

Introduction

GREG WOOLF / ILARIA BULTRIGHINI /
CAMILLA NORMAN

Approaching Sanctuaries

Near the beginning of the project from which this volume has emerged, a group of researchers gathered together at the Max Weber Kolleg in Erfurt to discuss what use we should or could make of the concept of Sanctuary.¹ It included prehistorians and ancient historians, experts on the ancient Mediterranean and the Near East, archaeologists and specialists in religious studies. Our experiences and knowledge were different but our interests intersected. For two days we explored each others' starting points, and tried to find areas of agreement, or at least agreement over what we did not know.

The term Sanctuary itself, we found, has no canonical meaning in any of our disciplines. The English term is first attested in the fourteenth century CE, and it maps imperfectly onto cognate and non-cognate terms in various modern languages. Sanctuary, *sanctuaire*, *Heiligtum*, asylum and other such terms marked out a field of common interest, but they did not describe a single well-delineated category. There were also some specialised meanings that did not translate from one discipline to another. But there were points of broad agreement that can shape further discussion. We begin with three of these.

Firstly, these terms have in common that they describe institutions that are *anchored in space*. Most ancient peoples also had portable images of their gods, some even had portable altars or tabernacles, and sacred objects or books that could temporarily convert a given location into a focus of collective ritual action. There were also other sacred things like amulets and curse tablets that might be deployed in a variety of locations and situations. Sanctuary generally describes a fixed point in an inhabited human landscape, and often a place where that human landscape and a divine one are brought into a closer than usual relationship. These are what are sometimes called 'thin

1 At the meeting in 2015 we were particularly guided by presentations from Timothy Taylor (Vienna), Esther Eidinow (Bristol), Rubina Raja (Aarhus) and Cory Crawford (Ohio University). Thanks to all of them for getting us off to such a good start.

places' where worlds are made to touch, in what Rüpke in this volume terms focalisation. Very often the location of these places is 'explained' by narratives. Indigenous Australian tellings of the Dreamtime, Greek myths of the deeds of heroes, Hebrew stories of epiphanies to the patriarchs and Moses all localise moments of foundational significance in particular places. Quite likely many sanctuaries were places where those stories were developed and retold, pegs for collective memory and treasuries of *logoi* that were available to historians composing other kinds of narrative.² From the Hellenistic period on, there were pilgrimages too in which individual religious experience was formed and confirmed through personal encounters with places famous in myth.³ Journeys and narratives both established links between particular sacred places, generating sacred geographies that were experienced before they were ever mapped or described. Like other ancient geographies, these asserted the importance of synchronic relationships. Sanctuaries, severally and together, suppressed the distance of time, allowing the landscape to accumulate dense networks of religious significance.

Secondly, and as a consequence of the first point, these places were treated as *marked out as special*, separate from other lived environments. For Greeks this crystallised in the notion of a *temenos*, a space sharply delineated from the surrounding landscape but one that included much more than the temples which today are the more visible remains of many sanctuaries. Roman religious experts also established spaces – some permanent, some temporary – designated as *templa* – a term which again does not correspond to modern terms. Ditches and banks, often marked by bizarre structured deposits, marked out areas of many La Tène sites north of the Alps. How precisely the populations that built and used them understood the differences these boundaries established is now irrecoverable. What is clear is that sacralizing particular spaces was a very common means of creating a sanctuary in many ancient societies, but the ways in which this was understood and described varied considerably.

Sometimes the difference between sacred and non-sacred places was expressed in heightened senses of taboo, rules governing who might enter and who must not, and determining at what times access was permitted and to whom. Unexpiated pollution, foreignness, recent sexual activity, menstruation or the aftermath of childbirth, or simply a failure to perform the required preliminary purifications (which might include fasting, sacrifice, or prayer) all might prohibit or delay access. Many ancient Mediterranean sanctuaries were provided with washing facilities, as are mosques today, but at Eleusis would-be initiates prepared themselves with bathing in the sea and also sacrificed. Sanctuaries might be presented as dangerous places, especially for rule-breakers. But they were also on occasion places of refuge and asylum. Today the resonances of those terms probably mean more than their original religious connotations. The crea-

2 Orlin 2007; Bommas, Harrisson and Roy 2012; Dignas and Smith 2012; Cusumano *et al.* 2013. See also Eidinow this volume.

