3 | Writing the Art, Archaeology and Religion of the Roman Mediterranean

PHILIPPA ADRYCH AND DOMINIC DALGLISH

The study of the ancient Mediterranean world has traditionally been a hotbed of ancestralist rivalries and competitive modern genealogies (nationalist and cosmopolitan, Christiano-centric and anti-Christian). This is especially true for what have been – from a European viewpoint – the privileged cultures of Greece and Rome. No account of Roman religion can be free of centuries of layered debate on these issues: consciously or unconsciously, the field is a tangle of constantly outdated 'presentisms' deriving their authority from accounts of a special, shared and collective past.[1] But Roman religion has a very special place within these narratives: it is *not* Christianity – it represents the past *before* the continuing Christian present, which Western scholarship has either upheld or detested since the Enlightenment – and it is *not* Greece, wherein the highest cultural and philosophical ideals of Europe were always vested. In no other field with which this book is concerned are the self-contradictions of a long history of varieties of investments more directly manifest, than in the subject of visual and material culture in relation to Roman religion.

Let us begin, as histories of Roman religions never begin, with an object. Of all the types of object we have from the Classical past, perhaps none so typifies our sense of ancient religion as the altar (Figure 3.1).[2] Altars are everywhere, with an impressive spectrum of possible artistic embellishments, inscribed ancient languages and contextual settings. They impel us

---

[1] For the classic philosophical account of 'presentism' in the writing of history ('all history is contemporary history'), see B. Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty* (London, 1941) 19. For discussion of Croce's approach, see M. Moss, *Benedetto Croce Reconsidered* (Hanover, 1987) 93–5; D. Roberts, *Benedetto Croce and the Uses of Historicism* (Berkeley, 1987) 151–2, 283–5; N. Conati, 'History as Contemporary History in the Thinking of Benedetto Croce', *Open Journal of Philosophy* 5 (2015) (http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/ojpp.2015.51007). For the place of the history of ancient art in this model, see B. Croce, 'History, Chronicle and Pseudo-History' (published in 1937) in B. Croce, *Philosophy, Poetry, History: An Anthology of Essays* (London, 1966) 497–508.

[2] Raphael's *Sacrifice at Lystra*, the cartoon now in the V&A made at the behest of Pope Leo X for the weaving of a tapestry unveiled in the Sistine Chapel in 1519, typifies this, placing the altar at the heart of the scene, the nexus between the falling axe, the bull, the statue of Asclepius behind, and the expectant victim to the left of the scene.

51

Figure 3.1 Raphael (1483–1520), The *Sacrifice at Lystra* (Acts 14:8–18, where the Lystrians offer sacrifices to Saints Paul and Barnabas after they have cured a lame man). Bodycolour on paper mounted onto canvas. Cartoon for a tapestry in the Sistine Chapel, commissioned by Pope Leo X and unveiled in 1519. Height: 350 cm, width: 560 cm, made c. 1515–16. Victoria and Albert Museum, on loan from the collection of Her Majesty the Queen. Photograph: Courtesy of the V&A. A black and white version of this figure will appear in some formats. For the colour version, refer to the plate section.

to think of what many see as the defining ritual that differentiates religions in the ancient and the modern periods, 'paganism' from Rabbinic Judaism or Christianity, polytheism from monotheism: the act of blood sacrifice.[3]

---

[3] See in particular G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 2009). On sacrifice more generally, see J. Carter, *Understanding Religious Sacrifice: A Reader* (London, 2003), for essays spanning more than a century written by a variety of renowned scholars. See also M. W. Knust and Z. Varhelyi, *Ancient Mediterranean Sacrifice* (Oxford, 2011) for a survey of the types, meanings and functions of ancient Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Jewish and early Christian sacrifice, and recent approaches to it. M.-Z. Petropoulou, *Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Greek Religion, Judaism and Christianity, 100 BC – AD 200* (Oxford, 2008) examines the mechanism of animal sacrifice, and the different conceptual realities involved in it in the ancient world. The recent edited volume of C. A. Faraone and F. S. Naiden, *Greek and Roman Animal Sacrifice: Ancient Victims, Modern Observers* (Cambridge, 2012), offers some new perspectives on an old problem in ancient religion. I. Strenski, *Contesting Sacrifice: Religion, Nationalism, and Social Thought in France* (Chicago, 2002), discusses the importance of discussions of sacrifice in scholarly conceptions of religion, particularly in France from the Reformation onwards. For Roman sacrifice, see e.g. J. Scheid, *Quand faire, c'est croire: les rites sacrificiels des Romains* (Paris, 2005), part 1, entitled 'Le sacrifice: rite central de la

Figure 3.2 Altars in the Senhouse Museum found at Maryport, UK. Dedicated in the 2nd century AD by the 'I cohors hispanorum' and their various commanders. Sandstone. All of a square type, but no two altars are the same either in dimension or decoration. Senhouse Museum. Photograph: By kind permission of the Manager and Trustees of Senhouse Roman Museum. A black and white version of this figure will appear in some formats. For the colour version, refer to the plate section.

In 1870, a spectacular concentration of altars was discovered at the Roman fort of Alauna – modern Maryport – in Cumbria, Britain: seventeen sandstone altars were found buried in pits in a field.[4] Many carry inscriptions, most with dedications to *Iuppiter Optimus Maximus* (Jupiter Best and Greatest), and many have friezes with geometric decoration (Figure 3.2). Further finds followed in later years, in addition to discoveries from the eighteenth century and earlier, and it is for this collection of altars that Maryport is best-known. Individually, the altars are not particularly remarkable; there are many examples of sandstone altars dedicated by Roman soldiers from Britain, they are not especially well-carved; the choice of deity is not unusual. What makes them stand out is their number, and the circumstances of their burial.

Nevertheless, they afford some information about the religious life of those who lived there in the past. They point to the names of gods – important foci

---

religion romaine'. Strikingly, the best archaeologically-focused account of Roman sacrifice – S. Lepetz and W. van Andringa (eds.), *Archéologie du sacrifice animal en Gaule romaine: Rituels et pratiques alimentaires* (Montagnac, 2008) – despite much on bones, finds and sacrificial reliefs (that is, both material and visual culture), has no room in its 300 pages for any discussion of altars.

[4] J. C. Bruce, 'On the Altars Recently Found in the Roman Camp at Maryport', *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* 2 ser. 1 (1874) 175–88. On the site see M. Jarrett, *Maryport, Cumbria: A Roman Fort and its Garrison* (Kendal, 1976); R. J. A. Wilson (ed.), *Roman Maryport and its Setting* (Kendal, 1997).

of worship; they provide names of individuals and groups too, offering a social dimension; the form of the altars speaks not only to religious practice, but to traditions in religious dedications, and the quantity of them might point to degrees of popularity. But to what extent, in interrogating such issues, is it appropriate to divide the totality of any one of these material objects into separate empirical chunks? Is it legitimate to focus only on the name of the god without considering the dedicant, the object's form, the decoration and the find context? These points, quite simple when levelled at just one object or a small assemblage, become more complex when expanded to the entire group. How do we relate one of these altars to the others found or to the site as a whole? How do we compare this site to others? And how do we relate them all to evidence for ancient religion more generally, including to varied forms of text written in different languages, and to an enormously varied visual and material world?

These questions circle around issues of evidence and the disciplinary specialists who contend with them, in particular historians, art historians and archaeologists, all of whom work on religion in the ancient world. The desire to cross disciplinary divides in order more effectively to study ancient religion – and in this chapter, in particular, Roman religion – has long existed. But a fundamental challenge remains. This is an issue that will become familiar over the course of this volume: the problem of commensurability. Is there a way of interpreting any one of these altars from Maryport so as to grant equal weight to its inscribed text, artistic features, and archaeological context? One of the aims of this chapter is to interrogate the ways ancient historians, art historians and archaeologists approach objects like these altars, and to examine how the questions asked of them are burdened by the preconceptions of each discipline. Can such objects of material and visual culture function in the writing of Roman religion, and in the writing of history more broadly?

Part of the challenge in the field of Roman religion, and its material culture more broadly, lies in the history of the disciplines. We start from the premise that Roman religion, as a set of practices and rituals with a series of objects and buildings as its accoutrements and setting, was fundamentally rooted in visual and material culture. Scholarship on Roman religion and Roman art has painted the two in parallel lines. Richard Gordon neatly encapsulated the disciplinary difficulties: 'The "experts" on ancient religious art are art historians, not historians of religion.'[5] To these one might add a third: archaeology.

---

[5] R. L. Gordon, 'The Real and the Imaginary: Production and Religion in the Graeco-Roman World', *Art History* 2 (1979) 5–34, at 11.

Despite Gordon's acute observation – articulated in the late 1970s – the absence of a sustained dialogue between ancient history, art history and archaeology remains a problem for discussing the materiality of Roman religion. To bring together different methods and media that would allow us to work with them in an even-handed fashion is one of the biggest challenges currently confronting the study of ancient religion.

Roman religious art, inasmuch as it can be distinguished as a category at all, has traditionally been seen mainly as art and not as a set of empirical data with a broader relevance for the history of religion. Roman religion as a topic of interest comes under the purview of Ancient History, and the study of it is to a great extent influenced by the preferences of this field for a dependence on textual sources (including epigraphy). The historic gap between the three disciplines concerned in different ways with the Maryport altars – ancient history, art history and archaeology – has affected the ways ancient religion has been written. This requires an examination of the different priorities of these three disciplines in approaching ancient religion, and religious material culture.

This chapter looks at each discipline in turn, starting with ancient history, and moving to Roman art and archaeology. These sections address some of the historical reasons for the lack of a meaningful language for the discussion of Roman religious material culture. We use the example of the Maryport altars to illustrate the divergent approaches each field can take to the same objects. The conclusion emphasizes the modern scholarship that is challenging the old narrative of parallel lines, and is starting to draw them together.

