MATERIAL AND EXPERIENTIAL RELIGION

INTRODUCTION

In the last twenty-five years there have been so many 'turns' in how the ancient world is approached that you could be forgiven for wondering whether research has tended to simply spin on the spot rather than move forwards in any decisive or meaningful direction. Amongst other things, and in no particular order, the discipline of archaeology, for instance, has undergone spatial, embodied, digital, mobility, ecological, material, symmetrical, relational, ontological, sensory, posthuman and cognitive turns. The specific theoretical and methodological concepts that underpin these directions can vary considerably, but collectively they reflect a shared concern to foreground the complexities of different types of matter in interpretations of past worlds. Many, although not all, also share interests in combining those material complexities with perspectives on experiences of embodiment and/or forms of 'being-in-the-world'. Within ancient religious studies, a re-orientation towards the sensory, embodied and experiential is well evidenced across recent scholarship, where it is accompanied by a significant paradigm shift away from top-down models of so-called '*polis*' or 'civic' religion, which stress the organising principles and socio-political aspects of religion, towards a focus on ancient rituals as 'lived'. Both trends have simultaneously stimulated the need to pay close and critical attention to the role of materials in generating ancient religion not as a set of shared beliefs or practices, but as a collection of dynamic and situational lived experiences emerging from ancient people's mutually constitutive relationships with the world.

Before reviewing how these changes are reflected in and driven by current scholarship it is necessary to establish some parameters. Since a short presentation of this type cannot be comprehensive, and my selections inevitably reflect my own disciplinary positionality, readers may spot what they consider to be glaring and potentially unforgiveable absences; so I offer a reminder that this Profile presents just some aspects of a vast range of exiting and vibrant research on very specific themes.[1] I have chosen to highlight publications that lean most overtly towards reassessments of the relationship between religion and the material world, many of which also seek to spotlight aspects of embodiment and other forms of lived or sensory experience. I have therefore set to one side major projects tackling topics such as late antique urban religion,[2] the naming and mapping of divinities,[3] the socio-political uses of religion,[4] and the history of religions,[5] as well as sensory per-

[1]Readers will also note an anglophone bias, related to the scale of the topic and my decision to focus on positions more prevalent in some academic traditions than others. For an up-to-date bibliography of publications on Roman religion, featuring work in languages other than English, see www.religioacademici.wordpress.com/news/.

[2]E.R. Urciuoli and J. Rüpke, 'Urban Religion in Mediterranean Antiquity: Relocating Religious Change', *Mythos* 12 (2018), 117–35.

[3]E. Bispham and D. Miano (edd.), *Gods and Goddesses in Ancient Italy* (2020); T. Galoppin et al. (edd.), *Naming and Mapping the Gods in the Ancient Mediterranean. Spaces, Mobilities, Imaginaries*, Vol. 1 (2022); C. Bonnet, *The Names of the Gods in Ancient Mediterranean Religions* (2024).

[4]D. Padilla Peralta, *Divine Institutions. Religions and Community in the Middle Roman Republic* (2020).

[5]J. Rüpke, *Religion and its History* (2021).

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spectives that retain a primarily textual focus.[6] I also spotlight largely pre-Christian contexts that I label for simplicity as broadly 'Greek' or 'Roman'. Disciplinary priorities around the de-centring of Greece and Rome make this approach less than ideal, and active decolonising could not be more pressing for a topic as ubiquitous to antiquity and as historically embedded in Western scholarly imaginations as ancient religion.[7] Nevertheless, the sheer diversity of religious practices, forms, settings, concepts and media, plus the daunting scale of the available source material, mean that it is necessary for purely practical purposes to impose some limitations. Finally, one of the most significant outcomes of the material turn has been greater analytical and reflective engagement with the question of what is meant by 'religion' in antiquity. For this reason, I do not present a definition, and what follows features a range of positions. I do, however, exclude activities such as mortuary rituals and funerary cult that under other circumstances might be categorised as religious.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF RITUAL

Studies of ancient religions continue to depend upon the recovery, publication and evaluation of material evidence connected with ritual activities. Work in this area, which can be characterised as 'the archaeology of ritual', involves the identification and reconstruction of religion based on the alignment of excavated data with known ancient ritual behaviours. In recent years this has tended to take two forms. The first involves surveying the types of material evidence that can be used for direct reconstructions and descriptive accounts of the key features of Greek and Roman religious activities. The most influential contribution in this category remains R. Raja and J. Rüpke's comprehensive guide to the range of contexts in which ancient religious practices involved objects and other material things.[8] Although most individual chapters offer little critical engagement with theoretical thinking about materiality, they convincingly demonstrate how essential it is that studies of ancient religion do not overlook the material world.