3 Hunt 1982; Frankfurter 1998; Elsner and Rutherford 2005.

tion of sanctuaries implies a sense of normal or profane space, just as a festival calendar brings into being days of normal work and routine.

A third commonality we identified was that sanctuaries were not simply places, but also spaces. From one perspective each sanctuary might be considered a point in the landscape, a point of contact between the ordinary and the sacred. But from another point of view sanctuaries were also bounded spaces, often subject to complex internal organization and zoning, spaces within which things happened that took place nowhere else, or where familiar activities acquired new and special significances. Communal dining is an obvious example of an activity that meant something different when it took place in a sanctuary. Ritualised commensality and/or drinking had many other functions in ancient societies from the overt equality of participants in Greek *symposia* and *syssitia* to the more hierarchical order of the Roman *cena* and distributions of food and wine by chieftains in European Iron Age sites.⁴ But dining within the sanctuary brought the gods to the banquets. On all this we could agree.

But we also found that Sanctuary is a fuzzy concept. Like any polythetic definition, ours draws attention to cases that resemble sanctuaries in some respects but not others. So at our scoping meeting in Erfurt we spent some time discussing cemeteries. These sites are typically clearly demarcated and, in some sense, special, they were often places within which certain activities were often proscribed and others required, and maybe even ‘thin places’ where contact with the dead might seem easier or a greater risk. Both sanctuaries and cemeteries were sites of particular ritual. Both might also be places of symbolic accumulation, spaces within which the living invested significant portions of their labour and wealth. Both kinds of spaces were closely integrated into the collective life of ancient communities. Many Greek sanctuaries were sites of mass gatherings during annual or penteteric festivals. The Roman festival of the *parentalia* might involve families eating a meal at a grave and sharing portions of it with deceased relatives. In a more sinister sense, graves were also one of the preferred spots at which to bury curse tablets. Yet despite these resemblances we were reluctant to consider cemeteries as sanctuaries. Perhaps it is the absence of the gods as opposed to ancestors, perhaps the highly specialised nature of communication that takes place there. Perhaps too the sense, in many of the cultures we knew about, that these things belonged to different realms. Roman augurs were forbidden to touch things to do with the dead. Many Mediterranean cultures located tombs away from the places where living mortals cohabited with the gods. The resemblance, or parallelism, between sanctuaries and cemeteries is real but there seemed some point in maintaining the distinction.

A second limiting case concerns those domestic residences in which cult regularly took place. At Çatal Hüyük in the Anatolian Neolithic, burials and signs of ritual activ-

4 Murray 1990; 2018; Slater 1991; Dietler 2010; Mastronuzzi *et al.* (this volume).

ity have regularly been found within houses.⁵ Serino's exploration in this volume of the sacred house at Himera shows a different way in which the domestic and the sacred could be combined. Household shrines are common in Roman houses, and there is a sense in which the *lararium* of a Roman mansion corresponds to a temple (as the *atrium* does to a *forum*), a place where images of gods were kept and occasionally worshipped. Yet it seems odd to treat part or all of a Roman house as a sanctuary: if we did we would have to count all those shrines at crossroads and rustic altars the same way.⁶ The concept of sanctuary would not mean much if it included everywhere that cult took place, because in ancient societies cult might take place almost anywhere.

These limiting cases indicate that our focus is on places considered as permanently special, rather than occasionally made so. Certainly, there are modes of ritual action that result in a sort of temporal sacralisation rather than a spatial one, and the same space may for a short time be treated as sacred, and then revert to mundane status. Many communal meals include a moment of ritual action such as the libation at a symposium, the glass left for Elijah at Seder, or the regular prayers of blessing and thanks that many Jews and Christians still say before meals. A public square might become the setting for a funeral or at least be closed to traders on a festive day. But these spaces are not pop-up sanctuaries, not even in the sense that Roman soldiers could build a turf altar and plant their standards in it as a focus of cult on the move. Sanctuaries did not last forever but they were built as if they would.

