Review

Reassembling Religion in Roman Italy
By E.-J. Graham (2021)

Reviewed by Andrew Durdin

One way of understanding Emma-Jayne Graham’s Reassembling Religion in Roman Italy is as an intervention concerned with the perennial problem of the place of the individual in ancient religion, especially Roman religion. As is well known, nineteenth- and early twentieth-century classicists assumed a view of ancient religion uncritically modeled on the modern, individual Protestant believer. It was a view that privileged the interior beliefs of individuals, while relegating collective rituals to the periphery. Fortunately, starting in the 1970s these anachronistic ‘Christianizing assumptions’ (to quote the late great Simon Price) were dragged out into the light of day. Unfortunately, the corrective to the unexamined premium on belief over ritual did not manage to transcend this duality – it simply flipped the script. Ritual became valorized instead of belief, collective life took precedence over individuals and, in particular, the civic rituals of Rome were reconceived as a vibrant, flexible, and adaptable semiotic system; namely, as something just as lively and dynamic as beliefs, but putatively without the inappropriate Christian baggage.

However, in recent years, scholarship has pushed back in the direction of reasserting the importance of the individual in Roman religion. This burgeoning body of work (here, I think of Jörg Rüpke’s Lived Ancient Religion project) insists that there is nothing inherently Christian about studying human psychological states (beliefs, etc.), and nothing inherently modern (or Western) about examining social processes of individuation. If the prior Protestant model of religion took individuals and their psychic content...
as given, the recent arguments for recuperating the individual in ancient Roman religion see individuals and their religious experiences as products of various and contingent social processes. Indeed, for advocates of this position, the study of ancient religion has been lopsided in its emphasis on the collective horizons of civic religion, which inevitably privileges the religious priorities of the civic (Roman) elite, while truncating the more subtle forms of religious self-fashioning and negotiation evident in Rome and across its empire.

It is within this context that Graham’s book looks to make its mark, pursuing the project of Roman ‘lived religion,’ with a focus on materiality and a set of theoretical approaches ‘loosely grouped under the heading of “new materialism”’ (p. 7). For Graham, while there is much to admire about the recent (re)turn to the individual, she wishes to note ‘how ancient lived religion was not a product of human individual intentionality or self-awareness alone but a result of experiences of material engagement’ (p. 19). In other words, according to Graham’s reckoning, something is lost in our analysis of Roman lived religion when a premium is placed simply on the catalyzing forces of human consciousness. Thus, Graham’s reliance on post-humanist theoretical tools is intended precisely to oust the human subject as the privileged locus of agency in the world and, by extension, to illustrate the unsuspected ways in which closer attention to the relationships of ‘humans and things,’ especially in ritualized contexts, redistribute the said agency.

Graham’s first two chapters set out the importance of her materially sensitive analysis and outline the parameters of her new materialist method. In the first chapter, Graham motivates her turn to materiality in what has become the standard rhetorical move for this brand of scholarship. Namely, that an emphasis on materiality rectifies an imbalance in traditional understandings of religion, which have mainly been concerned with ideational matters (e.g., meaning, beliefs, cognition, etc.) and thus elite matters. Graham keys this ‘material turn’ refrain to the specific study of Roman religion, insisting that preoccupation with matters of ritual and collective life over the last few decades has not really resulted in an emphasis on materiality. Rather, such studies have focused on what this or that ritual or artifact might mean, represent, or symbolize – often privileging elite written sources in extracting this information – to the detriment of how these items were encountered and experienced as real things by actual individuals in specific ritual contexts.

Chapter 2 provides a welcome overview of Graham’s analytic vocabulary as well as her basic methodological scaffolding. Responding to recent post-modern critiques of the applicability of religion to the ancient world, Graham spends a significant amount of time discussing what she means
by religion. For Graham, religion is fundamentally lived religion, which emphasizes the experiences of individuals that are produced during concrete, contextual, and embodied ritual practices. To this she adds the additional level of religious knowledge, which speaks to the processing of these lived experiences into more durable and routinized modes of understanding, know-how, and discourse about certain rituals. That these levels interact in varied, complex, and reciprocal registers is, for Graham, underscored by her further distinguishing religious knowledge into distal and proximal forms; namely, knowledge that is ‘out there,’ public, and sets the terms for engagement versus a more ‘up close,’ personal, embodied knowledge that emerges from creative engagement with the former.

But of course, experiences require an experiencer, knowledge requires a knower, and to distinguish between ritual and non-ritual actions or religious and non-religious things requires human acts of signification. Religion is always religion to someone, namely, a ‘sensing human body and analytical mind,’ (p. 39), even despite the new materialist’s (and occasionally Graham’s) tendency to downplay this fact with passive voice constructions that leave their subjects ambiguous. Indeed, Graham admits that the sort of ontological egalitarianism she envisions (i.e., ‘flat ontologies’) can never completely iron out human agency. Nor, she continues, should that be the goal. The promise of new materialism, according to Graham, is that its technical vocabulary – terms like affordance, assemblage, and thingliness – puts into relief unexplored nuances for studying lived religion. In other words, new materialist theories constructively build on the central premise of lived religion, that religious experiences are constructed in complex ways by individuals, and that they do so by emphasizing that physical things and material contexts are important components of these constructions. They are not simply inert matter acted on by humans, but are also agents, influencing and even constraining human agency. The human body in particular, across Graham’s analyses, illustrates this point repeatedly. While the human, as a subject, experiences and interprets, Graham also envisions the human body, as any other physical object, as possessing its own material ‘affordances’ – innate qualities that affect and are affected by other objects in the world. For Graham, agency is a thoroughly relational affair.