1. Historians' Constructions of Roman Religion

An altar should be a good introduction to the materiality of Roman religion. It is a physical witness of sacrifice, arguably an actor – with agency (culturally contingent on its ritual context, to be sure) – within performative religion. Any example should be useful to historians interested in sacrifice as a transactional process between the human and divine worlds, as an instantly identifiable part of ritual, indeed a key setting for its action. But rather than focusing on the objects on which sacrifices were performed, historians have approached sacrifice – and indeed the study of ritual more generally – through the traditional medium of texts.[6]

---

[6] Such as Pausanias *Hellados Periegesis* 5.15.10; Ovid *Fasti* 1.335–456; Horace *Odes* 3.18; Lucian *de sacrificiis*.

How might historians approach the Maryport altars? Can they be more than illustrations of a ritual setting or used as support for claims founded on the priority of textual sources? One starting point is with their inscriptions, which tell the viewer something about the dedicant, the god or gods to whom the altar was dedicated and the provincial epigraphic habit.[7] Let us examine one altar in particular, known (after its *inscription*, just to emphasize the priority of the written) as RIB 823, made from red sandstone probably in the reign of Hadrian (about 130 AD) and excavated before 1725 (Figure 3.3).[8] Its inscription reads:

<div align="center">

I O M

COH Ī HIS

CUI PRAE

M MAENI

VS AGRIP

TRIBV

POS

</div>

This may be translated as: 'To Jupiter Optimus Maximus. The First Cohort of Spaniards, which is commanded by Marcus Maenius Agrippa, tribune, set this up'. The First Cohort of Spaniards is first attested in Britain in the first century AD; members of this cohort are responsible for most of the inscribed altars found at Maryport.[10] In addition to this offering by the cohort as a whole, Maenius Agrippa dedicated at least three other altars, all as tribune; this, along with the testimony of the other finds, suggests that there was a strong tradition of dedicating altars to Jupiter Optimus Maximus among these soldiers.[11] The choice is not unusual; this

---

[7] On the epigraphic habit see R. MacMullen, 'The Epigraphic Habit in the Roman Empire', *American Journal of Philology* 103 (1982) 233–46; G. Woolf, 'Monumental Writing and the Expansion of the Roman Society in the Early Empire', *JRS* 86 (1996) 22–39; F. Lloris, 'The "Epigraphic Habit" in the Roman World', in C. Bruun and J. Edmondson (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Epigraphy* (Oxford, 2014) 131–47.

[8] Senhouse Roman Museum, MAYSM.1992.21; RIB [for Roman Inscriptions of Britain] 823; *CIL* vii.379 (https://romaninscriptionsofbritain.org/inscriptions/823).

[9] The Latin has therefore been restored as: I(ovi) O(ptimo) M(aximo) / Coh(ors) Ī His(panorum) / Cui Prae(est) / M(arcus) Maeni- / us Agrip(pa) / Tribu(nus) / Pos(uit).

[10] See RIB 2213; S. Frere, 'M. Maenius Agrippa, the *Expeditio Britannica* and Maryport', *Britannia* 31 (2000) 23–8. Another tribune, C. Caballius Priscus, appears to have been responsible for four other altars (Frere, 'M. Maenius Agrippa', 23). Agrippa, from Camerinum in Italy, is known from a career inscription found there: *CIL* XI.5632 = ILS 2735 with Frere, 'M. Maenius Agrippa', 24.
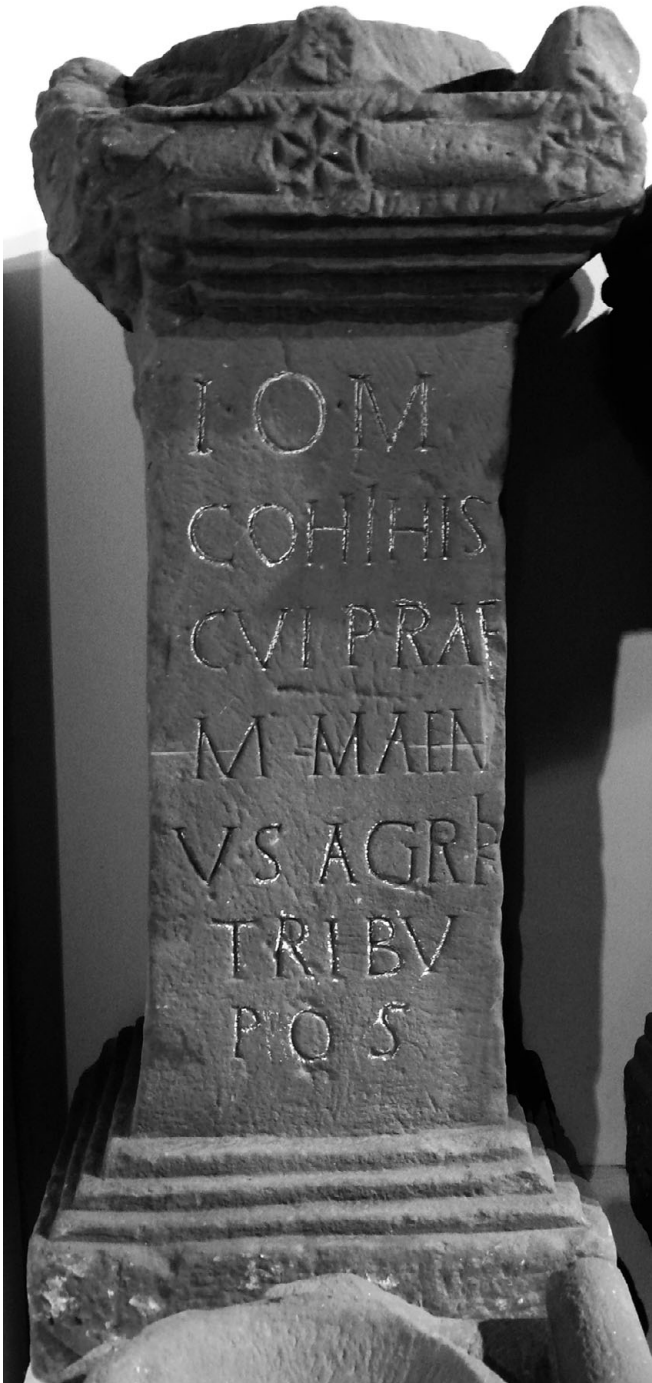
[11] RIB 8115–831; 833–5.

Figure 3.3 Sandstone altar from Maryport. Dedicated by the tribune Marcus Maenius Agrippa in the 2nd century AD. Senhouse Museum. Photograph: By kind permission of the Manager and Trustees of Senhouse Roman Museum. A black and white version of this figure will appear in some formats. For the colour version, refer to the plate section.

epithet belonged to the temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline in Rome, and signified his worship as supreme god.[12]

What can the rest of the altar tell us about Roman religion? It stands as a signifier of religious practice; does its function as an altar make it a sacred object? Was it intended as a specific indication of the cohort's religious identity as a collective, of Agrippa's own personal religious and social identity, or was it the kind of ubiquitous dedication that people in his position normally made, in this case attributed to the cohort as a whole?[13] As an object, it perhaps throws up more questions than it provides answers. But this should not be seen as a hindrance to studying religious material culture. Its very elusiveness as an object – particularly when compared to the more concrete nature of its textual inscription – gives an insight into why altars, such as those found at Maryport, have been largely disregarded in the writing of the history of Roman religion, unless they were major surviving monuments of the past, such as Augustus' Ara Pacis.[14]

What Is 'Roman Religion'?

Ancient history as a discipline has largely left material culture – with the exception of epigraphy – to archaeologists or scholars of ancient art. This section therefore focuses on Roman religion itself: in what ways it exists as a category, and whether it is workable as an adjectival label to hang onto material culture. It addresses two major problems for the study of Roman religion: the lack of a coherent definition and the traditional preference of historians for textual sources. These are by no means the only two

[12] Twenty altars were dedicated to Jupiter Optimus Maximus (RIB 815–31, 833–5); one to Jupiter Augustus (RIB 814).

[13] Note that of the four altars dedicated by Agrippa only this one (RIB 823) bears the name of both the unit and the commanding officer; the other three (RIB 824, 825 and 826) carry only the name of the commander: see D. Breeze, 'The Regiments Stationed in Maryport and their Commanders', in Wilson, *Roman Maryport and its Setting*, 67–89, at 67.

[14] Most scholarship on the Ara Pacis has overtly focused on its political agenda, for example P. Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (Ann Arbor, 1988) 120–3, 179–83, 203–5, 252–3, and J. Pollini, *From Republic to Empire: Rhetoric, Religion and Power in the Visual Culture of Ancient Rome* (Norman, 2012) 204–70, or on its artistic motifs, for example D. Castriota, *The Ara Pacis Augustae and the Imagery of Abundance in Later Greek and Early Roman Imperial Art* (Princeton, 1995) and D. Conlin, *The Artists of the Ara Pacis and the Process of Hellenization in Roman Relief Sculpture* (Chapel Hill, 1997). For a reading of it as a religious monument, see J. Elsner, 'Cult and Sculpture: Sacrifice in the Ara Pacis Augustae', *Journal of Roman Studies* 81 (1991) 50–61.

problems for the field, but the specific interest of this chapter in finding a viable unified language of discourse brings them particularly to the fore.

The hope of finding a clear definition of 'Roman religion' is both unrealistic and anachronistic. The subject is vast, and encompasses great temporal, geographic, linguistic and categorical variation. Its start and end dates are imprecise, and subject to debate. If we begin with the foundation of Rome, should we incorporate mythology into the religious history of the city? To what extent do these origins frame the religious landscape of the Republican and Imperial periods? Moreover, the search for an end date could take us up to the reign of Constantine and the advent of legalized Christianity (AD 306–337), to the fall of Rome (AD 476), or even to the fall of Constantinople (AD 1453) depending on whether our emphasis is on traditional polytheistic worship, on the city of Rome, or on the survival of aspects of a pre-Christian imperial model in Byzantium.[15] The geography of the subject covers the sprawl of the Roman Empire, including local, civic, provincial and state-sponsored practice, as well as the spread of new forms of religious worship through diaspora and mission.[16] And how far can Romano- or Italo-centrism be allowed to define religion in the context of an empire spanning the entire Mediterranean?

