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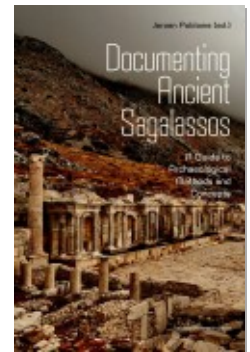
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How do we document ancient religion?

Peter Talloen

Introduction

Religion is generally seen as a system of belief in and responses to the divine, a system that is both internally coherent and also separated from other, 'secular' aspects of human life. However, this was not the case in classical antiquity. There was instead a wide range of ways in which people could interact with the divine world, which do not form a coherent system, nor were they clearly separated from other aspects of human experience. Having said that, ancient religion was not based on the revelation of divine truths in a set of sacred scriptures, but on a group of traditional practices that were thought to establish contact between mortals and the gods. The latter comprised a multitude of divine forces that could affect human life for better or worse, but could in turn be affected by human actions. By honouring these gods, mainly by offering them gifts, people could hope to win their favour and obtain help in achieving their goals. The ways in which the ancients understood their religion were therefore manifested more in performance and practice – in the rituals and routines of cult – than in explicit statements. Practice, not belief, is the key to understanding ancient religious life, according to Price, who sees questions about faith as the result of imposed alien values.[1] This is based on the anthropological principle that religion for most people in history has been a matter of practice, not intellection, and that the belief systems themselves arose out of evolving practices.[2]

These religious practices can be circumscribed as cult, a system of patterned actions in response to religious beliefs that relate to transcendent forces or supernatural beings or objects. Cult actions entail participation and offering by the celebrant, intended to focus attention on the religious experience and the presence of the deity, and are situated in the boundary area between this world and the next.[3] Typically, cults are developed within each society in accordance with local or *ad hoc* prescriptions and prohibitions, and find expression in rituals. A ritual is a complex of consistent and repeated actions effected by or in the name of an individual or a community. These actions serve to organise

space and time, to define relations between men and the gods, and to set in their proper place the different categories of mankind and the links which bind them together.[4]

The components of cult

The definition of cult used above identifies supernatural beings (pantheon), space (sacred landscape), celebrants (religious personnel) and ritual as the main constituents. In what follows, these different components of religious practice will be discussed and illustrated with examples from Sagalassos.