Sanctuaries in Human History

If we take the long view, sanctuaries are very ancient indeed. Cave paintings and carved rock shelters are among the earlier traces of communal ritual action. The dating and identification of early rock art and cave art is evolving rapidly, and the famous examples identified in western Europe have now been joined by examples from Indonesia, Australasia and the Americas. If the dates from Africa are at the moment more recent this may well reflect the limits of current research. Some of the most recent finds are more than 50,000 years old, and a few may even have been made by other species of humans. The time taken to create some of these images strongly suggests they were intergenerational projects. This is certainly true for much larger structures created by late Pleistocene and early Holocene hunter-gatherers and farmers. It has recently been suggested that sites like these may have provided foci for periodic gatherings of populations that in other seasons of the year were more widely scattered.⁷ Shared sanctuaries seem, from the beginning, to have been linked to shared senses of belonging and

5 Hodder 2010.

6 Van Andringa 2009; Flower 2017.

7 Wengrow and Graeber 2015.

community, perhaps also of kinship. A new separation of the dead from the divine seems to be a feature of this period. A few late prehistoric sanctuaries incorporate human remains into their structures, but these cases seem to be exceptional.

It has sometimes been suggested that the great investment of energy – especially of human labour but also materials – in these early monuments is a sign of the growing organizational power of agricultural societies, perhaps a complement to collective labour needed for clearing land and farming it, and also that megalithic monuments reveal new relationships with the land formed by populations that were more sedentary.⁸ This is possible, although the link between monumentality and agriculture now seems more complex as we appreciate the scale of some hunter-gatherer sanctuaries, such as Göbekli Tepe in Turkey, and as the history of agriculture itself seems less continuous in some regions, such as the British Isles. What all these sanctuaries have in common is the very long timescale, measured in human lives, over which they were used. Many sanctuaries were constructed over multiple generations, to the extent that sanctuary building might be considered as a ritual process, rather than simply the provision of spaces to be devoted to ritual. Over even longer timescales many sanctuaries were extended, repurposed, modified and even occasionally removed and re-sited. Given the very great commitment of labour and materials to the construction of archaic temples around the Mediterranean it is striking how often they were rebuilt again and again, and not only after episodes of destruction and collapse. Roman period structures often stand on the sites of Greek or Etruscan sanctuaries, and the Hellenistic and early Roman periods were major periods of temple building in Egypt. Like Mediaeval cathedrals, the most important ancient sanctuaries often seem to have been works-in-progress. Few major sites experienced a single moment of sacralization or completion.

The first historical societies – those marked by new versions of social inequality, by writing and in most cases by urbanism too – found new uses for sanctuaries. Special places, marked out by clear boundaries, existed within the cities of Bronze Age Mesopotamia and Mesoamerica, and were at the heart of the Etruscan and Greek cities built in the Iron Age. Mediterraneanists have long appreciated how sanctuaries were developed to mark the centres and boundaries of emergent city states.⁹ Sanctuaries only grew in number and variety in the centuries of demographic and economic growth, and as political and commercial and cultural horizons expanded. The Mediterranean world of the Hellenistic and Roman period knew sanctuaries at the centre of cities and in their suburbs, both grand rural centres and a mass of tiny religious spaces inserted into tiny spaces in urban topography and rural landscapes. It also witnessed an increased specialization as some sanctuaries became oracles, healing sites or places associated with dangerous crossings of mountains or the sea. There were sanctuaries

8 Sherratt 1990.

9 de Polignac 1984, translated and updated as de Polignac 1995. See also Alcock and Osborne 1994.

controlled by states, some controlled by sacred councils like the Delphic Amphictyony, some dominated by landowners or priesthoods. Late antiquity is characterised by yet newer modes of control and by the breakdown of a broad consensus that any god might legitimately have a place dedicated to his or her worship. Yet even as public cults deprived of funding collapsed, and some temples were attacked and vandalised, the Mediterranean sprouted a new generation of religious sites at the tombs of the martyrs and other eminent topographies.¹⁰

