are not restricted to exotic deities (as exemplified by the ground plan and furnishing of the so-called sanctuary of Syrian deities on the slopes of the Janiculum at Rome),³ but apply to regular temples, too, as we will see later on.⁴

1 Hesberg 2007, 454–56. The argument proposed below has been developed in Rüpke 2010 and 2011 and within the framework of the Kolleg-Forschergruppe (KFG) “Religious Individualisation in Historical Perspective” (DFG).

2 I am grateful to Mihaela Holhan, Erfurt, for the reference.

3 Goodhue 1975; see also Scheid 1995.

4 E.g. the image of Fortuna *huiusce diei*.

2 TEMPLES AND IMAGES

Temples usually house images. In his speech in front of the pontiffs, Cicero (106–43 BCE) protests that Clodius has robbed him of his house without sufficient legal basis for turning it into a sanctuary, that is, that Clodius consecrated his house, built a monument in the place of his house, and dedicated a statue (*consecrasse ... monumentum fecisse... signum dedicasse*).⁵ Clearly, this is intensification in religious quality. These steps did not necessarily have to follow the consecration. According to the Roman right of property and usual public procedure, a magistrate could dedicate a piece of land to the gods, thus transferring property from the public realm into the power of a god, rendering it *sacer*.⁶ A religious monument, the next step, need not house a statue: one could think of an open altar, an enclosure, even a roofed structure. Of course, a statue would undeniably attest that such a structure has to be considered as the “house”, *aedes*, of a god, a dwelling place of a divinity, not a storage room or a meeting hall, a *schola* – a building that might also, of course, house statues. Piety and rituals could exist without images.

And yet, by the time of Cicero, images were important and ubiquitous. In the case of Clodius’ dubious temple foundation, it is the use of the statue (of which we will learn further details later in his and my speeches) that seals the sacralisation of previously private property, which, I suppose, created unambiguity.

Varro (116–27 BCE), Cicero’s contemporary, claims this to be an old but secondary development after one hundred and seventy years of cult without images (*deos sine simulacro coluisse*),⁷ even if temples (Varro speaks more precisely of roofed structures – *testudines*) had already been in use earlier.⁸ Probably rightly, Varro is pointing to Greek and Etruscan influence in these matters,⁹ and to the fact that statuary is intimately related to architectural decor. Not the single image or the few images in the temple’s interior, but the many images put on the roof, would have been the more striking innovation, and remained the hallmark of Tuscan temples of this and later periods and of their Roman variants.¹⁰

Now, I am not going to discuss the historical significance of a philosophically motivated statement that postulates (because I do not see how Varro could possibly have clear evidence for the lack of images) the absence of large images in a locality before the start of urban monumentalization. And yet, Varro probably was right. With the exception of Egypt, the rise of anthropomorphic images in the mainland and on the margins of the Near Eastern and Greek cultures is datable to the seventh and sixth centuries BCE only according to recent research.¹¹ The religious experience I am addressing is a historically limited one, not a universal one.

5 Cic. *dom.* 51.

6 See Rüpke 2006.

7 Varro *ant. rer. div.* fr. 18 Cardauns.

8 Serv. *aen. auct.* 1,505; Cardauns, *comm. ad loc.* 1976, 147. Cf. Varro *ant. rer. div.* fr. 70, where *delubrum* is associated with images, not *templum*.

9 Varro *ant. rer. div.* fr. 38 Cardauns.

10 See Cristofani 1987; Zevi 1987; Izzi 2000.

11 For Greece, Peter Eich, forthcoming; for the Ancient Near East: Ornan 2005, 171.

As I have already pointed out, central features of Roman religion could function without reference to images. Divine property in space or in time (that is, consecrated land, or *feriae*, holidays marked in the calendar by *NP* and attributed to a single god)¹² might be seen as rather static features. However, even prayers and sacrifices could be performed without direct address to an image. A temporarily raised altar of grass sods and simple earthenware vessels would do, as Varro points out in the context of his critique of temple luxury.¹³ But this is no adequate description of the late Republican and Imperial period.

In historical perspective, other advantages were more important. The dominance of the iconographic system enabled the easy generation of new gods. Fortuna *Muliebris* has already been mentioned. The cult of divine qualities or personifications that seems so awkward to modern accounts of ancient religion loses all exceptionality if approached from the visual angle. Temples and statues made them an integral part of the system.¹⁴ Judged by the number of prodigies reported for these temples, Salus, Fortuna, or Concordia were not different from Juno or Mars; about one third of the prodigies reported for temples relates to these deities.¹⁵ It is from the temple of such a goddess, Fortuna *huiusce diei*, that we have fragments of one of the largest statues. This sculpture of probably more than eight metres stood on a base more than two metres high, and must have filled the small space of the circular "temple B" in the Largo Argentina.¹⁶ The recently popularized concept of "picturing," of transforming a world by making pictures of it, seems to capture this process neatly.¹⁷