Other works adopt thematic, geographical or chronological outlooks, including a re-examination of interactions between local and 'universal' expressions of Greek religion,[9] a multidisciplinary, multi-period volume collating work on sanctuaries and an assortment of sacred sites,[10] and a richly illustrated study of iconography, material culture and religion in Archaic and Classical Greece.[11] Projects of this type are flourishing for the Roman provinces, as evidenced by new regional studies as well as collections focused on detecting individual religious agency,[12] while the digital turn is reinvigorating aspects of

[6]Alvar Nuño et al. (edd.), *Sensorivm: The Senses in Roman Polytheism* (2021).

[7]For one example of an explicitly decolonial approach to ancient religion see M.M. McCarty, *Religion and the Making of Roman Africa. Votive Stelae, Traditions, and Empire* (2024).

[8]R. Raja and J. Rüpke (edd.), *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World* (2015).

[9]H. Beck and J. Kindt (edd.), *The Local Horizon of Ancient Greek Religion* (2023).

[10]G. Woolf, I. Bultrighini and C. Norman (edd.), *Sanctuaries and Experience. Knowledge, Practice and Space in the Ancient World* (2023).

[11]T.J. Smith, *Religion in the Art of Archaic and Classical Greece* (2021).

[12]Examples include C. Szabó, *Roman Religion in the Danubian Provinces. Space, Sacralisation and Religious Communication During the Principate (1st–3rd Century AD)* (2022); R. Haeussler and A. King (edd.), *Religious Individualisation. Archaeological, Iconographic and Epigraphic Case Studies from the Roman World* (2023); I.V. Brčić,

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the archaeology of ritual by offering new tools for data presentation and interpretation.[13] This includes the use of network analysis to reveal patterns within existing or newly digitised datasets, often involving epigraphic attestations of festivals, priestly titles and divinities.[14]

The second form taken by work on the archaeology of ritual comprises the publication of newly discovered sites and older excavation data. There are too many examples to list here, but I draw special attention to the two volumes arising from the excavation of Etruscan and Roman sanctuary remains at San Casciano dei Bagni (Tuscany, Italy).[15] These provide model examples of how the fast and generous publication of excavation data can allow archaeological evidence to enter quickly into scholarly discourse, and present a refreshing acceptance that, although rapidly published conclusions may later require revision, it is nevertheless vital to share initial data promptly and as widely as possible.

MATERIAL RELIGION

The archaeology of ritual provides an essential bedrock for most other aspects of ancient material and experiential religion and remains essential for the vitality of the field. It may therefore seem odd to write of a 'material turn' within a discipline that already has the material world at its centre, but many studies of ancient religion have increasingly come to involve a particular re-centring of materials and significant adjustments to the ways in which they are interrogated.[16] The key difference between the archaeology of ritual and research that I characterise here as 'material religion' is that the latter aims to examine fundamental questions about what religion is, how it emerges and why it takes particular forms *as a consequence of* complex relations between people and a wide-ranging material world, rather than assuming the existence of fixed forms of religion expressed through

G. Kremer and A. Nikoloska (edd.), *Contextualizing 'Oriental' Cults. New Lights on the Evidence between the Danube and the Adriatic* (2024).

[13]S. Blakely and M. Daniels (edd.), *Data Science, Human Science, and Ancient Gods. Conversations in Theory and Method* (2021); A. Collar and S.J. Eve, 'Fire for Zeus: Using Virtual Reality to Explore Meaning and Experience at Mount Kasios', *World Archaeology* 52(3) (2021), 521–38.

[14]A. Collar, *Religious Networks in the Roman Empire. The Spread of New Ideas* (2013); M. Daniels, '"Orientalizing" Networks and the Nude Standing Female: Synchronic and Diachronic Dimensions of Ideology Transfer', in: A. Collar (ed.), *Networks and the Spread of Ideas in the Past. Strong Ties, Innovation and Knowledge Exchange* (2022), pp. 31–78; F. Mazzilli, 'Roman Soldiers in the Religious, Social, and Spatial Network of the Hauran', *Mythos* 16 (2022); F. Mazzilli, 'A Decade of Religious Networks in the Pre-Roman and Roman Periods: An Assessment of their Methodology', in: R. Da Vela, M. Franceschini and F. Mazzilli (edd.), *Networks as Resources for Ancient Communities* (2023), pp. 165–83.

[15]E. Mariotti and J. Tabolli (edd.), *Il Santuario Ritrovato. Nuovi Scavi e Ricerche al Bagno Grande di San Casciano dei Bagni* (2021); E. Mariotti, A. Salvi and J. Tabolli (edd.), *Il Santuario Ritrovato 2. Dentro la Vasca Sacra* (2023).

