

Seeing the God

Edited by
MARLIS ARNHOLD,
HARRY O. MAIER,
and JÖRG RÜPKE

*Culture, Religion, and Politics
in the Greco-Roman World*

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Mohr Siebeck

Culture, Religion, and Politics in the Greco-Roman World

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Seeing the God

Image, Space, Performance, and Vision
in the Religion of the Roman Empire

Edited by

Marlis Arnhold, Harry O. Maier, and Jörg Rüpke

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Introduction

Under the title *Seeing the God: Image, Space, Performance, and Vision in the Religion of the Roman Empire* this volume presents the proceedings of the eponymous international conference which was held on June 3 and 4, 2015 at the University of Bonn, Germany. It brings together various disciplinary approaches to religious visual culture of Roman Imperial times and visualizes the entanglement of religious imagery with the visual culture of this period in general. Bridging the disciplinary gaps reveals mechanisms, such as legitimization strategies, which can be attested, for instance, through references to Imperial political iconographies in both texts and images. Understanding these mechanisms is essential as they represent articulations of the dynamics of religious practices and draw attention to various kinds of agents who acquired images for various purposes. In this regard, idolatry, 'Bilderdienst', does not serve any longer as a distinction between religious traditions. The central role of images and visual representations rather has been affirmed for nearly all traditions of the Imperial period. The scope of this volume therefore is to shed new light on the dialectics of the imagination and illustration of the divine in texts and pictures. The visual language, iconographic elements, spatial conceptions, modes of behavior, actions, and performances employed for the purpose of imagining the divine and making images visible can be found in various situations and contexts. For example, they were used to communicate political messages or express political authority. And depictions of the divine were also influential in other contexts. Such uses of visual language could be deployed both according with prevailing modes, as well as in ways that deviated from them.

The question is not just one of coding and the necessity of de-coding required in communication-mechanisms which have been outlined by Paul Zanker and Tonio Hölscher, as well as similarly by Clifford Geertz.¹ In light of the imagination and illustration of the divine we face a process of constant re-coding of meaning. The same visual cue used over a long period of time may differ in meaning from one context to the next, as well as from situation to situation. However, its meaning may also have undergone transformation if both cue and context remain the same, but the cue has likewise been employed for different purposes. A good example of this arises when a symbol has been abused.

¹ Geertz 1973, 3–30; Hölscher 1987; id. 2015, 662–686; Zanker 1987.

Asking how an idea of the divine comes into being and how the dialectics of these ongoing processes work, the contributions to this volume therefore address a number of questions:

- 1) In view of the various visual cues, these ought to be: Where did visual cues of the images and texts appear and possibly derive from? What do they stand for and how is their meaning transformed in the process of constant re-coding?
- 2) Regarding the contexts and situations in which visual cues are found: How do they affect meaning, particularly when we are dealing with standardized images? How do spatial settings direct the viewer or audience, create modes of visibility, proximity or distance to gods? What impact does performance have?
- 3) Concerning the recipients of the images and texts: How do the identity and particularly the disposition of the recipient influence the salience of meaning? How are processes of interpretation informed by textually induced discourses?
- 4) And finally: What follows from this for our understanding of the imagination and construction of the divine?

Addressing these questions from various angles, the volume comprises twelve chapters. Nine of these contributions were presented at the conference. Three additional chapters, those by Jörg Rüpke, Steven J. Friesen, and Robin Jensen, have been added to underline further aspects of the topic. The volume thus comprises contributions from experts from a wide range of disciplines oriented to different temporal and spatial locations in the Ancient Mediterranean – namely Classical Archaeology, Ancient History, Religious Studies, Theology, and New Testament Studies – and therefore creates a dialogue that moves beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries. As such, it is a groundbreaking effort that seeks to offer readers a wide spectrum of accounts and approaches and to signal the importance of attention to the visual across a broad range of specializations. It functions as an invitation to others to continue along this fruitful line of investigation of visual cultures in Antiquity.

To the Classical Archaeologist, the question of how to read an image, particularly when different forms of images of the same topic (descriptive vs. narrative) exist next to each other, is most central. Extending the discussion to include observation and discussion of context and situation of related processes of the re-coding of information and the way image and space function together are of utmost interest. By paying attention at the agents behind the images and the ongoing acquisition of visual elements and iconographies, the analysis is deepened.

For the History of Religion the ‘iconic turn’ has led to a fruitful critique of the privileging of textual traditions and demonstrated the wide range of variants in participants’ interpretation and use of images. At the same time, the dynamics of the different strategies to make the divine present and accessible and their de-

pendence on discourses to inform imagination and to limit and outlaw 'illicit' use of images is still in need of further research. Here, the conference's focus on the interplay of images and imaginaries in texts and the contributions dealing with the strategic aspects of references to and efforts in representations promise new insights in the perception of visual culture across religious traditions.