Sanctuaries and Structures

Sanctuaries also present some archaeologically distinctive features. Most were sites of intensive investment of labour and materials: one result is that in many cases sanctuaries were the first places to be identified by archaeologists. Around the Archaic Mediterranean the first cities rarely had any other large buildings. The gods were typically the first to receive grand houses made of fine stone, and roofs as well. Even in the Roman Near East, religious architecture dominated many cityscapes. The boundaries of sacred spaces were often elaborately signalled, by walls, ditches, images and inscribed markers.

It was common for the organisation, location and orientation of sanctuaries to have a cosmological significance. Paleoastronomers have gathered many examples of monuments oriented in relation to the solar year. More mundanely the placing of images and structures within the sanctuary (and also rules about where different grades of humans might stand) often expressed hierarchies of importance.¹¹

Most sanctuaries in the Mediterranean and the Ancient Near East included a central structure described as the home or house of the god, equated in some sense with human habitations and royal palaces. Like a cult statue, this was held to accommodate a deity without completely containing him or her. The major temples were the focus of considerable symbolic action, from destructions to rebuilding and repurposing. Historical writing in Greek and Latin tends to focus on the temples, and to a lesser extent on the cult statues, rather than the sanctuary as a whole. The long and complex histories of sites like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, the Temple of Artemis in Jerash, the Samaritan Temple on Mount Gerizim and the Temple of Jupiter on the Capitol in Rome all make this point very well.

But there was more to a sanctuary than the house of the main deity. There were often other shrines and usually a mass of ancillary buildings. There might be places to store or display offerings, treasuries like those set up at Delphi, and the *favissae* into which Romans sometimes cleared offerings they did not wish to retain or destroy, or

10 For an example of the process, Sweetman 2010; 2015.

11 Scheid 1999; Van Andringa 2012.

the *genizah* where Jewish sacred texts were deposited. Written testimony attests to a vast range of objects, images, documents, cash and relics that might be amassed in sanctuaries. Images of the gods are just one category here, although one that has received a great deal of attention.¹² Facilities for washing and dining have already been mentioned: there were also kitchens and sometimes fountains too. Some buildings have been identified as accommodation for pilgrims and/or temple slaves and full-time attendants. The interior organization of sanctuaries was often designed to shape the approaches, processions and exits of visitors, and the views and perhaps sounds and smells that would encounter them at each stage.

More generally sanctuaries can be thought of in relation to the idea of structured deposition, the careful arrangement of objects, sometimes including human and animal bodies, that have been transformed by ritual action. Ritual has often been characterised as action governed to a high degree by prescriptive norms and ritual action as marked by an intense attention to detail.¹³ This is reflected in the material traces of ritual in sanctuary archaeology, often sedimented over long periods of use. These traces naturally represent only the final chapter of complex cultural biographies, and it is the work of imagination as well as interpretation to reconstruct the lived experience of sanctuaries. How would we imagine the Second Temple of Jerusalem without the anecdotes about it included in the Gospels? Our testimony for the routine use of Greek and Roman sanctuaries is surprisingly scarce.¹⁴ This is one gap this book seeks in part to fill.

The Sanctuary Project

The work on which this volume draws was funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation through an Anneliese-Maier Research Prize awarded to Woolf on the nomination of Professor Jörg Rüpke. Its activities were directed by Woolf and Rüpke and took place at a variety of locations as well as the Institute of Classical Studies in London and the Max Weber Kolleg in Erfurt where they were respectively based. Other activities funded or partly funded through this prize include the doctoral thesis of Csaba Szabó on sanctuaries in Roman Dacia,¹⁵ postdoctoral fellowships for Bultrighini and Norman, a summer school in Erfurt, and the production of a new account of Roman religion edited by Rüpke and Woolf.¹⁶ The project also co-funded a number

12 Gordon 1979; Scheid 1995; Estienne 2010; Mylonopoulos 2010; Kiernan 2020; Arnhold and Sporn this volume.

13 Bell 1992; Boyer 1994; Liénard and Boyer 2006.

14 Veyne 1983; Dubourdieu 1997.

15 Now published as Szabó 2018 and Szabó 2015.

16 Rüpke and Woolf 2021.

of meetings and conferences with other research groups, the acts of one of which has been published as *Sensorium. The Senses in Roman Polytheism*.¹⁷ The editors are delighted to acknowledge with gratitude the support of the Humbolt Foundation and the stimulus it has given to debate in this broad field.