[16]S. Blakely (ed.), *Gods, Objects, and Ritual Practice* (2017); C. Moser and J. Knust (edd.), *Ritual Matters. Material Remains and Ancient Religion* (2017); M.J. Versluys and G. Woolf, 'Artefacts and their Humans: Materialising the History of Religion in the Roman World', in: J. Rüpke and G. Woolf (edd.), *Religion in the Roman Empire* (2021), pp. 210–33.

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material culture. In other words, 'The material study of religions refuses to reduce artifacts to abstract meanings or doctrines' and, instead, 'means studying what things do to make religions happen'.[17] Material religion as it was originally developed for contemporary religions calls for a re-positioning of material things so that they no longer merely reflect or embody religious ideas or experiences but are co-creators of them, working *with* people to generate religious experiences and forms of religious knowledge. For antiquity, explorations of these relationships are being pioneered by the *Baron Thyssen Centre for the Study of Ancient Material Religion* (The Open University, UK), which actively promotes 'the systematic study of how ancient religion happened in and through material things'.

As might be expected, the broad principles of material religion have influenced investigations of the ancient world in multiple ways. One recent volume, for example, has focused on the materiality of festivals in the Graeco-Roman East, with contributors using inscriptions and coinage to explore how festivals emerge as social and cultural phenomena, rather than assuming that they provide direct testimony for festival events.[18] Ancient pilgrimage has also witnessed a burgeoning of critical attentiveness to the material world in ways that cross-cut other emerging interests in mobilities and spatiality, re-framing pilgrimage as a complex materially situated yet mobile lived experience.[19] This is complemented by new formulations of religious 'place' that reveal how a combination of temporally situated engagements with the material aspects of a location produced dynamic or 'continually becoming' sacred landscapes.[20] A study by C. Moser has revealed, for instance, how the materiality of altars can be interpreted in relation to memory and 'emplaced ritual movement', their material qualities enabling them to function as ritual participants that 'actively guid[ed] the transmission and replication of past religious practices' in both the present and the future.[21] Alongside this sit growing interests in the embodied experience of ritual performance, including dance, music and other soundscapes as well as their connection with the physical spaces of sanc-

[17]D. Morgan, *The Thing About Religion* (2021), pp. 22 and 76; a similar point is made for ancient religions in: D. Frankfurter, 'Ritual Matters: Afterword', in: C. Moser and J. Knust (edd.), *Ritual Matters. Material Remains and Ancient Religion* (2017), pp. 145–50. See also *Material Religion. The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*; P. Tamimi Arab, J. Scheper Hughes and S.B. Plate (edd.), *The Routledge Handbook of Material Religion* (2023).

[18]Z. Newby (ed.), *The Material Dynamics of Festivals in the Graeco-Roman East* (2023).

[19]T.M. Kristensen and W. Friese (edd.), *Excavating Pilgrimage. Archaeological Approaches to Sacred Travel and Movement in the Ancient World* (2017); W. Friese, S. Handberg and T.M. Kristensen (edd.), *Ascending and Descending the Acropolis. Movement in Athenian Religion* (2019); J. Kuuliala and J. Rantala (edd.), *Travel, Pilgrimage and Social Interaction from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (2019); A. Collar and T.M. Kristensen, *Embedded Economies of Ancient Mediterranean Pilgrimage* (2020); A. Collar and T.M. Kristensen (edd.), *Pilgrims in Place, Pilgrims in Motion. Sacred Travel in the Ancient Mediterranean* (2024).

[20]C. Moser and C. Feldman (edd.), *Locating the Sacred. Theoretical Approaches to the Emplacement of Religion* (2014); A.-K. Rieger, 'Short-Term Phenomena and Long-Lasting Places: The Altars of the *Lares Augusti* and the *Compita* in the Streets of Ancient Rome', *Journal of Urban Archaeology* 2 (2020), 113–38; E. Angliker and A. Bellia (edd.), *The Soundscape and Landscape at Greek Pan-Hellenic Sanctuaries* (2021).

[21]C. Moser, *The Altars of Republican Rome and Latium. Sacrifice and the Materiality of Roman Religion* (2019), p. 7.