From the perspective of biblical and early Christian studies, a focus on the role of images in the culture in which Christianity developed urges movement away from a purely textual study of an emerging religious tradition. It invites a comparative and phenomenological account of the role of imagery in both textual and material forms in creating and preserving religious identity, boundaries, and understanding. For too long, New Testament and early Christian studies have left elements of visual culture aside in part because the disciplines have been dominated by the view that the earliest Jesus traditions were aniconic and in part because the disciplines have been too dominated by the view that the early church was a socially separatist movement that sought to insulate itself from its wider culture. However, a paucity of evidence in the first case does not necessarily lead to the firm conclusion that Christ religion was aniconic and while there are indeed strong invocations to separatism within many early Christian documents, the audiences addressed by them were inextricably bound up in the social and cultural currents of their contexts. Attention to the visual reveals this and urges biblical scholars not to be blind to the iconographical elements of the Greek and Roman world that shaped people, including Christians, in often unconscious ways.² Indeed, the irony of the exhortations to be separate is that they are often presented in ways that presume some (even if low grade) facility with the rhetorical methods of so-called pagan contemporaries.

Each of these disciplines engages the imagination and the images of the divine in different ways and builds on a long tradition of methodological approaches and research agendas as well as various forms of theoretical and conceptual systematization. Creating a dialogue between them, this volume gives essential impulses for both the overall topic and further disciplinary applications.

Archaeology has developed and refined the analytical methods to study images and objects and emphasized the relevance of their appearance, form and style. The close inspection of production modes allows for detailed insights into economic processes. The inclusion of functional contexts such as houses, sanctuaries and the spatial and topographical environs of finds in general³ illuminates further aspects which are crucial for the analysis of the role and meaning of images and objects. Yet in archaeology, 'religion' is still too often perceived as

² In this regard, the essays contained in Robbins, Melion and Jeal 2017 furnish a refreshing reorientation and build on earlier treatments by Snyder 1985, Jensen 2000, Crossan and Reed 2004, Weissenrieder, Wendt and von Gemünden, 2004, Canavan 2012, Elliott and Reasoner 2011, Robbins 2016, Kahl 2010, Lopez 2008, Niang and Osiek 2012, and Maier 2013.

³ E.g. Kaufmann-Heinimann 2007, Haug and Kreuz 2016.

limited to gods and ‘belief’. The notion of religion as communication of various agents with divine and human others – as introduced by Jörg Rüpke⁴ – here shifts attention onto the discursive level and the role of images and objects as media.⁵ As such, they present constitutive elements of these discourses but likewise come into being through these, as is evident, for example, for temple dedications by Republican generals at Rome.

Religious studies contributes central aspects such as agency, performance and sensual experiences next to larger conceptual and theoretical frameworks concerning various notions of religion in the above mentioned examples as well as the concept of lived religion.⁶ Recent studies have underlined the significance of material and visual evidence in the study of religion.⁷ Their search for ways to approach these methodologically clearly benefits from the cross-disciplinary dialogue with the fields of archaeology and art history. This dialogue, however, reaches far beyond the supply of tools and the contribution of ideas: A historian of religion may ask whether the relevance of the appearance of images merely is a scholarly construction – to which an archaeologist will immediately reply that it rather was of utter importance in antiquity but followed different rules than other forms of expressions of religion did.⁸ The example illustrates well the relevance of this dialogue for interpretations and the impulses given by either discipline. Material religion is, however, not only reinforcing questions of the construction of the divine, its anthropomorphism, gendering and identifiability. It is also stressing the aesthetic dimension of religion as well as its spatialised character, binding religious practices and the presence of the divine to specific places.

In an analogous way, a scholar of New Testament and early Christian origins is invited through an approach centred in the visual material culture to identify more clearly intersections of religious beliefs with larger cultural phenomena in which early Christ believers were embedded. Such an invitation seeks to move the discipline beyond a purely lexico-graphical approach to ancient texts, or to treat wider issues as mere backdrop to the important task of exegesis, and insists upon recognition of ancient Christ religion as one amongst many religions of the Roman Empire. It is against this trans-disciplinary backdrop that we raise the question: Which knowledge does it take to identify an image as representation of a deity or a space as a sanctuary dedicated to a specific cult?

⁴ Rüpke 2015.

⁵ For instance: Hosseini 2008; Meyer 2008; Morgan 2011; Stolorow 2005.

⁶ Rüpke 2016; id. 2015.

⁷ For instance: Houtman and Meyer 2012; Pezzoli-Olgiate and Rowland 2011; Morgan 1998.

⁸ The example given here refers to a question addressed by Jörg Rüpke at the participants of the panel “Shaping the Divine Counterpart – Communicating Religion through Signs, Image-Objects and Architecture in Graeco-Roman Antiquity” held at the Annual Conference of the European Association for the Study of Religion 2017 at Leuven.

The twelve chapters of the volume have been arranged into three sections comprising four chapters each. Section 1 introduces various *Forms of Imagining Divine Presences and of Referring to Divine Agents*, thus opening the discussion of what images of the divine can be – and of what is articulated through them. The chapters of this section shed light on issues such as the material conditions and visualities of divine imaginaries, as well as various kinds of evidence and the related methodological approaches.

In his essay on *Material Conditions for Seeing the Divine: The Temple of the Sebastoi at Ephesos and the Vision of the Heavenly Throne in Revelation 4–5*, Steven J. Friesen contrasts two late first-century religious phenomena from very different socio-economic contexts in Western Asia Minor – the provincial Imperial cult temple established at Ephesos in 89/90 CE, and John’s vision report of the throne of Israel’s God as found in Revelation 4–5. This comparison furnishes the backdrop for reflection on the difference that material conditions make in visualizations of the divine. For both phenomena, the paper focuses on financial resources, material objects and the parameters for vision, as well as language and narrative. The author concludes that the categories of classical visuality and ritual-centered visuality do not do justice to the two phenomena. The materiality of the two divine sightings – at the temple and through the text – requires us also to consider visualities of subordination and subversive ways of seeing.