The focus of the project grew out of a desire by Rüpke and Woolf to explore some of the intersections between the former's work on Lived Ancient Religion, funded by the European Research Council, and the latter's interest in the materiality of ancient religion in the very long term. A central aim was to ask how sanctuaries formed human experience and religious knowledge in the ancient world, and to do so by establishing conversations between a range of different disciplines including prehistoric and classical archaeology, social anthropology and ancient history, art history, Jewish and early Christian studies, and the history of religions.

Lived Ancient Religion arose in part from a dissatisfaction with accounts of ancient religion that focused on political institutions and prescriptive norms. In the ancient Mediterranean these approaches are sometimes termed *polis*-religion or public religion and have a long historiography. Rüpke and Woolf had both been involved in a critique of this perspective.¹⁸ Lived Ancient Religion offered a means of decentring the state, and exploring a much wider range of cognitive, literary and social engagements with ritual, especially those of individual agents.¹⁹ Julia Kindt says more about this context to the Sanctuary Project in her closing chapter.

Sanctuaries seemed a good point at which to explore these intersections since they were a common – perhaps universal – product of human societies, making them a good terrain for comparison. As sites of material accumulation and symbolic investment they also featured prominently in the archaeological record of many societies. Because they contain much of the early evidence for the cognitive activities of anatomically modern humans they had been central to recent debates on the archaeology of mind. For practical reasons, and to ensure a good fit with the Lived Ancient Religion project, we concentrated on the societies of the Mediterranean world and the Ancient Near East during the first and last millennia (BCE and CE), but looked more widely for inspiration.

Sanctuaries already had a place in the history of religions, even if only a few studies, such as Jonathan Z. Smith's classic study 'To take place', have set them in the centre of the enquiry.²⁰ Sanctuaries were commonly understood as places that were permanent-ly special, even when no rituals were taking place. Epigraphic evidence in particular

17 Alvar Nuño, Alvar Ezquerro and Woolf 2021, based on a conference held at Universidad Carlos III in Madrid. We were also pleased to work with the CURERE network led by Dr Katell Berthelot (CNRS, Aix) and Jonathan Price (Tel Aviv), with whom we ran a joint meeting in Manchester.

18 Rüpke 2011; 2013; Woolf 1997; 2013; Rüpke and Woolf 2013. For other important critiques see Gordon 1990; Kindt 2009. For a response see Scheid 2016.

19 Rüpke 2016; Gasparini *et al.* 2020.

20 Smith 1987.

reveals several ways in which they were integrated into the lives of private individuals. Worshippers visited sanctuaries to make gifts in the hope of eliciting reciprocal help from deities; they might encounter those deities at a sanctuary in dreams, prophesies or theophanies; and they often sought cures or guidance from oracles. Petridou's chapter on Aristides brings out the potential complexity and nuance of these experiences which in his case combined physical sensations with a wider knowledge of Athenian as well as Pergamene traditions. None of this negates the significance of state action and communal decision-making in setting up, establishing and managing sanctuaries (indeed Petridou shows how aspects of this were appropriated by Aristides in reaching his own highly individualized understanding of his situation). Some rulers and states even sent embassies to oracles and most celebrated those of their citizens who were victorious in sacred games. But it is also clear from finds at Dodona and elsewhere that sanctuaries also catered to the needs and desires of individuals. Lived ancient religion was lived, at least in part, in a world structured by sanctuaries. Sanctuaries, conversely, provided resources that individuals might deploy in their own religious projects and to shape their own experiences of the divine.

