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Personal experience and material devotion in ancient Greek religion

K. A. Rask, *Personal experience and material devotion in ancient Greek religion*. Routledge monographs in classical studies. Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2023. Pp. 226. ISBN 9781032357485.

Review by

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Preview

“Can we reconstruct the religious lives of worshippers like Zoilos, named on a votive fragment, from the archeological and textual evidence?” More specifically, “what of their relationships with Aphrodite, and the embodied experience of individuals standing before her small temple [at Gravisca in Etruria]? Can we get at the inner emotions of these visitors, safely descending from the ship’s deck to the shore?” K.A. Rask’s book begins with these questions, which will arouse the curiosity of anyone interested in ancient Greek religion, its worshippers, its gods and the actions taken by the former to honour the latter. As its title suggests, this work is in line with two relatively recent approaches to ancient religions: personal experience (the ‘lived ancient religion’ that has developed as a counterpoint to ‘polis-religion’) and materiality (the ‘material turn’ that is increasingly asserting itself in the sciences of antiquity).^[1] To quote the author: “Studies of Mediterranean religions increasingly center materialist phenomenologies and artefact agencies” (p. 11).

The introduction (Chapter 1) therefore defines this theoretical framework and describes the approach adopted and the aims of the book. The focus is on the experience of individuals rather than on social contexts and civic institutions, sanctuaries and cult personnel, or literary discourses. But how to define this “experience”? According to K.A. Rask, it “includes an individual’s bodily engagement, mental and emotional perspectives, and first-person point-of-view as they engage the gods and the supernatural during major religious events, personally significant moments, and the occurrences of daily life” (p. 4). A brief reference is made to phenomenology as the theoretical background to this concept of “experience”. As the book is primarily concerned with the personal aspects of religion, practices traditionally regarded as “magic” are included here “as an aspect of Greek religious life” (p. 5). For the author, another aspect of lived religious experience is the engagement with favoured deities in various ways, as “emotionally resonant personal relationships”, which she calls “devotional activities”. As examples of these activities, she briefly mentions in her introduction Sappho’s *Hymn to Aphrodite* or the shrines founded by individuals. But the preferred medium for the study of individual experience and materiality is undoubtedly the ex-voto, understood as *anathema* or *agalma*. On the one hand, offering is a central activity in Greek “personal religious activity”, and, on the other hand, objects of this type provide valuable bodies of data. The author globally refers to “a materialist viewpoint” (p. 9) for defining her approach, with an emphasis on “material and visual culture” (p. 11). A comparison with other cultures, such as contemporary Christianity, is sometimes open “to showcase stimulating and inventive ways of thinking about Greek religion” (p. 14).

Four specific aspects of the religious experience of ancient Greeks are addressed in the book: (1) haptics and self-made votives, (2) lifelong religious practices and ubiquitous material culture, (3) divine/supernatural presences in daily life, (4) materiality and media of presence, each corresponding to a specific chapter. I will briefly summarise each of them before moving on to the discussion.

Chapter 2 focuses on self-made votives as devotional artefacts, taking into account the labour, time and commitment of the “devotees” involved in the creation of items such as vegetal wreaths, figural cakes, woven or wooden votives. These four categories of objects are examined in turn to introduce “new perspectives to the study of Greek dedicatory practices” to “holy beings”, or “holy figures” (a curious anachronistic term regularly used for designating the divine recipients of these offerings).

Chapter 3 looks at personal biography and life-long religious practices, with an emphasis on children, and the “corporeal” engagement with objects, images and other materials, that lead them to learn to imitate adults and imbue them with sentimentality and memories. It is against this background that the notion of *patria* is addressed, not in terms of a collective reference to the community’s past, but in terms of personal biography: it encompasses the right way of doing things the way it has always been done in one’s own life and family.

Chapter 4 addresses the experience of the supernatural presence in the personal lives of the ancient Greeks (based on the work of Angelos Chaniotis and Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis). Gods, heroes and *daimones* (conceived here as “souls” or “ghosts”, which is a later significance of the word) are felt to be close and working in the world, even if no effective epiphany is experienced. In keeping with the ambitions of the book, it is above all the materiality and the lived experience of the divine presence that is analysed.