Various textual remains and image-objects of deities are explored as elements of different strategies of interaction and communication of human agents with divine agents by Anna-Katharina Rieger via the rock sanctuary of Caesarea Philippi on the southern slopes of Mount Hermon. Taking into account the material particularities and the spatial setting of the image-objects and inscriptions from the area of the sanctuary itself, as well as of those referring to the latter, Rieger scrutinizes the standard academic narratives about Greco-Roman gods which often allude to literary sources or far-fetched analogies, in order to open up the interpretation to practices and experiences. Material affordances such as sizes and spatial options for interaction with the image-objects as well as epigraphic references addressing the gods are considered important tools for understanding the image-objects of gods. Extra emphasis is laid on the question of perception, as well as on the conceptualization of contexts in the archaeological method. Processed and unprocessed (stone) materials are analyzed without evaluative distinction. With this shift of perspective from a relation of image-object and viewer to a relation which encompasses human agents, materialities, a layered contextualization, as well as spatial ranges, the image-objects can be better embedded into spatial practices, individual needs, and civic conditions at Caesarea Philippi. The chapter is titled *Imagining the Absent and Perceiving the Present: An Interpretation of Material Remains of Divinities from the Rock Sanctuary at Caesarea Philippi (Gaulantis)*.

Kristine Iara, in her contribution *Seeing the Gods in Late Antique Rome*, investigates the role of religious imagery in the city of Rome in Imperial times and Late Antiquity. The examination of the extraordinarily rich and manifold evidence from the Forum Romanum and the Capitoline reveals a wide range of possibilities and strategies of the ways the gods were represented and referred to. Within the overall material evidence, the anthropomorphic statue was only one among many possible ways and means to refer to the deities, rendering their presence perceivable and facilitating the communication between people and gods. Further, the particular chronological focus she adopts allows her to observe the same objects within changing conditions: progressing Christianization effected immense changes in the perception of divine representations and the interpretations of meanings.

Jörg Rüpke's contribution broadens the scope of the first section further. He underlines that gods are visible not only in the form of representation, but also through the visibility of communication with them. It is the visibility of the most prominent religious agents of the ancient city of Rome on which the chapter *Not Gods Alone: On the Visibility of Religion and Religious Specialists in Ancient Rome* focuses. It analyzes the distinctiveness of Roman senatorial priests (*sacerdotes*) during ritual action. Despite the high prestige sought and conferred by these offices, they did not appear as different from other magistrates in many instances, as they were all distinguished by a purple-edged *toga praetexta* only. The underlying logic seems to have been a division of labour, relying on a high prominence and even awkward visibility of very few priests on the one hand and the prestige conferred by these exemplary figures on the aristocracy as a whole on the other.

Section 2, *Modes of Image Creation and Appropriation of Iconographies and Visual Cues*, deepens the discussion by drawing attention to the specific appearance and iconographies used for images of the divine. These could be created but they were also appropriated from other contexts to produce specific meanings.

Richard L. Gordon focuses on images created for and employed in performative actions: In a sense, all divine images in late Egyptian religion can be thought of as 'performative' inasmuch as the ceremonies of 'opening the mouth' and 'opening the eye', i.e. the fictive calling to life of statues, were a staple of daily temple ritual. This claim, which Gordon terms 'high ritual realism', directly informed the use of divine images in temple magical practice, which was likewise a priestly monopoly. The inclusion of a divine image in a magical text was analogous to the theological knowledge required for an effective praxis. Temple practice thus had no place for the idea of imitation. Once Greco-Egyptian magical practice began to be practiced in a few large cities outside of Egypt, such as Carthage and Rome, that is, after the late second century CE, the absence of the temple context induced practitioners, even when they had access to written

formulae, to appeal instead to their own imaginations, and so to the inventory of graphic signs in the new life-context. Titled *Getting it Right: Performative Images in Greco-Egyptian Magical Practice*, this chapter focuses on exemplary cases in which such late second to late fourth century CE practitioners decided to use their own personal representations of spirit-powers that lacked a settled or agreed upon iconography to add additional authority to their *defixiones* on lead, distantly echoing the temple tradition.

In her contribution *Imagining Mithras in Light of Iconographic Standardization and Individual Accentuation*, Marlis Arnhold analyses the various forms of iconographic, motivic, and compositional consistencies present in complex representations of the tauroctony of Mithras. Asking which conditions were required and can be made out for these to have emerged, she sheds light on the production processes behind these images, including the question of where they were produced. The author argues that production was not restricted to the most important urban centers but could have taken place anywhere. Consequently the models for the various motives, iconographic solutions and modes of composition must have been easily accessible if not widely known. The frequent use of generic motives which were likewise employed in other functional contexts, as well as of easily recognizable iconographies, furthermore implies that very little knowledge was required to grasp the images' content and meaning. The god and his cult imagined in this way thus appear hardly mysterious or secretive at all.

