



Religious identity, ritual practice and sacred architecture  
in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East, 100 BC - AD 400:  
Sanctuaries between culture, religion and society

The Near East was in antiquity, as today, a hot spot for cultural, religious and political conflicts. Through studying the region in antiquity it is possible to focus on what the background for these conflicts were and how conflict management and solutions were implemented. The aim of this research project is to investigate the role of the sanctuaries in the zone between culture, religion and society in the late Hellenistic and Roman Near East and to view them in a diachronic perspective. In relation to the problems of religious and cultural nature today the project is relevant as it lays the ground to understanding cultural and religious developments in the region.

Cultural, political and religious attitudes were reflected in ancient architecture and the related groups of material, such as inscriptions, written sources, decorative elements and sculpture. An abundance of sources tells about the relationship between religious groups, the rituals connected to the cults and the conflicts between various religious groups. A syncretism of architectural traditions is often observed in the Hellenistic and Roman Near East. In this syncretism a unique mix of religious and cultural traditions, which does not occur in other parts of the Hellenistic and Roman world, can be observed. A well-known example is the Temple of Bel in Palmyra in Syria. On the outside this temple was an exact copy of the Greek Temple of Artemis in Magnesia in Asia Minor and thereby expressed an awareness about what was en vogue architecturally speaking, namely Greek and Roman architecture. However, on the inside the temple was planned and decorated in an "oriental" style with a strong wish to express local religious traditions. This syncretism of architectural traditions was a conscious and thought-through action with an aim: namely to express a "cultivated" and refined knowledge of local and "global", in the sense of imperial, religious and cultural traditions and representations as well as unite these in a sacred visual expression. This was a legitimisation of local traditions. Furthermore it was an expression of loyalty towards the ruling power, the Romans. In turn an efficient model of conflict management and at the same time an expression of a local wish for modernisation without the loss of tradition.

Another focus of the research project is the meeting between cultures, in particular the reactions of the Romans, as westeners, to "oriental" religions and the processes that this meeting between western and near eastern cultural and religious traditions caused are central to the project. One intention is to increase the modern awareness about the fact that the theme "Orient versus Occident" is an old one within the European cultural sphere and one which we need to approach with caution and awareness. A strong tendency in western scholarship within a number of disciplines focussing on the Near or Middle East is to "orientalise" the region. Furthermore the project will bring to the foreground what role classical archaeology can play in this communication process and how the



discipline can add to a better understanding of the multifaceted region that the Near East was in antiquity.

Exactly because the architecture in antiquity expressed societal values and norms, an analysis of the architectural and decorative development of urban, sub- and extra urban sanctuaries in the late Hellenistic and Roman Near East in the period 100 BC – AD 400 will form the basis for a discussion of the religious and cultural identity of the users, both individuals and groups. It will also seek to explain how these forms of identity interacted across societal structures. In the sanctuaries aspects of religious and cultural identity were reflected through the sacred functions and the ritual practice along side the numerous non-religious functions. Sanctuaries were not only sacred spaces. They surely provided spaces for ritual practices and religious rites, but also for social gatherings. Some of them functioned as meeting places, places of production, as banks and some held asylum. The use of sanctuaries covered a wide range of aspects connected with daily life in the ancient world that were not exclusively religious. Through these usages one gains an impression of the multi-functionality of these complexes. Sanctuaries played a central role in ancient society and to societal self-representation. Sanctuaries could be spaces where representatives, such as travelling merchants from different cultures met and were united through religion, religious belief and ritual practice. Sanctuaries were spaces which provided grounds for conflict management, solution and negotiation, but on the other hand they were also spaces where conflicts could be escalated, where outsiders were not welcome and where the concept of “the other” thrived. Nevertheless, a particular willingness to be inclusive is also encountered in some cases.

