

**Contextualising the sacred in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East:
Religious identities in local, regional and imperial settings**

International conference at the University of Aarhus, Denmark

18. – 20. September 2008

Background and aim of the conference:

The conference is held within the framework of the project “Religious identity, ritual practice and sacred architecture in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East: Sanctuaries between culture, religion and society” based at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, undertaken by Dr. Rubina Raja and funded by the Novo Nordisk Foundation. The conference is the first in a series, which will explore various aspects of religious identities in the Near East through bringing together scholars from a variety of disciplines. The theme is situated at the interface between the study of texts, architecture and religion and therefore presents an ideal situation for interdisciplinary studies.

Cultural, political and religious attitudes were reflected in ancient architecture, inscriptions, written sources, decorative elements and sculpture. An abundance of sources testify to the dynamics of religious life and the relationship between religious groups, which allows us to learn about the multi-faceted and continuously developing religious identities encountered in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East.

Representations and expressions of religious identity in sacred architecture and texts are the central concerns of the papers. Each will explore questions related to these representations and expressions through the written evidence, the inscriptions and the architectural and functional development of temples and sanctuaries including themes such as definition, creation, dissolution, interconnections between sacred sites, access and audience as well as continuity and change. Through the presentation of material which is not usually accessible across disciplines and the subsequent publication, individual scholars will gain new perspectives on the region on which they are working.

With a point of departure in the development of urban, sub-urban and extra-urban sanctuaries and cults as well as the written sources associated with them, the contributions will explore the shaping

and development of the religious identity of individuals, groups and societies and will assess how these categories of religious identity were interrelated and shaped by a variety of circumstances.

The aim of the conference “Contextualising the sacred in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East” is to bring scholars together from a variety of disciplines who work on the Near East in various capacities, archaeologists, ancient historians, epigraphers as well as linguist in order for them to present their research connected to the theme “religious identity”. The idea of this interdisciplinary forum is to encourage the dialogue and discussion between the disciplines as well as lay the ground for further themes to be explored.

Despite implications of geographic distance and political boundaries, the cultures of the Near East from the Hellenistic period throughout the Roman period were dynamically interconnected and mutually dependent; religious identity is at the core of such expressions of relationship and difference. In this period a number of formative elements, culturally, politically and religiously speaking, helped shape and set the framework for later religious transformations.

The aim is also to investigate the role of the sanctuaries in the zone between culture, religion and society in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East. By bringing together ancient historians, classical archaeologists and philologists the aim is to explore the immense potential in diachronic studies of sacred space and religious identity. Through the development of cross-regional and integrative methodologies it is the intention that this conference will open up new research questions and agendas for all these subject areas.

Examples of questions to be explored:

- How local was religious identity in the late Hellenistic and Roman Near East?
- Can regional traits be distinguished as well and what does this bring to our knowledge of the local situations?
- To what degree was religious identity “imperialised” in the course of the Roman imperial period? What did this mean to the local societies? How was such an “imperialisation” (or could one call it a “globalisation” of its time?), if at all, expressed? Here other expressions of “imperialisations” than the imperial cult should also be considered.
- Texts and Architecture: exploring relationships between written sources describing ritual as well as other practices and sacred space.

- The potential multi-functionality and flexibility of sacred space (sanctuaries as production centres, as association centres (guilds) etc.).
- Sacred landscapes: how are temples and other sacred sites integrated and connected across landscapes? In what ways can we model the performances and practices that participate in and enable integration?
- Religious identity: How do we access religious identity through religious/sacred architecture and written sources?
- Sponsorship, dedication, display: Can it be determined what impact it had on the shaping of a society's religious identity when a single person or a group sponsored a sanctuary within public space or when individuals and groups were involved in display within sacred areas?
- Degrees of access (public, private, personal): What material and textual evidence do we have for various degrees and contexts of access? Can sanctuaries, although located in "public" spaces, be divided into categories of public, semi-public and private religious architecture? What is the evidence for transformation of access, such as initiation, as well as changes in the meanings of particular areas? Did elites create performances and practices that were accessible to wider communities or were spaces and performances self-sustaining and exclusive?
- Continuity and change: To what extent can continuity and discontinuity of local and regional traditions in religious architecture and practice be traced through the material evidence and the written sources?
- How did changes in power structures impact expressions of religious identity?