Pantheon: the subjects of cult

Lacking today's sophisticated technology and science, ancient man was particularly vulnerable to disease and death, as well as the ravages of war and natural disasters. He was also basically dependent on subsistence agriculture, which was directly affected by the regional climate and environment. Consequently, in looking for protection and support, he tried to engage supernatural assistance in his mortal struggle, conceiving of the polytheistic pantheon, including the great Olympian gods, along with a wide range of lesser deities, demi-gods, local heroes and spirits, each of which represented a particular aspect of life. All of these had distinguishable identities enabling the worshipper to call upon them in appropriate terms or times. The most important deities were given additional titles or epithets to differentiate which of their functions was being invoked. The epithet *karpophoros* or 'the fruit-bearer' of Zeus as worshipped by the agricultural estates of Sagalassos, for example, characterises him as protector of agriculture (Fig. 1), while Herakles 'of the *komè* of the Moatreis' was the chosen protector of the village of Moatra in the territory of the city.[5] In this way, the ancients rationalised their experiences of the natural world, responding to their fears, needs and desires by invoking, placating and revering the appropriate deity. As ancient religion was an open system in which people exercised free choice, new deities could constantly be added to their local pantheon. The changing composition of *panthea* can reveal not only changing local priorities but also contacts with other cultures. In the Roman imperial period, for instance, this would result in the adoption of the Nilotic deities Isis, Sarapis and Harpokrates at Sagalassos and other cities in Pisidia.[6]
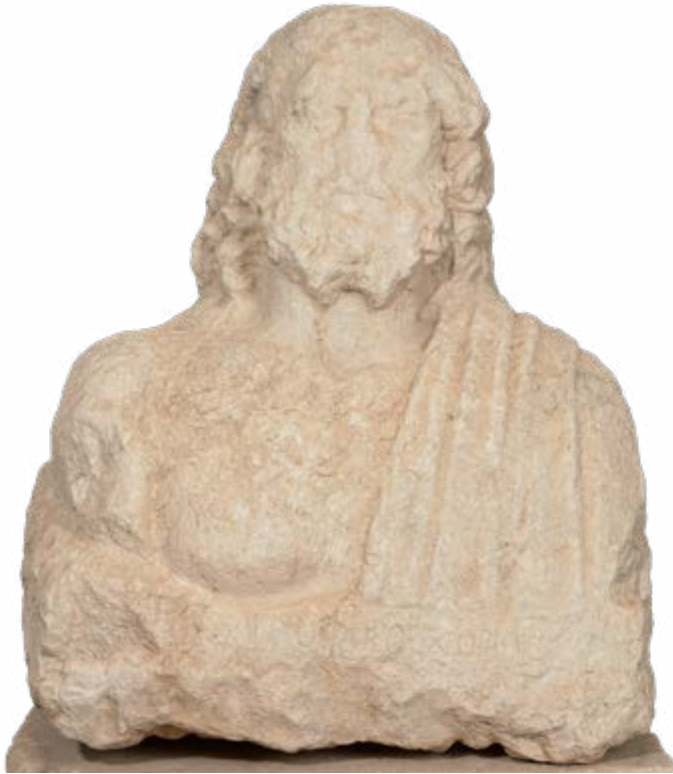
Fig. 1. Limestone bust of Zeus Karpophoros, dating to the Roman imperial period and found at Çeltikçi in the territory of Sagalassos.

Sacred landscape: the places of cult

The ancient gods were thought to inhabit the physical space. Worshippers re-cognised this presence of divine power by allocating sacred space for communi-cation between human and divine. There were no sacred places per se, but only spaces institutionalised and recognised by humans who perceived them as hav-ing a sacred character, either because of some special geographical or numinous quality, or because they contained some particular manifestation of the divine. Therefore, sacred spaces cannot be separated from the persons that consider them sacred. It was their ritual activity that marked a place as sacred. To avoid inadvertent pollution, such a sacred area needed to be identifiable. These loca-tions were therefore often monumentalised, built up as theatres for religious

rites and practices. Large, well-established sanctuaries would have been easi-
ly recognisable from their conventional architecture and elaborate entrances,
such as the Temples of Apollo Klarios, Antoninus Pius and Tyche at Sagalassos.[7]
Many sacred sites, however, were not so obviously marked. In the countryside
especially, any spring, rock face or cave could belong to a deity, like the so-called
Rock Sanctuary, a rock outcrop in the urban periphery of Sagalassos, which
became sacred through the deposition of votive offerings (Fig. 2).[8]

Fig. 2. View of the Rock Sanctuary, a rock outcrop with crevices which served as a sanc-
tuary for Aphrodite in the periphery of Sagalassos.

The ensemble of spatial expressions and correlates of religious behaviour is
designated by the term 'sacred landscape'. Successive sacred landscapes could
differ greatly, even without a change of the fundamental character of religion,
because each period had its own logic or grammar in terms of the nature and
location of monuments.[9] The dominant settlement type during antiquity was
the city-state or *polis*, an institution which united the inhabitants of a speci-
fied geographical area within a single governmental structure. It consisted of
two components, an urban centre (*asty*) and its dependent countryside (*chora*).
These urban and rural settings of cult are often considered two separate spheres
of religious life, each with a distinctive appearance characterised by monu-
mental sanctuaries in the *asty* and non-monumentalised, 'natural' sanctuaries
predominant in the *chora*.

