

Reviews

Jörg Rüpke, *Pantheon. A new history of Roman religion*. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018, 551 p. 64 photos, ISBN 9780691156835.

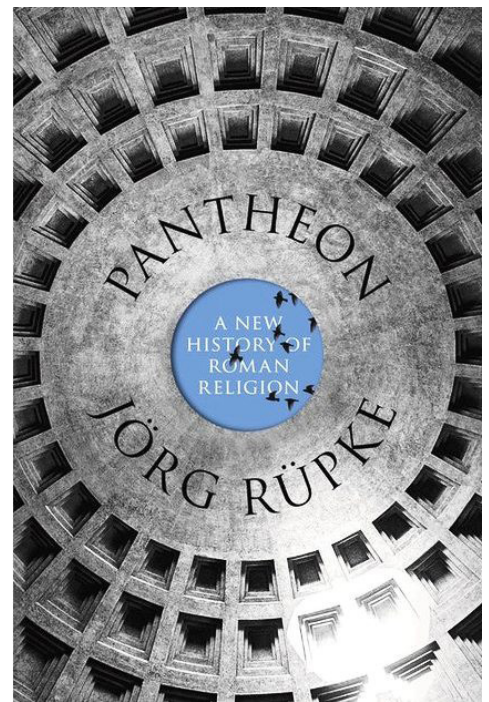
Pantheon is the last great synthesis on Roman religion, published first in German, later translated in Italian and English too¹. It is a monumental work of Jörg Rüpke, permanent fellow and vice-director of the Max Weber Center in Erfurt, one of the leading experts and innovative voices in Roman religious studies². His work was focusing in the last decade on Lived Ancient Religion, a concept developed by him and his team from Erfurt and transformed into numerous paradigmatic works – monographs, proceedings and studies – as part of an ERC Advanced grant³. Pantheon is the final result of this intellectual journey and paradigmatic shift represented by Rüpke and his school in the broader study of Roman religion and generally, in religious studies as such. The large number of reviews shows the impact of the book within the discipline⁴. Before presenting the book itself, a short historiographic contextualization is necessary to understand the emerge of this new school and its paradigmatic „manual”.

A SHORT HISTORY OF ROMAN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Although the material evidence of Roman religious communication represents almost half of the complete epigraphic, iconographic and architectural heritage of ancient Roman history and it was researched systematically since two centuries producing thousands of important works on the various aspects of Roman religion, there is still no systematic summary of the historiography of Roman religious studies⁵. The first major works on Roman religion were published in the 19th century, the positivist and legal approach – dominated by Th. Mommsen and G. Wissowa – culminated in the paradigmatic work of the last one⁶. The work of Wissowa and most of the 19th century focused on Roman religion as a civic/ polis religion, formed in an urban environment, controlled by religious specialists and a strict, legal tradition. The major force in the communication between divine and human agents was the Roman law, but time, state and the divine agents played a significant role in Wissowa’s work. These are important aspects, which were approached differently by F. V. Cumont, who challenged the notion of *sacra peregrina*, and named with a new terminology: Oriental Cults⁷. This approach and the doctrinal influence of Cumont changed the major currents of Roman religious

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DOI: 10.14795/j.v7i2.541

ISSN 2360 – 266X

ISSN–L 2360 – 266X

¹ RÜPKE 2016, RÜPKE 2018. The English translation is slightly different from the original, German one and it was translated by David M.B. Richardson, who worked with J. Rüpke since a decade, translating numerous important works of the German scholar.

² For his work and impact on the history of Roman religious studies see: SZABÓ 2014.

³ The results of the Lived Ancient Religion project – abbreviated in the followings as LAR – are extremely numerous. The major ideas were summarized in the following programmatic works: RÜPKE 2012, ALBRECHT ET AL. 2018, RÜPKE 2019, GASPARINI ET AL. 2020. see also: RAJA/RÜPKE 2015.

⁴ An example and probably, the most important review: BREMMER 2018.

⁵ PHILLIPS 2007, RIVES 2010. See also the bibliography in footnotes nr. 4-5 in SZABÓ 2017, 152.

⁶ WISSOWA 1912.

⁷ CUMONT 1906. See also: BONNET 2005.

studies and created a strong dichotomy between “state religion” and “sacra peregrina” of Wissowa⁸. Few individual voices tried to think outside these two major boxes. One of them was W. Fowler, who’s book on the religious experiences in Roman religion remained for a long time unique of its kind⁹.

