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The Significance of Objects: Considerations on Agency and Context

Rubina Raja, Lara Weiss

The Significance of Objects:
Considerations on Agency and Context **297–306**

Katharina Rieger

Waste Matters: Life Cycle and Agency of Pottery Employed
in Greco-Roman Sacred Spaces **307–339**

Rubina Raja

In and Out of Contexts: Explaining Religious Complexity
through the Banqueting Tesserae from Palmyra **340–371**

Georgia Petridou

Speaking Louder with the Eyes:
Eye-shaped Ex-Votos in Context **372–390**

Frank Daubner

Macedonian Small Towns and Their Use
of Augustus **391–414**

Chris Mowat

A Study on Spontaneity:
Some Notes on the Divinatory Handbook
P.Ryl. 28 **415–440**

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The Significance of Objects: Considerations on Agency and Context

The ‘Lived Ancient Religion’ (LAR) approach has become a research agenda that over the last four years offered a lens to change the way in which we may study and understand religion and its function in the Roman Empire more clearly.¹ Developed within the ERC Advanced Grant project based at Erfurt University, and as a result of the work done over the last years, it has triggered a string of publications tackling issues of methodological and theoretical concerns.² The papers in this volume largely stem from an ERC / LAR conference.³

The concept of ‘Lived Religion’ has been in use for analysing contemporary religion since the 1980s, with works like Robert Orsi’s *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880–1950* (1985, 2nd ed. 2002), and was further developed by the anthropologist Meredith McGuire in her book *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*.⁴ McGuire’s approach offered a new direction also for studies of religion in antiquity: namely to focus on individual and group *appropriation* of religion.⁵ Accordingly, ‘Lived Ancient Religion’ (LAR) aims at exploring everyday expressions, practices and interactions of people negotiating and (re-)shaping

1 The editors of this volume would like to thank and acknowledge the work of the anonymous peer-reviewers. Furthermore we also would like to thank Jörg Rüpke for his kind feedback on a draft of this introduction.

2 Raja and Rüpke 2015; Raja 2016; Rüpke 2016a and Rüpke 2016b.

3 The papers of this volume stem from a conference of the ERC Advanced Grant ‘Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning “cults” and “polis religion”’ project held at Haus Hainstein in Eisenach (Germany) from 9 to 11 October 2013. It was dedicated to Professor Richard Gordon on the occasion of his 70th birthday. See also *RRE* 1.2 (2015) for a set of papers stemming from this conference. The conference was supported by the European Research Council within FP2008–2013 under contract no. 295555, ‘Lived Ancient Religion’.

4 McGuire 2008.

5 Raja and Rüpke 2015, 12; McGuire 2008. See also Rüpke 2012 for a summary of this approach.

religious organisations and belief systems.⁶ ‘Ancient’ means focussing on the Roman Empire here. The LAR conference on the meaning of objects aimed at exploring how objects created ‘meaning’ in situational constructs. The idea was to examine the effectiveness of religious instruments as actually employed in order to create, change and enhance meanings.⁷ Indeed, objects were the primary material which created a physical and visual framework around which religious life unfolded in antiquity. It is important to realise that objects could have a variety of meanings depending on the person(s) handling them as well as according to the situations and / or spaces in which they played a part. One key issue of the conference was therefore the question of how the meaning of objects was appropriated by individual and collective agents in different situations: that is, not only in public ritual, but also in more or less exclusive associations and at home. In fact, we seek to avoid the tendency of taking the importance of objects for granted, because within the framework of the LAR approach, meaning is considered as situational and not constant. Meaning can change, and those potential changes may create new meanings that may again vary in the same context for different agents.