The appropriation of existing iconographies is also argued for by Robin Jensen in her chapter on *The Polymorphous Jesus in Early Christian Image and Text*. Early Christian visual depictions of Jesus typically present him as a beardless youth, often with long, curly hair. These representations appear in scenes showing Christ as a healer or wonderworker, although sometimes also when he appears as a teacher surrounded by his apostles. Beginning in the mid-fourth century, these depictions are joined – sometimes in close physical proximity – to representations that show him thickly bearded and virile, regally enthroned, or transferring a scroll of the New Law to Peter and Paul. Such divergences in Jesus' physical depiction could be explained by the desire to express his dual natures (human and divine), affirm the futility of making a definitive image of the Divine One, or signify his different roles (teacher of true philosophy, miracle worker, ascended Lord). They also may be intended to demonstrate his superiority to the Greco-Roman gods insofar as he possesses all their characteristics and powers in himself. In other words he is simultaneously like Apollo and Jupiter, while transcending both, along with all the other gods. However, early Christian documents that report observers remarking on Jesus' varying and changing image, both in his earthly life and following his resurrection, offer another perspective. Jesus was and was not confined to one human appearance or physique. The problem of depicting Christ in visual art thus raises questions such as, what characterizes a true likeness, whether certain conventional portraits are

potentially idolatrous, and what artists intend or viewers perceive in depictions of the man-God, Jesus.

The appropriation of visual cues symbolizing specific values in narratives is dealt with by David L. Balch in his chapter on *Founders of Rome, of Athens, and of the Church: Romulus, Theseus, and Jesus. Theseus and Ariadne with Athena Visually Represented in Rome, Pompeii and Herculaneum*. The author builds on earlier research where he has argued for structural similarities in accounts of the origin of Rome and Luke-Acts' narration of the origin of Christianity. When Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Luke narrate biographies of the founders, Romulus and Jesus, and then write the history of their two institutions, the state and the church, their two narratives share thirty values. For example, both Romulus and Jesus were born by divine act; both were killed, but then appeared after their deaths. The institutions that they founded both grew by receiving foreigners, which resulted in new names: Latins and Christians. The chapter explores the influence of another founder, Theseus of Athens. Three Roman emperors, Augustus, Nero, and Vespasian, legitimated themselves not only as successors of Romulus, but also by claiming similarity to Theseus. This imperial propaganda is reflected in Roman domestic art, in frescoes of Theseus painted in houses in Rome, Pompeii, and Herculaneum. One key theme in contemporary literature and art was that Theseus founding the city was more important than his family life. Ariadne, a princess of Crete, had helped Theseus kill the Minotaur and then had abandoned her family to sail away with him. Nevertheless, the goddess Athena appeared to Theseus and demanded that he abandon her and sail away to found Athens. This Roman domestic visual culture powerfully presented imperial claims and furnishes a hypothetical backdrop for understanding the way some early Christ believers would have received Luke-Acts. Luke's narrative makes counter claims: the moral value more important even than that of family is not Rome, but Christ: 'Whoever comes to me and does not hate [his] ... wife ... cannot be my disciple' (Luke 14:26). Both Dionysius and Luke go even further. A key story of the foundation of Rome involves the conflict between Rome and her mother city, Alba. Instead of their armies fighting, the Roman Horatii and the Alban Curiatii, cousins who love each other, 'are willing to give their lives for their country'; they are 'eager to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus' (Acts 21:13). A soldier's or a disciple's ultimate commitment is not only more important than family, perhaps including a wife, but more important than their own lives, a thirty-second value narrated in the foundations stories both of Rome and of the church.

In the final section, *Evocation of Specific Images in People's Minds*, emphasis is put on the persuasive character of the use of specific images. The essays in this section look at various methodological and theoretical tools of interpretation. In doing so they again emphasize the importance of attention to the overall visual

culture of the period framing the material each essay considers. The section starts with Harry Maier's chapter on *Seeing the Blood of God: The Triumphant Charade of Ignatius of Antioch the God-Bearer*. The paper takes up ancient and modern visual theory to show how Ignatius of Antioch (writing in the first decades of the second century) presents himself as a token of the suffering of Jesus. As such he draws attention to an anticipated gruesome execution as a criminal in a Roman arena as a picture of the divine. Ignatius regularly calls himself 'God-bearer' (*theophoros*) and in a procession to the divine. In particular the essay takes up ancient notions of ekphrasis and then locates them within a larger theorization of how to understand and interpret visual culture more generally. With the help of contemporary anthropological study of visual culture, it develops a theory of visualization and visual culture that sees the visual as encoded in a larger cultural narrative than can be recoded and then must be decoded by reference to both those larger narratives and the specific ones in media for making the divine visible. The chief medium for Ignatius is his journey to his anticipated execution. Along the way, in seven letters to churches in Asia Minor, he opposes a group he identifies as those who deny that Jesus as divinity was born or suffered. This is why he uses ekphrastic language to make his own suffering visible to his readers, so as to use himself as an image for his divinity's suffering. His entire journey thus becomes a kind of theatrical performance of Christ's suffering, one that will find its climax on the stage of the Roman arena. The paper uses the theorization of image and text by W.J.T. Mitchell who has analyzed the role of imagery in the textual communication of meaning. Mitchell argues that some forms of visual imagination accord with cultural expectations while others disrupt them by being placed in counter-cultural narratives. The essay applies this to the Roman understanding of the execution of criminals by being mauled by beasts as the erasure of social identity and the ultimate gesture of public shame and humiliation. Ignatius breaks such a coded meaning by reinterpreting his execution as an honour that confers upon him a potent identity. He thus uses visualization of his humiliating death as mirror of Jesus' crucifixion, which also, as shameful exposure, is celebrated as the manifestation of victory and honour.