The first half of the 20th century produced numerous syntheses on Roman religion from Anglo-Saxon¹⁰, French¹¹ and German¹² literature too. Some of these books were highly influential, especially the large synthesis of F. Altheim. During the 1960’s and 70’s two major book series marked the discipline of Roman religious studies: almost 100 volumes were published in the series of M. J. Vermaseren (*Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’Empire romain*¹³), who continued the work of F. Cumont on the so called Oriental cults, but focused his research on the archaeological evidence. A slightly different, more classical approach of Roman religion (where Reichsreligion and Provinzialreligion, as concepts played a key role) was established in the monumental volumes of *the Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*. These two series produced thousands of pages and a systematic analysis of the archaeological, epigraphic, literary and historiographic sources of Roman religious communication, however didn’t change radically the major theoretical currents established in the end of the 19th century.

A paradigmatic work was published in 1998 by M. Beard, S. Price and J. North. Speaking in plural, about Roman religions, the three authors had a radically new approach on Roman religions, pluralizing the narrative of the official Reichsreligion and polis-religion and integrating domestic religion, magic, monotheistic tendencies and the followers of Christ too in this topic. Price and his team questioned also the dichotomy of “oriental religions” and the “official” Roman religions, opening the door for a rich literature on the reinterpretation of Orientalism in religious studies¹⁴.

The work of Jörg Rüpke and the so called Erfurt School on Roman religion introduced a paradigmatic, new research methodology and approach in the last 10-15 years, especially through the lived ancient religion project. Through numerous books mentioned before, Rüpke and his school became now one of the leading voices in Roman religious studies, especially in Europe, but also in the USA. Several other, important voices and approaches however, coexist on the academic market, creating a methodological heterogeneity¹⁵.

A NEW HISTORY OF ROMAN RELIGION: REFLECTIONS ON THE BOOK

The title of the book is very ambitious and programmatic: it intends to write a “new” history of Roman religion – a singular notion, in contrast with the paradigmatic work of S. Price and his team from 1998. But the English title is also in a slight contrast with the original, German title,

⁸ The last one was analyzed by Wissowa in less than 30 pages in his book: WISSOWA 1912, 348-379.

⁹ FOWLER 1911.

¹⁰ ROSE 1948.

¹¹ BASANOFF 1942, GRENIER 1948, BAYET 1957, DUMEZIL 1966, SCHILLING 1979.

¹² ALTHEIM 1931-33, LATTE 1961.

¹³ The series were continued as Religions in the Graeco-Roman World at the BRILL, Leiden.

¹⁴ VERSLUYS 2013.

¹⁵ SCHEID 2015.

which was focusing on the history of ancient religions in Mediterranean world¹⁶. Although the book evokes historical analogies from a broader geographic area, most of the examples are from Rome and the Western provinces. The title of the book is also unusual: although Rüpke argues already in the foreword on the innovative aspects of his methodology, the title “Pantheon” reflects the totality of divine agents and presumes a controlled, institutionalized and systematic religion. In contrast with this, the cover of the book reflects much more powerful the essence of Rüpke’s work: beyond the strong and institutionalized pantheon (reflected on the cover by the cupola of the Pantheon from Rome) there is the large and unlimited sky (the oculus and the free sky beyond the cover), which symbolize in this case the facets of religious communication, levels of religiosity of ancient people and a constant transformation of religious knowledge, spaces and agents in historical framework.

The book has thirteen chapters, each are divided in several important subchapters. Because of the monumental spatial and chronologic frame of the book, each subchapter (which varies from 1 to 5 pages) are basically short summaries of Rüpke’s previous works or entire sub-disciplines within Roman studies, Roman religious studies or Roman provincial archaeology. The first chapter entitled “A history of Mediterranean Religion” has four subchapters and it presents the major methodological outlines of Rüpke’s book. The author emphasizes, that he will discuss in the book the history, which created religion from rituals, differentiating ritual from religion and establishing also a certain kind of hierarchy between these notions.

He begins with two paradigmatic questions: what is Mediterranean Religion and what is religion itself? None of these heavy questions are clearly answered however. He argues that Rome had a strong interconnectivity with the Greek speaking world, the Hellenistic kingdoms, but also with the Punic-Phenician, near eastern and even mid-Asian empires, which influenced also its religious history, therefore Roman religion is deeply a Mediterranean religion. In his definition of religion, Rüpke argues, that “without invocation or ritual [...] religion does not happen” (p.9.), defining religion as a communicative force between not indisputably plausible divine agents (know as gods) and human actors. Rüpke defines also the major facets of religious competence: religious agency, identity, communication and strategy on the level of the individual. In the work of Rüpke agency-theory is essential and represents one of the innovative aspects of the book. He built up his own definition of agency based on the article of M. Emirbayer and A. Mische¹⁷. Religious identity is discussed shortly through the notion of religious grouping and questioning a historiographic tradition that argued “ancient religions turned tribal religions into world religions” (p.15.). His subchapter on religious communication (15-21.p.) is a vivid picture of all the sensual effects and details of religious interaction between divine and human agents in various spaces and times.

