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# Living with the gods in the Roman Empire: "Everything, everywhere, all at once"

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RÜPKE, J., and G. WOOLF, eds. 2021. *Religion in the Roman Empire*. Die Religionen der Menschheit 16. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer Verlag. Pp. 323. ISBN: 978-3-170-29224-6.

The editors of this expansive, creative, multi-authored enterprise – for it is at once more and less than the comprehensive treatment of religion in the Roman empire that the title implies – begin by posing a seemingly simple question: "how… was Roman religion lived?" (9). They invite the reader to go on a journey with them beyond traditional approaches to Roman religion, based primarily on texts, reflecting the views of elite men, and concerned with the institutions that governed practice, instead to see Roman religion as a complex system in which people from throughout the Roman empire of all ages, genders, backgrounds, and beliefs took part. The narrative is not linear, and readers looking for detailed information about specific festivals, for example, may find themselves disappointed; few topics or examples are treated in sufficient depth to give a full overview. Yet

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in place of a teleological approach, grounded necessarily in the narratives of ancient authors and shaped by their various agendas, the volume offers readers new lenses through which to consider many issues, from the practice of imperial cult and its interaction with local traditions to the many roles, formal and informal, of ritual practitioners.

The volume consists of eight chapters: J. Rüpke and G. Woolf, "Introduction: Living Roman Religion" (9–24); G. Woolf and M. J. Versluys, "Empire as a Field of Religious Action" (25–42); W. Van Andringa, "The City as a Field of Religious Action: Manufacturing the Divine in Pompeii" (43–60); R. Raja and A.-K. Rieger, "Sanctuaries, Places of Communication, Knowledge, and Memory in Roman Religion" (61–106); G. Petridou and J. Rüpke, "People and Competencies" (107–40); H. Wendt, "The Gods and Other Divine Beings" (141–65); R. Gordon "Managing Problems: Choices and Solutions" (166–209); M. J. Versluys and G. Woolf, "Artefacts and their Humans: Materialising the History of Religion in the Roman World" (210–33); G. Petridou and J. Rüpke, "The Impact of Textual Production on the Organisation and Proliferation of Religious Knowledge in the Roman Empire" (234–61); R. Gordon, R. Raja, and A.-K. Rieger, "Economy and Religion" (262–305). As these chapter titles indicate, the subject matter is enormous, a veritable kaleidoscope of intersecting topics, types of evidence, and approaches – so multifaceted that it is difficult to reconcile them. Hence, the reference in my title to the award-winning 2022 film *Everything, Everywhere, All at Once*, about an ordinary woman trying to manage complex relationships across many iterations of her life in the multiverse.

Adopting open and flexible definitions is a prerequisite to following along the myriad journey(s) into lived experience presented by the volume. In the introduction (9–24), J. Rüpke and G. Woolf define venerated entities broadly as "agents," which could include gods, divine beings, spirits of ancestors, demons or angels; religious activity is "present at a time and a place where, in a particular situation, at least one human individual includes such agents in his or her communication with other humans, whether by merely referring to those agents or by directly addressing them" (12). In other words, they urge us to abandon any conception of Roman religion as monolithic, or even gods-centered, and instead to conceive a set of interrelated systems through which people made sense of the world around them – seen and unseen; mundane and mysterious – which brought them into contact, communion, and sometimes conflict with others around them. The people in question were those who lived in Roman-controlled territories from the late 1st c. BCE through Late Antiquity. As G. Woolf and M. J. Versluys argue in the chapter that follows (25–42), this vast geographical and chronological scope means that a student or scholar must always bear in mind that most, if not all, people had complex, layered identities (related to profession, related to family, related to region) that influenced their individual experiences of the divine. "Indeed, the local and the universal went hand in hand, and were rarely mutually exclusive or even opposed categories" (26).