In her chapter on *Space and Vision of the Divine: The Temple Imagery of the Epistle to the Ephesians*, Annette Weissenrieder, addresses the topic of the section as follows. The subject of this chapter is a spatial and temporal contextualization of the image of the temple in the letter to the Ephesians (2:11–22). Ephesians celebrates the end of ethnic and religious divisions and the peace Christ brings by inviting listeners to imagine the destruction of a temple middle wall dividing Jews and Gentiles. She invites us to consider the extent to which the image of such a wall constitutes a border and the way we should think about the middle wall. How exactly should we understand the relationship between the walls and the space in between them? The temple image is often understood as thematizing the new temple in Christ and at the same time a spiritualizing of the Jewish

temple cult by interpreting Christ's death and resurrection as the tearing down of the partition dividing Jews from Gentiles on the temple mount of Jerusalem. This contextualization is based on key terms of the text, which are hapax legomena in the New Testament and the Septuagint. But Weissenrieder invites us to expand our understanding of the term by considering its presence in domains outside of strictly textual Jewish and Christian usage, namely, in epigraphic and archaeological material. Terms like *μεσότοιχον* – dividing wall, but also *ἀκρογωνιαίος* or *συναρμολογουμένη* refer to a sacred space of a pagan temple, expressly in the temple dedicated to Apollo in Didyma. Methodologically, Weissenrieder aims to show that the author of Ephesians 1–2 relies heavily on the ambivalent status of images and orients his pictorial description on the basis of visual codes in antiquity. Visual images provide a possible context for the text, but the text does not constitute one single visual image. She shows that the goal of the image of this wall is to initiate viewers into a new exegetical reality through seeing the mystery of Christ (once – now; to reveal: *ἀποκαλύπτω*; enlighten, to illumine/make clear: *φωτίζω*), which the text relates to the enthroned Christ.

In her chapter titled *Citadel of the God(s) or Satan's Throne: The Image of the Divine at the Great Altar of Pergamon between Ruler Religion and Apocalyptic Counter-Vision* Brigitte Kahl works with the Gigantomachy Frieze of the Great Altar of Pergamon and Hesiod's *Theogony* to offer an inventory of the visual vocabulary of Western God-imaging and its ideological implications with regard to divinization of power, dehumanization of expendable Others, and earth-subjugation. Her inventory uses the tools of semiotics to lay bare a set of binary oppositions that encode the political ideology of the monument. The Pergamene version of the primeval battle of the Gods against the Giants and arch-mother Gaia depicts the anti-divine forces in a spatial and aesthetic arrangement that reflects a hierarchical order of binaries. The Giants are below not above, out not in, unrestrained and menacing versus composed and salvific, ugly/beastlike instead of beautiful, defeated rather than triumphant. Conceptually, these visual dichotomies express the political and social antagonisms of law versus lawlessness, order versus chaos, good versus evil, civilization versus barbarian terror, power versus powerlessness, heaven versus earth. Within this paradigm, the divine is visually and ideologically always attached to the superior position of a Self claiming dominance over an Other. The only deviation is the earth goddess Gaia who is singled out as part of the anti-divine coalition of the earthborn 'below' and thus subject to the death and punishment, suppression and exploitation imposed on them: a visual anticipation of earth neglect, nature abuse and ecocide in Western culture. In the Book of Revelation this visual semiotics of the divine is exposed to a relentlessly iconoclastic deconstruction. Pillorying the Great Altar as Satan's throne, John the Seer dismantles the normative images of divine power and their mirroring representations of human rulers as gods. The Roman emperor and his divine effigy is visualized as a monstrous serpentine idol with

the features of a man-eating red dragon. In a bold act of messianic re-imagination John vandalizes the established iconography of the divine and replaces it with the image of a tortured and crucified God at the bottom of the power pyramid: a slaughtered lamb.

The final chapter of this section and the volume, *Kinetic Divine Concepts, the Baptist, and the Enfleshed Logos in the Prologue and Precreation Storyline of the Fourth Gospel*, Vernon K. Robbins, guided by a merger of cognitive scientific perspectives on abstract concepts and the sensory dimension called *kinesthesia*, presents an experimental translation of the prologue to John (1:1–18).

This approach highlights the movement of the abstract concepts of logos, life, light, grace, truth, and glory from the precreation realm of ‘being’ into the realm of ‘becoming’ where things can be seen by humans. From the perspective of cognitive science, this is a process of bringing ‘imageless’ concepts to human scale, whereby writers can develop them rhetorically through composition, completion, and elaboration. He goes on to consider the prologue’s elaboration in John 1:1–42, which transforms the story of John the Baptist from its prophetic-apocalyptic conceptuality in the storyline of the synoptic Gospels into precreation formulation where he ‘witnesses’ to the coming of the Logos as eternal life-light into the sphere of creation. A special goal of the paper is to argue that the elaborated prologue introduces precreation conceptuality that functions as a cognitive frame for the entire narrative of the Gospel of John.