The categorical variation in what constituted religion is especially difficult to convey. The term 'religion' covers the traditional collection of gods at Rome, the advent of new and local gods from across the empire, the role of the state in propagating cultivation of imperial cults (however we may understand them), the longevity of ancient traditional civic and rural polytheisms, the place of magic, the beliefs of a household and the role of individuals in choosing a personal form of worship that suited them best, the range of so-called mystery and initiation cults, the differences

---

[15] On identity conflict in Byzantium, see A. Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge, 2007) Part I; on its Roman identity, A. Kaldellis, *The Byzantine Republic: People and Power in New Rome* (Cambridge, MA, 2015). On the transformation and tenacity of festivals in the Greek East, see F. Graf, *Roman Festivals in the Greek East* (Cambridge, 2015).

[16] On the geographical spread of various cult activities, see for example, D. Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West: Studies in the Ruler Cult of the Western Provinces of the Roman Empire*, 3 vols. (Leiden, 1987–2005); the work of William van Andringa on sanctuaries and religious practices in Roman Gaul: W. van Andringa, *Archéologie des santuaires en Gaule romaine* (Saint-Etienne, 2000); W. van Andringa, *La religion en Gaule romaine* (Paris, 2002); the works of Ted Kaizer and Lucinda Dirven on local cults in the Roman Near East: T. Kaizer, *The Variety of Local Religious Life in the Near East in Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Leiden, 2008); L. Dirven, *Hatra: Politics, Religion and Culture between Parthia and Rome* (Stuttgart, 2013). On geographic conceptions, see Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford, 2000).

between local religions and more universal ones. It raises questions about the role of sacrifice versus other ritual acts, such as the sprinkling of incense or libation,[17] the distinction between public and domestic worship, and understandings of belief.[18] It even includes early forms of the modern world religions of Judaism and Christianity, which we might no longer consider to be particularly 'Roman', but played significant, even transformative, roles in the Roman religious landscape.

There is no precise ancient definition of religion, no straightforward Greek or Latin term that the modern scholarship can adopt, and this makes the task of approaching the subject more complex. As such, the study of Roman religion may seem frequently to depend upon the preferences and interests of individual historians or to be subsumed into wider historical fashions and trends. Nonetheless, definition continues to be the key to exegesis for many scholars of ancient religion. One of the main problems lies in our restricted linguistic choices for discussing religion: the terms that we use, and the conceptions of religion that underpin them, are inevitably informed by our experience of modern world religions. The approach of many ancient historians educated in Europe or America has therefore been shaped by a Christian legacy of writing about religion and has frequently been a reaction to it.

Despite these complications, the characterisations of some of the field's most important figures continue to colour scholarship. For Theodor Mommsen, the great nineteenth-century Prussian historian, Roman religion was cold, formalistic, and state-controlled:

> it was of a very earthly character, and scarcely different in any material respect from the trembling with which the Roman debtor approached his just, but very strict and very powerful creditor. It is plain that such a religion was fitted rather to stifle than to foster artistic and speculative views.[19]

---

[17] Now the subject of an excellent book on art and religion in the Greek context: M. Gaifman, *The Art of Libation in Classical Athens* (New Haven, 2018).

[18] On belief see T. Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford, 2015).

[19] T. Mommsen, *Römische Geschichte*, 3 vols. (Leipzig 1854–6) Vol. I, Ch. XII [= *The History of Rome* (London, 1894) 206–35, with quotation from p. 224] with discussion by J. Scheid, 'Polytheism Impossible, or the Empty Gods: Reasons Behind a Void in the History of Roman Religion', *History and Anthropology* 3/1 (1987) 303–25, esp. 307–8 and 316–17, with 308–13 on Mommsen's followers. It was an attitude that would continue to dominate perceptions of Roman religion for decades to come. See for example the influential lectures of William James (*The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London, 1902)) particularly 38–44, with 86–7.

The message is clear: compared to the more spiritual character of mono-theism, Roman religion was transactional, legalistic, and based on social models of reciprocity and justice.[20] Rather than seeing religion, Mommsen saw the Roman legal system, replicated in different social structures; in essence, Mommsen denied the very religiosity of Roman religion. This is to say that he denied that Roman religious structures had more than a social purpose: they were the opposite of personal, spiritual – and Protestant – approaches to Christianity.

Defining Roman religion from a social – or even a state – perspective is widespread. One approach has been to emphasize certain aspects of Roman religion that speak more to social, economic or political structures than to religious elements per se.[21] The project of integrating Roman religion into wider Roman society, and into particular social structures, has enjoyed widespread popularity; the methodologies involved have varied, almost from historian to historian, though certain themes and terms have gained especial purchase. The mid-twentieth-century German historian Franz Altheim clearly saw Roman religion as an intrinsic part of all other areas of life in the Roman world, which should not be separated from them without losing something of its nature:

> A history of Roman religion, as a special subject of study, can only be orientated by a history of Rome in general. It can only be understood as a part of a coherent whole, which, regarded from another standpoint, presents itself to us as the history of Roman literature, of Roman art, of Roman law, and which, like every history, has its focus in the history of the state.[22]

---

[20] On the legalistic and prosaic, the precedent of Hegel is clear, for example, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, tr. T. M. Knox (Oxford, 1998), on the Philosophy of History, III, i, 1, where he laments, 'How little have these prosaic conceptions in common with the beauty of the spiritual powers and deities of the Greeks!'

[21] Influential works on Roman religion from the 1980s explored the social dimensions such as the spread of Christianity, e.g. R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven, 1984) and R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians in the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine* (Harmondsworth, 1986); or of the imperial cult, e.g. S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge, 1984); M. Beard and J. North, *Pagan Priests: Religion and Power in the Ancient World* (London, 1990); Fishwick, *The Imperial Cult in the Latin West*; I. Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford, 2002). For a recent (if somewhat self-regarding) review of the writing of and the problems in the history of Roman religion, see J. Bremmer, C. Bonnet, J. Lieu, Z. Vahelyi and J. Rüpke, 'Discussing Religious Change: A Panel on Jörg Rüpke's *Pantheon: A New History of Roman Religion*', *Religion in the Roman Empire* 4 (2008) 107–54, esp. 134–49.

[22] F. Altheim, *A History of Roman Religion*, tr. H. Mattingly (London, 1938) 3.

The conception of Roman religion as inherent in all other areas of Roman society, that collectively focused on the state – which in Altheim's work of the 1930s and 1940s had distinct debts to National Socialist ideology – would later give rise to the idea of an 'embedded' religion, that could not be separated from Roman literary, artistic, legal and political life along the lines by which we comprehend religion today.[23] This template for seeing religion as an intrinsic part of society is closely related to the *polis*-religion model of work on Greek religion.[24]

Recently, there has been a surge of interest in finding the voice of the individual in history, including in the history of religion.[25] The recognition of the power of individuals can also be seen explicitly in what one might call the 'late-Capitalist' model of a competitive religious marketplace in the Roman world.[26] The focus on the individual allows scholars to bypass some of the difficulties inherent in changing conceptions of religions and social structures; the centre of research revolves around the individual at a

---

[23] On 'embeddedness' see J. North, 'Conservatism and Change in Roman Religion', *Papers of the British School at Rome* 44 (1976) 1–12; J. North, 'Religious Toleration in Republican Rome', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 25 (1979) 85–103; M. Beard, J. North and S. R. F. Price, *Religions of Rome*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1998). Among those against 'embeddedness', see A. Bendlin, 'Social Complexity and Religion at Rome in the Second and First Centuries BCE' (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1998); B. Nongbri, 'Dislodging "Embedded" Religion: A Brief Note on a Scholarly Trope', *Numen* 55 (2008) 440–60.

[24] C. Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Further Aspects of Polis Religion', *AION* 10 (1988) 259–74 and 'What Is Polis Religion?' in O. Murray and S. Price (eds.), *The Greek City from Homer to Alexander* (Oxford, 1990) 295–322, published together in R. Buxton (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion* (Oxford, 2000) 13–55. This model focuses on the ways in which the political and social structure of Greek city-states was able to mould religious practices, although the idea of *polis*-religion among the Greeks has come under increasing criticism: see in particular G. Woolf, 'Polis-Religion and Its Alternatives in the Roman Provinces', in H. Cancik and J. Rüpke (eds.), *Römische Reichsreligion und Provinzialreligion* (Tübingen, 1997) 71–84 and J. Kindt, *Rethinking Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 2012). For adaptations of aspects of this model to Roman religion, see R. L. Gordon, 'Religion in the Roman Empire: The Civic Compromise and Its Limits', in Beard and North (eds.), *Pagan Priests* , 233–56 and J. Scheid, *The Gods, the State and the Individual: Reflections on Civic Religion in Rome* (Philadelphia, 2016).

[25] See J. Rüpke (ed.), *The Individual in the Religions of the Ancient Mediterranean* (Oxford, 2013); G. Woolf, 'Ritual and the Individual in Roman Religion', in Rüpke (ed.), *The Individual in the Religions*, 136–60; J. Rüpke, *On Roman Religion: Lived Religion and the Individual in Ancient Rome* (Ithaca, 2016); J. Rüpke, *Religious Deviance in the Roman World: Superstition or Individuality?* (Cambridge, 2016); Scheid, *The Gods, the State and the Individual*, 32–43. For an attempt to tie the individual to the archaeology of religion, see J. Rüpke, 'Individual Choices and Individuality in the Archaeology of Ancient Religion', in R. Raja and J. Rüpke (eds.), *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World* (Chichester, 2015) 437–50.