All chapters adhere to this people-forward approach, though it is worth noting that individual authors or co-authors define (or redefine) terms as suited to their subject areas. Thus, in treating the nature of the gods, H. Wendt provides a definition of lived religion, complementary but differently reasoned to that offered in the introduction (141–65). Wendt argues that Roman religion was more than a rigid system (of institutions, practitioners, and gods), which might seem fixed as described by an author at a given point in time or be construed as evolving from one set of practices to another, with the rise of Christianity and the popularity of cults dedicated to so-called universal deities like Isis


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and Mithras. Instead, she argues that Roman religion rested on a series of interactions with the divine sphere that reflected commonality and continuity. Religion, whatever the nature of the deity venerated and whether practiced in Rome or in a provincial city, was constituted through speech acts like prayer and vows, giving gifts through acts of sacrifice or dedication, celebrations including festivals and meals, and conducted in sacred spaces. Wendt further argues that the proliferation of freelance specialists and religious experts later in the Imperial period can be explained in part as a reaction to this shared foundation, as such practitioners laid claim, whether presupposed upon intellectual or oracular abilities, to specialized knowledge, offering spiritual insights beyond the ordinary through direct personal communication with divine beings. Wendt's contribution also overlaps in illuminating ways with other chapters, including discussion of domestic or private religion (51–52; 168–69) and treatment of the importance of human interactions with material as reflective of belief systems (210–30; 166–67). By and large, however, the reader must forge connections like these among the volume's essays, whether on matters of definition or the treatment of specific topics. Some authors direct the reader to other essays; others do not. Although a minor point, the absence of thorough cross-referencing creates a sometimes confusing experience of circularity for the (probably rare) reader who approaches the book cover to cover, rather than mining the chapters for particular themes or examples. There is an excellent index – yet indexes are of most use to readers who know, in advance, what they are looking for.

This leads to my chief critique of the volume: the essays do not appear to have been produced with the same audience in mind. The series, Die Religionen der Menschheit, offers what the publisher describes as comprehensive surveys of world religions for educated, non-specialist readers. W. Burkert's sweeping and influential treatment of Greek religion is part of the same series.[1] Some essays in the book appear to have been written to this brief. W. Van Andringa's chapter on Pompeii, for example, is well suited to advanced undergraduates and educated readers (43–60). In this, it presents a stark contrast with much of the volume, seemingly geared toward those comfortable with dense academic prose. In a relatively short space, Van Andringa surveys the material from Pompeii and presents evidence from shrines in houses to major temples to extra-urban sanctuaries: this is a truly comprehensive discussion. It includes material that only specialists in the archaeological record of Pompeii would know and some of which is little discussed, such as the painted depiction of a water god from the *castellum aquae* of the Vesuvian gate – intriguing because of its stylistic similarity to shrine paintings and because its potency did not derive from visibility. It was painted on the interior of the structure, above the channel where water from the aqueduct entered the tower. Located there, Van Andringa argues that it marked a change from sacred space to that which was under the control of city residents: "this is where the action of the goddess of the spring stopped, the water was then distributed and used, losing its sacred character" (46). Yet, Van Andringa does not offer much guidance to readers hoping to deepen their study. The bibliography is slender, citing primarily English-language works. It omits references to scholarship that documents or catalogues the city's many ritual contexts, including a truly transformative piece of scholarship by the author himself on streetside altars.[2] Curious, too, is the omission of scholarship that relates to the lived religion approach, such as

1 Burkert 1977, reprint 2011.

2 To take a few examples: on street-side shrines, Van Andringa 2000; on domestic shrines, e.g., Giacobello 2008; on the Venus sanctuary, Carroll 2008; Carroll 2010; on the Sant'Abbondio



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P. Foss's work on shrines in kitchens, which addressed the inclusion of enslaved family members, responsible for food production.[3] Despite these quibbles, Van Andringa's contribution emerges as the most accessible and readable section of the book, and I suspect it will be widely referenced. It will certainly find a home in undergraduate syllabi and be of considerable aid to those not already well versed in the archaeological record of the site. In contrast, other essays in the volume provide extensive bibliography, in multiple languages – an invaluable resource, for the curious generalist and for scholars – but their text is much harder going for readers without significant knowledge of either Roman culture or religious history.