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Section 1

Forms of Imagining Divine Presences
and of Referring to Divine Agents

Material Conditions for Seeing the Divine

The Temple of the Sebastoi at Ephesos and the Vision of the Heavenly Throne in Revelation 4–5

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The problematic of this volume revolves around ancient visualizations of transcendent figures – how such images were perceived, how humans made sense of them, how these functioned in social and specifically religious contexts, and how these systems of meaning developed as they moved through time and space. My chapter makes the argument that in order to interpret such ethereal experiences we must pay attention to the material conditions that always surround and inform visualization. I begin with Jaś Elsner’s proposal regarding two forms of ancient viewing and supplement this with Charles Long’s attention to materiality. I then use this hybrid approach to analyze two bodies of data – the Temple of the Sebastoi at Ephesos and an apocalyptic vision that is now part of the Book of Revelation. My goal is to suggest that every vision of the divine, every transcendent sighting, also has an accumulation of objects that help us see societal taxonomies, hierarchies, and spaces that would otherwise have eluded us.

1. How to View Viewing: The Material Contexts of Subjectivity

Jaś Elsner made an important argument about ancient visualization of the divine in his study on visibility and subjectivity in Roman art and literature.¹ Elsner built the case for two forms of viewing in the Roman world – “classical visibility” and “ritual-centered visibility” – corresponding to two forms of subjectivity. He argued that classical visibility was characterized by the idealized reproduction of natural forms in painting and sculpture. It was a mimesis “from the aesthetic sphere of the art gallery” that encouraged the viewer to stand apart and observe

* I thank Jaimie Gunderson and Ryan Fitzgerald for their assistance with the research on this project.

¹ Elsner 2007, 1–26.

the scene without contact, generating a subjectivity of longing and nostalgia that invoked unrequited desires of everyday life.² At the other end of the spectrum was a ritual-centered visuality of sacred images found in sculpture and in writers like Pausanias and Lucian. The important characteristics of this second form of visuality were ritual context and frontality, generating in the viewer an intimacy with the deity that comes from the direct gaze of divine and human at each other.³

Elsner recognized that the voyeuristic classical and the intimate sacred visualities could be compared in many ways, but the important distinction for him was that ritual-centered visuality denied (rather than encouraged) the desires and rules of everyday life. This ritual-centered visuality placed the viewer in a liminal space in which the goal was “to undermine the multiple discourses of the social arena, the screen of signs produced by and carried over from ‘everyday life.’” The ritual process of purification “constructs a barrier to the identifications and objectifications of the screen of discourse [of everyday life] and posits a sacred possibility for vision, which is by definition more significant since it opens the viewer to confronting his or her god.”⁴

This way of posing the question of visuality allows Elsner to make his main point, that the divide between the arts of classical antiquity and of the Middle Ages was not so radical as many assert.⁵ But it also gives us a limited view of ancient visualities for two reasons. First, the method does not fully exploit the analytic potential of the material relationships of divine vision: the art objects (paintings and sculptures) are deprived of much of their context by dealing with them in isolation from their functional locations as parts of the social hierarchies in elite houses, temples, and elsewhere. The objects tend to become instead isolated examples of artistic creation. Second, the method underestimates the materiality of the texts themselves, treating them primarily as repositories of information about ancient visualities. Thus, the texts are mined for accounts of viewing, without much attention to the socioeconomic biases or interests of the authors. To develop Elsner’s method, we need to recognize that texts are also material objects associated with particular sectors of society, and that an art object is part of a network of objects in a home, a temple, or another space.

In order to make this expansion, I draw on the work of Charles Long. In a chapter on the importance of objects in indigenous religions, Long reminded readers that even intangible phenomena have material aspects.

It is a well-attested fact that every conception of the “self” or “soul,” no matter how ethereal or pure, irrespective of the culture or civilization, *every* conception of a self is related to or presupposes a material object or form as its expressive mode or accompaniment.

² Elsner 2007, 2–10, 24; quote is from 3.

³ Elsner 2007, 11–26.

⁴ Both quotations in this paragraph are from Elsner 2007, 25.

⁵ Elsner 2007, 1, 26.

The notion of a “self” or “soul” requires to a greater or lesser degree the accumulation of objects. These objects or materialities are not adventitious or helter-skelter; they acquire either a personal or societal taxonomy, hierarchy, space, and so on.⁶

Long further suggested that it is incumbent on us to consider carefully the material connections of the ethereal. There is, he wrote, a “dynamic of concealment” when we imagine souls and selves as immaterial, and the immaterial imaginings can have material consequences that catch us off guard or escape our notice altogether. In this paper I extend Long’s observation about souls and selves to deities and to the human visualization of the divine.