[26] An idea first formulated by J. North, 'The Development of Religious Pluralism', in J. Lieu, J. North and T. Rajak (eds.), *The Jews among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire* (London, 1992) 174–93, and later popularized by Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, vol. 1, 245–312.

certain time and in a certain place, and the ways in which her or his identity was shaped.[27]

These approaches – which are by no means exhaustive – are wide-ranging and potentially incompatible; it is perhaps understandable that there has traditionally been a reluctance to address the issue of how to integrate into this already-heady mix the study of religious material culture. The French school of ancient religion took visuality and archaeology seriously, notably in the work of Jean-Pierre Vernant on ancient Greece,[28] and of Romanists in the wake of Robert Turcan and John Scheid.[29] The landmark publication in 1998 of *Religions of Rome* by Beard, North and Price included an entire volume dedicated to sources with literary and epigraphic texts presented alongside images.[30] But none of this can be described as a fully equal integration where material culture is

[27] For a formulation of this argument, see J. Rüpke, *Pantheon: A New History of Roman Religion* (Princeton, 2018) 7–10.

[28] For a range of Jean-Pierre Vernant's work on these issues see 'Naissance d'images', in J.-P. Vernant, *Religions, histoires, raisons* (Paris, 1979) 105–37 (translated into English in J.-P. Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, ed. F. Zeitlin (Princeton 1991)); several essays published in the collected volume of essays *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs: études de psychologie historique* (Paris, 1985); also Vernant, *Mortals and Immortals*. Perhaps as a result of Vernant's work, work on the role of Greek images in religious contexts has received considerably more attention than in Roman contexts, for example A. A. Donohue, 'The Greek Images of the Gods: Considerations on Terminology and Methodology', *Hephaistos* 15 (1997) 31–45, and T. S. Scheer, *Die Gottheit und ihr Bild: Untersuchungen zur Funktion griechischer Kultbilder in Religion und Politik* (Munich, 2000); M. Gaifman, 'Visual Evidence', in E. Eidinow and J. Kindt (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Religion* (Oxford, 2015) 51–66; C. Barrett 'Material Evidence', in Eidinow and Kindt (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Religion*, 113–30; T. S. Scheer, 'Art and Imagery', in Eidinow and Kindt (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Religion*, 165–78; M. Gaifman, 'Theologies of Statues', in E. Eidinow, J. Kindt and R. Osborne (eds.), *Theologies of Ancient Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 2016) 249–80. For just a small indication of Vernant's lasting influence see R. Neer, 'Jean-Pierre Vernant and the History of the Image', *Arethusa* 43 (2010) 181–95; P. Borgeaud and D. Fabiano (eds.) *Perception et construction du divin dans l'Antiquité* (Geneva. 2013).

[29] E.g. R. Turcan, *Les Sarcophages romains à représentations dionysiaques: essai de chronologie et d'histoire religieuse* (Rome, 1966); R. Turcan, *Religion romaine*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1988); R. Turcan, *Rome et ses dieux* (Paris, 1998); J. Scheid, *An Introduction to Roman Religion* (Edinburgh, 2003); van Andringa, *La religion en Gaule romaine*; Lepetz and van Andringa (eds.), *Archéologie du sacrifice animal en Gaule romaine*; V. Huet, 'La mise à mort sacrificielle sure les reliefs romains: une image banalisée et ritualisée de la violence?' in J.-M. Bertrand (ed.), *La violence dans le monde grec et romain* (Paris, 2005) 91–119; V. Huet, 'Les images de sacrifice en Gaule romaine', in Lepetz and van Andringa (eds.), *Archéologie du sacrifice animal en Gaule romaine*, 43–74; V. Huet, 'Reliefs mithriaques et reliefs romains "traditionnels": essai de confrontation', in C. Bonnet, V. Pirenne-Delforge and D. Praet (eds.), *Les religions orientales dans le monde grec et romain* (Rome, 2009) 233–56.

[30] Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, vol. 2: *A Sourcebook*.

the driving empirical data for the study of Roman religion, rather than the illustrator of texts.

In using the term 'Roman religion', one must acknowledge its many imperfections: it can imply the predominance of the city of Rome, ascribe unity to a widely disparate number of religious beliefs and practices based on geography and empire, and it forces us to subscribe to the cult of catch-all expressions. But it can nevertheless prove useful. Roman religion might better be understood as an amalgamation of religious forms, ideas or practices in the Roman period.[31] It is a necessarily imprecise term that can allow us to think in terms of connections, without implying uniformity. It is this very imprecision that has the potential to allow scholars to work more with material culture, not forcing readings on the material, but allowing it to speak. As the search for absolute definitions of Roman religion have given way to more open approaches, material culture has more opportunity to play a part in scholarly conceptions.[32]

The Privileging of Texts

Nonetheless, there remains a discernible preference for textual, and particularly literary, sources. This emphasizes the instinctive bias and training of many ancient historians and is an inclination that has led ancient historians to look for texts in order to understand Roman religion. In *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, Ramsay MacMullen questions the biases of historians:

> We ourselves naturally suppose, immersed as we are in the Judeo-Christian heritage, that religion means doctrine. Why should we think so?[33]

One response to his question could be that our modern understanding of doctrine, and hence of religion (if 'religion means doctrine'), frequently

---

[31] For recent discussions of how we frame our understanding of religion in the ancient world see B. Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven, 2013) 15–24; Rüpke, *Pantheon*.

[32] Recent years have seen a rising tendency in handbooks and collections of work on Roman religion to connect it to other fields. See C. Ando, *Roman Religion* (Edinburgh, 2003); Scheid, *Introduction to Roman Religion*; J. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 2007); J. North and S. Price (eds.), *The Religious History of the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Oxford, 2011). This is perhaps linked to a greater ease with understanding fluid definitions of Roman religion, without labouring over focused readings on the place of belief, ritual, theology and even, tentatively, materiality.

[33] MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 8.

depends upon texts. Nonetheless, while ancient historians are unlikely to express an explicit interest in Roman religious *doctrine*, this can appear to be the aim of those who focus on texts at the expense of archaeological material.[34] A recent movement towards the intellectualization of Roman religion has reinterpreted certain Roman texts as attempts to articulate and describe religious activities and behaviours.[35]

One of the most famous of such texts, Varro's *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* was dedicated to Julius Caesar in 46 BC. Although the full work has been lost, sufficient quotations survive in Augustine's *De civitate dei* for a partial reconstruction. The treatment of religious material culture – in particular, the use of images of the gods – is especially interesting. Varro claims that the ancient and original form of Roman religion did not use images of the gods, and that this led to a purer relationship with the divine; the introduction of images, by contrast, had brought about a lessening of fear and an increase of error.[36] A similar argument is put into the mouth of Lucilius Balbus in Cicero's *De natura deorum* (43 BC). Balbus posits that images of the gods, which teach worshippers how deities look and dress, have brought about a perversion of religion.[37]

Such texts are not value-neutral guides to visual culture in Roman religion. Varro espoused an erudite, complex and hybrid position with debts to Academic, Stoic and Cynic philosophy, and this is evident throughout the *Antiquitates*;[38] in *De natura deorum*, Cicero creates a philosophical dialogue to examine religion. Both of these writings reveal the preoccupations of their authors: tradition and status (as exemplified through rituals and priesthoods), and a fast-changing political landscape in the late Republic in which 'old' values were becoming obsolete. While they – and others like them – provide information on certain factual points, and an excellent presentation of a particular apologetic position

---

[34] See Chapter 4 of this volume.

[35] For a summary of this as a trend, see D. MacRae, *Legible Religion: Books, Gods, and Rituals in Roman Religion* (Cambridge, MA, 2016), 3–5.

[36] August. *De civ. D.* 4.31; Varro, *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* fr. 18 and 22. See for instance P. van Nuffelen, 'Varro's Divine Antiquities: Roman Religion as an Image of Truth', *Classical Philology* 105 (2010) 162–88, esp. 182–5; J. Rüpke, 'Historicizing Religion: Varro's Antiquitates and the History of Religion in the Late Roman Republic', *History of Religions* 53 (2014) 246–68, esp. 256–7.

[37] Cic. *Nat. D.* II.28.

[38] See Y. Lehmann, 'Varro the Roman Philosopher', in D. Butterfield, *Varro Varius: The Polymath of the Roman World* (Cambridge, 2015) 123–39; L. Kronenberg, 'Varro the Roman Cynic: The Destruction of Religious Authority in the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*', in J. König and G. Woolf (eds.), *Authority and Expertise in Ancient Scientific Culture* (Cambridge, 2017) 306–28.

within a complex debate, they give neither a full picture, nor an unbiased one.

If some of the key internal Roman accounts argue against the importance of visual culture to religion, it is hardly surprising that this stance has been echoed by subsequent historians. The preference given to textual over material or visual evidence is in part due to a tradition of writing history, from a German Protestant heritage in particular, in which words, and the understanding gained through reading texts, has long been valued over the use and interpretation of images and material culture.[39] This model has habitually written religion out of texts, at the expense of the wealth of religious visual material from the ancient world. Yet relying upon textual evidence raises several problems: it tends to privilege elite and literate voices, it reduces visual evidence to the role of an aesthetic supplement, and it may over-simplify history. The focus on texts can overlook not only the value of material and visual evidence in reconstructing a more comprehensive picture of religious behaviours, but also the important contribution that can be made by more cognitive approaches to religion.[40] The bottom line is that – today as in antiquity – religious practice and imagination cannot be separated from the spaces, decorations, objects and implements with which and within which devotion is practised. The question is to what extent scholarship can grasp this experiential world.

2. Art Historical and Archaeological Formulations of Religion

Can images, objects and physical contexts be employed to cast different kinds of light on Roman religion? What questions would we like them to answer, and what are the limitations that their forms impose? If the questions that we ask of material culture were initially designed for an entirely different form of evidence (i.e. for texts), they are bound to lead to unsatisfactory conclusions. This is a simple point, though one that is often overlooked: we either must change the type of answers we want, or change the questions.