There is much more, however, to praise in this volume. Material and literary evidence are here equal partners in the difficult enterprise of reconstructing lived religion. Two contributions that pair well are R. Raja and A.-K. Rieger's discussion of sanctuaries (61–106) and M. J. Verlsuys and G. Woolf's treatment of artifacts (210–33). Raja and Rieger ask us to set aside what may at first blush seem most important about sanctuaries, their design and external appearance, to consider how they functioned as hubs of human and divine activity. Many of us were taught and in turn teach our own students to think first about the physical characteristics of sacred sites, even when we are interested in broader issues of cultural exchange. As I was reading this chapter, a well-known example from my survey course on Roman art and archaeology came to mind, the two temples at Pyrgi, Temple B (ca. 500 BCE) and Temple A (ca. 470 BCE), and I was excited to think about how I might build on Raja and Rieger's approach to encourage my students to think about it differently. In a standard way of teaching this site, we might argue that the former, with its peripteral colonnade, reflects the influence of Greek traders who were plentiful in the Italian harbor town, while the latter, with a more standard Tuscan design, reflects a political backlash against non-locals, with whom the Etruscans were increasingly in conflict.[4] Raja and Rieger do not go so far as to tell us to ignore design, but they stress that sanctuaries varied widely in size, situation, and design, and that choices like these were primarily intended to facilitate the *do ut des* relationships between people and gods, however that was defined in a given time and in a given place. Sanctuaries were ever evolving, frequently updated (and sometimes left with renovations unfinished) as generation after generation of worshippers visited these sites to affirm their personal relationships with the gods and to perform aspects of their identity in places important to members of their own families, past and present. Considered in this way, sanctuaries possessed the power to shape individual experience and were also stages upon which social and political change played out. Teaching Pyrgi, then, we might begin by stressing that both temples were part of the same sanctuary, enclosed by a shared boundary wall; the site was rich enough in resources to accommodate two grand monuments within a relatively short span of time, manifestly attractive to locals and people coming from long distances. This site reflected ritual, social, economic, and political interaction, with individuals or small self-defined cohorts of people (traders, priests, townsmen, and so on) as the drivers of these exchanges. Impressively, Raja and Rieger's

sanctuary, Bielfeldt 2007; Wyler 2011; on the temple of Isis, De Caro 1992; Swetnam-Burland 2015, 105–41.

3 Foss 1997. Similarly, students and scholars should be aware of recent work on graffiti from Pompeii associated with shrines, for this category of evidence reflects the specific prayers, ideas, and understandings of individuals. Though not available to Van Andringa at the time of writing, see Benefiel 2021; Swetnam-Burland 2022.

4 For discussion, see Haynes 2000, 174–82; bibliography in Ridgway *OCD* s.v. "Pyrgi."



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examples range from the Archaic (the Portonaccio temple at Veii) to the Late Antique period (the Mithraeum at San Giovanni di Duino) and include sites throughout the empire. The authors do not offer deep insight into those sites they discuss but provide a framework useful for thinking of the role and importance of any site, devoted to any god, and built at any point in time during the Roman empire. "Religion was … *lived* in such spaces and the constant interaction between space and people would have had an impact on how religion was practiced and given shape over time" (61).

Later in the volume, M. J. Versluys and G. Woolf build on this foundation to consider the role of artifacts in shaping religious experience (210–33). Like other contributors, they take the long view rather than focusing on a single site or region, but they also embrace a comparative approach, useful for the readership of the Die Religionen der Menschheit series, by making references to the role of material in shaping religion from other cultures, times, and places. One example is the discussion of changes in the representation of the gods in Andean material culture after Spanish conquest. Versluys and Woolf's way of presenting the difficult issue of how we can use material culture to better understand ritual experience is at once simple, clear, and theoretically rigorous, and should be required reading for those new to the study of Roman religion, whatever evidence they prioritize. They point out, rightly, that even ritual texts produced by the Romans were also, at the time of their making, material things. All such things possess power to shape experience, of course reflecting the intentions of their creators at the moment in time and space when they were made, but thereafter taking on additional agency and potency "independent of what they were originally intended to signify" (216). Versluys and Woolf then turn to case studies that explore "objectscapes," defined as the materials and ways of working with these materials available to people in a specific time or place and how these responded to social, cultural, or political change. Specific media considered include hollow terracotta votives, the cement and marble revolution in temple and sanctuary design, lead objects, and automata, moving objects that simulated human or divine action.