A comparative study of the sanctuaries over a longer period of time on the basis of archaeological, epigraphic, numismatic and written sources allows for a discussion of the central role of the sanctuaries in the society as a whole. An examination of the multi-functional role of the sanctuaries is crucial, as the non-sacred or non-religious functions often are ignored or underplayed in studies of ancient sanctuaries. The period 100 BC – AD 400 is chosen because it includes a range of historical events that had a major impact on the development of the Graeco-Roman world, hereunder the transition from the late Hellenistic period to the Roman period, from relative autonomy of several areas within the region to more or less direct imperial rule, the Jewish Wars as well as the introduction of Christianity as the state religion of the Roman empire. One aim of the project is to look at sanctuaries across the late Hellenistic and Roman Near East in order to examine what impact the transitional periods had on the development of the religious life. There is a tendency in the archaeological scholarship to either want to classify monumental architecture from the early imperial period onwards as results of acculturation in connection with the growing Roman presence or to seek the reasons in the “oriental nature” of the region. Neither is of course correct. Through careful consideration of the available material it is possible to follow the “negotiation”-process. It is possible to pin down how architecture and architectural decor was used to renew focus



on local and regional traditions and to reinvent or create local religious identities and history, while at the same time incorporating new concepts of spatial arrangements and decoration.

The main questions that will be addressed include:

How can sacred architecture be used to understand the term "religious identity"?

In what ways do cultural and religious identities overlap? Is this overlap visible in the material culture?

What influence did changes in power structures from the late Hellenistic period to Late Antiquity have on the expressions of religious and cultural identity in the sacred architecture?

To which degree can continuity and discontinuity of local and regional traditions in sacred practice be traced in the architecture?

To what extent was the complex relationship between the emperors, the client kings, the sponsors and the society expressed in the sacred architecture?

What importance did it have for the development of the sacred architecture that complexes in many cases were sponsored by private people? Did these private sponsors have an influence on how religious identity was represented in the architecture?

How and to what degree were local and regional traditions adapted to the growing Roman presence?

Monumental sacred architecture is normally classified as public architecture, but was not always as publicly accessible as assumed. Is it possible to group sacred architecture into various categories, such as public, semi-public and private? If so, how were these categories reflected in the architecture?

How was the term "sacred architecture" defined in an ancient context and which functions did "sacred architecture" have? Here it needs to be considered that our perception of the terms "sacred" and "holy" are heavily influenced by the Christian definition of these terms, which stand in contrast to the term "profane" implying a division of religious, political, economic and social activities. This division of activities and of civic and religious spheres cannot be directly transferred to the ancient architecture, which to a high degree was multifunctional.

Is the terminology connected to sacred architecture, correct and precise? The terminology used to describe pre-Christian sacred architecture is strongly influenced by the later developed church architecture terminology, in turn having an impact on how non-Christian sacred architecture is perceived. A re-evaluation of the terminology connected to ancient sacred architecture based on literary evidence and written sources will form part of the project.



Through studying the development of sanctuaries and relevant material in a cross-regional perspective over a longer period of time it is possible to examine continuity and change in architectural shapes and religious practice, to some extent, as well as to discuss the backgrounds for these developments. Studies of sacred architecture in the pre-Hellenistic and Hellenistic periods and regional studies of sacred architecture belonging to the Roman period exist. However a cross-regional and diachronic study of the architecture in connection with the epigraphy, numismatic evidence and the literary sources is lacking.

The Roman Near East has been chosen as a case study, because the region offers rich possibilities for undertaking comparative cross-regional research with an interdisciplinary perspective. The region is often described as being overall homogenous, culturally, linguistically, politically and religiously speaking, but in reality it was a highly differentiated region as a result of local and regional differences. There are numerous well-preserved and published sanctuaries in the region, herunder late Hellenistic and Roman period sanctuaries as well as Jewish and Christian sanctuaries. This allows for a detailed analysis of complex problems, which cannot be treated in other parts of the ancient world.

Material from other periods and areas, such as Babylonia, Mesopotamia, Constantinople and the Near East in the early Islamic period, will be included in order to draw perspectives on similarities and differences from other cultural and religious spheres. To strengthen the interdisciplinary aspect of the project a background group consisting of senior researchers from a number of disciplines advises on various matters. The background group helps to further cross-disciplinary research within the framework of the project as well as to further the methodological and theoretical approaches applied to the empirical material.

The background group counts the following senior researchers:

Lise Hannestad, senior associate professor, classical archaeology, University of Aarhus

Klemens Kappel, associate professor, philosophy, University of Copenhagen

Inge Nielsen, professor, classical archaeology, University of Hamburg

Ton Otto, professor, anthropology, University of Aarhus

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The project is based at the Department of Classical Archaeology, Institute of Anthropology, Archaeology and Linguistics, University of Aarhus, Denmark and is generously sponsored by the Novo Nordisk Foundation.

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