---

[39] See M. Squire, *Image and Text in Graeco-Roman Antiquity* (Cambridge, 2009), Ch. 1. For a definition of 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' approaches to writing religion, as used in this volume, see Chapter 1.

[40] For a concise appeal for cognitive studies, see C. R. Phillips, 'Approaching Roman Religion: The Case for *Wissenschaftsgeschichte*', in J. Rüpke (ed.), *A Companion to Roman Religion* (Oxford, 2007) 10–28.

Material culture is by its nature particular. We can group and categorize images, objects, types of building and so on, but when we assess them, they are rooted in the physical world.[41] Traditionally, that physicality is itself approached through two – not always compatible – disciplines: archaeology (addressing material culture) and art history (addressing visual culture). Most scholars today would agree that the modern notion of 'art' cannot be applied to the ancient past without careful consideration. The resulting discussions have taken a number of routes, including the search for the beginnings of art history and a form of artistic appreciation in the ancient past itself.[42]

Others have questioned whether 'art', or perhaps 'Art', is a suitable term at all.[43] These discussions demonstrate the subjectivity of the word, but equally indicate the continuing desire to grant to material objects the power to move us in the way that 'art' as a descriptive category suggests.[44] While much of the evidence that art historians and archaeologists may call upon is the same, and any division is ambiguous, the fact remains that Classical art historians and archaeologists are frequently different beasts with different methodological choices. This is well illustrated in studies of ancient religion. Michael Squire wrote recently that, 'any division between

---

[41] This is why one must be hesitant about too enthusiastic a use of certain classic papers in the history of art and religion which discuss images from an ideal-typical perspective but never cash out their reflection on any specific (potentially recalcitrant), actual and particular objects. Examples include E. Kitzinger, 'The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954) 84–150; Gordon, 'The Real and the Imaginary'; J. Rüpke, 'Representation or Presence? Picturing the Divine in Ancient Rome', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 12 (2010) 181–96; C. Ando, 'Praesentia Numinis. Part 1: The Visibility of Roman Gods', *Asdiwal* 5 (2010) 45–73, 'Praesentia Numinis. Part 2: Objects in Roman Cult', *Asdiwal* 6 (2011) 57–69, and 'Praesentia Numinis. Part 3: Idols in Context (of Use)'. *Asdiwal* 10 (2015) 61–76.

[42] See for example Gordon, 'The Real and the Imaginary', 5–10; J. Tanner, *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece: Religion, Society and Artistic Rationalisation* (Cambridge, 2006) 246–76, and V. J. Platt and M. Squire (eds.), *The Art of Art History in Greco-Roman Antiquity*, Special Issue of *Arethusa* 43/2 (Baltimore, 2010).

[43] A brief summary with references is provided by P. Stewart, *The Social History of Roman Art* (Cambridge, 2008) 2–3. See also N. Kampen, 'On Not Writing the History of Roman Art', *The Art Bulletin* 77 (1995) 375–8, and 'On Writing Histories of Roman Art', *The Art Bulletin* 85 (2003) 371–86; S. Scott, 'Art and the Archaeologist', *World Archaeology* 38 (2006) 628–43.

[44] Summarizing the argument made by Porter in the same volume, M. Squire, 'Introduction: The Art of Art History in Greco-Roman Antiquity', *Arethusa* 43/2 (2010) 133–63, esp. 153–4: 'If, as cultural historians, we posit too large a chasm between the ancient and modern worlds, there can be no getting across; worse still, Porter warns, we will end up denying the fundamental continuities in human sentience that bridge the historical divide between past and present.' R. R. R. Smith, 'The Use of Images: Visual History and Ancient History', in T. P. Wiseman (ed.), *Classics in Progress: Essays on Ancient Greece and Rome* (Oxford, 2002) 59–102, 64 phrased it well when he described ancient art as 'a convenient collective misnomer'.

("subjective") art history and ("objective") archaeology is a chimera of our own modernist making'.[45] This creature has long existed. The histories of the two complementary fields are necessarily intertwined, but they are different disciplines with distinct modes of analysing their chosen material.[46]

Roman Art and Religion: Category and Style

Our Roman altar from Maryport (Figure 3.3) has never excited the interest of art historians. It is debatable whether it possesses 'artistic' elements at all – it lacks figural representation that for many would raise it above the 'decorative';[47] and its features are so common as to express little individuality. They are coarsely executed in a simple way, and not of great quality when compared to other ancient material. On the other hand, the ornamental roundels with rosettes at the top are sufficiently distinctive to have aided the restoration of a missing corner only excavated in 2011.[48] This form of ornamentation is characteristic of a number of other altars at the site (notably RIB 826, which was also dedicated by Agrippa although this has an additional circle and dot motif), but less elaborate than the demi-lunes, zig-zags, vegetal scrolls and ribbing found on other altars in the Maryport group. This altar, to be blunt, is not evidence that art historians are likely to engage with. This raises two interconnected questions for this section: first, what has historically constituted 'art', in particular 'Roman art'?; and second, what is 'religious art'?

The usefulness or even the validity of Roman art as a category has historically been in doubt. Traditionally, Roman art has been a disciplinary placeholder between (the glories of) the Greek tradition and the advent of the (decadent) Middle Ages.[49] Even when granted autonomy, Roman art

[45] M. Squire, 'Classical Archaeology and the Contexts of Art History', in S. E. Alcock and R. Osborne (eds.), *Classical Archaeology*, 2nd edn. (Oxford, 2012) 468–500, 493.

[46] This perspective is admittedly a simplification of many dynamic education systems and cannot be seen as more than a generalization. As Squire, 'Introduction', 145, observes, the German tradition judges classical archaeology and classical art history as being inseparable. Smith, 'The Use of Images', 64–5, characterized this division as being between Greek art and Roman archaeology. See also Kampen, 'On Writing Histories of Roman Art', 373.

[47] For ornament see now N. Dietrich and M. Squire (eds.), *Ornament and Figure in Graeco-Roman Art* (Berlin, 2018).

[48] See E. Chapman, F. Hunter, P. Booth, P. Wilson, J. Pearce, S. Worrell and R. Tomlin, 'Roman Britain in 2011', *Britannia* 43 (2012) 271–421, esp. 294.

[49] Kampen, 'On Not Writing the History of Roman Art', 375, citing in particular the positions taken by Johann Joachim Winckelmann and Alois Riegl. See also O. Brendel, *Prolegomena to the Study of Roman Art* (New Haven, 1979); Smith, 'The Use of Images'; and R. Brilliant,

existed either as an offshoot of Greek art or as a passive body under the influence of other artistic cultures; at its best it was an emulation of Greek or a precursor to late antique artistic developments; at its worst a symptom of decadence and decline.[50] The independent study of Roman art as a positive phenomenon in its own right was born very late – at the end of the nineteenth century – in the Viennese work of Franz Wickhoff and Alois Riegl. But it was always regarded as a mixed bag – not a pure result of a single spurt of ethnic genius (as in Greece) but a dualism or pluralism of eclectic styles, classes, racial and cultural impulses that ultimately depended on a large, pluralist and culturally mixed imperial system comprising many languages, visual styles and cultural traditions.[51] That pluralism is specifically parallel to the well-known religious pluralism of the Roman Empire.[52] This sense of Roman visual culture as derivative of Greek, with little value accorded to models of replication or the eclectic

---

Roman Art from the Republic to Constantine (New York, 1974), who attempts to pick up from Brendel.

[50] Brendel, *Prolegomena*, 15–24, traces the history of the separation of the study of Roman art from Greek. On emulation see H. Koch, *Römische Kunst* (Breslau, 1924), laden with overbearing comparisons with Greek art, and later E. H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (London, 1960) 110–25, on Greek painting. On Roman art as a forerunner, over which there was a fierce debate in Vienna, see Chapter 5 of this volume. The conflation of artistic decline with moral decline is an enduring theme, with roots in Roman antiquity. See for example the critiques of Vitruvius (VII, 5, 3f) and Pliny (*HN* XXXV, 2–5) on the decline of painting.

[51] For dualism see e.g. G. Rodenwaldt, 'The Transition to Late Classical Art', *Cambridge Ancient History* 12 (1939) 544–70, 546–7 and G. Rodenwaldt, 'Zur Begrenzung und Gliederung der Spätantike', *Jahrbuch des deutsches Archäologisches Instituts* 59/60 (1944/45) 81–7, esp. 84, 87; G. Kaschnitz von Weinberg, *Das Schöpferische in der römischen Kunst* (Hamburg, 1961) 42–51, esp. 48–51; R. Bianchi Bandinelli, *Rome: The Centre of Power: Roman Art to AD 200*, tr. P. Green (London, 1970) 51–105 and R. Bianchi Bandinelli, *Dall' Ellenismo al Medioevo* (Rome, 1978) 19–48; M. Torelli, 'Roman Art, 43BC–AD69' in *Cambridge Ancient History* 10 (2nd edn ., 1996) 930–58, esp. 930–1, 956–8. For pluralism, see e.g. P. von Blanckenhagen, 'Elemente der römischen Kunst am Beispiel des Flavischen Stils', in H. Berve (ed.), *Das Neue Bild der Antike* (Leipzig, 1942) 310–41; Brendel, *Prolegomena*, 101–37; T. Hölscher, *Römische Bildsprache als semantisches System* (Heidelberg, 1987) 10, 17–19 translated into English as *The Language of Images in Roman Art* (Cambridge, 2004) xix–xxii, 5–7; S. Settis, 'Un' arte plurale. L'impero romano, i Greci e i posteri', in E. Gabba and A. Schiavone (eds.), *Storia di Roma IV: Caratteri e morfologie* (Turin, 1989) 827–78; J. Elsner, 'Classicism in Roman Art', in J. Porter (ed.), *Classical Pasts: The Classical Traditions of Greece and Rome* (Princeton, 2006) 270–97.

