

The archaeology of ancient cult: from foundation deposits to religion in Roman Mithraism

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Introduction

In the past two decades, the “archaeology of religion” has moved from the margins of scholarship to the center, led by the growth of postprocessual archaeological hermeneutics.¹ Such theoretical frames — whether the materiality of religion, objects as agents, the entanglement of humans and objects, or “thing theory” — demonstrate the centrality of the physical world and its archaeological correlates to religion. They offer new ways of posing questions about the construction of meanings for worshippers through materials.²

If the benefits of these approaches for placing archaeology at the heart of ancient worshippers’ thought-worlds are clear, such “archaeologies of religion” also work counter-productively, for they continue to isolate “religion” as a distinct object of ancient practice and of modern enquiry. Yet as a host of scholarship on ancient religion has pointed out, religious knowledge in the Roman world was not primarily predicated on internalized beliefs or interpretative frameworks, but rather was mediated in a range of externalized, social forms.³ The concept of “religion” being an interior state or consisting primarily of propositional claims owes much to Enlightenment, Protestant thought; some have even advocated abandoning the term “religion” altogether when dealing with antiquity, for the term presupposes a domain of activity and thought that never had neat boundaries in antiquity.⁴ Rather, religious knowledge in the Roman world was predicated upon the performance of, and participation in, actions — in J. Scheid’s aphorism, “faire, c’est croire”.⁵ It was primarily the manipulation of objects, images and environments — ritual practice — that constituted the religious life of the Roman world. Instead of fixating upon *savoir penser*, ways of thinking or the interpretative frameworks that worshippers might apply to or derive from objects, it may be worth turning greater attention to *savoir faire*, to

1 Recent work mostly focused on prehistory and post-antiquity includes T. Insoll, *Archaeology, ritual, religion* (New York 2004); id., *The Oxford handbook of the archaeology of ritual and religion* (Oxford 2011); D. Barrowclough and C. Malone (edd.), *Cult in context: reconsidering ritual in archaeology* (Oxford 2007); E. Kyriakidis, *The archaeology of ritual* (Los Angeles, CA 2007). For the Mediterranean world in particular, see R. Raja and J. Rüpke (edd.), *Blackwell companion to the archaeology of religion in the ancient world* (Oxford 2015).

2 The work edited by C. Moser and J. Knust, *Ritual matters: material remains and ancient religion* (Ann Arbor, MI 2017), proposes to apply these frames to ancient religion, but it is telling that the theoretical frames they propose are hardly taken up in any of the papers; instead, individual chapters primarily offer reconstructions of rites.

3 E.g., J. Scheid, *Quand faire, c’est croire: les rites sacrificiels des Romains* (Paris 2005); J. Rüpke, *Religion of the Romans* (Cambridge 2007) 6-15.

4 B. Nongbri, *Before religion: a history of a modern concept* (New Haven, CT 2013); cf. T. Masuzawa, *The invention of world religions, or, How European universalism was preserved in the language of pluralism* (Chicago, IL 2005), for the creation of “religion” as an academic category within the context of 19th-c. colonialism. Note that it was precisely at this time, in the context of encyclopedias, that the use of Mithraism and discussion of it as a religion, gained wide currency in the Anglophone world especially: e.g., G. T. Bettany, *The great Indian religions, being a popular account of Brahmanism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism ...* (London 1892).

5 Scheid (supra n.3).