Chapter 5 is closely related to the previous one and continues along the path of presence, focusing on the medium that expresses it: various materials and substances believed to contain the powers and presence of supernatural beings such as objects of everyday life (rings and seals), items involved in magical rituals (the term ‘magic’ appears here), dedicated personal objects (rings, seals, hair, etc., as media evoking the presence of a physically absent mortal body in the sanctuary where they are offered).

Chapter 6 brings together the threads of the previous chapters, anchoring the analysis in the world of seafarers and maritime life. It returns to Gravisca, where the book began, and addresses the archaeology of the site, in comparison with other port shrines, such as Naucratis. This single case study of maritime experience is intended to offer the opportunity to test the usefulness of the lived religion approach in the context of people engaged in highly dangerous work.

Unlike many publications based on these new approaches (lived ancient religion and the material turn), which offer the mere juxtaposition of papers from different authors, K.A. Rask has made the remarkable effort to write a monograph to test the validity of the global question raised by these supposed new paradigms: what can we reconstruct of the “varieties of the religious experience” (to quote the title of William James’ famous book) of ancient peoples in their daily life and life course in terms of feelings, emotions, affective reactions, first-person experience of the world, bodily practices of embodied actors, etc. Moreover, she has set out her argument in a theoretical framework that should make it possible to avoid the subjectivity of the modern interpreter as far as “personal experience” is concerned. This is all the more necessary when studying a culture of the past where the available evidence is rather patchy and, of course, the fieldwork of the kind carried out in the context of twentieth-century Christian devotionality (taken here as an element of comparison) is not possible. Another pitfall of the notion of “personal experience” is the level of specificity that can be achieved beyond broad statements belonging to a very general, day-to-day “anthropology”. Again, one might have hoped that the author’s theoretical concern would help to avoid the trap.

Unfortunately, theory and methodology are two different things, and the former, without the latter, remains rather disconnected from the field of study and from the data it is meant to understand. In the present case, there is no presentation of the method used to address the (limited and fragmentary) evidence or of the criteria for selecting it. Even if artefacts and iconography are to form the basis of the analysis, it is clear that such a study cannot do without texts, whether literary or epigraphic. They appear in each chapter of the book in a somewhat haphazard way, in parallel with objects and images. However, while the theoretical approach is detailed in the introduction, the criteria for selecting the documents (of any kind) are never made explicit. Much of the discussion about texts is based on secondary literature, with which there is a constant dialogue, but an in-depth study of well-defined evidence with a clear method of study would have been a real touchstone for the “lived ancient religion” perspective. As a result, the subjectivity of interpretation and the general nature of the conclusions—the two pitfalls that could be avoided by a theoretical approach that defines its objects—return due to the lack of method in the treatment of evidence. I will give some examples to support this critical assessment.

The allusion to Sappho’s *Hymn to Aphrodite* in the introduction, even if it is a one-off, already raises the problem of method. Lyric poetry today is no longer conceived as a direct first-person expression of personal experience, but as part of a ritualised collective performance (by the way, this is something not disconnected from the ‘polis-religion’). We cannot, therefore, without caution, invoke this type of text in passing to illustrate a supposedly “personal experience” or “devotionalism”. My remark could be seen as a bad rap for a work that focuses on materiality, but the example is indicative of a flaw that goes beyond that: to take the evidence at face value, without reflecting on the specific cultural and social contexts in which it has been produced. What is the benefit of reading, about self-made votives (chapter 2), that “all these sensuous activities and materials infused a ritual process acted out by makers and inseparable from the corporeality of touch” (p. 33)? Or, as far as weaving is concerned: “for ancient devotees, the carding of wool, spinning it into thread, and the interweaving of strings on a loom haptically expressed personal piety” (p. 39). How much progress have we made in our knowledge of ancient Greek religion in reconstructing a “haptic” perspective? Is there a specific “Greek” way of touching in this regard? A handmade ex-voto certainly says something about the dedicator’s particular involvement in the process, but can we go beyond this very general observation?

