

Rönnlund lists as ticking the right boxes to be a city in the table mentioned above are probably closer to the real maximum than the 22 unnamed cities he claims as urban. An implication of this is that the sharp drop in urban population of the region he sees in the Roman period (which shows a reshuffle and a concentration of main centers) may have been less dramatic than Rönnlund suggests. Much possibly also depends on what happened outside the catalogued sites and forts, in the mostly uncharted rural territories.

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**Matthew Haysom, Maria Mili, and Jenny Wallensten (eds) *The stuff of the gods. The material aspects of religion in ancient Greece*. Skrifter utgivna av Svenska institutet i Athen, 4°, 59. pp. 248, 45 colour and b/w ill., 13 tables. Stockholm: Svenska institutet i Athen, 2024. ISBN: 978-91-7916-068-5, hard cover SEK 636, open access <https://doi.org/10.30549/actaath-4-59>.**

The volume under review originates from an international conference held on 7–9 July 2015 and organised by the Swedish Institute at Athens in collaboration with the British School at Athens. Despite the quite long time elapsed from the conference to the publication of the proceedings, the seventeen papers collected in the volume, preceded by an Introduction by the editors, duly take into account literature appeared since and are therefore up-to-date. The intellectual premises of the conference and volume are those of the material turn in the humanities and social sciences. The papers seek to apply its methodologies and research questions to the realm of Greek religion.

The papers offer a series of investigations into various aspects concerning the material dimension of Greek religion, with the underlying idea that belief, with all cognitive and emotional experiences associated with it, is inextricably linked to the material world. As the editors say in the Introduction, the colloquial title *The stuff of the Gods* programmatically aims to address the tension between the ‘mundane aspect of material culture and the rarefied aspect of the divine’, where ‘stuff’ ranges ‘from piles of dung to chryselephantine statues and spaces of all sorts’

(p. 8). It would certainly be a mistake, though, to think that the volume uniquely focuses on the material aspects of religion as inferred from the archaeological evidence—be it architectural remains, sanctuary dedications, domestic figurines, or vase painting. Quite the contrary, the papers address materiality, spatiality, monumentality and related questions from a wide range of perspectives, by interrogating and combining a diverse array of sources, including epigraphic (esp. Chapters 1, 3, 4, 5, 8, 14) and literary texts—whether poetry, mythology, or historiography (esp. Chapters 2, 16)—and offering insightful contributions on the lexicon of religious practice and belief (esp. Chapters 1, 5, 6, 14).

It would be long to review the manifold insights offered by each individual paper. In what follows I shall rather comment on recurring themes that underscore the coherence of the volume—and of the research endeavour—in spite of the diversity of the material and case studies addressed. Yet, if one criticism has to be made, it is precisely that such coherence and the thematic connections between papers have not been sufficiently emphasised. Besides the remarks of the editors in the Introduction as well as the very few cross-references in individual papers, the volume is not structured so as to group together contributions that share similar approaches, address similar types of evidence, or come to similar conclusions. The seventeen essays freely follow one after the other, but it would have been helpful for the readers if the volume had been subdivided into thematic sections, each containing papers showing a particular connection. Sometimes one wonders why certain papers appear in a given position: for example, there is no cogent explanation as to why Chapter 9, ‘The affordances of terracotta figurines in domestic contexts’ by C.E. Barrett, is detached from Chapter 13, ‘Ambiguity versus specificity in modest votive offerings’ by G. Salapata, which also comes to similar conclusions by focusing for the most part on the same class of evidence. The same could be said for Chapter 8, ‘Decisive dedications. Dedications outside of sanctuary contexts’ by J. Wallensten, which makes a good pair with Chapter 14, ‘Writing to the Gods? Archaic votives, inscribed and uninscribed’ by J. Whitley, both focusing on the display contexts of specific types of inscribed dedications.

Among the most interesting insights that underpin several of the papers, there is certainly the call to revisit our assumptions about the divide between ‘sacred’ and ‘secular’, or variants thereof, as concerns Greek religiosity. P. Pakkanen (Chapter 5:

'Movable Sacrality. Considerations on oscillating sacredness of material objects relating to Greek sanctuaries') shows that objects associated with sacred contexts are not univocally and perpetually tied to sacred uses but could be repurposed along a 'continuum of opposites' (p. 62) that embraces modern conceptions of 'sacred' and 'secular' alike. The same coexistence of divine and human realms is evidenced in G. Ekroth's analysis of the concept of *temenos* (Chapter 6: 'A room of one's own? Exploring the *temenos* concept as divine property'): the *temenos* is, paradoxically, the space where the human dimension of religion emerges most vigorously, as shown by the various measures implemented by *temene*'s caretakers in order to negotiate the complex relationship between divine property and human needs. C. Pott's contribution on the appearance of religious architecture in archaic Etruria (Chapter 12: 'An external view. Architecture and ritual in central Italy') similarly calls for blurring the divide between human and divine in our understanding of religious monumentality: rather than separating the divine from the human, religious buildings would serve the purpose of 'draw[ing] people in' (p. 176) – turning out to be engaging rather than awe – inspiring or intimidating. Finally, C.E. Barrett's paper on awe-inspiring terracotta figurines (Chapter 9, title cited above) and G. Salapata's on modest votive offerings (Chapter 13, also cited above) emphasise the multiplicity of meanings and functions assigned – from time to time or even at the same time – to small items found in domestic and ritual contexts, where it is not always possible – or meaningful at all – to draw a distinction between opposites such as decorative and religious or divine and mortal.