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tuaries,[22] while the interdisciplinary 'Staging of Religious Atmosphere in Ancient Cultures' ('Inszenierung religiöser Atmosphäre in antiken Kulturen') research group at Philipps-Universität Marburg (Germany) is tackling questions of how ancient objects, spaces, actions and sensory perception created distinct religious 'atmospheres'. Meanwhile, C. Norman's study of the Daunian anthropomorphic stone stelae of pre-Roman Italy, a region completely lacking in archaeological traces of ritual, has proven convincingly that close analysis of ostensibly 'non-religious' materialities can also provide insights into local forms of material religion.[23]

Studies of sacrifice have also undergone a turn towards the material and experiential as innovative work shifts attention away from the meanings associated with sacrificial acts and the selection of specific animal victims towards new queries about the materiality of ritual performance. This includes G. Ekroth's bioarchaeological analyses of the complex engagements between ancient people, animal remains and other material detritus of sacrificial activities.[24] Similarly, the last few years have seen a boom in research addressing the wider role of animals, animal bodies (living, dead and iconographic) and other forms of animal material culture in ritual settings.[25] Researchers are also using materialities to ask questions about how the nuances of human–animal relations played into religious experiences and forms of knowledge.[26] Nonetheless, despite a growth in ecocritical approaches elsewhere, the materiality of the non-human environment, including plants and trees, currently remains significantly underrepresented in work on Greek and Roman religions.[27] It is possible that behind this lies a lingering anxiety about the legacy of early animist misuses of ancient religion by the likes of E.B. Tylor and J. Frazer. Even so, positive advances in other ancient contexts that make constructive use of posthuman and New Animist concepts to investigate religious ontologies offer valuable methodological and theoretical models that could profitably be extended to Greek and Roman religion.[28] Water, especially its curative and therapeutic properties, has received more attention, although much of this remains rooted in the traditions of the archaeology of ritual, with

[22]E. Angliker, 'Dances and Rituals at the Sanctuary of Despotiko', in: A. Bellia (ed.), *Musical and Choral Performance Spaces in the Ancient World* (2020), pp. 17–30; E. Angliker, 'The Soundscape of Dodona: Exploring the Many Functions of Sound', in: E. Angliker and A. Bellia (edd.), *The Soundscape and Landscape at Greek Pan-Hellenic Sanctuaries* (2021), pp. 39–49.

[23]C. Norman, 'The Ritual Ecology of Archaic Italy: A View from Daunia', in: G. Woolf, I. Bultrighini and C. Norman (edd.), *Sanctuaries and Experience. Knowledge, Practice and Space in the Ancient World* (2023), pp. 89–114.

[24]G. Ekroth, '"Don't Throw any Bones in the Sanctuary!": On the Handling of Sacred Waste at Ancient Greek Cult Places', in: C. Moser and J. Knust (edd.), *Ritual Matters: Material Remains and Ancient Religion* (2017), pp. 33–55; G. Ekroth, 'A Room of One's Own? Exploring the *Temenos* Concept as Divine Property', in: M. Haysom, M. Mili and J. Wallensten (edd.), *The Stuff of the Gods. The Material Aspects of Religion in Ancient Greece* (2024), pp. 69–82.

[25]J. Kindt (ed.), *Animals in Ancient Greek Religion* (2021).

[26]A. DiBattista, 'Bone Objects as Offerings of Animal Bodies in Archaic Greek Sanctuaries', *American Journal of Archaeology* 127 (2023), 339–64.

[27]This is not to say that the topic of 'sacred trees' has been entirely ignored, but existing studies focus on their role in literary discourse rather than assessments of trees as material components of the world.

[28]A. Perdibon, *Mountains and Trees, Rivers and Springs. Animistic Beliefs and Practices in Ancient Mesopotamian Religion* (2019).

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relatively few studies actively reflecting on the implications for religion of water's physical qualities.[29]

Evaluations of the materiality of votive offerings and dedicated objects are thriving, and mounting interest in embodiment has meant that anatomical votives especially have become the subject of numerous original studies, ranging from cross-cultural reinterpretations[30] and syntheses[31] to edited collections[32] and a plethora of individual essays and projects.[33] Motivated by new thinking around objects and embodiment, and firmly embedded within the sensory turn, votive studies have demonstrated effectively how projects that place materialities at the forefront of questions about past religions can also bridge between other areas of research, notably art history, history of medicine, critical disability studies and sensory studies.[34] These votive studies sit at the cutting edge of ancient material religion, revealing how the manifold capacities of personal items and their sensory affordances as material things produced lived and embodied forms of religion at the level of an individual or small group, in comparison with major state festivals or sacrifices.[35]

[29]M. Annibaletto, M. Bassani and F. Ghedini (edd.), *Cura, Preghiera e Benessere. Le Stazioni Curative Termominerali nell'Italia Romana* (2014); E. Betts, 'Places of Transition and Deposition: Phenomena of Water in the Sacred Landscape of Iron Age Central Adriatic Italy', *Accordia Research Papers* 14 (2016), 63–83; M. Bassani, M. Bolder-Boos and U. Fusco (edd.), *Rethinking the Concept of 'Healing Settlements'. Water, Cults, Constructions and Contexts in the Ancient World* (2019); E.-J. Graham, 'The Fluidity of Things. Exploring the Sensory Transposition of Place in Late Roman Italy and Beyond', *Accordia Research Papers* 16 (2024), 199–215.