[52] A point made by Elsner, 'Classicism in Roman Art', 273–4. On religious pluralism see e.g. North, 'Religious Toleration in Republican Rome'; North, 'The Development of Religious Pluralism'; Beard et al., *Religions of Rome*, vol. 1, 245–363; A. Bendlin, 'Looking Beyond the Civic Compromise: Religious Pluralism in Late Republican Rome', in E. Bispham and C. Smith (eds.), *Religion in Archaic and Republican Rome* (Edinburgh, 2000) 115–35; J. Rüpke, *From Jupiter to Christ: On the History of Religion in the Roman Imperial Period*, tr. D. M. B. Richardson (Oxford, 2014) 169–209.

and creative use of existing visual categories to generate new models of meaning and representation until the last generation,[53] was thus accentuated by the plurality of variants found throughout the empire. It is this lack of founders, originators and most importantly 'artists' that led to a prevailing view that Roman art, particularly portraiture with veristic tendencies, lacked the 'spiritual animation' of the Greek classical ideal.[54] The legacy that it has imparted to Classical art history is the repression of possible religious meanings in artistic material, from the Classical Greek period through to the advent of Christianity as the state-endorsed religion of the Roman Empire.

The wedge between art and religion is not easily removed: to discuss religious art is not necessarily to discuss religion. In several texts from the late nineteenth century onwards, a great many artworks were brought together and assessed precisely because of their 'religious' character.[55] But such corpora failed to turn discussion of the art under examination *back* onto religion, or to do so without being constrained by textual accounts of what religion *should* be. These were art historical accounts of religious material, not religious histories. Though not greatly concerned with religion, two seminal works published in 1987 encapsulate the move for Roman art to speak back to and about society. These were Paul Zanker's *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*, and Tonio Hölscher's

---

[53] See the review article by C. H. Hallett, 'Emulation versus Replication: Redefining Roman Copying', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 18 (2005) 419–35, of E. K. Gazda, *The Ancient Art of Emulation: Studies in Artistic Originality and Tradition from the Present to Classical Antiquity* (Ann Arbor, 2002), and E. Perry, *The Aesthetics of Emulation in the Visual Arts of Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, 2005); J. Elsner and J. Trimble (eds.) 'Art and Replication: Greece, Rome, and Beyond', *Art History* 29 (2006) 201–342; K. Junker and A. Stähli (eds.), *Original und Kopie: Formen und Konzepte der Nachahmung in der antiken Kunst* (Wiesbaden, 2008); M. Marvin, *The Language of the Muses: The Dialogue between Roman and Greek Sculpture* (Los Angeles, 2008); J. Trimble, *Women and Visual Replication in Roman Imperial Art and Culture* (Cambridge, 2011); A. Anguissola, *"Difficillima imitatio": Immagine e lessico delle copie tra Grecia e Roma* (Rome, 2012); S. Settis, A. Anguissola and D. Gasparrotto (eds.), *Serial/Portable Classic* (Milan, 2015). For a discussion of copies in relation to religion in particular, see A. Anguissola, 'Retaining the Function: Sacred Copies in Greek and Roman Art', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 51 (2007) 98–107.

[54] This was a view subscribed to by Hegel, for instance; see P. Kottman and M. Squire (eds.), *The Art of Hegel's Aesthetics* (Paderborn, 2018).

[55] For example, A. Della Seta, *Religione e arte figurata* (Rome, 1912); C. Clerc, *Les theories relatives au culte des images chez les auteurs grecs du IIme siècle après J.-C.* (Paris, 1915); E. Strong, *Apotheosis and After Life: 3 Lectures on Certain Phases of Art and Religion in the Roman Empire* (London, 1915); I. S. Ryberg, *Rites of the State Religion in Roman Art* (Rome, 1955); E. Will, *Le relief cultuel gréco-romain: contribution à l'histoire de l'art de l'empire romain* (Paris, 1955); K. Schefold, *Römische Kunst als religiöses Phänomen* (Reinbek, 1964).

Römische Bildsprache als semantisches System.[56] Establishing an approach that still invigorates the discipline, these texts enabled a view of the ingenuity of Roman art as lying in the creative use of earlier, even preconceived, styles, forms and media to convey different meanings from those intended when those models were created (whether in Classical or Hellenistic Greece, or earlier in Rome, or in Egypt or in the near East).[57] Defining Roman visual culture in these terms meant that it had more wide-ranging implications for use as evidence in historical questions – including the study of ancient religion – than had been possible before.[58]

Since the 1980s there has also been an increasing number of art historians interested in religion. In 1981 the first volume of the great iconographic encyclopaedia of ancient mythology, the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* (LIMC), was published, its run finally finishing in 2009.[59] This was followed by the specifically religion-centred iconographic *Thesaurus cultus et rituum antiquorum* (ThesCRA) published between 2004 and 2006.[60] The Institute of Religious Iconography at the University of Groningen published its annual 'Visible Religion' between 1982 and 1990 with several contributions from Classical scholars, and at the end of the decade, David Freedberg's *The Power of Images* was published, dealing with all manner of magical and religious manifestations of art across cultures.[61]

---

[56] Zanker, *Augustus und die Macht der Bilder*, translated as *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, and Hölscher, *Römische Bildsprache als semantisches System*, translated as *The Language of Images in Roman Art*.

[57] Cf. Elsner, 'Classicism in Roman Art', 270–6 for extension of the argument beyond Greek models.

[58] For other examples, see the wide-ranging political take of R. Turcan, *L'art romain dans l'histoire: six siècles d'expressions de la romanité* (Paris, 1996). For the study of society through art see J. Clarke, *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans: Visual Representation and Non-Elite Viewers in Italy, 100 BC–AD 315* (Berkeley, 2003) and Stewart, *The Social History of Roman Art*.

[59] H. Ackermann, J.-R. Gisler and L. Kahil (eds.), *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, 8 vols., plus 2 supplements plus index (Zurich, 1981–2009).

[60] V. Lambrinoudakis and J. Balty (eds.), *Thesaurus cultus et rituum antiquorum*, 5 vols. plus index (Los Angeles, 2004–6).

[61] D. Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago, 1989). See V. J. Platt, *Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Graeco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion* (Cambridge, 2011) 78 n.4; B. Gladigow, 'Präsenz der Bilder – Präsenz der Götter. Kultbilder und Bilder der Götter in der greischischen Religion', *Visible Religion* 4–5 (1985–6) 114–33, and 'Epiphanie, Statuette, Kultbild: Griechische Gottesvorstellungen im Wechsel von Kontext und Medium', *Visible Religion* 7 (1990) 98–121; H. Versnel, 'What Did Ancient Man See When He Saw God?', in D. van der Plas (ed.), *Effigies Dei: Essays on the History of Religions* (Leiden, 1987) 42–55, esp. 46–7; J.-P. Vernant, 'Mortals and Immortals: The Body of the Divine', in *Mortals and Immortals*, 27–49; A. Schnapp, 'Are Images Animated? The

But with what might be described as 'degree-zero' art-historical objects without much distinctive iconography, like the Maryport altar, there has been little attempt to find a language or means for including them into a historical account of religion, despite the fact that they offer such rich and extensive primary evidence for religious practice and its accoutrements.[62] Not only has scholarship failed to make such things speak *back* to social formations, it has failed to find a way of letting them speak at all.

Archaeology and Religion: 'Ritual' versus 'Religious' Classification

The role of archaeology for the study of religion, and Roman religion in particular, might seem to be self-evident.[63] The enormous number of images of gods in one form or another, of temple complexes, and other paraphernalia (prominent amongst them, altars), contextualizes and helps us visualize the ancient world. It is evidence that religion left its mark. But the extent to which it is possible to analyse archaeological remains in order to assess religion is debatable: what exactly can one hope to ascertain?

When the largest collection of altars from Maryport was found in 1870, questions immediately arose as to why they had been placed there.[64] Laid in a series of pits, the altars had clearly been removed from their original stations, but had evidently achieved a new and deliberate position that could reveal a particular form of behaviour. Initially it was supposed that the altars were buried for safe-keeping by those who had used them for religious purposes,[65] possibly as a result of military

Psychology of Statues in Ancient Greece', in C. Renfrew and E. B. W. Zubrow (eds.), *The Ancient Mind: Elements of Cognitive Archaeology* (Cambridge 1994) 40–4.

[62] For the altar in Greek religion as a form of material aniconism, see M. Gaifman, *Aniconism in Greek Antiquity* (Oxford, 2012) 32, 44, 225–32 and H. Blume, 'The Furniture of the Gods: The Problem with the Importation of "Empty Space and Material Aniconism" into Greek Religion', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 17 (2015) 55–68.

[63] Ours cannot be an exhaustive overview of archaeology, Classical archaeology or even of Roman religious archaeology. On the development of archaeological thought more generally, see the classic by G. Daniel, *150 Years of Archaeology* (London, 1975), and the monumental work by B. G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought*, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 2007), esp. chs. 2 and 3 on Classical archaeology and antiquarianism. On the historical development of Classical archaeology see S. Dyson, *In Pursuit of Ancient Pasts: A History of Classical Archaeology in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New Haven, 2006). For a specific and approachable work see J. Droogan, *Religion, Material Culture and Archaeology* (London, 2013).

[64] For an early interpretation see Bruce, 'On the Altars Recently Found in the Roman Camp at Maryport'.

[65] Bruce, 'On the Altars Recently Found in the Roman Camp at Maryport', 179–81.

invasion.[66] Half a century later, it was suggested that they had in fact been buried year on year, in a kind of ritualized pattern, following the dedication of a new altar at the start of the year.[67] At the end of the 1990s this hypothesis was discounted because the supposed ritual of burying was shown to be without basis.[68] In 2012, following excavations the previous year, the burial of the altars was shown to coincide with the building of a large timber-frame structure, meaning that the stones were used as packing material.[69] In other words, interpretive assumptions shifted from a fantasy of residual and resistant paganism preserving its sacred objects via a model of ritual ideology to straightforward pragmatism.