Peter Talloen

Religious personnel: the celebrants of cult

As divine powers were believed to affect people's lives, access to those powers was obviously important. Celebrants naturally comprised all people participating in cultic actions, but there were groups which established a claim of sole or privileged access to this divine power, and thereby acquired their own social power. They could therefore manipulate and control individual and collective behaviour through an authority which was invested primarily in a religious office or function.

One of the landmarks in the religious life which emerged under Hellenic influence was the introduction of new cultic functionaries. These included not only priests – the superintendents of religious practice as represented by the priest of Zeus Solymeus at Termessos in southern Pisidia (Fig. 3)[10] – but a whole range of officials concerned with the performance of rites, the upkeep of sanctuaries and the management of religious accounts, who performed their duties in the name of the *polis*. Rather than the function of a specialist who had undergone religious training, priesthood became a public office which was in several aspects similar to the magistracies. They were elected by and from the people, placing overall control of the religious life of the community in the hands of the citizens and their political leaders. It was the role of the *polis* to coordinate the sacred and the human spheres to ensure that the community flourished. The dominant social group, the land-holding elite that presided in the councils, provided the magistrates as well as the religious functionaries, as these offices entailed expenditure: priests were expected to pay for the upkeep of sanctuaries, the performance of rituals and the organisation of spectacles. In return, they acquired social recognition and symbolic capital.

Fig. 3. Hellenistic limestone base dedicated by Otanes, the priest of Zeus Solymeus at Termessos and depicting a sacrificial scene (Lanckoronski 1892: Fig. 8).

Cultic rituals

As mentioned above, the central focus of ancient religion was rituals, a complex of actions set to define relations between men and the gods. Piety was expressed in behaviour, in acts of respect towards the gods, represented by sacrifice, offerings and gifts. The presentation of religious offerings was modelled upon this pattern of exchange between status-unequals, in which the inferior offered what he could, in return for what was appropriate for the superior to bestow on him. Every exchange re-enacted the status-relation and reaffirmed it. The ritualised actions of giving aimed to honour the gods and, at the same time, averted the misfortunes which might result from the gods' anger at their neglect. The offering of gifts was ruled by the reciprocal principle of *do ut des*. This is exemplified by offerings in accordance with a vow, which identified an object dedicated to a divinity or spirit as the fulfilment of a promise.[11] In this way, offerings could be seen as part of a kind of commercial transaction between man and god.

There were two principal categories of oblations used to enter into and sustain a good relation with the gods: sacrifices and dedicatory offerings. Sacrifices comprise those donated objects intended for consumption, whether divine or human, while dedicatory offerings are basically durable. The most important form of cult was sacrifice, as it constituted the core of the majority of religious rituals (Fig. 3). The typical victim was an animal, but there were also bloodless or 'pure' sacrifices of corn, cakes and fruit, as well as liquids such as water, wine and milk, offered in addition to or instead of the animal. Such sacrifices – originally the offering of agricultural products as a tithe recognising the beneficence of the deities – were a gift to the gods who had to receive their share of all human goods: first-fruits of harvest, libations at drinking parties, etc. Dedicatory offerings can be defined as all non-consumable objects dedicated to a deity. These offerings were enormously varied, ranging from a simple terracotta figurine (Fig. 4) like the many thousands found at the Rock Sanctuary mentioned above to a marble-clad temple. They all had a common purpose, namely to please the god.

Two groups of rituals are generally recognised. One was public, closely connected to the state, with rituals and sacrifices funded by the state, offered by civic religious officials for the protection of the city and the prosperity of its people, in the communal cult places. In return for the blessings of particular deities, representatives of the community would establish a permanent public cult, with a public shrine and the regular performance of sacrifices of animals and other specified rituals. Public cult was thus essentially the sum of the rituals employed by public representatives to maintain good relations between the community and its gods. The numerous public rituals, which generally took place on fixed dates every year, thus constituting a religious calendar, could vary from relative-

Peter Talloen

ly simple sacrifices to elaborate festivals, like the *Klareia* in honour of Apollo Klarios at Sagalassos.[12] Participation in civic cults was mandatory for all citizens to preserve the 'peace of the gods' or *pax deorum*, to ensure their benevolence and protection of the city.

