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ROMAN RELIGION — RELIGIONS OF ROME

– *interview with professor Jörg Rüpke* –

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Jörg Rüpke (1962) is one of the leading scholars of Roman religious studies. Chair of Comparative Religion at the University of Erfurt since 1999 and fellow of the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies, since 2000 he chaired numerous international projects and grants, many of them dealing with various aspects of the Roman religion. With more than 20 individual monographs and 38 edited volumes, his work has become unavoidable in the field of religious studies. Taking an overview or an account of his work and activity, we can have a broader view on the actual state of the Roman religious studies — a discipline in continuous formation and transformation.

You have learned Latin and Religious Studies (Religionswissenschaft) in various universities in Germany and abroad, but formed as a scholar in Tübingen, one of the most important centers for religious studies with a rigorous tradition in theological studies, too. Why did you choose the study of Roman religion and who influenced you in the beginning of your career?

In the very beginning of my studies I was interested in religions of Asia, in classical antiquity and in theology, too. I learned also Hebrew, but after a short time I realized that I was above all interested in religious studies. At Bonn I had as a mentor, prof. Karl Hoheisel (1937–2011) editor and one of the authors of the Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum, the only person at the faculty who had special interests in Roman religion. Than in

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Tübingen I met Hubert Cancik and Burkhard Gladigow, who had an important role in my formation as a scholar.

Your Ph.D. thesis dealt with the religious aspects of the wars in Roman times². In the 1990's your interests will focus especially on the historiography of the Roman religion and the Roman calendar³ followed after 2005 by your studies on religious rituals of the individual and the community⁴. How do you choose a topic for a research program?

I don't really choose a topic or research program as a predefined plan. Usually they are born from my earlier works. For instance, my PhD topic was chosen by professor Gladigow. I planned a detailed chapter on Roman festivals in military context, which wasn't published finally in the *Domi militiae*. I spent all my summer of 1992 writing a chapter on the calendar as a basis for these festivals, of which I was very fascinated at that time. Actually, in 2–3 months, I wrote the basics of my habilitation work on Roman calendars. In the 1990's working on so called "imperial religion", my interest turned increasingly on regionalism and local aspects of the Roman religion, which influenced my project on regionalism, provincial and imperial religion and later on individualization, too.

During these 25 years while you became a leading scholar in the study of Roman religion, the methodology of Religious Studies generally—but especially in the *Römische Religionsgeschichte*—changed radically. Some of the scholars—like C. Robert Phillips or Carl Orson—talked even about a crisis in the methodology⁵. Is it true?

² RÜPKE 1990.

³ RÜPKE 1993, RÜPKE 1995.

⁴ RÜPKE 2001.

⁵ PHILLIPS 2007, RIVES 2010.

I would not affirm that we are facing now a real “crisis of the discipline”, because there is in fact, no united discipline of Roman religious studies. We are facing the flourishing of Isiac studies or Mithraic studies but are witnessing many neglected aspects too. Historicizing Roman religion is still lacking: a unified view on Roman religion or even, about ancient religion generally. Judaism and Christianity are still not integrated in the study of the ancient religions. Theology deals separately with them, as “church history” and in some places Religious Studies still treat separated “world religions”. Similarly to this, Judaism is often missing from such projects that deal with ancient Magic and religion. Important syntheses are missing in current research. We tried to reduce this gap in the research with the Companion to the Roman Religion⁶ and now we are working on the Companion to the archaeology of religion in the ancient world, which hopefully will also contribute to widening the field of our discipline⁷.

One of your major works deals with the priests of the city of Rome, collecting all the sacerdotal personae from Republican time to Late Antiquity⁸. We see there hundreds of names—many of them remarkable persons of the Roman history—with different roles from the typology of Joachim Wach: founders of religions, diviners, magicians, priests ... What was the impact of these people in Rome and in a smaller area, like a provincial city?

They were not so important as it seems to be. It was not like in the case of ancient Egypt or the Mesopotamian city-states, where priests had much more power and influence. They are part of everyday life, but the official religion is mainly performed by the magistrates. Priesthood had a secondary importance in this social structure. This has important consequences. Religion is set free for

⁶ RÜPKE 2007.

⁷ RÜPKE 2014.

⁸ RÜPKE 2005.

individual engagement and self-representation in an imperial structure, which had large free spaces—in ideological and religious terms—for these functions and the dynamics between different social and religious levels and manifestations. We must analyze the priesthood of the Roman Empire against the background of empire.

Another book of yours—translated even in Korean—deals with the Roman calendar⁹. The number of the sources and the variety of the different urban Fasti are stunning, but can we reconstruct by these analogies the religious calendar of a Roman individual, too? Or the religious Fasti of a provincial city?