[30]J. Hughes, *Votive Body Parts in Greek and Roman Religion* (2017).

[31]F. Fabbri, *Votivi anatomici fittili. Un straordinario fenomeno di religiosità popolare dell'Italia antica* (2019).

[32]I. Weinryb (ed.), *Ex Voto. Votive Giving Across Cultures* (2016); J. Draycott and E.-J. Graham (edd.), *Bodies of Evidence. Ancient Anatomical Votives Past, Present and Future* (2017).

[33]P. Kiernan, 'Miniature Objects as Representations of *Realia*', *World Archaeology* 47 (2015), 45–59; J. Hughes, '"Souvenirs of the Self": Personal Belongings as Votive Offerings in Ancient Religion', *Religion in the Roman Empire* 3 (2017), 181–201; A. Wigodner, 'Gendered Healing Votives in Roman Gaul: Representing the Body in a Colonial Context', *American Journal of Archaeology* 123 (2019), 619–42; see also the collection of essays hosted by 'The Votives Project'.

[34]Art Historical: J. Hughes, 'Dissecting the Classical Hybrid', in: K. Rebay-Salisbury, M.L.S. Sorensen and J. Hughes (edd.), *Body Parts and Bodies Whole. Changing Relations and Meanings* (2010), pp. 101–10. Medical: R. Flemming, 'Anatomical Votives: Popular Medicine in Republican Italy?', in: W.V. Harris (ed.), *Popular Medicine in the Ancient World* (2016), pp. 105–25; G. Petridou, 'Speaking Louder with the Eyes: Eye-Shaped Ex-Votos in Context', *Religion in the Roman Empire* 2 (2016), 372–90; Disability: E.-J. Graham, 'Mobility Impairment in the Sanctuaries of Early Roman Italy', in: C. Laes (ed.), *Disabilities in Antiquity* (2016), pp. 248–66. Sensory studies: E.-J. Graham, 'Holding the Baby? Sensory Dissonance and the Ambiguities of Votive Objects', in: E. Betts (ed.), *Senses of the Empire: Multisensory Approaches to Roman Culture* (2017), pp. 122–38; K.A. Rask, 'Familiarity and Phenomenology in Greece: Accumulated Votives as Group-Made Monuments', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 21–22 (2020), 127–51.

[35]This is especially true of work on textiles and clothing dedications: C. Brøns, *Gods and Garments. Textiles in Greek Sanctuaries in the 7th to the 1st Centuries* BC (2017); A. Petsalis-Diomidis, 'Undressing for Artemis: Sensory Approaches to Clothes Dedications in Hellenistic Epigram and the Cult of Artemis Brauronia', in:

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Several of the contributions cited above also have connections with frameworks of lived religion. For some this is stimulated by direct engagement with formulations of lived religion by scholars of contemporary religious studies, especially their interest in relations between ritual embodiment and the material world.[36] For others it means following the lead of the 'Lived Ancient Religion – Questioning "Cults" and "Polis Religion"' (LAR) project, which was hosted at Max-Weber-Kolleg der Universität Erfurt (Germany) and directed by J. Rüpke.[37] This project, which places communication between individuals and the divine at the centre of its model of ancient religion, has been immensely influential, directly and indirectly generating a substantial amount of innovative scholarship. It should be stressed, however, that not all studies adopting either of these lived religion perspectives involve material religion by default. Nonetheless, a reimagining of religion in terms of dynamic, embodied, situational and individualised encounters with the divine, and a requirement to examine such engagements at the level of the personal and the everyday has amplified the need to pay critical attention to the material world.

Although it has become standard for scholars of Roman religion to refer to LAR, even if only to comment on the extent of their engagement with its formalised aspects, this is much rarer for studies of Greek religion, and despite many shared interests none of the major projects on Greek religion cited so far in this Profile lean on LAR-based methodological or analytical frameworks. Outputs from the LAR project have certainly addressed aspects of religion in Greek cultural contexts, but it is noticeable that interests in how Greek religion was embodied, and the extent to which these lived experiences were subject to variations within situational contexts, are presented more commonly with reference to 'personal' or 'local' forms of religion.[38] This is evident in K.A. Rask's *Personal Experience and Materiality in Greek Religion*, the first book-length study to unambiguously query 'aspects of lived experience and personal religion using phenomenologically oriented approaches: materiality, the body as the arbiter of perception, first-person experiences of the world, and, among other concerns, the centrality of personal biography and emotion'.[39] The strength of approaches like Rask's lies in their creative combination of elements from multiple

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A. Kampakoglou and A. Novokhatko (edd.), *Gaze, Vision, and Visuality in Ancient Greek Literature* (2018), pp. 418–63; E. Mackin Roberts, 'Embodied Wearing: Clothing for Artemis in Ancient Athenian Religion', *Material Religion* 20 (2024), 257–82.