The same can be asked for many other assessments in chapters 2 and 3: e.g. the “sensation” of gathering green plants and flowers in a pure meadow by Hippolytus giving a wreath to Artemis in Euripides (p. 35); “the process of making an offering” which would be “rendered personally and emotionally significant” (p. 44); “the numerous references to children in the decrees” [where? when?] suggesting “that the inclusion of the youngest generation in religious activities was a serious public matter” (p. 56); the statement that “their [the children] religious knowledge was marked by watching their parents and siblings hold small dedications in their hands and place them in shrines, and learning to do so themselves” (p. 61, cf. also p. 75, the statement that children dedicate objects, without references); the fact that “Greeks responded emotionally to their religious visual and material culture” (p. 72), etc.

The issue of “supernatural presence” and “media of presence” in chapter 4 and 5 addresses important questions for understanding a polytheistic culture. These parts are the most successful in the book and full of very interesting insights about “divine presence”. I only have one regret. Robert Orsi’s work on “presence” in “lived” contemporary religion is used extensively here, and this openness to other periods is interesting. However, the issue addressed by K.A. Rask has been extensively studied for decades in French-speaking scholarship, from the perspective of historical anthropology. The question of “presence” is what Jean-Pierre Vernant called “*présentification de l’invisible*” in a famous essay published in 1983.^[2] However, the dialogue with this very fruitful line of research has not been taken up, which is a pity, since some of the questions raised here have already been raised before, including in the treatment of the iconography of the vases (which is a collective medium).^[3]

Chapter 6 comes back to Zoilos and others at Gravisca and Naucratis, as anxious Archaic sailors and seafarers seeking the protection of the gods. The “affective quality” of their visits to the sanctuaries and “the phenomenological impact” of the places is here emphasized, in contrast to the highly dangerous nature of sea travel. But are we really able “to reconstruct their visits to particular built environments, their engagement with local cultural situations, and ... their histories in specific cults” (p. 163)? We are still a long way from that.

I am aware that I am going against the grain by being so critical of current research trends. While I am absolutely convinced (who wouldn't be?) that we need to ask new questions of our evidence (gender studies is a perfect example of this need), some of these questions, however interesting and appealing they may be, are doomed to remain unanswered. To think that they can be resolved, by applying various successive theoretical turns to the evidence, is a delusion that risks two things: reinventing the wheel, or passing off the scholar's ability to speculate about the “personal” lives of the past as a valid and fruitful reconstruction of past societies.^[4] Despite the efforts and hard work of the author, the book under review does not completely escape these risks.

Notes

[1] See, for example, the very recent book edited by Matthew Haysom, Maria Mili, & Jenny Wallensten, *The stuff of the gods. The material aspects of religion in ancient Greece* (Skrifter utgivna av Svenska institutet i Athen, 4°, 59), Stockholm 2024. ISSN 0586-0539. ISBN 978-91-7916-068-5. <https://doi.org/10.30549/actaath-4-59>

[2] Jean-Pierre Vernant, ‘De la présentification de l'invisible à l'imitation de l'apparence’, in: *Image et signification. Rencontres de l'École du Louvre*, Paris, 1983, p. 25-37, republished in: *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs. Étude de psychologie historique*, Paris, 1985, p. 339-349.

[3] Sylvia Estienne, Dominique Jaillard, Natacha Lubtchansky & Claude Pouzadoux (eds.), *Image et religion*. Naples, Publications du Centre Jean Bérard, 2008 [online: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.pcjb.4401>]; Hélène Collard, *Montrer l'invisible : rituel et présentification du divin dans l'imagerie attique* (Kernos, suppl. 30), Liège, Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2016.

[4] On a similar theme to K.A. Rask's book, Adeline Grand-Clément's recent essay accepts the partially subjective nature of any study of this kind: *Au Plaisir des dieux. Expériences du sensible dans les rituels en Grèce ancienne*, Toulouse, Anacharsis, 2023.