The present volume sets the litmus test for the question of the meaning of objects by putting the usual question the other way round, i. e., by centring on individual and group agency, not object agency.⁸ The new test question is: *How, where and by means of what agency could objects become devoid of meaning or end up out of ‘situations’, and indeed may have changed their meaning over time?*⁹ This new perspective is heavily inspired by ‘thing-theory’ as advocated by Brown.¹⁰ Thing-theory allows us to distinguish and analyse possible changes in the meaning and use of objects: first and foremost by the distinction between object and thing. In thing-theory, an object becomes a thing when it loses its original meaning. But how can we distinguish a potential loss of meaning archaeologically? When, if so, did a votive set in a temple as a gift to the god(s) lose its meaning? When was an object out of context? When was it reused as a thing instead of an object, by whom, and in which situations? Can we distinguish use from misuse in archaeological contexts, especially when considering the problem that most of these contexts were disturbed and / or reflect abandonment practices? The case studies presented in this volume illuminate the various levels which need to be

6 Raja and Rüpke 2015, 12.

7 See the methodological reflections in *Religion in the Roman Empire* 1.1 (2015).

8 Following Gell’s definition of agency, Gell 1998, 16.

9 Raja and Weiss 2015, 142.

10 Brown 2004 and Brown 2001.

considered in order to distinguish 'thing' from 'object', and, indeed, object use from primary to secondary contexts and situations.¹¹ This perspective is crucial to grasp and understand the textual and material evidence of past societies and clearly distinguish among the phases in an object-thing's life cycle. The contributions in the current volume are case studies on a variety of situations and developments, which demonstrate the attribution or loss of meaning of objects in religious contexts in the Roman period.

A second important aspect brought forward in the present contributions is contextualisation: that is, challenging the idea that meaning can be taken for granted. In order to decipher the meaning of objects, be they from textual or material evidence from antiquity, we have to contextualise the objects within their chronological as well as spatial contexts.¹² Without contexts, objects might lose their meaning, be it for contemporaries or in the sense that we can no longer decipher it. Therefore sketching out the changing contexts of the material is most vital for any further analysis and discussion. The more considerations we include on the potential life cycle of an object, and on when (or if) an object might have become a thing, the closer we get to understanding the object in its various contexts. Often it becomes clear that objects would not lose any meanings, but rather change their meanings according to situations (see Raja and Rieger in this volume) or depending on certain agents.¹³

In summary, these five papers, which all use different empirical material and situations as their case studies, provide new insights into a plethora of ways in which religious practices mediate and communicate meanings across cultures, regions and time. They all emphasise the perspective of individual and/or group appropriation, as opposed to a concept of religion strictly defined by rules and regulations that were just being blindly obeyed.

The papers span a number of different categories of objects and also disciplinary approaches, providing insight into the multitude of possibilities and limitations with which we are confronted when working with material from the ancient world. Objects in and out of contexts are addressed, as well as objects that are difficult to interpret, and even objects about which we may debate whether they were objects at all, find a place in this volume.

The paper 'Waste Matters: Life Cycle and Agency of Pottery Employed in Greco-Roman Sacred Spaces,' by Katharina Rieger, on the 'afterlife' of pottery in sanctuaries, pushes the boundaries of how we might explore the role of ceramics used in ritual practices, even after such vessels were disposed,