Fig. 4. Terracotta figurine of Aphrodite (Roman imperial period) produced at Sagalassos, found at the Rock Sanctuary, and kept at the Burdur Museum.

The other group comprised sacrifices and offerings presented by private persons. Past emphasis on religion as manifested in state-sponsored or civic cults has given way to a recognition that religious expression outside the context of public worship – expression generally associated with the household and family – was also significant and must be investigated.[13] Such religious expression might include supplication of a household's patron deities and rituals related to

the cycle of life, such as pregnancy, birth, adulthood and death. The domicile was evidently a central locus for petition of family gods, but it hardly exhausted the phenomenon of private religion. The religious activities of private individuals could also occur in places other than the home, such as local sanctuaries where votive material can be used as an indicator of such actions. Private rituals can therefore perhaps be best defined as those rituals which were not organised by public authorities. Rituals regulated the whole of everyday life so that every social act (birth, marriage, death, agreements) and every aspect of production (sowing, harvesting, making pots) had to be accompanied by some appropriate sacralising performance. Conversely, structural changes in society demanded changes at the ritual level, whether by the introduction of new forms, or by attributing new meaning to existing rituals. Ritual too was thus by no means static.

The archaeology of cult

Since most cities of the ancient world, including Sagalassos, could not boast any of the renowned sanctuaries or deities, their religious life does not feature in any writings of the ancient authors. Although one may regret the lack of texts, there is no shortage of alternative source material: the great mass of epigraphic evidence collected by numerous scholars, the catalogues of coins minted by the cities, and the continuing archaeological discovery of the material manifestations of cult, both through excavation and survey. Combined they generate a depth of evidence that can support generalisation about religious practice. As mentioned above, ancient religion was inscribed in actions, defined by symbols and objects which offer us the possibility to record them and to reconstruct the ritual actions which they served. The translation of religion into material signs makes ancient cult approachable within the archaeological record.[14] The main advantage of an archaeological approach to cult might be its ability to encompass the material results of this religious behaviour, resulting in general patterns of interpretation applicable to wide-ranging time frames, regions and communities, in contrast to the documentary sources, which often display inbuilt biases resulting from their mostly context-specific origin and message. Moreover, archaeology provides the opportunity to document routine cult actions which have left no mark in the written record. The main disadvantage of this approach is the fact that the archaeological identification of ancient ritual activity is problematic. Apart from the nature and quality of the available archaeological record, this recognition of human activities directed towards the supernatural is just as much determined by the methodological and theoretical framework

Peter Talloen

applied to the sources. There is a great need for an explicit statement that establishes archaeological correlates of religious behaviour. This lack of methodology for reconstructing religion is most sharply felt for societies known only archaeologically. The situation is intrinsically better for the historical periods with developed architectural forms, a wealth of documentary or epigraphic evidence, and an established iconography of divinity expressed in a well-defined typology, which help to identify the artefacts as religious in nature. We will now have a closer look at these material categories.

Architectural sources

Places of cult are generally identified as sanctuaries. The definition of a sanctuary has to be broad enough to include any location that was set apart to accommodate the performance of some ritual and which could be regarded as sacred. Essentially, a sanctuary is a place where a person or people expect to come into contact with a supernatural force or being. For this no actual building was required; an area left vacant for the purpose, designated as *temenos*, or a natural point of attraction such as a spring or a cave was sufficient, as long as it could evoke a boundary zone between this world and the next. How do we recognise such a sanctuary materially? There is of course the familiar image of the classical temple, as still visible at the Pisidian city of Adada (Fig. 5), housing the cult statue of the deity and storing votive offerings. As the most visible element of ancient cult ritual it was the centre of the cult site, but in fact the entire sanctuary or *temenos* – as a place cut off from other areas of human settlement – was liminal. This means that not only the temple but also the surrounding constructions should be considered in their entirety, including porticoes for the convenience of the celebrants, elements of water supply for drinking and ritual cleansing, and subsidiary buildings for cult equipment.[15] In fact, altars, not temple buildings, were the key element of sanctuaries, since it was there that the offerings to the deity took place. After the altar, the next most common feature of any type of sanctuary were the votive offerings, which were not to be removed from the sacred enclosure. In this way, actual ritual activity took place outside the temple and the latter was solely designed to house the statue of the god and some of the votive offerings.