This expansion of Elsner’s method along the lines laid out by Long gives us more nuanced appraisals of ancient visualities and demonstrates that “classical visuality” and “ritual-centered visuality” are specifically ancient elite male discourses about visualization. A more disciplined attention to materiality allows us to imagine not only the unrequited desires of Achilles Tatius as he writes about a temple fresco of Perseus slaying the sea monster that threatens Andromeda while she is shackled in the hollow of a rock. In contrast to this classical visualization we could also imagine a local slave girl viewing that same image and experiencing very different unrequited desires as she accompanies her master to the temple. How would she view Poseidon, whose monster is about to make the imprisoned Andromeda a bride of Hades? Or, in addition to Pausanias’s written description that evinces a particular ritual-centered visuality of the altars in the *altis* at Olympia, we might also imagine an actual male wrestler in front of an actual altar at Olympia before he competes. How might he see the divine in this ritual setting and how might it compare with the stylized discourse from Pausanias?

In order to pursue this approach to divine visualizations, I examine two ritual-centered projects that included visions of the divine: a provincial imperial cult temple at Ephesos, and the apocalyptic Revelation of John. Both projects come from western Asia Minor, both are normally dated to the late first century CE, both deal with the theme of the divine emperors, and both would have been known to at least a few of the same people. They differ in that one was a ritual space full of divine images and one was a text about a vision of Israel’s God. My analysis concludes that one ritual setting employed a visuality of subordination in relation to dominant society and the other a more subversive visuality. In the process, by paying attention to the accumulation of objects in these two projects I highlight the socioeconomic parameters and the deployment of ideologies in divine vision.

⁶ Long 2003, 172, author’s emphasis.

2. Seeing Gods at the Temple of the Sebastoi

The Temple of the Sebastoi at Ephesos became functional in 89/90 CE. It was a temple dedicated by the province of Asia for the worship of Domitian and the Flavian imperial family.⁷ It provides us with an example of a ritual-centered visuality that did not hold the discourses of everyday life at a distance (evidence that thus contests how Elsner treats ancient visuality). Rather, the temple and its associated institutions set parameters for viewing the divine in a way that involved an engagement of all the senses, in a setting that was framed by the elite sectors of society and that affirmed their roles in the existing hierarchies of power.

2.1 *Ritual Context and Objects*

I begin with an overview of the objects accumulated around these deities. The physical site of the temple was on an artificial terrace constructed in such a way as to overlook the Ephesian upper agora from the agora's west side. The precincts were 85.6 × 64.6 m, with a temple facing east toward the agora. There were stoas around the precincts facing the temple on at least three sides (*Figs. 1–3*).⁸

The main entrance into the precincts was on the north side not far from the northeast corner of the stoas, approximately on access with the altar and two stories above the pavement of the plaza below. The entrance consisted of a flight of stairs (4.3 m wide at the base) for one story that then split at 90 degree angles into western and eastern stairs allowing access to the precincts at the level of the second story. A much smaller entrance to the precincts was located at the south-east corner of the precincts (*Fig. 4*).⁹

We do not have any descriptions of the rituals that took place at this particular temple. There would certainly have been processions, and they would almost certainly have approached from the plaza before ascending via the main entrance.¹⁰ When approaching from this plaza, the viewer's first full vista of the complex would have been from below facing a three-story stoa facade (an exterior facade directed away from the precincts). The second story of this facade was lined with about 40 columns bearing engaged statues of deities. Fragments of two engaged statues – of Isis and Attis – have been recovered, suggesting a range of gods and goddesses from at least the eastern Mediterranean and perhaps from further west as well.

⁷ For descriptions of the temple and its relations to Ephesos and Asia, see Friesen 2001, 43–52 and Friesen 1993. For a recent summary from the Austrian Archaeological Institute, see Österreichisches Archäologisches Institut, accessed February 25, 2016, <http://www.oelai.at/index.php/cult-and-rule.html#Domitian>.

⁸ Keil 1932, 53–61.

⁹ Vettors 1972–75, 311–315.

¹⁰ Sacrificial animals could not have entered via this stairway. Daniel N. Schowalter argues that they would have entered at the smaller southeast entrance (Schowalter, in press).

Entering the precincts from the main stairway, a viewer would have seen the small east front and longer north side of a moderately-sized Hellenistic temple to the viewer's right (toward the west side of the precincts). The temple had steps on all sides and was lined by a peripteros (8 × 11 columns) around a tetraprostyle naos. In short, the architecture was that of a typical Greek temple.

Fragments from one of the temple statues have been found – the head, left forearm, and left big toe. The head probably represents Titus and belonged to an over life-size seated statue of that emperor.¹¹ Since the temple was dedicated well into Domitian's reign, we should imagine also at least a statue of Domitian, and most likely one of their father Vespasian. Other family members could also have been portrayed (*Fig. 5*).

In front of the temple (to the east) was an altar. Fragments of sculptural reliefs from the altar screen have been recovered. The sculptures come from a second century renovation. One long screen is decorated with military motifs – shields, armor, captive barbarians, swords – while the short screen contains a nearly-square traditional sacrifice scene with a bull tethered to an altar beneath a garland and bull's head decoration.

A large number of statues also occupied the temple precincts. Thirteen statue bases have been identified to date that were commissioned by other cities in Asia for the establishment of the temple at Ephesos in the late first century CE. The inscriptions on the bases are discussed below. For now it is sufficient to note that the bases were found in secondary contexts where they were reused in antiquity and throughout intervening centuries, and that the inscriptions do not reveal what entities were portrayed by the statues. If archaeologists have recovered perhaps 10 % of the original number of bases, we could reckon with 100 or more statues in the precincts at inauguration.