Some of the intellectuals and the literates surely had personalized calendars. We know from ancient sources, like Ovid or Petronius, that some of the Romans had scrolled calendars or marked the black and white days with nails on a wall. It was a symbol for personal beliefs. In the case of cities, we must highlight the difference about East and West. In the Near East, the Julian calendar was introduced late, because most of the urban centers had their own specific calendar systems. However, even in the West, the local calendars and religious holydays—known mainly from the Hispanic municipal laws and some fragmentary preserved urban fasti¹⁰—were very diversified, with few common festivals, like the Saturnalia or the imperial holidays. It is important to mention, that the monumental marble calendars disappeared even from Rome after the time of Tiberius, which suggest that the new Julian calendar—and the fasti themselves—became an integrated part of the Roman society.

Dealing with the faith of the ancient man (and woman) is a risky job. We know some puzzles from different periods, times and places about

⁹ RÜPKE 2011.

¹⁰ About the urban calendars see: RÜPKE 1995, 95–165, REEVES 2004.

the faith and individual acts, feelings, cloths, places and instruments of religious manifestation. It is like reconstructing the life of a star by astronomers: you need analogies. What do we know about Roman religion in fact?

About the feelings and direct, religious experiences of the Roman people we have very few information. But we can ask also, what do we know about the religious experience of our generation? We had almost the same lack of information about the religiosity of the people from the beginning of the 20th century. With the exception of some personal journals, short remarks, poems and interviews we don't know how they interacted and lived their religion. It is the same with the Romans: we have mainly the official façade of the religiosity, the self-expression and representation of the people, with some laconic sources of personal religiosity, mainly from literary and epigraphic texts.

You are a member and coordinator of many international projects. Some of them, like the “Religiöse Individualisierung in historischer Perspektive” (second phase: 2013–2017) have already a great echo in the international literature¹¹. What are the perspectives and main ideas of this project?

In this project we are working together with theologians, historians, archaeologists and historians of religions mainly from Europe and the Americas, but having also collaborators from India, China and New Zealand. Our main aim is to identify discernable patterns of religious individualization, mainly focusing not only on one society or period, but investigating the transfer of different forms and agents of religion in and outside of a group. We also want to analyze some historiographical aspects, redefining also the term “religion” in the frame of this new perspective of the individual. As a perspective for this project, we will organize small workshops and conferences on the topic.

¹¹ RÜPKE 2013.

Another project is entitled “Lived Ancient Religion (2012–2017)”¹². In this work we can find many young scholars dealing with some particular aspects of ancient religion like the small sanctuaries, the religious life of Ostia or Karanis. Why was this project developed and what are the main tasks of it?

The project is aiming to present “lived religion” not as a supplement to “cults” and “polis religion”, but as a pervading perspective on (not only) ancient religion. Using the inspiration of Meredith McGuire’s work on embodied practices of contemporary religion only as a starting point, the project’s aim is not to recreate a methodology of this kind for ancient societies and individuals, but more to use this as a starting point for new perspectives. Having already organized some workshops and conferences, the research group will meet next time at Copenhagen in May, 2014¹³.

Beside publishing books and articles on Roman religion, religious studies and historiography, you are also a very dynamic culture diplomat, elected in 2012 as a member in the German Council of Science and Humanities. How do you see the future of classical studies in Germany and generally, in Europe? What are the main problems or tendencies and how could we change it?

Classical studies as a privilege of the intellectual bourgeois is in disappearance even in Italy, Germany or Switzerland. However, it is still easier to find financial support for such research in Western countries. Many of the studies are focusing on “globalization” in Roman world or on the relation of Rome and China – as a postmodern, actual topic. But this is above all a scholarly concern. Above all it is very important to present the

¹² RÜPKE 2012.

¹³ Workshops of the project: Presence of death in lived religion. 11th EASR Annual Conference 2012 “Ends and beginnings”, Södertörn University, Stockholm, 23–26 August, 2012; Archaeology of Lived Religion in Antiquity, Rome, 5–7th November, 2012; “Sharpening the knife”: making religion effective in everyday life. Erfurt, 11–14 June, 2013; The role of objects-creating meaning in situations. Eisenach, 9–11 October 2013; Stories told and memories uttered – Ettersburg/Weimar, 29–31 January, 2014.

Roman Empire and its heritage in Europe, the Near East and North Africa as an opportunity to stress a shared cultural heritage.

You are a restless researcher of the Divine. As a private person, how do you communicate with God? With other words: what the Divine represents for you?

This is a question beyond my professional role and beyond my scholarly tools.

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