

“Grouping together in Lived Ancient Religion”, international conference of the ERC project “Lived Ancient Religion”, 2nd to 4th June, 2014 at the Royal Academy of Sciences and Letters, Copenhagen

How do groups come into being? How do the members interact, internally and externally? What is the role of groups in changing societal and political situations? These were the main questions posed by the 4th LAR-conference “Grouping together in lived ancient religion”, a conference, which offered new insights into the nature and dynamics of groups in religious contexts.

Focusing on situational communication in and of groups, the conference drew on the concept of “culture in interaction”, implying the shaping of “group styles” for understanding formation, unity or diversity of religious groups (Lichterman – Eliasoph 2003). These concepts allow for theorising situational differences in creating and reproducing religious representations, knowledge and practices – away from public norms. Speech and text, selection of objects, dress and gesture, as well as choice of time and place might be significant in order to establish groups at least on a temporary basis. The six sessions of the conference were dedicated to the different situations and strategies by which people unify and specialize in, establish authority by or enunciate religious groups. Classicists, archaeologists, sociologists as well as scholars from Theology, Judaic studies and Ancient History gathered at the Royal Academy of Science and Letters of Denmark to discuss these issues.

Paul Lichterman (Los Angeles) opened the first session by providing a rich discussion of the “sociological perspective on groups in religions contexts”. He broadened his and N. Eliasoph’s concept of group style (embracing *group boundaries*, *group ties* and *speech norms*) by *group scenes* that form the collective (religious) practice and can be appropriated depending on the individual situation. Many of the following contributions referred to his concepts and explored in how far they might bear on religiously defined groups in antiquity. Emiliano Urciuoli (Modena) utilized the field-theory of Paul Bourdieu and looked at how Christians behaved as members of the political elite of pre-Constantinian Rome. The in principle contradictory fields of “power” and “Christian religion” were merged in the political and economic interest of these individuals, who belonged simultaneously to different “social universes”. The contribution of Urciuoli raised the general issue of identities determined by the belonging to a group: Our terminological distinction of “Christ” and “Roman” was an entity *in personam*.

The second session – “Encounters in travelling” – focused on how groups may form and on how existing groups may (inter)act in the special situation of being on the move. Philippe Bornet (Lausanne) showed how Rabbis established their authority and fostered the spread of ideas or rules by travelling around. Changing places and coming into contact with different groups helped to build up a network where they were active as guests, teachers and arbitrators. Katharina Rieger (Erfurt) analysed Late Hellenistic and Roman sacred places along the routes of the Arab Desert that are both, adapted to and formed by travelling individuals and groups. Through religious practices as dedications and graffiti these travellers communicated to others (individuals or groups). Without being present at the same moment they formed

groups – beyond time and space. Tim Whitmarsh (Oxford) dealt with a “mental community”, the *atheoi*. He focused on the Late Hellenistic times where reflections in texts show that these *atheoi* are not formed by social interaction but by their renunciation of the gods. He argued that the *doxographia* of that time structured the knowledge and facilitated the formation of networks of intellectuals – unified in the negation of the gods – in Early Imperial times.

The contribution of Eric Rebillard (Ithaca) in the third session of the conference on „Encounters in public and private spaces“ inquired into the strategies employed by Christians in third century Carthage to distinguish themselves from their fellow Carthaginians. Rather unexpectedly, the followers of Christ attached importance to distinction by means of dress, naming or gestures only internally. Yet, in situations among other Carthaginian citizen, these distinctions did not play any role. Those “separate worlds” did not exist socially and spatially, but only temporarily in the contexts of religious gatherings. Arja Karivieri (Stockholm) with her paper on cave sanctuaries in Attica raised the question of cult practices, their religious affiliation, (intellectual) motivation and density, especially in Late Antiquity. The increase of the objects (lamps) as opposed to the decrease in the variety in Late Antiquity and Early Byzantine times is evidence of large gatherings in those caves and/or with a higher frequency. Karivieri related this phenomenon to the neo-platonic philosophy and the religious groups related to it. On the other hand, the mere increase of population in that time could be the reason for a surge of activity in the caves.