The balance of the book is then given over to applying these theoretical overtures to various bodies of Roman (Italian and mostly republican) archaeological data from roughly the fifth century BCE to the fifth century CE. In each chapter, the idea of ritualized ‘assemblages’ – that is, the ways humans and things come together to produce religious agency – provides an analytic map for shifting attention away from standard interpretative contexts, couched in representational or semiotic assumptions, and toward
more subtle relationships between humans and things. In Chapter 3, Graham makes the case for rejecting understandings of religious places defined along the lines of a ‘checklist of architectural features’ (p. 44). Instead, she argues that religious place is better conceived in imaginative reconstructions of the kinesthetic experience of human bodies as these interact with the physical structures and environmental topographies of ritualized places (e.g., ascending the ramps at the sanctuaries of Fortuna Primigenia at Praeneste). Chapter 4 examines cultic iconography with a view to how the objects used in ritual settings formed relationships with participants and produced different kinds of knowledge. Graham makes the case that mundane tactile realities such as, for instance, the supposition that incense boxes were awkward to hold in a ritual procession or that the experience of having one’s auditory and visual senses impeded by certain ritual headgear could give rise to forms of ‘profound proximal knowing’ (p. 97). Chapter 5 takes up the use of anatomical votives of the mid-republican period, exploring the ways in which gifts to the gods which replicated body parts (e.g., feet, internal organs, and even animal body parts), were more than just stand-ins for real, ailing body parts. Focusing her analysis on the temple to Juno Sospita at Pantanacchi, Graham explores how the material qualities of, for instance, hand-shaped votives, despite their material uniformity, had the ‘capacity to exist somewhere between a proxy for a real hand and a representational hand, simultaneously being both and neither’ (p. 122).

The final two chapters on divinity (Chapter 6) and magic (Chapter 7) are the most challenging. Divinity is eminently important to Graham’s project, since ‘for the agency produced by a relational assemblage of things to be described as religious, it must include things that are divine, supernatural, otherworldly’ (p. 36). As the sine qua non for what constitutes ritualized assemblages, divinity is largely assumed in Graham’s discussions of objects in previous chapters. But to construe divinity itself as a material thing that is ontologically equal to other components of a particular assemblage, and to analyze it in the same way as she has with other things, poses difficulties. Part of the problem is that in deprioritizing cult statues (and elite literate theologies) in thinking through Roman divinity, and thereby attempting to open up ‘a much wider range of experiences and concepts of divinity than these previous approaches have allowed’ (p. 164), the actual status of the ‘divine thingliness’ can at times seem rather uncertain. On the one hand, Graham wants to avoid overt anthropocentrism in construing divinity (i.e., ‘divine power is all in the heads of humans’; p. 146), but in doing so she edges toward suggesting that the thingliness of divinity has some ontological status independent of human consciousness, and that it ‘materially manifests’ in particular parts of an assemblage. The former continues to
wrinkle efforts at flat ontologizing, and the latter smacks of some sort of animism (despite Graham’s protest to the contrary), or even an old-style history of religions phenomenology of the Sacred.

Graham’s final chapter on magic is something of a recapitulation of the organizing topics of previous chapters, but in terms of ‘the production of certain types of agency that can be described as magical’ (p. 182). Taking her point of departure from the fountain dedicated to the Roman goddess Anna Perenna at Rome (which brings her analysis well into the late imperial period), Graham unfortunately engages in the sort of indecisive analysis that marks so many contemporary discussions of ancient magic. On the one hand, Graham is clear and persuasive that the distinction between magic and religion is quite meaningless when it comes to interpreting certain ancient artifacts. On the other hand, if her previous six chapters have insisted on developing a materially oriented approach to religion, her last chapter seems set on rehabilitating – at the material, individual, experiential level – the second half of the familiar binary. In fairness to Graham, her goal is not to quibble over definitions but to offer a causal account of experiences that might be, under whatever definition, tagged as religious or magical. But this seems to me only to defer such issues, and to render magic and religion as different forms of agency runs up against the same problems as so many other theoretical and methodological attempts to distinguish (even heuristically) religion from magic, or even magic as some space within religion; namely, what privileges the feature used to distinguish the two? Or, as Graham puts it, if a common process produces both, and they ‘might be difficult to distinguish beyond the level of the individual’ (p. 199), then what analytic purchase does maintaining such a distinction give us?

All that said, Graham’s book is a tightly organized and well argued study that illustrates the value of a well wrought and consistently applied theory and method, especially to bodies of ancient evidence that can prove frustrating to interpret. For those convinced of the importance of lived religion and the material turn, Emma-Jayne Graham’s book will surely offer an exciting read and provide further confirmation of the descriptive and analytic possibilities for this form of theorizing. For those who (like myself) remain skeptical as to the overall descriptive and analytic utility of such approaches – that is, whether they represent fresh, new perspectives or simply repackage old problems – this book nonetheless gives us a number of interesting matters to consider as we mull it over.

Notes
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