What the studies of the Maryport altars have in common is a focus on classifying the act of burial.[70] The need for systems of classification is particularly pronounced in archaeology, and because of this we may propose two questions about the discipline's development from the late nineteenth century onwards. First, what influenced the formation of the classification system that determined what was and what was not 'religious'? Second, what has been the impact of 'ritual' as a means of classification, and what is its relationship with understandings of religion?

The tendency to want to refer to an object as being *either* one thing *or* another has persisted.[71] Such categorization became, to a greater or lesser extent, a dichotomy separating the religious from the unreligious, spurring the kinds of distinctions that still govern how many archaeologists 'do' religion: looking for the abnormal and irrational to characterize something as 'religious'- or 'ritual'-based, against their descriptive opposites.[72]

---

[66] Such as that of the Maeatae in 196, as suggested by R. G. Collingwood, 'The Roman Fort and Settlement at Maryport', *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society* 36 (1936) 85–99, esp. 97.

[67] L. P. Wenham, 'Notes on the Garrisoning of Maryport', *Transactions of the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society*, Series 2, 39 (1939) 19–30, esp. 22.

[68] P. R. Hill, 'The Maryport Altars: Some First Thoughts', in Wilson (ed.), *Roman Maryport and its Setting*, 92–104.

[69] I. Haynes and T. Wilmott, 'The Maryport Altars: An Archaeological Myth Dispelled', *Studia Universitatis Babes-Bolyai – Historia* (2012) 25–37.

[70] This focus on what one might call the death moment in the biographies of these objects, when they were finally interred, is in stark contrast to the traditional focus of art history on an object's moment of creation.

[71] In this respect, archaeology has been heavily influenced by classification systems within the natural sciences. See J. M. Fritz and F. T. Plog, 'The Nature of Archaeological Explanation', *American Antiquity* 35/4 (1970) 405–12, for a review of mid-twentieth-century thought on the matter.

[72] The old joke in archaeology, whereby everything that was unintelligible was referred to as a 'ritual object' is discussed in R. D. Whitehouse, 'Ritual Objects: Archaeological Joke or Neglected Evidence?', in J. B. Wilkins (ed.), *Approaches to the Study of Ritual: Italy and the*

That reflex for identifying ritual objects reveals much about how religion has become relegated to the eccentric category of the socially non-normative, an unfortunate and anachronistic result of the prevalence of secularism in the academy.

The French sociologist Émile Durkheim and the Durkheimian school had a profound impact on the development of archaeological approaches to religion from the late nineteenth century onwards.[73] The notion of the sacred and the profane as a means of distinguishing religious material, central to Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912),[74] has been immensely influential; Durkheim's definition of religion and his means of categorizing what is religious had lasting appeal.[75] He posited that religion was inherently a social process; what was not social, was not religious, but rather 'folklore'.[76] Religion, when viewed in this way, was inseparable from other social phenomena.[77]

Julian Droogan recently examined the intermingling of such ideas with Marxist conceptions of religion and society, which were dominant in scholarship in the later twentieth century. The combination of viewing religion *as* society, and the denial of religion as being more than a product of economic and material conditions (in Marxist terms), ultimately made the study of religion a secondary aim for archaeologists.[78] Little of what

---

Ancient Mediterranean (London, 1996) 9–30, esp. 9–10. On the deeper distinction between 'admired' and 'emulated' classical antiquity, and the 'primitive' prehistoric in archaeology, see D. Wilkinson, 'The Apartheid of Antiquity', *World Archaeology* 43/1 (2011) 26–39.

[73] Of central importance in this school were Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss. See further Strenski, *Contesting Sacrifice*, 156–79.

[74] E. Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie* (Paris, 1912), translated as *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (London, 1915).

[75] Durkheim's appeal certainly continues, and examples abound of the use of this phrase, for example, R. C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into Some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience* (Oxford, 1957); M. Eliade, *The Sacred and Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York, 1961). In 2005 the ethnographer and anthropologist W. Y. Adams could still say, 'I can hardly do better' than to refer to Durkheim for a definition of religion: *Religion and Adaptation* (Stanford, 2005) p. x.

[76] This is argued throughout his work, but for an explicit statement of this idea see his definition of what a religion is: *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 46.

[77] That other great sociologist, Max Weber, stated eight years after Durkheim that 'gods and demons, like vocabularies of languages, have been directly influenced primarily by economic situations and the historic doctrines of different peoples'. M. Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, tr. E. Fischoff (Boston, 1963) 13.

[78] Droogan, *Religion, Material Culture and Archaeology*, 71–107. The archaeologist *and* religious scholar Jules Toutain (1865–1961) is almost the exception that proves the rule: his publications include, *Études de mythologie et d'histoire des religions antiques* (Paris, 1909)*, Les cultes païens dans l'empire romain*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1907–20); *Nouvelles études de mythologie et*

developed in the archaeological interpretation of religion in the early twentieth century was theorized until the 1980s.[79] The importance of the definition, however, is evident from the lack of classical archaeological works that attempt to deal with deeper problems of religion beyond cataloguing material.

There has been a reluctance on the part of archaeologists to see religion as part of their remit. The attitude is typified by Christopher Hawkes' 'Ladder of Inference'.[80] Hawkes claimed that the four steps ranging from the easiest to the hardest to infer from archaeological phenomena are: the techniques used to create them; the subsistence-economics that was built on them; the social and political institutions that built them; and, finally, to infer religious institutions and spiritual life from them. Hawkes was not wrong to argue that understanding religion from archaeology alone is hard, but was he right to close the door on such an aim?[81]

Over the last thirty years there has been a surge of interest in developing archaeological techniques for challenging just the sort of argument that the likes of Hawkes had put forward, in the hope of finding a place for archaeological investigations in the study of religion. Hawkes' point, as he made clear, is that religion and spiritual life cannot be approached 'unaided' or in other words, without a textual history. The great challenge to this proposition, in terms of archaeological studies, has been focused on landscape and on ritual, in particular within the burgeoning field of cognitive archaeology. In the last thirty years there have been dozens of conferences, edited volumes and monographs produced on this topic within Classical archaeological circles, all responding to this new intellectual movement.[82]

---

d'histoire des religions antiques (Paris, 1935), and his translation with Stiébel of James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* between 1903 and 1911 (*Le Rameau d'Or*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1903–11)).

[79] Droogan, *Religion, Material Culture and Archaeology*, 73.

[80] C. F. C. Hawkes, 'Archaeological Theory and Method: Some Suggestions from the Old World', *American Anthropologist* 56 (1954) 155–68, esp. 161–2. See the useful piece by C. Evans, 'Historicism, Chronology and Straw Men: Situating Hawkes' "Ladder of Inference"', *Antiquity* 72 (1998) 398–404.

[81] Hawkes makes it explicitly clear ('Archaeological Theory and Method', 162–4) that this is what he believes.

[82] For example Renfrew and Zubrow (eds.), *The Ancient Mind*; T. Insoll *Archaeology, Ritual, Religion* (Cambridge, 2004); T. Insoll (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion* (Oxford, 2011); E. Kyriakidis, *The Archaeology of Ritual* (Los Angeles, 2007). Ian Hodder's work, particularly on Çatalhöyük, has been particularly influential, for example most recently: *Religion in the Emergence of Civilization: Çatalhöyük as a Case Study* (Cambridge, 2010) and *Religion at Work in a Neolithic Society: Vital Matters* (Cambridge, 2014). A number of scholars have developed the work of the anthropologist Harvey Whitehouse (see in particular

In the alignment of material culture with the study of ancient religion, Simon Price's influential book of 1984, *Rituals and Power*, and Colin Renfrew's 1985, *The Archaeology of Cult* were both landmark publications, heavily reliant on archaeological findings and their interpretation. Both also drew extensively on the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz.[83] Relativism, so important for anthropologists keen to allay fears of cultural bias, allowed particular evidence to be viewed as culturally specific. Sociological approaches that had once suppressed religious meanings in material culture could now be utilized to think about religion. Material evidence could provide indications about the religious habits of ancient communities, and such approaches were also a means of avoiding the baggage of contemporary, Eurocentric schemes of what constituted religion. In the decades since, numerous Classical archaeologists have taken the study of ritual to heart.[84]

Yet little attention has been paid to defining the relationship of ritual to religion and vice versa. The contribution to understanding of religion made by studies of ritual thus remains founded upon uncertain principles. Without clarity on this, ritual-centred approaches cannot hope to play more than a marginal role in responding to the larger question of what we *mean* by the term 'religion'.[85] For example, the LIMC's successor, the *Thesaurus cultus et rituum antiquorum* (ThesCRA), as a multi-volume condensation of contemporary academic opinion on images and religion, has been damningly summarized: 'Notwithstanding the great usefulness of such a compendium, it is frankly a monumental testimony to a series of presumptions and presuppositions grounded in no argument or analytic justification

H. Whitehouse, *Modes of Religiosity: A Cognitive Theory of Religious Transmission* (Oxford, 2004)), including in the combined volume edited by Luther H. Martin and Harvey Whitehouse, *Theorizing Religions Past: Archaeology, History, and Cognition* (Oxford, 2004).

[83] C. Geertz, 'Religion as a Cultural System', in M. Banton (ed.), *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* (London, 1966) 1–46; C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (London, 1973).

[84] For a summary of perspectives not limited to Classical archaeology, see L. Fogelin, 'The Archaeology of Religious Ritual', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 36 (2007) 55–71.