The second chapter presents as he called, the “religious media revolution” of the late Bronze age and early Iron Age Europe, presenting the major changes of religious com-

¹⁶ RÜPKE 2016.

¹⁷ EMIRBAYER/ MISCHÉ 1998.

munication and their media (deposits, houses, shrines, representations of gods). Rüpke beautifully evokes a fictional story of a woman from an average Iron Age settlement, creating a cognitive, almost experimental archaeological exercise on reconstructing the mentality and the major ideological, cognitive and religious changes of this age. Rüpke speaks shortly about the major differences between East and West Mediterranean in this period, which would be a very important aspect. Religious interconnectivity intensifies only after the Greek colonization. Rüpke rightly argued the important changes in early Iron Age Europe in religious media, especially the emerge of new sacralised spaces, large scale human depictions, burial practices, religious deposits and their strong connection with the newly emerging social structures. Interestingly, Rüpke evokes numerous important, contemporary results of classical archaeology and archaeology of ritual and religion from central Italy (Gabii, Campoverde, Satricum), mentions also the animal sacrifices (dogs for example), but do not associate with the later, archaic Roman calendar which might be relevant (Robigalia)¹⁸.

The third chapter deals with the already established, well formed religious infrastructure of the 7th-5th centuries BC. This chapter focuses on two major phenomena: religious innovation and religious investment, especially through some well documented archaeological case studies from Latium and Etruria. Rüpke rightly argued, that emerging social and military elite will slowly monopolize and use religious communication and spaces as a political investment. Notions, such as monumentalisation of sacralised spaces are presented with few, but well documented case studies from central Italy. Rüpke gives a very interesting view on the change of the aedes from houses to public templa and also the role of animal sacrifice and sacrificial – religious banquettes and foods, as new strategies in religious communication. Rüpke discusses also the emerge of the first artists, who contributed to the visual narratives and bodies, faces of god, especially from Etruscan milieu (Vulca, Murlo sculptor).

The fourth chapter is focusing on religious practices and the increasing variability of strategies between the 6th and 3rd centuries BC. Rüpke presents the anthropomorphic bodies of gods, the large number of terracotta votives and the role of anatomical ex votos. The vow (donum, votum) as a new religious strategy produced also the first important epigraphic memories of religious communication. Legitimizing religion became a public affair, contributing and shaping the evolution of temple-art, ritual, figurative monuments, epigraphy and textualising religion. Textuality contributed also to the ritualisation of religion and offered a greater variability for performance. The book shortly presents also the apparition of so called complex public rituals which contributed to the emergence of a religious elite.

The fifth chapter deals with this newly emerged religious and economic elite. Rüpke presents the curiae and the changes in space sacralisation in early Republican Rome through individual actors and the notion of religious appropriation. Along this chapter, the author presents shortly – almost as half page long abstracts – of a century long

¹⁸ The early Iron Age traditions of the Robigalia is not even mentioned by the author, neither the work of Dumézil is not cited. See also: SMITH 2000, 172, footnote nr. 11. on Robigalia and dog sacrifices.

research on the social history and religious role of flamens, Vestal Virgins, augurs and the numerous other pontifical colleagues, many of these being analyzed in details by the previous studies of Rüpke, known in the 1990's as a foremost specialist in Roman priesthood¹⁹. The author ingeniously presents the evolution of political statehood of Rome through the perspective of religious specialists and their control on time (calendar), functions (priesthood), social dynamics (patricians vs plebeians) and public ceremonies and institutions. Banquettes and the arrival of the Bacchic ceremonies are also presented in this socio-historical context of the religious power elite. Each subchapter of this part of the book is a very clear and holistic summary of the major books of J. Rüpke published previously on war and religion, priesthood and Republican religion. The methodology in which the author presents these small (3-4-5 pages long) subchapters – which are often, deals with large topics with a century long research history - are combining the primary, literary sources with a large number (100-150 footnotes each chapter) of bibliography, transformed in a coherent synthesis²⁰.