3 USING IMAGES

It is a truism of the iconic turn¹⁸ that images are created by seeing, that by being seen they are perceived as looking at the observer, thus focusing the analysis on the interaction of object and observer, rather than using only a semiotic approach and focusing on inherent qualities of the object.¹⁹ The gaze of the temple visitor changes the image, creates, if you like, a new social fact. Varro is right in stating that images made of bronze, earthenware, plaster, or marble²⁰ do not feel and do not demand anything, thus producing neither guilt nor gratitude (fr. 22 Cardauns). And yet the praying visitor makes the god hear, even if the deity refuses to grant the

12 See Rüpke 1995, 472.

13 Varro *ant. rer. div. fr.* 38 Cardauns.

14 Clark's notion of "resources" (she adds, e. g., festivals) stresses the creative process, and downplays the individual appraisal. See Clark 2007.

15 Clarke 2007, 184.

16 See *ibid.*, 128–31.

17 See e. g. for geography: Crang 1997.

18 Maar 2004.

19 Briefly Bauer 2007, 105; Bräunlein 2009, 774–77.

20 Cf. Sen. *superst.* fr. 31 = Aug. *civ.* 6.10 on the contrast between the inviolability of the gods and the unworthiness of the matter.

wish. With regard to the practice of depositing votives, Propertius' poem on Ver-
tumnus in the *vicus Tuscus* is very much an analysis of this constructive process.²¹
These habits were reinforced by law. The superior status of an image of the emperor
is not affected by the choice of the material; neither gold (still exceptional by Var-
ro's time) nor plaster makes a difference.²²

In reflecting on the limits of appropriate religion, practices related to statues are
within the focus of the critique of *superstitio* or *deisidaimonia*. Richard Gordon has
pointed out the different thrusts of these two concepts: the rather theological criti-
que implied in the Greek, and the more political prohibition implied in the Roman
term.²³ Not unsurprisingly, parallel arguments appear in Greek and Latin philo-
sophical texts. One of the few fragments known from Seneca's treatise *De supersti-
tione* deals with such practices, for instance, people who wash or comb a statue
from a distance.

*In Capitolium perueni, pudebit publicatae dementiae, quod sibi uanus furor adtribuit officii.
Alius nomina deo subicit, alius horas Ioui nuntiat: alius lutor est, alius unctor, qui uano motu
bracchiorum imitatur unguentem. Sunt quae Iunoni ac Mineruae capillos disponant (longe a
templo, non tantum a simulacro stantes digitos mouent ornatum modo), sunt quae speculum
teneant; sunt qui ad uadimonia sua deos aduocent, sunt qui libellos offerant et illos causam
suam doceant. Doctus archimimus, senex iam decrepitus, cotidie in Capitolio mimum agebat,
quasi dii libenter spectarent, quem illi homines desierant. Omne illic artificum genus operatum
diis immortalibus desidet.*

"But if ever you go up on the Capitol, it will make you feel ashamed just to see the crazy per-
formances put on for the public's benefit, all represented as duties by light-hearted lunacy. So
Jupiter has a special attendant to announce callers and another one to tell him the time; one to
wash him and another to oil him, who in fact only mimes the movements with his hands. Juno
and Minerva have special women hairdressers, who operate some distance away, not just from
the statue, but from the mirrors. You find some people who are praying to the gods to put up
bail for them, and others again who are handing over their writs and expounding the lawsuits
they are involved in. There used to be an old, decrepit but very experienced pantomime artist
who put on his act every day on the Capitol as if the gods were enjoying the show of a man
whom those human spectators have deserted. Every type of artisanship has settled down there
working for the immortal gods."²⁴

The following fragment, likewise willingly quoted by Augustine, makes the emo-
tional component even more explicit:

21 Prop. 4.2; see Rüpke 2009.

22 Methodius *de resurrectione* 2.24.1 Bonwetsch: "Straightaway images of emperors, even if they
are not made of more valuable material – gold, silver, electrum or ivory – nevertheless have
honor before all. For men attending to images not fashioned from more valuable material do not
think less of them than of others, but they honor them all equally, whether they are made from
gypsum or bronze. Furthermore, the one who blasphemes against either is not released because
he dishonoured clay nor convicted because he disparaged gold, but is convicted because he
displayed impiety toward the emperor and lord himself." (I owe the reference and translation to
Clifford Ando). The reference to *gypsou ē chalchoū* with its unnecessary repetition of the ques-
tion of material seems to point to a connection to Varro.

23 Gordon 2008.

24 Sen. *superst.* fr. 36 Haase = fr. 69 Vottero (*Aug. civ.* 6.10), transl. in Beard, Mary; North, John;
Price, Simon (eds.) 1998, *Religions of Rome*. Cambridge, 2.234 (completed by me).

Hi tamen, inquit, etiamsi superuacuum usum, non turpem nec infamem deo promittunt. Sedent quaedam in Capitolio, quae se a Ioue amari putant: ne Iunonis quidem, si credere poetis uelis, iracundissimae respectu terrentur.