The sanctuaries of the ancient Mediterranean world had already received a good deal of attention from archaeologists when the Project began. But the majority of these studies were focused on temple architecture and on the artworks and other votive material recovered in the great excavations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As some of the contributions to this volume show, current research agenda are very different. But only a few studies treated the emergence of sanctuaries in broader social perspective.²¹

The Sanctuary Project set out to build on studies of this kind but to focus instead on religious action. We were inspired by a range of approaches including a new cognitive archaeology pioneered in relation to prehistoric sites of cult,²² new research into object agency and the impact of material culture in forming human experience,²³ and work on the interplay of images and worshippers in ancient religion.²⁴ During the course of the project much more has appeared on Roman material culture and ancient religion, but little could be incorporated into the original research design.²⁵

21 Among them de Polignac 1984; Coarelli 1987; Morgan 1990. More recently there has been much new work of very high quality including Derks 1998; Van Andringa 2000; Stek 2009; 2015; Moser and Feldman 2014.

22 Mithen 1996; Lewis-Williams 2002.

23 Gell 1998; Osborne and Tanner 2006; Garrow and Gosden 2012; Chua and Elliot 2013.

24 Gordon 1979; Elsner 2007; Van Andringa 2012. See now in addition Kiernan 2020.

25 Versluys 2014; Van Oyen and Pitts 2017; Graham 2021 and the work of the Baron Thyssen Centre for the Study of Ancient Material Religion at the Open University.

Experiential Approaches to Ancient Ritual

Reconstructing the experience of ancient worshippers demands both imagination and restraint. Imagination is necessary because of the inaccessibility of the *qualia* of others' religious experience even today, let alone in the face of the severe evidential difficulties we face in dealing with the ancient world. Restraint is needed because the temptation to flesh out the evidence with speculation or inappropriate analogy is so strong.

One powerful tool has been the careful examination of that handful of testimony dealing with the experience of visiting ancient sanctuaries. The notion of *theoria* brings together religious travel and the experience of viewing objects and events of religious experience.²⁶ Literary transformation of that experience takes the form of *ekphrasis*, the representation in text of experiences that included visual, auditory and other sensory components.²⁷ Pausanias is far and away our best witness of this kind from any period of the pre-Christian Mediterranean, and he appears in several chapters in this volume. Recent work has made the most of his narrated explorations of holy spaces in the Roman province of Achaëa.²⁸ Franchi's chapter in this volume includes an elegant exposition of how this works in relation to Delphi. The results are revealing not only about the nature of the sites and monuments visible and visitable in the second century CE but also about the specificity of Pausanias' religious, literary and cultural perspective. Pausanias' subjectivity included participation in a contemporary view of the Greek past in the Roman present, and also a provincial and Asian take on Old Greece. His narration of visits was also highly selective in what he decides to report of all that he must have seen. All representation is selective of course. But it is also true that writing about religion is often itself a religious activity. Recognising Pausanias' subjectivity makes his account more valuable rather than less, as it reminds us of how religious experience varies with the individual. Where we can compare ancient responses to the same set of monuments, we rarely find them coinciding exactly. This applies both to the monuments of the city of Rome and to individual sanctuaries like that at the source of the Clitumnus.²⁹ Every experience and every narration of it is different.

Yet subjectivity does not operate without parameters. Some of those parameters were set by the character and formation of our ancient witnesses, their physical capacities to see, hear and feel and the presuppositions which they brought to those experiences when they interpreted them. Other parameters were set by the nature of the sensory world through which they moved, a world that was often carefully designed and managed by those who built and managed sanctuaries. Religious experience emerged

26 Rutherford 2000; 2007; 2013.

27 Elsner 1995; 2007.

28 Elsner 1992; Alcock, Cherry and Elsner 2001; Hutton 2005; Prezler 2007; Pirenne-Delforge 2008. See also Bultrighini and Franchi in this volume.

29 On Rome, Edwards 1996; Scheid 1996; on the Clitumnus, Dubourdieu 1997.