Finally, a few words about the way in which the volume presents the evidence for participants and practitioners – those who actually lived, and experienced, Roman religion. G. Petridou and J. Rüpke (107–40) discuss priests and specialists, ranging from those who served in public roles that mirrored dominant social and political hierarchies and were funded by public monies, even if supplemented by the individual holding the role (e.g., the *pontifex maximus*, the *flamen dialis*, and members of various collegia and groups like the Arval brethren; there is an interesting dialogue here, too, with a later essay treating the economy, 262–92), to those that operated alongside or outside of these traditional systems, whether because they were denied opportunities based on gender and class (e.g., wise women or those who helped prepare for rituals, such as *sagae* or *piatrices*) or because the deities they served came from afar (e.g., Isis, Mithras). Petridou and Rüpke's takeaway point, that religious hierarchies exist either in relation or in opposition to other power structures in a society, will not surprise readers. Yet this chapter is rich with examples, drawing attention to less well-known material from throughout the Roman world. References to inscriptions and textual sources are abundant. What is most impressive, however, is how this diverse material is drawn together into an account that makes sense of so many different cults and ritual roles, all products of a roughly similar way of thinking about power and influence, including henotheistic religions sometimes considered inherently separate from "traditional" Roman religion, Jews, and early Christians.



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Richard Gordon's essay (166–209) provides a useful counterpoint to this discussion of agency by looking at ritual options open to individuals and families to help them mitigate real world problems. He notes that though much of our evidence for Roman religion reflects the perspectives of urban elites, "in terms of sheer number, most religious acts took place in the agrarian sector, where the mass of the population lived, exposed as they were to the vagaries of weather, blight, animal pests, and contagious disease among the livestock" (166). This is an emerging area in Roman archaeology more generally and thus a timely topic.[5] Though literary sources do not provide rich information about the lived experiences of rural populations, Gordon's proposal for uncovering this aspect of Roman religious experience is to scrutinize acts, both institutionalized and individualized, that relate to concerns of agricultural uncertainty and scarcity, and death and disease. Much of the essay deals with means of healing, and Gordon offers an interesting synthesis that shows the relationship between popular remedies and ritual actions, such as wearing amulets or speaking prayers or even employing magical nonsense words. Terracotta votives, especially anatomical ones, show how pervasive these concerns were, and reflect the options and choices available to those of lower means, living outside urban environments. The chapter touches on many other topics as well, including discussion of minor ritual specialists who might be consulted for magical cures, and charms that an individual was empowered to perform on their own behalf. One quite brief but intriguing section (185–88) looks at what bio-archaeological evidence might add to our picture of ordinary people's ritual experiences, specifically relating to ritual meals consumed during or as part of the preparation for funerals. Gordon summarizes recent work looking at faunal remains associated with tombs and argues that in so doing we can see subtle differences in regional practices. In Pompeii, for example, roughly two-thirds of ash urns contained animal bones along with human remains, representing animals butchered for ritual meals or animals burned on the pyre but not consumed; 60 percent of the bones associated with tombs were from pigs and 30 percent were from sheep and goats. In contrast, only a small minority of ash urns from the North African site of Pupput/Hammamet contained animal bones, primarily poultry. Yet here, there is also evidence of the inclusion of animals, seemingly raw, in inhumation burials. Gordon does not fully synthesize this data, which might confuse general readers because of its complexity and because the datasets are not directly comparable. Even so, the discussion is a useful reminder of the range and diversity of experiences empire-wide, even for ritual acts like cremation, which we might tend to think of as broadly similar.

In sum, this is a book of great ambition. It aims not only to teach its readers about a broad subject (all of Roman religion, practiced Mediterranean-wide, over the course of centuries), but to do so in a way that does not limit future inquiry with a rigid framework. All of the authors encourage the reader to think in new ways and pose difficult questions. It is no surprise that a book of such lofty goals cannot live up to its promise in some respects, nor reach all readers who might pick it up, from the advanced undergraduate to the specialist. No work can be everything to everyone. Yet the volume is rich with ideas and abundant in resources, and is sure to be of use to many, even those who have explored the subject already. For readers who return to it as their ideas grow and new questions arise, it will provide many answers and will furnish much food for thought.

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5 E.g., Bowes 2020.



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# Expanding Jarash: excavations bring new insights into the northwest urban quarter

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