[36]R. Orsi, 'Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion', in: D. Hall (ed.), *Lived Religion in America. Toward a History of Practice* (1997), pp. 1–21; M.B. McGuire, *Lived Religion. Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (2008).

[37]The LAR Project (2013–2017); key publications include: J. Rüpke, 'Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning "Cults" and "Polis Religion"', *Mythos* 5 (2011), 191–203; J. Albrecht et al., 'Religion in the Making: The Lived Ancient Religion Approach', *Religion* 48 (2018), 568–93; J. Rüpke, *Pantheon. A New History of Roman Religion* (2018); V. Gasparini, et al. (edd.), *Lived Religion in the Ancient Mediterranean. Approaching Religious Transformations from Archaeology, History and Classics* (2020). Related projects include 'The Sanctuary Project' (2014–2019); 'Religion und Urbanität' (2018–2026); and the journal *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Mohr Siebeck, https://www.mohrsiebeck.com/zeitschrift/religion-in-the-roman-empire-rre/aktuelles-heft/).

[38]J. Kindt, *Rethinking Greek Religion* (2012); J. Kindt, 'Personal Religion: A Productive Category for the Study of Ancient Greek religion?', *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 135 (2015), 35–50.

[39]K.A. Rask, *Personal Experience and Materiality in Greek Religion* (2023), p. 11.

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theoretical positions on embodiment, lived experience, sensory perception, the materialness of ordinary things and ubiquitous day-to-day practices.

Approaches to ancient religions that adopt a broadly lived religion perspective combined with a re-centring of the material world are often equally closely entwined with sensory studies. A special edition of the *Open Arts Journal* on 'Material Religion in Pompeii', for instance, presents the first collection to apply a range of sensory informed methodologies to the interpretation of public and private forms of ritual activity in a single Roman town.[40] These approaches are also beginning to impact on the UK museum sector, with A. Lee making a compelling case for greater integration of 'sensory and emotional experiences of "doing" religion', and the inclusion of interpretations that address 'the situational needs, actions and experiences of the original makers, users and depositors of the material culture displayed'.[41] Others have embraced methods derived primarily from cognitive science, although much scholarship of this type entails scrutiny of written sources rather than materials. For that reason I will not dwell on cognitive approaches, beyond noting that key publications include J. Larson's pioneering re-assessment of Greek religion[42] and the first two volumes in a new *Ancient Religion and Cognition* book series, which feature some chapters spotlighting materiality and objects.[43] Cognitive approaches have also been applied to studies of ancient magic and 'mystery cults', possibly because of the centrality to the latter of richly imagined cosmologies and initiation processes.[44]

Indeed, one area to have benefited considerably from the adoption of varying formulations of lived religion and its association with materiality, embodiment and sensory experience is ancient magic. Perspectives that emphasise materiality as the starting point for an analysis of how objects, substances, bodies and other things were entwined with the personal and situational nature of most, if not all, ancient magical activities, have reinvigorated debates about the relationship between magic and religion in crucial new ways. A series of insightful contributions, primarily by early career researchers, have brought the materiality of magic from a position on the fringe of ancient religious studies to the mainstream.[45]

[40]J. Hughes (ed.), *Material Religion in Pompeii*. *Open Arts Journal* 10 (2021). See also above on votives and below on magic.

[41]A. Lee, 'Experiencing the Divine? Museum Presentations of Religion in Roman Britain', *Antiquity* 98 (2024), 1321–39.

[42]J. Larson, *Understanding Greek Religion. A Cognitive Approach* (2016).

[43]E. Eidinow, A.W. Geertz and J. North (edd.), *Cognitive Approaches to Ancient Religious Experience* (2022); A. Graham and B. Misic (edd.), *Senses, Cognition, and Ritual Experience in the Roman World* (2024).

[44]B. Misic, 'Cognitive Theory and Religious Integration: The Case of the Poetovian Mithraea', in: T. Brindle et al. (edd.), *TRAC 2014. Proceedings of the 24th Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference* (2015), pp. 31–40; O. Panagiotidou and R. Beck, *The Roman Mithras Cult. A Cognitive Approach* (2017); J. Larson, 'The Cognitive Anatomy of a Mystery Cult', in: N. Belayche, F. Massa and P. Hoffmann (edd.), *Les Mystères au II^e siècle de notre ère: Un Tournant* (2021), pp. 181–97; E. Eidinow and I. Salvo (edd.), 'Special Issue: Cognitive Explorations of Magic in the Ancient World', *Journal of Cognitive Historiography* 8 (2023).