Although the term sanctuary suggests an architecturally defined space with features such as altars and temples, much of ancient religious activity, especially in the countryside, was connected with specific places in the landscape which inspired awe, with or without any man-made signs of their importance. While excavators of prehistoric sites have formulated explicit criteria for deciding what particular sites were sanctuaries, classical archaeologists have been less explicit

about their methods. For establishing cult sites in the countryside, for example, a loose range of potential diagnostic features have been used in the available literature, ranging from architectural features and epigraphic sources, via the presence of divine images, to concentrations of fine pottery and spectacular locations. In the case of the aforementioned Rock Sanctuary, it was the abundant concentration of votive offerings that allowed the site to be identified as a sanctuary.

Fig. 5. Corinthian prostylos temple (late second century CE) dedicated to the deified emperors and Zeus Megistos Sarapis at Adada.

Moreover, ritual activity was not limited to actual sanctuaries, but was embedded within the settlement fabric as a whole, as is abundantly clear at Sagalassos. It could take place in public places of gathering, whether open-air like the city square and theatre, or closed like the council hall and public baths. Divine representations were often associated with public structures such as the monumental fountain on the Upper Agora of Sagalassos dedicated to Dionysos, and the northern city gate watched over by busts of Athena and Ares. Although these types of buildings belonged to the architectural category of 'secular buildings' according to the criterion of primary function, they too formed part of

Peter Talloen

the symbolic system of cult. To other non-sacred structures, such as private dwellings, ritual acts could only be related incidentally. In this case, the *in-situ* presence of material manifestations of cult is required in order to incorporate these structures as locations of cultic activity.

Epigraphic sources

The 'epigraphic habit', the custom of having all sorts of information inscribed in stone,[16] caused the public space of ancient cities and the cemeteries that surrounded them, as well as rural settlements and sanctuaries, to be adorned with monumental writing. In the context of religious practice, such inscriptions can reveal the names of the gods that were worshipped, the offices that served their cult, the status and sometimes intentions of the dedicators, as well as particular rites, celebrations or prescriptions. A commemorative inscription was not a necessary part of any offering, whether dedicatory or sacrificial, public or private, as the large number of uninscribed objects found in sacred places indicates. But it should be considered normal that the dedicator should wish the memory of his gift to be kept, being a prevailing motive in the dedication; thus the priestess Briseis commemorated with an inscription on the shaft of an altar her dedication of this ritual installation to Angdeisis, a local form of the goddess Kybele, at a rural sanctuary of the goddess in the territory of Sagalassos (Fig. 6). In this way, dedicatory inscriptions, or statements of who had dedicated what to which divinity, allow us to take a glance at their authors' religious beliefs, while honorific and funerary inscriptions could refer to the identity of the deceased as a religious functionary, as a president or victor of games in honour of a deity, or as a member of some religious association. Inscriptions are not merely documentary sources but also archaeological ones, since all aspects of the carrier (i.e. type, decoration and material) as well as its spatial context have to be taken into consideration.

Fig. 6. Inscribed limestone altar for Angdeissis, a local version of the Mother Goddess, erected by her priestess Briseis (second century CE) from Bağsaray in the territory of Sagalassos.