11 For useful contributions see also Houtman and Meyer 2012.

12 Raja (forthcoming) contains a string of contributions on such issues.

13 Weiss 2015.

when they, so to say, had served their primary functions as ritual vessels. Pottery is a primary category of archaeological evidence in almost any ancient context, and it often presents a string of methodological problems, since it requires chronologies and contexts in order for interpretation to be undertaken; and often both of these parameters are missing. Pottery was commonly used in ancient sanctuaries: as votives, as ritual vessels, as tableware for ritual banquets, and also as containers for all sorts of things. Put differently, pottery was used in multiple ways in religious contexts: it could play a role in a ritual itself, and constitute an important agent in a ritual and the surrounding events. Pottery was thus well integrated in the life within a sanctuary, but in various ways, thereby offering an interesting case study for the present volume. In fact, as Rieger highlights, most understanding of pottery within sanctuary contexts is limited to the use of the pottery in the various ritual contexts mentioned above. Whereas the object biography strictly speaking stops with the act of deposition at the closure to the ritual itself, Rieger pushes analysis further by asking: What happened to the pottery after this point in time? For example, why is so much pottery found in ancient sanctuaries and why did it stay there beyond its last 'actual' function? Why was it not just cleaned up? Does the presence of pottery carry a meaning in itself? If so, what meaning can we extract from the reconstruction of the life cycle and final destination of the pottery? Raja and Rüpke propose that 'for the analysis of religion in the Roman Empire, as well as elsewhere, meanings constructed by situations rather than coherent individual worldviews should be identified' in order to move beyond the understanding of ancient religion as polis or state religion.¹⁴ The pottery from sanctuaries provides a line of enquiry which allows for new ways of analysing the lived aspects of ancient religion within the *temenos* walls of the sanctuaries. Pottery gives us insights into an entangled world of domestic, economic and religious realms and presents a true challenge for the archaeologist and ancient historian who aims to disentangle the processes and understand the lived aspects of this group of evidence.¹⁵ Rieger follows two lines of enquiry into how to understand ceramic evidence from sacred contexts: 'life cycle' and 'agency'. Furthermore she looks at the ordinary pottery – fine and coarse wares – but explicitly not at their ritual shapes. Thereby she arrives at an as broad a contextualisation as possible, i.e., embedding the pottery within a wider societal context, thereby adding to our otherwise quite specialised view of ceramics found

¹⁴ Raja and Rüpke 2015, 13–14.

¹⁵ For a collective research project funded by the Carlsberg Foundation tackling issues of ceramics in context, both methodologically and theoretically see: <http://projects.au.dk/ceramics-in-context/> headed by Rubina Raja, also for further publications.

in sanctuaries. By including a wide range of case studies and locations with very different backgrounds, Rieger compares the use of these objects beyond the part of their life-cycle which is usually being studied and explores these ceramic objects that were part of both daily life as well as of sacred contexts. Vital questions are, for example, how these objects might have impacted on the formation of social interactions as well as on the communication with the gods and on human agents in a sacred setting. Objects demanded attention, and what impact did they have on human behaviour and practice? The agency, or continuous agency – beyond the votive act, the religious ritual or the cultic meal – stands at the centre of Rieger's research asking us to what extent we in fact can or cannot come to useful conclusions about how we see pottery in sacred contexts when we take into consideration the complete life-span of these objects. Communication – between individual and deity, two individuals, or an individual and a group – continued beyond the ritual acts themselves and constituted an embodied part of how we should view these objects in context and understand their meanings beyond limiting meaning just to the ritual situation.

In the contribution 'In and Out of Contexts: Explaining Religious Complexity through the Banqueting Tesseræ from Palmyra,' Rubina Raja explores to what extent religious complexity might be understood better through the rich corpus of the so-called banqueting tesseræ that functioned as entrance tickets to ritual dining events in sanctuaries in Palmyra. These banqueting tesseræ present the richest source for understanding the religious life of the city in the Roman period. More than 1,100 different types, produced in series, exist. Many of these were commissioned by individuals, which we know because they carry Palmyrene Aramaic inscriptions giving us the names of the individuals who hosted the respective religious banquet.¹⁶ Their iconography, which could be rather detailed although these clay objects were small, as well as their inscriptions offer the possibility of enquiring into the structure of Palmyrene religious life and in particular into the roles that individuals could play in the shaping of religious life in the city's sanctuaries. These objects tell us that it was possible for a number of different groups and individuals belonging to different groups to host banquets at appropriate ritual dining spaces within the parameters of sanctuaries for a certain period of time. All these individuals were depicted as Palmyrene priests, but they did not necessarily act as priests for the deity who was worshipped in the sanctuaries where the respective banquets were held. The tesseræ, Raja argues, provide insights into the ways in which religious

¹⁶ Ingholt, Seyrig and Starcky 1955 for the latest corpus of these tesseræ.