[85] J. Elsner, 'Material Culture and Ritual: State of the Question', in B. Wescoat and R. Ousterhout (eds.), *Architecture of the Sacred: Space, Ritual, and Experience from Classical Greece to Byzantium* (Cambridge, 2012) 1–26, offers a summary critique of the problem, written in 2008, that succinctly articulates the specific problem of inference for archaeologists and art historians studying religion. Though the field is dominated by optimists, it is worth noting that more cautious members of the discipline have recently been more vocal. G. Lucas, 'Evidence of What? On the Possibilities of Archaeological Interpretation', in R. Chapman and A. Wylie (eds.) *Material Evidence: Learning from Archaeological Practice* (London, 2015) 311–24, has expressed doubts about the 'quite profound ontological leaps . . . routinely assumed in archaeology', in something of a revival of Hawkes' scepticism.

whatsoever.'[86] It lacks any discussion of either the category of 'ritual' or that of 'religion', nor of the equation of these two terms throughout. This is a signal instance of the optimistic inclusion of evidence and subjects of inquiry without a fundamental appraisal of the problems they bring.

Ritual is something that might be observed, as for example in scenes of processions in Roman art, or inferred from the nature, context or comparability of a particular object to others, as in the case of the Maryport altars (both their dedications and potentially their burials). But in what sense is the ritual that they suggest religion? Clearly, there was some religious substance in the regular dedication of altars by members of the same military company; but the mid-twentieth-century theory (entirely unsupported by evidence) that the Maryport altars were buried in an annual ritual represents a good example of ungrounded optimism in inferring ritual and religion from archaeology. This assumption has recently been rejected in favour of pragmatic interpretations of the burials as enabling building foundations. In Durkheimian terms, 'secular' rituals, like going to work every morning at the same time, do not necessarily occupy 'sacred' as opposed to 'profane' space.[87] Might works of art or objects of material culture operate differently if viewed as either ritual items or religious items? And how might we relate studies of ritual to comparable studies of religion? These are more troubling questions than perhaps they should be, throwing into light the gap between ambition and practice in archaeology.

3. Conclusions

At present, the study of Roman religion through material culture is caught between the currents of the three broad disciplinary approaches we have

---

[86] Elsner, 'Material Culture and Ritual', 9. It may be added that there is no discussion of the relationship of religion and ritual in any of the 500 pages of Raja and Rüpke (*Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World*), despite the phrase 'archaeology of religion' being in the book's title and the phrase 'archaeology of ritual' being the title of part 1 (pp. 27–80).

[87] Catherine Bell's influential distinction of ritual from everyday actions demonstrates Durkheim's enduring influence and describes 'ritualization' as 'a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities': see C. Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford, 1992) 74. Later Bell states that, '. . . what is ritual is always contingent, provisional, and defined by difference' (91). Bell does not explicitly define religion, but her use of Durkheim's terminology of the sacred and profane (*passim*) with ritualization implies that ritual and religion are synonymous and on the sacred, privileged and non-quotidian side of Durkheim's great divide. This in turn conceives of religious acts in abnormal, distinctive terms. Though this might be a good way of conceiving of some types of ritual, it is debatable whether it is universally relevant for the study of religion.

been discussing: historical, art historical and archaeological. We have demonstrated in each sub-section how the interpretation and use of the Maryport altars could be affected by these often-competing lines: historians have valued the inscriptions over the objects; art historians have not engaged with them at all; archaeologists have seen them mainly in terms of their collectivity and what their burials may entail. The challenge is partly located in the difficulties of communicating across disciplinary boundaries. The trouble is that, whether striving against or working within subject boundaries, one encounters the deeply ingrained problems that prevent effective cross-disciplinary communication and comparison. While there is no desire to keep these approaches distinct from one another, there remain no sustained precedents for a comparative dialogue.

Ideological biases of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have denied the significance of material evidence in relation to religion, denied the religiosity of aesthetically judged objects, and denied the significance of an object or image's religious aspects in relation to other social structures. In part, at least in relation to questions in the study of religion, this is connected to the fact that the ancient 'polytheistic' religions of antiquity are an outlier in the bigger narrative of the world religions, including the main thrust of this volume. Unlike the world religions – and indeed unlike some universalizing religions that ultimately never 'made it', such as Manichaeism – the religions of Graeco-Roman antiquity, with the exception of Judaism and Christianity, were not founded on written scriptures. Since academic method in studying religion is profoundly dependent on starting from scripture (itself a process embedded in centuries of theology in Europe and Asia), the lack of scripture has always complicated the study of ancient religion. This is why the study of ancient religion has largely lain in the purview of the ancient historian and to an extent, the archaeologist, rather than in the hands of theologians. With recognition of material culture's central place in ancient religion, the focus has rightly shifted and specialists working on this material have increasingly participated in discussions of religion.[88]

The result has been a certain discomfort about how to marshal an evidential base for ancient religion and indeed the problem of what constitutes appropriate empirical evidence at all. Religion only became an interesting aspect of the study of material culture when it was

---

[88] For some thoughts on visual theology in ancient Greece, see R. Osborne, *The History Written on the Classical Greek Body* (Cambridge, 2011) 185–215 (on 'godsbodies'); Platt, *Facing the Gods*, 77–123; M. Squire, *The Art of the Body: Antiquity and Its Legacy* (London, 2011) 154–201; Gaifman, *Aniconism in Greek Antiquity*, 243–70.

acknowledged that images and objects could play more than one signifi-
cant role even for the same person, and that different viewers saw the same
thing differently. But as soon as *response* to objects, rather than the
meaning of objects became the object of study, the evidence that material
culture could provide in relation to religion ran into direct conflict with
constructions of religion that have traditionally sought the kinds of firm
categories constructed through scripture and its commentarial exegeses.

   This chapter has shown that we need a discourse that allows us to talk
across our various forms of evidence, without unduly stressing one eviden-
tiary base or methodological framework. It is worth asking whether it is
possible to write a religious history entirely from material and artistic
evidence. For many, it will be very difficult to grasp how such a thing
could be done. How will we know what was meant, who was who, what
things were for? These are reasonable doubts; but only insofar as we cling
to the traditional types of history, and history of religions, that are written
from texts. To reverse the question, can we write an adequate religious
history *without* material and artistic evidence? For the ancient world, the
answer must be no. In part, this is because the Greeks and Romans never
conceived of their religious life in the kind of textual terms defined by
scriptures: how can we know how they visualized their gods, how they
framed them in space, what their procedures for worship were, without the
evidence of material culture?

   Our ability to incorporate material evidence into our pictures of the past
is dependent upon a continued interrogation of the methods we use. The
particularity of material evidence remains problematic. The idiosyncrasy of
many objects and images, not to mention contexts, makes it extremely
difficult to talk across time and space in the way we do when discussing
economics or political power. But, in transforming object-specific studies
to broader histories, we should expect to challenge our preconceptions not
only of what religion was, but of how we write about religion and construct
history more generally. The very introduction of material evidence into our
picture of religion, long excluded by a dominant textual tradition, is part of
the way we may break this cycle. But in doing so, we have to be aware that
many of the ways that we *do* history or think about religion must neces-
sarily be questioned as a result.

   Objects like the Maryport altars offer a valuable example of methodolo-
gies and questions rooted in material culture. What they might tell us is not
necessarily confined to one aspect of religion: as well as religious practice,
we might think of religious identity, of belief, of the sacrality of the altars
themselves and the extent to which they *are* religion. Their materiality and

the dimension of time, the fact of their continued existence in a changing world, makes it almost impossible for them to have maintained the same nature and degree of significance amongst the people who used them from the day of their creation to the time when they were buried. The altars may not be able to reveal all that we wish to know about them, but to have such expectations is to miss the point: no single piece of evidence can ever provide the full and final answer. Few things ever come with a maker's mark and complete biography attached. The key is to ask questions *of* them and to use them to *help* answer questions.[89] It is these doubts and possibilities, this type of reflection, which needs to be built into materially engaged histories of religion in the future.

We have recently seen a greater willingness from scholars to talk about religion beyond what have traditionally been conceived of as the boundaries of the disciplines of art history and archaeology, and similarly a desire to use material evidence by historians. Concerted efforts have been made to respond not just to the call for increased use of visual material as an intrinsic part of the evidence for Roman religion, but to face the challenges that this presents. These have come from all sides of the disciplinary divides and are frequently configured as inter-disciplinary approaches.[90] It is to this kind of model that we must look, in order to challenge the common perceptions of how to study Roman religion, be that through a historical, art historical or an archaeological perspective.

---

[89] For a philosophical account of this issue from the one great Roman archaeologist who was also a great philosopher, see R. G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography* (Oxford, 1939) 122–4.

[90] See in particular J. Elsner, *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text* (Princeton, 2007) 1–26; C. Ando, *The Matter of the Gods: Religion and the Roman Empire* (Berkeley, 2008) 21–42; S. Estienne, D. Jaillard, N. Lubtschansky and C. Pouzadoux (eds.), *Image et religion dans l'antiquité gréco-romaine* (Naples, 2008); T. Habinek, 'Ancient Art versus Modern Aesthetics: A Naturalist Perspective', *Arethusa* 43 (2010) 215–30; J. Mylonopoulos (ed.), *Divine Images and Human Imaginations in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Leiden, 2010); Platt and Squire (eds.), *The Art of Art History in Greco-Roman Antiquity*; V. J. Platt, 'Art History in the Temple', *Arethusa* 43/2 (2010) 197–213; Platt, *Facing the Gods*; Squire, 'Introduction'; Raja and Rüpke (eds.), *Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World*, 6–7. Sylvia Estienne's edited volume was the product of a joint French–Italian conference and four-year seminar series running at the French school of Rome. The desire to get something done is extremely evident in this volume, even if the quality of its contributions differs markedly. The 2010 volume of *Arethusa* edited by Platt and Squire demonstrated the potential of future studies, drawing on the various expertise of its contributors to paint a picture of both historiographical and modern views on understanding Graeco-Roman art more broadly.