[45]S. McKie, 'Distraught, Drained, Devoured, or Damned? The Importance of Individual Creativity in Roman Cursing', in: M. Mandich et al. (edd.), *TRAC 2015. Proceedings of the 25th Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference* (2016), pp. 15–27; A.M. Whitmore, 'Fascinating *Fascina*: Apotropaic Magic and How to Wear a Penis', in: M. Cifarelli and L. Gawlinksi (edd.), *What Shall I Say of Clothes? Theoretical and Methodological Approaches to the Study of Dress in Antiquity* (2017),

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Ideas about object agency have long featured within studies of religious material culture.[46] However, research has started to move beyond the duality of relations that object agency establishes (human–object) to explore other concepts which, rather than characterising agency as something possessed by a person or a thing, frame it in terms of affect and as the relational outcome of encounters *between* the qualities of a much wider range of multiple human and non-human things. From this perspective we can no longer write only about 'humans' sharing relations with 'objects', but must attend to the qualities of the matter of which they are composed: wood, metal, clay, wax, bone, wool, hair, blood, flesh and so on. Projects inspired by Actor Network Theory (ANT), 'new materialisms', assemblage theory and other broadly post-humanist and post-anthropocentric positions are embracing these ideas as a means of extending material religion beyond the capacities of human-made objects towards new understandings of how ancient religious ontologies were constituted through relations with the matter of the world more generally.[47]

Fresh attentiveness to the matter of the ancient religious world is also pushing traditional topics in new directions, such as studies of religious iconography. P. Kiernan's work on *Roman Cult Images*, for instance, chooses to explore not merely which deities images represented (and related questions about their perceived status as signifying, hosting or embodying a god or goddess), but also what, as an element of specific ritual configurations of matter, the material qualities of those images did to generate religious experiences and localised forms of knowledge about gods.[48] Other research has queried why it matters that figured objects were made using materials with particular qualities and how that enabled imagery to be subverted or experiments made with scale.[49]

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pp. 47–65; A. Parker and S. McKie (edd.), *Material Approaches to Roman Magic. Occult Objects and Supernatural Substances* (2018); C. Sánchez Natalías, 'Aquatic Spaces as Contexts for Depositing *defixiones* in the Roman West', *Religion in the Roman Empire* 5 (2019), 456–67; S. McKie, *Living and Cursing in the Roman West* (2022); A. Parker, 'Teething Problems: Pierced Tooth Amulets and Sensing Pain in the Roman Archaeological Record', *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* 6 (2023).

[46]Recently, however, 'object agency' tends to have become erroneously labelled as a form of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), despite the origins of the latter comprising very different concepts of both agency and objects: G. Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology. A New Theory of Everything* (2018). As the material turn prompts greater engagement with theoretical positions developed in other areas of the humanities and social sciences, researchers need to remain fully alert to the nuances of the terms they choose to use.

[47]I. Selsvold and L. Webb (edd.), *Beyond the Romans. Posthuman Perspectives in Roman Archaeology* (2020); E.-J. Graham, *Reassembling Religion in Roman Italy* (2021); E. Mol, 'New Materialism and Posthumanism in Roman Archaeology: When Objects Speak for Others', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 33 (2023), 715–29.

[48]P. Kiernan, *Roman Cult Images: The Lives and Worship of Idols from the Iron Age to Late Antiquity* (2020); R. Osborne, 'Stuff and godsense', in: M. Haysom, M. Mili and J. Wallensten (edd.), *The Stuff of the Gods. The Material Aspects of Religion in Ancient Greece* (2024), pp. 15–24.

[49]S.M. Langin-Hooper, 'Fascination with the Tiny: Social Negotiation through Miniatures in Hellenistic Babylonia', *World Archaeology* 47 (2015), 60–79; J. Hughes, 'Tiny and Fragmented Votive Offerings from Classical Antiquity', in: S.R. Martin and S.M. Langin-Hooper (edd.), *The Tiny and the Fragmented. Miniature, Broken, or Otherwise Incomplete Objects in the Ancient World* (2018), pp. 48–71.