All these papers cogently invite us to adopt a more fluid understanding of sacredness and to step aside from modern expectations, which may impose anachronistic divides on the evidence. At the same time, however, one should remain alert to the possibility that meaningful distinctions become so diluted that their heuristic validity is lost, or that an excess of interpretive options remains open at all times – not necessarily a bad thing *per se*, but potentially tricky on a conceptual level. For example, questioning the categories of 'display purposes' or 'decorative functions' in favour of a more fluid 'religious-decorative' continuum (see Barrett, Chapter 9) may run the risk of falling in a 'hypertrophy – of – the – sacred' trap, whereby it is ultimately the category of 'sacred' that – whether consciously or not – drives archaeological interpretation. (This conceptual trap of modern archaeology is brilliantly described in D. Macaulay's satirical graphic novel *Motel of the mysteries*, published by Clarion Books in 1979.)

Similar calls to overcome a static understanding of religiosity come from R. Osborne's remarks on the changing image of Athena in Athens from the 6th to the 5th century (Chapter 1: 'Stuff and godsense') and C. Durvye's analysis of how perceptions of the Delian Aphrodite changed after the turning point of 167 BC (Chapter 3: 'Of things and men in the sanctuary of Aphrodite (Delos). Does the content of a sanctuary define the personality of the god?'). Both papers draw our attention to the flexibility – or better mutability – of the image of those deities as conveyed by the objects dedicated to them and as determined by changes in socio-political circumstances, audiences, and worshippers.

The relation between political and religious change is also explored by M. Haysom (Chapter 10: 'Investigating the instability of religious material culture in Greek prehistory. The case of 'bench shrines') and C. Morgan (Chapter 11: 'Adding buildings to Early Iron Age sanctuaries. The materiality of built space'), yet with quite different conclusions and implications—certainly more different than what it sounds like from the abridged presentations in the volume's Introduction. While Morgan rejects the common association between the appearance of monumental buildings in Iron Age sanctuaries and the 'rise' of the *polis*, approaching the emergence of religious monumentality from a multifactorial perspective, the link between religious change and political change is inherent to Haysom's argument. Haysom suggests that 'bench shrines' were introduced in the Aegean during the 13th century following an increase in the 'compartmentalisation of public space and seats of terrestrial authority' (p. 143), which would drive similar developments in the religious sphere leading to '[a] newly compartmentalised conception of the numinous'. Evidently, the compartmentalisation of terrestrial authority could hardly be independent of developments in the political ideologies of the palaces; in light of this, what remains unexplained in this model is how it is that 'bench shrines' were adopted 'by a range of different types of society across the Aegean' (p. 142), whether palace-centred or not.

A final remark is in order on the importance of sensorial experiences when studying the materiality of religion – which is at the core of the contributions by R. Osborne (Chapter 1, above), N. Papalexandrou (Chapter 15: 'The aesthetics of rare experiences in early Greek sanctuaries'), and C. Vout (Chapter 17: 'The stuff of crowded sanctuaries'), while being an important element of other essays, too (e.g. C. Potts', see above). These contributions draw our attention to the ability of objects visually

or tangibly to generate particular perceptions of sacred spaces or deities – an ability which was purposefully exploited by temple or sanctuary administrators. The same also applies to music and scent (cf. Osborne, pp. 19, 21), where further research is needed. Here it is especially worth noting that Papalexandrou's sensory approach to 'Orientalising' griffin cauldrons has the potential to restore coherence to the much-debated concept of 'Orientalising' itself, especially with regard to the critique – in many ways certainly appropriate – that this concept dissolves a plurality of cultures and cultural stimuli under a vague umbrella term ('Orient'): the griffin cauldrons' capacity to evoke rare sensory experiences operates coherently in different dedication venues, irrespective of any particular cultural influences that may underlie the fashioning of those objects.

All in all, this is a very interesting volume that can certainly be recommended to anyone interested in Greek religion as well as in the conceptual issues surrounding the 'material turn' in the humanities. While taking religion as its core topic, the volume is an excellent example of how disciplines beyond archaeology, including text-based ones, may benefit from materiality studies.

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## HELLENISTIC

**Sebastian Scharff, *Hellenistic athletes: agonistic cultures and self-presentation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Pp.384. ISBN 9781009199957, hardback \$130.**

In his introduction (Chapter 1), Scharff starts with a brief overview of previous scholarship. He deals with how scholars have moved on from the traditional view that the Hellenistic period saw a decline in agonistic life to a new outlook resting on new evidence and fresh thought that draws on sociological, political, historical, archaeological and linguistic perspectives. In contrast to previous studies, Scharff's focus is upon the victorious competitors (in both athletic and equestrian contests) and on their self-representation. Having analysed the broader context and listing the factors that inform his study, Scharff gives an account of his methodology, stressing in particular that he focusses on victor epigrams as a key element in the representation of athletic glory. This approach will reveal, he believes, the existence of a direct or indirect 'agonistic discourse' among athletes, cities, regions, kings, courtiers and prominent citizens. Such a discourse, says Scharff, is naturally influenced by current circumstances and how athletes wish their victory to be perceived.

In Chapter 2 ('What's New in Hellenistic Athletics?'), the author looks at the various ways in which athletics flourish during the Hellenistic period and especially over the 3rd and 2nd century BC at panhellenic, regional and local levels. Numerous new contests and festivals of various levels of prestige emerge during the period. Several local games are established as crown (stephanitic) games, their status thereby upgraded, so that they can now compete in fame and glory with the four great Panhellenic games (that is, of course, the *Olympia*, *Pythia*, *Isthmia* and *Nemea*). Change and development in agonistic culture during the Hellenistic period is evident in various ways. It is found in the innovations made to the structures of festivals and to the hierarchy of athletic contests, in the introduction of new disciplines to athletic life, in the establishing of new age groups for competitors and in the adoption of new types of prizes, such as metal items termed *brabeia* in place of traditional crowns. The appearance in the Hellenistic period of well-organized and well-equipped facilities for training athletes and for hosting associated