

Engaging with the Gods: Experiencing Romano-British Religion in Museums

The Roman period is ubiquitous in popular media and the public consciousness, featuring regularly in formal education programmes, on film and television, and in museum displays. Scholarship into the northwestern provinces of the Roman Empire, not least in Britain, has undergone fundamental shifts in recent decades through the application of postcolonially inspired theoretical approaches, yet seems to have had little impact on public perceptions. Despite overly-simplistic narratives of mobile and proactive “Romans” gifting civilisation to static and passive “natives” having been firmly overturned in scholarly minds, they persist in the popular imagination.

Religious practices in Roman Britain are similarly being academically reassessed, and increasingly seen as fundamental to the creation of hybrid identities rather than as a secondary outcome of social or economic change. Concepts of religion are also being redefined, beyond the worship of named anthropomorphic deities at formal “temple” sites to recognising the significance of ritualised structured deposits at settlements, and more personalised and embodied modes of communicating with the supernatural. The mechanisms underlying processes such as syncretisation are now considered to be more socially and religiously nuanced than traditional perceptions of Roman “tolerance” towards the deities of conquered peoples. Concepts of religious practices in Roman Britain are, in short, becoming more focused on lived experiences, and the author’s ongoing PhD research at the Archaeology Department of Durham University is exploring how this dynamically changing picture of religion in Roman Britain is being presented in British archaeological museum displays.

To explore lived religious experiences in Roman Britain, I am primarily employing the concepts developed by the University of Erfurt’s “Lived Ancient Religion” project (2012–2017 but with successor projects still ongoing). Although focused on the ancient Mediterranean, its principles are increasingly being recognised in studies of religion in Roman Britain: religious choice and individuality, the dynamic negotiation of religious and social authority (“religion in the making”), and the performative creativity inherent in every ritual act. I believe that this approach can offer a valuable model for museums wishing to present a more nuanced, personalised, and socially and politically engaged Romano-British religious landscape. This means challenging normative archaeological museum display practices founded on aesthetic, typological and material juxtapositions of objects, rejecting “religion” as a discrete display category, and considering the materiality and multisensory properties of objects and embodied responses to them. It also involves the creation of more engaging and emotive interpretation strategies, challenging visitors’ preconceptions of the period and uncritical applications of anachronistic terminology such as “religion,” “ritual,” and “gods” to the ancient world. Beyond viewing religious displays as collections of epigraphy and iconography used to illustrate the existence of various named deities, it promotes religious activity as a dynamic process, inextricably entangled with social, political and economic structures. It views communal religious practices as the result of individual creativity and power negotiations, and places multi-sensory embodied human interactions with material culture at the heart of religious experiences.

The scholarship of contemporary material religion also provides a valuable model for archaeological displays to follow, and indeed the considerations suggested above are unlikely to sound evolutionary to those familiar with the content of this journal. However, archaeological material rarely forms a substantial aspect of such discussions and there is much to be gained from the integration within museum displays of archaeological material culture theories and studies of contemporary material religion.

Despite a dearth of modern worshippers of the gods and goddesses of Roman Britain, we cannot overlook the possibility of intense visitor interactions occurring with its material culture, if only by those of extant faiths who still fear or wish to denigrate ancient religions. Romano-British religious material culture is generally considered to be religiously inert, a category of archaeological data rather than actively sacred or numinous, yet anecdotal and published accounts record the discrete sticking of crucifixes under museum altars and the leaving of proselytising tokens at Romano-British religious sites. Supposedly “dead” religious beliefs clearly retain the power to generate passionate responses.

My research includes detailed analyses of display construction and interpretative language at a representative sample of museums, qualitative interviews with relevant curators, and a wider public survey. These will combine to review existing sector-wide approaches to interpreting Romano-British religion and highlight recent innovations in exploring individual religious experiences. For example, the “votive lamp” interactive at Chesters Roman Fort (Historic England) on Hadrian’s Wall (Figure 1) centers on religious choice, prompting visitors to consider the attributes of various deities and select three that they would make offerings to. I will also explore as far as possible the innovative presentation of Roman religion in other northwestern provinces, such as the use of video projections of ritual processes onto altars at the Musée de la Romanité in Nîmes, France (Figure 2). Through this research, I hope to present achievable strategies for future interpretation projects and promote new and engaging methodologies for interpreting the rich religious material culture of Roman Britain.

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