The sixth chapter is focusing on religion, as communication through language, narrative and texts. Rüpke analyses the evolution of textual religion, as a tool in religious communication. Recording and memorializing religion (lex sacra, disciplina etrusca, priestly archives) became not only an administrative activity, but contributed also to the production, control and authority of religious knowledge. This chapter deals also with the creation and social, historical role of the founding myths of Rome, the use of Roman-Latin historiography in religious narratives and the problematic notion of “religio” in ciceronian literature, comparing with pietas and sanctitas. The seventh chapter deals with the Augustan age and its religious reforms. A topic discussed in hundreds of articles and monographs is presented through the innovative methodology of Rüpke, focusing in this case on memorialisation of religious space, time and media (coins, reliefs, imperial inscriptions, building projects, new historical narratives and court-writers). Built around the dichotomy of innovation and restoration, Rüpke presents the role of networking in religious communication in Rome, used by Augustus and his predecessors following the approach of R. Syme on the imperial network and new personnel. Transforming Rome itself into a religious mnemotope and using new religious media, Augustus centered the imperial power in a new hierarchy of religious communication.

The eighth chapter is the centerpiece of the book, presenting the innovation of Rüpke's Lived Ancient Religion project. The chapter presents the major ideas of this new, methodological approach, focusing on the variability of religiousness in antiquity, going beyond polis religion and institutionalised, public religion and giving a detailed glimpse on religious individualisation, embodiment and the great variety of secondary and primary spaces, where religious communication occurred with divine agents. By exploding

¹⁹ RÜPKE 2008, 6-17 as a translation of his *Fasti Sacerdotum* published originally in German.

²⁰ The in depth details of these subchapters are very heterogenous: those topics in which Rüpke became an authority – for example the one on priests, war and religion, religious imperial propaganda, calendar, superstitio or legal aspects of Republican religion – are much more detailed with analogies and examples (both epigraphic, literary and bibliographical).

the prefabricated ancient and modern authorities (religious and historiographic), Rüpke tries to catch the „religion in the making” or „religion from below”. To do this, the author gives a short summary of his numerous articles focusing on religious individualisation and the notion of self-world relationship²¹, followed by well documented house shrines and domestic (primary) sacralised spaces and the agency role of objects in religious communication and autonomy, expressed in tombs, gardens, houses, streets and crossroads too. Rüpke in this chapter contests the private-public and domestic categories, creating a new space taxonomy of sacralised spaces based on the intensity of space sacralisation and human or material tools invested. The 50 pages long chapter represents a new, fresh approach on the great varieties of religious communication and its forms, however the examples are limited almost exclusively on Rome and the literary sources of the Principate.

The next three chapters – more than 100 pages – are dealing with the so called „second paganism”, the emerge of new gods, new religious ideas and small group religions in the Roman Empire. Rüpke presents shortly the general conditions and macro-structures, where such religions transformations could happen, however many important aspects and sources – such as Lucian and his satirical approach on religious transformations during the Principate – were simply mentioned in a footnote. The author presents the newly introduced religious narratives and strategies of Isis, Serapis, the imperial cults (Augusti), Mithras, experts and providers (religious entrepreneurs), shortly mentioning also the role of magic in Roman religious communication. The author follows the major results of the last two decades, questioning the notion of “oriental cults” and presents these as small group religions²². Rüpke presents shortly also the arrival of the Jesus followers and the early Christian communities, presenting the theory of M. Vinzent on the chronology of the textual canon of Christianity based on the work of Marcion²³. The last major chapter of the book ends with a comparative analysis of small group religions and their role in the dynamics of religious marketplace – a theory which persists since J. North and R. Stark’s paradigmatic works. Following an Anglo-Saxon tradition of academic writing and narrative, Rüpke ends his book with the opening metaphor, evoking the fictional memory of Rhea, the Bronze Age Italic woman who might wonder on the radical religious changes of the Mediterranean world in Late Antiquity.

The book ends with more than 1500 endnotes, citations and references on a huge corpus of literary sources and bibliography (around 1000 titles), which gives a holistic view on Roman religion, especially in Rome, Italy, the urban contexts of the Western provinces and rarely, in North Africa, Asia Minor or Egypt. The Danubian provinces are almost completely missing from the analogies.

Jörg Rüpke’s monumental book is way too big for most of us: it is an opus magnum of a scholar who is active and very productive since three decades. There are few scholars today, who are prepared to write a relevant and in depth review of such a synthesis. In this short presentation

²¹ RÜPKE 2015.

²² GORDON 2017.

²³ VINZENT 2014.

my aim was much more profane: to contextualize the book in a larger, historiographic context and to present factually the major results and methods of the book. The impact and the future of Rüpke’s book can be measured by the intense discussion among his colleagues, producing endless reviews and review-articles²⁴.

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²⁴ BREMMER 2018.

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