Aspects of gender were the topic of the fourth session, „Gender specific strategies and situations“. Here Kate Cooper (Manchester) developed further her thoughts on “subordinate members” (of a household, a group, a society) and their vulnerability. By comparing late antique female martyrs, *defixiones* and the kidnapping of Syrian nuns in the year 2013, she explored the possible ways women can oppose to violence and (male) dominance. Darja Šterbenc Erker (Berlin) addressed the role of the Roman *matrones* as powerful group in religious and thus political concerns in Augustan times. A close reading of official documents of the *ludi saeculares* of 17 BCE (CIL 6, 32323) reveals the disobedience of the matrons as group, who decided not to fulfill their part in the rites. Conscious negation of authority along the lines of different religious duties (mourning, *ludi*) of one societal group leads to a reformulation of the ritual rules of the *ludi*.

The fifth session was dedicated to „Textual communities“, where Karen L. King (Harvard) offered an example on how to apply group style to ancient groups that formed around reading, hearing and interpreting texts. Referring to Pauline literature and the understanding of text as practice, she argued that a religion like Christianity, based on texts, varies widely through the different situations where the texts are enacted, and what practices are played out. This view allows for assessing the impact of putative texts as well. Françoise van Haepere (Louvain-la-Neuve) interpreted epigraphical evidence (taken as speech norm) from Ostian guilds as example for groups using texts as forming and unifying element (ties and boundaries). Via these practises, van Haepere maintained, not only did they establish their internal

cohesion, but also communicated their external references (city, Imperial court). Even though highly formalized, these epigraphic documents were used in a highly refined manner by the *collegae* to clear their position in the social network of Ostia. JÖRG RÜPKE (Erfurt) questioned the concept of textual communities as strong momentum also for religious groupings, especially in times of political and cultural change. Referring to texts from different genres that span across the first centuries CE he claimed that it were more local and transient networks that formed around textual practices, rather than strong, textual communities, unified through a canon of texts. Speech norms can be detected in texts from the first century CE onwards, nonetheless, group ties and boundaries were transmitted only to a limited extent.

The focus on „Short term ritual communities“ in the sixth session offered us the opportunity to look at temporarily limited groupings, how they were constituted and perpetuated. Maura K. Heyn (Greensboro) explored the signs and styles priests on Palmyrene tomb reliefs used to represent themselves by choosing distinct features of dress, gesture and attributes that set them apart from others Palmyrenians. The depictions in the tombs were used to remind of communal (religious) gatherings, thus strengthening both, the prestige of the deceased and the community identity of Palmyra. Aspects of time and point in time were addressed by Michael Satlow (Providence) in his contribution on the Jewish New Moon celebrations. By comparing the rules for this periodical practice from The Hebrew Bible with the ones of Late Antique Rabbinic texts, he showed how variable and flexible a calendric festival can be and the ways the importance of a ritually correct observance of the New Moon had changed. Lived religious practices and centralized rules (temple / rabbi) are highly interwoven with local variations to which Rabbis responded as having great importance. Clemens Leonhard (Münster) discussed the gradual differences of adherence to Christian groups – a characteristic of Late Antiquity. Participation and access to rituals was on a temporary basis (Eucharist); or it was only seen as a potential (Baptism). “Extra-liturgical benefits such as access to informal social networks” was of more importance in the second/third century than a fully established membership, as developed in the fourth/fifth century CE. Differentiation by group styles and internal bonding was of limited interest for early Christians. Rubina Raja (Aarhus) addressed the issue of banqueting groups in Palmyra. Mirrored in the *tesserae* – entrance tickets to their ritual banquets – these groupings appear as temporarily, spatially and socially highly restricted and exclusive. This phenomenon – comparable to associations – allows for questioning the heuristically hampering categories of public and private cultic activities and the related static groups of a public or a private body of people. Such short term communities served as link between other social groupings in the society, thus establishing at the same time distinction and connection.

The participants engaged in a lively and highly interrelated discussion, thus narrowing down the questions that remained, the helpful sociological concepts or terminological problems. As a result most participants agreed to the suitability of a definition of groups via *styles* and *scenes* that takes account of groups as highly fluid and unstable entities of societies. However, the distinction of group from, for example, network,

community or association has yet to be determined. On this definition depends how to assess the quality and types of interaction which all groupings substantially are based on. Depending on the variety and simultaneously the limitedness of ancient sources (texts, objects, spaces, reconstructed practices) their distinctive characteristics and qualities have to be clearly delineated. Moreover, the individual and his/her choices (out of a culturally given set) as an influential factor of a group's constitution must not be neglected either.

The range of methodological approaches and scholarly backgrounds offered in the fourth LAR conference inspired thoughts that will bear on the approach of *Lived Ancient Religion*, emphasizing ways of interaction, contrasting the authoritative rules and local practices, and focusing on situational differences.

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