groups and individuals acting on behalf of these groups interacted. In fact, the participants of the banquets were all part of the extended families within Palmyrene society, but there they often interacted across their 'tribal' family constellations. Raja also shows that the banqueting practices were highly variable both socially but also in terms of religious practices and allowed a variety of groups, and indeed individuals, to interact within a range of different social and religious constellations. The tesserae were tiny objects and discarded after use, i. e., after having allowed people to gain access to the ritual dining. As evidence they are direct expressions of how we, in the case of Palmyra, cannot separate social and religious life from each other, and also of how individuals had a direct impact on how and when religious events took place. The tesserae were thus media that allowed agents to move from one context to another for a restricted period of time. Thereby these objects, which were always found out of context, gain a fluid meaning that could be constructed and reconstructed only in the light of the process of events which must have been part of the tesserae's life cycle: commissioning, making, distribution to invitees, collection at entrance and dispersal at the end of the event. Furthermore the tesserae, through the iconography that they carried, were also expressions of knowledge, be it of Palmyra's local religious life or of Roman visual language, which, in the cases brought forward in this article, showed that an awareness of the various levels of interaction – local, regional and imperial – also was of concern – both for commissioner (host) and receiver (guest). These objects worked on a variety of levels moving between contexts and meanings.

The contribution 'Speaking Louder with the Eyes: Eye-shaped Ex-Votos in Context,' by Georgia Petridou, addresses and examines the meanings of the eye-shaped ex-votos from sanctuaries dedicated to Demeter and Kore. These deities were not traditionally associated with illness and healing. Therefore Petridou sets out to discuss, through archaeological, epigraphic and literary evidence, how we may contextualise and understand these objects, which at first seem outside of any appropriate religious context. The eye-shaped ex-votos resemble other anatomical votives found in sanctuaries dedicated to healing cults, but in the case of the ones addressed here we are confronted with a spectrum of challenges and possibilities concerning interpretation. One of the central questions to be asked is whether these objects in fact were ex-votos dedicated by ill or healed individuals with eye diseases or whether they were testaments of ocularcentric processes which would have informed the worshippers' religious experiences. These are two very different possibilities for interpretation and underline the importance of a context-first approach, taking a holistic view of the objects and consid-

ering their primary functions as well as the string of meanings which they could have held in various situations. It is complex and difficult to distinguish between the actual and metaphorical meanings which these objects might have held. This finding points to a conceptual fluidity between physical vision and/or blindness and mystic vision and/or blindness. The paper demonstrates that although Kore and Demeter were not primarily considered healing deities, they were indeed thought of as regulating eyesight – as the archaeological and literary evidence testifies to. Despite not being able to give a clear-cut answer, Petridou shows exactly how objects need to be interpreted within particular situations and may hold a prominent importance when viewed in these situations. She goes on to conclude that the eye-votives speak loud and clear, whatever interpretation one takes, about the central importance of the ocularcentric processes that informed the dedicants' experience in the sanctuaries of Demeter and Kore.

Frank Daubner, in his contribution on 'Macedonian Small Towns and their Use of Augustus,' highlights how objectification often is created after events have taken place and are therefore seen in hindsight. In this case, Daubner suggests that Augustus was only retrospectively seen as an emperor, but not in his own time, and sets out to explore how Augustus was used as an image and object in Macedonian smaller towns during his lifetime. Although this interpretation may not come as a surprise to scholars of antiquity, it still reminds us bluntly of the fact that objectification never is or was objective and always holds some interpretation, and that we can have difficulties distancing ourselves even from ancient material. The article explores the multiple facets of the worship of Augustus in Macedonian smaller towns and gives insight into how such developing worship was shaped quite differently from location to location. Daubner also stresses the centrality of space, spatial relations and locations – as well as absence – within the space of objects and monuments. He argues that public space was a controlled space and that leaving it empty or filling it up had huge implications on how to perceive those objects put in the space. If a space was less filled, the objects and monuments in it would naturally receive more attention. Daubner neatly explains a string of case studies where the worship of Augustus is visualised in more or less prominent terms, becoming part of changing urban public spaces in these towns in a time which cannot even be called Augustan, because that is a period or epoch which scholars have invented in modern times.