“At least the services they offer are not indecent or dishonourable, however unnecessary. But there are some women who hang around on the Capitol because they believe that Jupiter is in love with them, totally undeterred by fear of Juno’s anger and jealousy – formidable enough, if you believe the poets.”²⁵

My quotation of this passage is, of course, not driven by ridicule, as St. Augustine’s is. It is Seneca’s stoicism that criticizes the replacement of reason by emotion, as words like *furor*, *insanire*, and *dementia* indicate. The whole line of argumentation runs from the supposedly fictitious emotions of bereavement and joy, regulated by calendar in the case of Isis (fr. 35), to falling in love with Jupiter at the end. In Seneca’s argumentation, these emotions are located in sanctuaries. This is clear from a somewhat later fragment quoted in the same chapter by Augustine, who, like Seneca, is interested in emotions, but, unlike Seneca, is interested in gods rather than in their temples. Thus the pairing of gods criticized by both²⁶ is not ascribed to mythology, but to temples, as the terms *adoramus* and *cultum* demonstrate.

A generation later, but perhaps closer in time, Plutarch likewise illustrates his criticism of *deisidaimonia* by describing behaviour in temples.²⁷ Instead of places of salvation in crisis, sanctuaries become places of punishment (4a). This logic of hate and fear and of seeking proximity to the gods (11) permeates the whole treatise. The *proskynesis* in front of images instead of a realistic conception of transcendent deities, combining criticism and refuge (6b), is characteristic. To stay at home is a rather mild form of *deisidaimonia* (7d), while the most severe form is realized in the temples of gods (9b). It is the image of the Carthaginians’ sacrifices of their own children that forms the final climax (13) of the concluding analysis of *deisidaimonia* as emotional disorder (14), leading to atheism rather than – the final word – *eusebeia* (14).

The sense of divine presence, intensively – but I would claim, also representatively – demonstrated by the aforementioned examples, converges with archaeological findings. Paralleling a development that is visible in the restoration of some Greek temples in Hellenistic and Imperial times²⁸ (but prevalent in Sicily and South Italy), Roman temples seem to have staged this sense of presence in order to enable corresponding experiences. Indicators are the lavish interior of temples,²⁹ the complex architectonic regulations of access, and the very careful presentation of the cult statue. Doors and doorways increased in importance, and floor mosaics or curtains could articulate the structure of the temple interior and the temporal dimen-

25 *Ibid.*, fr. 37.

26 Sen. *superst.* fr. 38 Haase = Aug. *civ.* 6.10, p. 269 Weiss.

27 Plut. *superst.* There is no consensus on the dating; an early dating to the 60s had been advocated (Görgemanns 2003, 307, in discussion of Erbse 1952, 297–304). See also Moellering 1963 and Martin 2004 on Plutarch; and on the dating of Seneca see Lausberg 1989, 1897–98.

28 *Steuernagel* 2009, 124–26.

29 *Ibid.*

sion of the process of approaching the statue.³⁰ Positioning the statue directly on the mosaic floor could stress its mobility.³¹ The combination of different materials could heighten the impression of vividness.³² This does not always combine well with the Greek tradition of an awe-inspiring aesthetic produced by a beautiful and large image at the back wall of the innermost chamber.³³

The anecdotal evidence, already referred to above, also gives a similar picture. P. Cornelius Scipio Africanus spent every night before major decisions sitting alone in the *cella* of Jupiter in the Capitoline temple, as if in dialogue with the god (*quasi consultantem de republica cum Iove*).³⁴

4 CONCLUSION

Greeks and Romans of the Hellenistic and Imperial periods knew of the fear of the gods when thinking about death or divine epiphanies in public as well as private space. Much more regularly, however, emotionally loaded religious experiences took place in temples. Such experiences were not an add-on, confined to lunatics or religious *virtuosi*, but fundamental for the plausibility of religious actions as well as religious concepts. “Experience” and “emotions” are lacking in the indices of older and recent handbooks on Roman religion, be it Scheid; Beard, North, Price; or Rüpke. In William Warde Fowler’s Gifford Lectures on “The Religious Experience of the Roman People”, first published in 1911, the situation is the same. Starting from the Stoic critique of passions, Fowler lamented the lack of inter-human emotions and the enthusiastic embrace of humanism brought by Christianity³⁵ and mysticism. More broadly discussed is the soul’s yearning for eternity and its imagination, not emotions displayed towards or inspired by gods.³⁶ It’s time for change.

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30 Hesberg 2007. Pliny (*NH* 36.185) might refer to the installation of mosaics in the Capitoline temple of Jupiter in 146 BCE.

31 Hesberg 2007, 458.

32 *Ibid.*, 456.

33 See Bäbler, Nesselrath 2007, 141. For the aesthetics of colossal images at Rome, see Cancik 2003, 224–48.

34 Gell. 6.1.6; Liv. 26.19.5 (*consideret*); see Rüpke 2007, 20.

35 Fowler 1911, 375 and 453.

36 *Ibid.*, 380–402.

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