

Ritual in the Roman World: Approaches to Theory and Practices



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RITUAL IN THE ROMAN WORLD

APPROACHES TO
THEORY AND PRACTICES

Edited by
Alessandra Esposito, Jason Lundock,
Kaja Stemberger Flegar and David Walsh

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1.

Reflections on the Intention and Structure of the Current Volume

Jason Lundock

The ancient empire of Rome may rightly be regarded as among the most diverse of political and socio-cultural structures to ever exist upon the Earth. While it was the trend of scholarship during much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to focus attention on the similarities and continuities across this political and social order, perspectives and interests began to change with the rise of post-modernism and post-colonialism in the mid-twentieth century; marking a decided shift in worldview and perspective among many scholars across disciplines. In Roman studies, this has seen the move from top-down imperial perspectives on culture, such as those offered by Mommsen (1909) and Haverfield (1923), giving way to more bottom-up approaches and research interests among historians and archaeologists of the Roman period; the general rejection of the “Romanisation” model and its replacement with concepts such as Webster’s “creolisation” (2001) and Mattingly’s “discrepant experiences” (2006) being among the most notable developments in the early twenty-first century. These models have been of great influence across Roman studies and have contributed significantly to current research into the religion and ritual practices of peoples across the empire; with Szabó’s *Roman Religion in the Danubian Provinces* (2022) and Haeussler and King’s volume *Religious Individualisation: Archaeological, Iconographic and Epigraphic Case Studies from the Roman World* (2023) being two of the best examples of this trend in most recent years. The current volume seeks to contribute to this ever-developing discussion by offering focused treatments on a variety of subjects within ritual behaviour in the Roman world. By doing so, it is the intention of the editors and the authors to exhibit some of the plurality and diversity of ritual practice and perspective in the Roman world through the lenses of current theoretical frameworks with the aim of providing useful information both to the general reader on ancient studies as well as to complement the research of future scholars in focused topics within Roman culture and ritual behaviour.

This volume is the result of several years of collaboration between myself and my co-editors in combining our various research interests regarding ritual practice in the Roman world and investigating new developments and theoretical frameworks within this field. The chapters presented in this volume are largely developed from papers presented in panels we organised at the 2023 Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference and the 2023 European Association of Archaeologists Conference, as well as some papers solicited externally for inclusion. We have selected papers from a diverse array of current research in ancient Roman ritual practice to offer the reader both a variety of subject matter as well as differing research approaches and methodologies; it is hoped that this offers the reader both the opportunity for focused work relevant to their immediate research interests as well as offering them diverse material and perspective which may help to inform and inspire their future approaches.

We have arranged our volume into three thematic sections, which we hope will aid the reader in utilising the volume for their particular research interests. The first section, **Ritual of Place**, comprises papers that study how the physical location is viewed and understood in the process of the ritual experience. Henig’s contribution looks at how ritual may have been practiced in villa sites in Roman Britain and recent research into how the study of space may inform our understanding of ritualised behaviour in the villa setting, encouraging us to see past the definitions of space and action so often assumed in scholarly work regarding the ancient world. King’s paper applies Pythagorean mathematics to the analysis of temple construction, offering a fresh view into the prevalence of mathematical theory in the ritual world of the ancient Mediterranean. This section closes with Dolci offering an examination of how ritual place was viewed in the Levant during the transitional period of Late Antiquity, presenting a fresh approach to the engagement between pagan and Christian traditions in this region during a critical period of cultural developments.

The second group of papers, **Objects and Action in Ritual Practice**, is comprised of studies focused upon small finds data as well as performative models applied to the understanding and interpretation of ritual behaviour. Chadwick and Ghey’s contribution on aquatic deposition in Britain builds on a multi-year study and contributes to a growing literature of fascinating studies on this subject, such as Henig and Lundock’s 2022 volume on water within the Roman world. Irvin’s contribution discusses the spread of dog sacrifice in the ancient Mediterranean as an example of communicated symbolic association and proselyting of ritual practice across diverse cult traditions, offering a new view into how the ancients may have thought of ritual practice and the symbolic incorporation of ‘foreign’ models into

their religious lives. Andersen uses epigraphic evidence in their study of gender in ritual practice, offering new insight into an aspect of the ritual experience which helps expand the conversation of gender in ritual behaviour in fresh and illuminating ways. This section closes with Willems' paper on the role ritual had in the world of craftspeople in the Roman world, offering a thoughtful reminder of the overarching presence of ritual in the lives of the ancients which is often underappreciated in our more secular age.

This volume closes with our third section, **Focused/Site Specific Studies**, comprised of four papers offering analyses based on specific sites to apply theories of ritual interpretation. Walsh opens this section with their paper on ritual litter at the Carrawburgh Mithraeum, discussing the perpetuation of use in ritual locations after they are supposing to have gone into 'disuse' and how this can change our understanding of these places within the living landscape and lived experience of people across differing periods and cultures. Clifford examines evidence from West Hill, Uley regarding the utilisation of cockerels at the site, offering a new and intriguing perspective on the role they may have played in ritualised behaviour and how this may contribute to our understanding of the symbolic associations of the cockerel in the imagination of peoples across Britain and the Roman world more widely. Quatrelivre's paper uses the site of Gournay-sur-Aronde to explore the development of the study and interpretation of ritual sites in the archaeology of France, offering a perspective of how it has influenced archaeological practice and historiographic theory. Grassi closes this section with their examination of the site of Tas Slig in Malta, using this as a case-study for the examination of how ritual behaviour was built and formulated to characterise the identities and sense of place of the Maltese peoples within the wider Roman world.

These papers all bring fresh ideas and new research to the discussion of ritual behaviour in the Roman world, while the diversity of topics brings together multiple perspectives for the reader to enjoy and consider. It is the sincere hope of myself and my co-editors that this volume shall offer constructive arguments in this ever-growing field of research and we look forward to taking part in the conversation as it continues to develop in the coming years. We would like to thank all of the contributors and participants of the aforementioned conferences; the conversations we had, both during the panels as well as more widely at the events and after, helped develop our perspectives and offered valuable thought as we moved into the publication process. We would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers, whose expertise and insight helped develop these papers into their final publication form. We would also like to thank you, the reader, for your interest in this material and we hope you find the research within to be stimulating, interesting and useful for your own research as well as for your personal enrichment and enjoyment.

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