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Even the topic of aniconism has been approached from a material perspective, with certain arrangements of matter shown to actively evoke divine absence (e.g. an empty chair).[50] Some have critiqued material and lived religion for forgetting about the gods,[51] but it seems that interests in encounters with the matter of the divine are now simply a little different, having progressed from considerations of identification, presence and ritual viewing, to ritual doing, feeling and being, and the role of matter in the co-creation of both ideas about and relations with divinity.[52]

The potential of a re-centring of matter to spark a host of new interpretations is evident in a recent collection on *The Stuff of the Gods*, in which the editors define their collective focus as: 'the broadest possible definition of "stuff", one that encompasses the entirety of the material world. By stuff we mean objects ranging from piles of dung to chryselephantine statues and spaces of all sorts.'[53] Most chapters in the book begin explicitly with an analysis of such 'stuff' or seek to access it in innovative second-hand ways, often via other types of matter, including textual and literary sources, iconography and epigraphy. Indeed, what these essays collectively reveal is how multiple layers of matter and of materiality were at play simultaneously within Greek religion, and how material religion need not necessarily be inherently archaeological in outlook. Ancient material religion perspectives compel new questions about the role of objects, materials, animals, the environment and things that are accessible in other material forms, ranging from epic poetry to inscriptions.[54] Equally, when contributors to the volume are nominally assessing one type of 'stuff', they are sometimes doing that in order to say something about another: T.J. Smith's chapter, for example, employs an assessment of imagery on vase paintings to think not just about the presence or supposed 'meaning' of real animals in sacrifice but also about the significance of their distinctive materiality.[55] What this volume succeeds in showing is how thoroughly pervasive matter and material things of all types were in the continual co-creation of ancient religion and religious experience, but in taking that matter

[50]M. Gaifman, *Aniconism in Greek Antiquity* (2012).

[51]J.N. Bremmer, 'Jörg Rüpke's *Pantheon*', *Religion in the Roman Empire* 4 (2018), 107–12.

[52]S.M. Langin-Hooper, *Figurines in Hellenistic Babylonia. Miniaturization and Cultural Hybridity* (2020); S.M. Langin-Hooper, 'Burying the Alabaster Goddess in Hellenistic Babylonia: Religious Power, Sexual Agency, and Accessing the Afterlife Through Ishtar-Aphrodite Figurines from Seleucid-Parthian Iraq', *American Journal of Archaeology* 127 (2023), 209–40; C.E. Barrett, 'The Affordances of Terracotta Figurines in Domestic Contexts: Reconsidering the Gap between Material and Ritual', in: M. Haysom, M. Mili and J. Wallensten (edd.), *The Stuff of the Gods. The Material Aspects of Religion in Ancient Greece* (2024), pp. 111–32.

[53]M. Haysom, M. Mili and J. Wallensten, 'Introduction', in: M. Haysom, M. Mili and J. Wallensten (edd.), *The Stuff of the Gods. The Material Aspects of Religion in Ancient Greece* (2024), pp. 7–14.

[54]E.-J. Graham, 'The Haptic Production of Religious Knowledge Among the Vestal Virgins: A Hands-On Approach to Roman Ritual', in: A. Graham and B. Misic (edd.), *Senses, Cognition, and Ritual Experience in the Roman World* (2024), pp. 59–88; M. Mili, 'Why Did the Greek Gods Need Objects?', in: M. Haysom, M. Mili and J. Wallensten (edd.), *The Stuff of the Gods. The Material Aspects of Religion in Ancient Greece* (2024), pp. 25–34.

[55]T.J. Smith, 'Resistant, Willing, and Controlled. Sacrificial Animals as "Things" on Greek Vases', in: M. Haysom, M. Mili and J. Wallensten (edd.), *The Stuff of the Gods. The Material Aspects of Religion in Ancient Greece* (2024), pp. 83–96.

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seriously on its own terms it does so in a very different way from the efforts to survey and collate archaeological evidence for religious activities with which this Profile began.

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The immediate future for ancient material and experiential religion will almost certainly involve deeper, more extensive and more systematic engagements with the positions described here and others inspired by developments in archaeological and post-humanist theory. By necessity my emphasis has been on Greek and Roman contexts, but within this the minimal presence of cross-cultural publications also signals a need for greater multi-period, multi-cultural and geographically diverse interventions. Indeed, putting together this survey has revealed a rather surprising lack of dialogue between scholars working on Greek or Roman material religion, and religions in other ancient contexts. This situation risks impoverishing theoretical debate and slowing down innovation. And this is not even to mention late antiquity and early Christianity, where material religion and experiential approaches continue to be comparatively few and far between.[56] It certainly seems that the theoretical concepts and methodologies adopted to interrogate ancient material religion and the pioneering outcomes of those investigations remain largely isolated from one another due to artificial boundaries within the discipline. The present article may not have done anything to rectify that, but perhaps readers will nevertheless be encouraged to imagine yet more novel, creative and interdisciplinary ways to contextualise ancient religious matter(s).

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[56]K. Bowes, 'Early Christian Archaeology: A State of the Field', *Religion Compass* 2 (2008), 575–619; R.N. Denzey Lewis, 'Ordinary Religion in the Late Roman Empire: Principles of a New Approach', *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5 (2021), 104–18.

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