Iconographic sources

The image is a medium to avoid absence, to make the invisible visible. The use of images was a central point in ancient religious practice, as cult required the faculty of representing the divinity: in order to worship a god one had to figure that god and be able to distinguish him or her from other deities. Therefore, specific images were developed in accordance to the polytheist pantheon composed of a variety of deities and divine figures, each with their own guises and attributes.[17] Importantly, figuration in classical antiquity was basically anthropomorphic in nature. Although the ancients conceived that animals could be attributes of the gods (e.g. the eagle of Zeus, the stag of Artemis, the lion of Kybele, the owl of Athena), in the classical world at least the attendant animals are not treated as equivalent to these deities. It is only coupled with the whole figure that these attributes have meaning. In general, animals or other attributes perform as indicators or symbols of the nature of the deity. The ear of corn, for example, is taken as characteristic of the agricultural character of Demeter, or as a kind of embodiment of the god, just like the thunderbolt of Zeus, the club of Herakles, the lyre of Apollo, the bow of Artemis, the *thyrsos* or fennel staff of Dionysos, the *kerykeion* or staff with intertwined snakes of Hermes, or the trident of Poseidon.

A first material category of images representing divinity were cult statues as exemplified at Sagalassos by the copy of such an image of Apollo Klarios that was placed in the Nymphaeum near the entrance to his sanctuary (Fig. 7). They were the prime icons of antiquity, held to display supernatural power and rendering the living gods present. Cult effigies were regarded as inhabited by the *numen* or spirit of the worshipped deity, empowered to receive votive offerings, answer petitions of suppliants and, at times, even become animate. The representation of a god was experienced as 'the presence' of that particular deity in a locality. Images of deities were of course not limited to their cult statues, but featured in a whole series of objects. This comprised reliefs, figurines, decorated pottery (Fig. 8) and jewellery. Household items such as pottery and jewellery decorated with religious scenes were not necessarily cult-related, but they certainly provide information on the religious environment of the people who manufactured and used these artefacts.[18]

Peter Talloen

Fig. 7. Marble copy (early second century CE) of the cult statue of Apollo Klarios from the Hadrianic Nymphaeum at Sagalassos.

Fig. 8. Ceramic tray (second century CE) decorated with a central medallion depicting Dionysos supported by a satyr and greeted by Pan, from the Urban Mansion at Sagalassos.

How do we document ancient religion?

A final category of iconographic sources were coins issued by the city. This civic coinage asserted the religious-political self-image of its body of citizens, clearly indicating which cults supported the identity of a city and from which deities citizens expected protection and prosperity. The images and legends of local coinage represented the community as a sacred city under the protection of powerful and important deities, who are depicted together with their symbols, temples and festivals; Sagalassian coins, for example, feature a depiction of the shrine of the city-goddess Tyche (Fig. 9). An overview of the coins of each city therefore allows an insight into the case-specific symbolic systems.[19]

Fig. 9. Bronze coin of Sagalassos (reign of Claudius II) depicting the city's Tychaion or shrine for the goddess of fortune, Tyche (Photo courtesy of the Royal Library of Belgium).

Other material sources

Besides the obvious sources of architecture, epigraphy and iconography, 'mute' archaeological evidence can also be used to reconstruct religious practice. As a result of standard shapes, formulae and imagery, the cultic nature of the former types of evidence is fairly easy to establish. In many cases, however, ritual objects cannot be recognised as easily. Such objects were endowed by ritual with qualities that brought them into relation with the divine or made them conducive to the efficacy of the ritual, and thus caused them to enter the domain we label 'sacred', while there is nothing in their intrinsic nature that distinguishes them from objects of everyday use, like the implements used in cooking or textile production. The ceramic loom weight shown in Figure 10 was one of several objects related to textile production that was deposited as a votive gift at the Rock Sanctuary. Except when present in an explicitly cultic context, like votive deposits, such objects will remain undetectable.