Chris Mowat's 'A Study on Spontaneity: Some Notes on the Divinatory Handbook *P.Ryl.* 28' deals with a palmomantic text, a handwritten ancient Greek codex in which meanings are attributed to the spontaneous twitching

of various body parts. The texts, as Mowat argues, was produced to create a material presence of knowledge. The fact that such a text could be written down quickly and without regard to the full tradition surrounding such divinatory texts makes it an interesting case study for the meaning of texts as objects. Although divination is a well-explored field within ancient studies, research on palmomancy remains scarce. Mowat's contribution thus provides a refreshing view on the role of lived ancient religion in palmomancy. Texts were there to be read and most importantly used – that is, appropriated, modified, and even invented. Mowat shows that although 'spontaneously created', the text should not be mistaken as being 'fake'. Schools of Textual Criticism have long acknowledged that reconstructing a so-called *Urtext* is not a relevant question for understanding the use-life of certain texts.¹⁷ This is once again true for the realm in which divinatory traditions were used. In order to show the deeper meaning of texts as objects, Mowat applies performativity theory as coined by Austin, firstly to denote utterances that have the capacity to act or to consummate an action or an identity. Secondly, he situates performativity in a divination context, concluding that performativity then is retroactive: the expectations connected to a palmomancy consultation in terms of both form and outcome constitute the tradition, but are at the same time necessary to establish the reality of the ritual. Put differently, in retrospect a prediction that became true warrants the performance of this, but also future, divinatory practice. As Mowat states it 'would be the expectation of the elements that constitute the tradition actually establishing the reality of the consultation, and being retroactively necessary for said consultation to be correct. The retroactive nature of performativity is particularly relevant in divinatory contexts. A prediction is verified when it comes true and, as such, retroactively confirms the reality of the ritual, the consultation and the prophecy.' The performativity as such hence becomes the object expressed through the divination text. In fact, the divinatory text becomes the construction of credibility not necessarily based on a pre-existing truth, but on a truth that is performatively constructed by its creation. Mowat hence demonstrates that the divinatory handbook *P.Ryl.* 28 reflects a tradition of performatively constructed 'truths' that made up a lived divinatory tradition. The fact that the text was spontaneously written did not make it less 'true'. On the contrary, the creative process of its coming into being allows an insight into the lived experience of a religious expert making it an object for a variety of agents.

17 E.g. Hussein (forthcoming); Cherniak 1994; Maas 1985.

To conclude, the contributions in this volume bring up a variety of issues central to how various types of objects may be interpreted and how their meaning may have changed according to context and situation, or over time. The objects include texts, small objects designed to be used only once, ceramics allegedly meant for certain situations, and the large life-size sculpture of the emperor Augustus. This shows that size does not matter. All these objects, large or small, played various roles in complex processes involving numerous agents over time. The objects created situations through their presence – some, but not all, turned into things. Some were open to take up other meanings in situations depending on human as well as object agency.

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Religion in the Roman Empire (RRE) is bold in the sense that it intends to further and document new and integrative perspectives on religion in the Ancient World combining multidisciplinary methodologies. Starting from the notion of 'lived religion' it will offer a space to take up recent, but still incipient research to modify and cross the disciplinary boundaries of 'History of Religion', 'Anthropology', 'Classics', 'Ancient History', 'Ancient Judaism', 'Early Christianity', 'New Testament', 'Patristic Studies', 'Coptic Studies', 'Gnostic and Manichaean Studies', 'Archaeology' and 'Oriental Languages'. It is the purpose of the journal to stimulate the development of an approach which can comprise the local and global trajectories of the multi-dimensional pluralistic religions of antiquity.

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