Fig. 10. Ceramic loom weight (Roman imperial period) found at the Rock Sanctuary near Sagalassos.

Limitations

Our understanding of religious practice is very much the product of the sources we employ and their availability. The evidence for religious practice is inevitably affected by patterns of research in a given region. In spite of the great efforts of the last decennia, many sites in Pisidia remain poorly published – or not published at all – and most artefact types have never been studied systematically. As a result, the imposition of patterns on this difficult and inchoate material is challenging and at times somewhat speculative. Furthermore, any research that has occurred has largely focused on the urban centres. The limited knowledge of rural cult is largely based on some isolated sanctuaries, and stray altars and reliefs. For the majority of these sources, information is confined to the intrinsic data of the object as they could not be recorded in context, consequently limiting the deduction of information for contextualisation.

Obviously, there is also a bias of higher-visibility products. Monumental sanctuaries are far more likely to be detected than rustic constructions or simple domestic shrines. Special sacred sites in the countryside, for example, were often unmarked by formal architectural monuments and are therefore difficult to recognise in the landscape. We also have to realise that epigraphic evidence, even in its most modest form, does not comprise products that were generally

available to all layers of society, and we have to accept that some groups will simply not be heard. Equally, civic coins reflected the religious views of the elite representatives of the city that issued them. In the case of Sagalassos, our evidence is also temporally biased, as it is most heavily concentrated in the first three centuries CE. Few sources of any sort dating to the Hellenistic period have been found in the region of Pisidia. Cultural superposition, i.e. the continuous occupation of a site, will have been partly responsible for this lack, but processes such as urban growth and monumentalisation made certain periods more archaeologically visible than others. Finally, the material at our disposal sets limits to the kind of understanding that can be reached. Archaeology can register the material manifestations of religious practice and interpret them in terms of the ritual activities of the community which once used them. Archaeological sources, however, cannot claim to reveal the religious experience or thoughts of any single individual of the period. Furthermore, the material evidence can only provide us with indications of some of the ritual activities that took place. There will have been others that did not leave traces in the archaeological record, for example music, dance, songs and prayers – indeed, particularly prayers, as appeals made to the gods in a variety of situations (requests for blessings, prosperity, health and divine intervention), are one of the least noticed because most highly routinised everyday activities.[20] Even many of the sacrifices did not leave any traces, especially those involving perishable offerings, like food, clothing and wooden artefacts. In sum, the difficulties inherent in any attempt to comprehend the elaborate, complex and fragmentary material record of the ancient systems of religious practice are profound, but they should not deter us, since it would be unacceptable to ignore or neglect the omnipresent sphere of religion in the reconstruction of daily life.

Notes

1 Price 1999, 3.
2 Geertz 1973, 213–218.
3 Renfrew and Bahn 1991, 359.
4 Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992, 27.
5 For Zeus Karpophoros see Talloen 2015, 249; for Herakles of the Moatreis see Talloen 2015, 248.
6 Talloen 2015, 196–99.
7 Talloen 2015, 102–08 gives an overview of such monumental sacred architecture.
8 See Talloen 2019.
9 Nixon 2006, 5.
10 A standard work on priesthood in antiquity is Beard and North 1990.
11 Van Straten 1981.
12 On religious festivals in Pisidia see Talloen 2015, 296–304.
13 Kindt 2012.
14 Renfrew and Bahn 1991, 358–62; Insoll 2011; Raja and Rüpke 2015.
15 An overview of the structures and other artefacts to be found in classical

Peter Talloen

sanctuaries is given by Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel 1992, 57–60; Whitley 2001, 134–36; and Pedley 2005.

16 MacMullen 1982.

17 The exhaustive overview provided by the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mytholo-giae Classicae* (*LIMC*) is an indispensable tool for anybody dealing with ancient iconography.

18 Talloen and Poblome 2005.

19 Price 2005.

20 On the importance of ancient prayer see Versnel 1981, 17–26.

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