Along with rituals of sacrifice we also need to reconstruct games in honor of Domitian. The bath-gymnasium complex near the Ephesian harbor was constructed during his reign and there are scattered references to Olympian games instituted for Domitian at this time.¹² Thus, the architecture and inscriptions indicate that imperial cult institutions for Domitian completely reconfigured the harbor area of Ephesos and significantly altered the upper agora area. The associated rituals went far beyond the temple proper, creating connections between the upper and lower city areas, which were two fundamental foci in the Ephesian city center.

To sum up this section, then, a range of objects accumulated around the divinity of the Flavian imperial family. The objects can be characterized as a typical

¹¹ Keil 1932, 53–61. The identification as Titus is accepted by Georg Daltrop, Ulrich Hausmann and Max Wegner (Daltrop, Hausmann and Wegner 1966, 26, 38, 86, and pl. 15b). An identification as Domitian is supported by Jale Inan and Elisabeth Rosenbaum (Inan and Rosenbaum 1966, 67 and pl. 16 #1).

¹² Friesen 1993, 114–141.

temple assemblage in a Hellenistic idiom: a peripteral temple flanked by stoas, a monumental entryway, many statues, inscribed bases, sculptures with sacrificial motifs. The significance of this particular temple assemblage for Ephesos and for the region is indicated by the prominent site of the building and objects, the coordinated reconfiguration of other areas of the city, and the creation of Olympic games to accompany the temple rituals.

2.2 *Viewing the Divine*

This assemblage of objects related to the Flavian emperors constituted what Elsner would describe as a ritual-centered context for viewing the divine. The resulting visuality, however, was not characterized by the sort of frontal, intimate encounter with the divine gaze described by him. It was instead what I would call a visuality of subordination. I focus on three characteristics of this visuality.

The first characteristic of note is that visual access to the temple statue was highly restricted. We can assume that Domitian occupied the central position opposite the door of the naos at least until his death by assassination in September, 96 CE. This central position was then given perhaps to his father Vespasian or his deceased brother Titus. Irrespective of the identity of the central statue, however, viewers would only have seen this representation of the god from a limited space in front of the temple when the doors were open. If access was allowed into the temple, the over life-size statue(s) would no doubt have made an impression on those people who could enter. Note, however, that the viewer would be looking up at the much larger imperial deity. Judging from the extant head of Titus, the imperial statues did not look down to return the gaze of diminutive mortals.

A second characteristic of the visuality at this temple complex was the variety of opportunities to see many goddesses and gods. Upon approach to the precincts through the main staircase and after departure by this route, several dozen life-size statues of deities would have stood high above the mortals from the second-floor colonnade of the exterior facade. Inside the precincts, many of the standing statues must have been of supernatural beings – gods, goddesses, mythological characters, personifications of cities and of virtues. Some of the statues would certainly have portrayed Domitian and members of the Flavian dynasty, but – judging from the extant statue bases – all of them would have stood well above the eye-level of mortals. In addition to the statuary we might mentally restore paintings on the walls of the stoas in the precincts, even though we have no physical evidence for the character of the walls or their decoration. So the objects accumulated around the Flavian imperial deities provided many visualizations of divine figures, even if many of the details are now lost to us.

A third characteristic was the engagement of the other senses in the ritual-centered visualizations afforded by the Temple of the Sebastoi precincts. I begin with the auditory senses. What would a viewer have heard? There would have been

ambient noises of the crowds – greetings, conversations, footsteps, children’s voices, coughing. A good deal of this would probably have been suppressed from conscious awareness and relegated instead to the background. There would have been ritual noises as well: prayers, percussion, bells, flutes, horns, choirs of hymnades, animals moving, bulls lowing or reacting to the hammer and dagger, bulls falling to the ground, reactions of spectators.

Olfactory engagement would have been constant, though for the most part perhaps beyond conscious awareness as well. We should imagine the smell of a crowd, mostly unwashed; also the bodily functions of animals and humans; the smell of incense; burning wood; then burning fat, hair, and skin.

These rituals did not focus on special appeals to the sense of touch, although there would have been heat, shade, perspiration, brushing up against other people, the rub of clothing, the pressure of footwear hitting stone pavement. Nor was the sense of taste utilized in the ritual beyond those who received food from the sacrifice, who purchased something to eat, or brought their own sustenance.

At the Temple of the Sebastoi, then, actual viewing of the imperial gods was fairly limited. But the experience of viewing the divine was rich with social taxonomies and relationships, to which I now turn.

2.3 Hierarchies and Ideologies of Divine Vision

The inscribed statue bases from the temple precincts help us see some of the hierarchies that these objects acquired. The inscriptions came from cities in the province that donated statues for the inauguration of their temple. Here is an example of the standard formula used by subject cities in the province (*Fig. 6*; double brackets indicate erasure with restored text).

To Emperor [[Do- mitian]] Caesar	Αὐτοκράτορι [[Δο-]]
Sebastos [[Germa- nicus]], when the proconsul	[[μιτιανῶι]] Καίσαρι
(was) Lucius Mestrius	Σεβαστῶι [[Γερμα-]]
Florus.	[[νικῶι]] ἐπὶ ἀνθυπάτου
The Demos of the Keretapaians	Λουκίου Μεστρίου
(because of) the Temple in Ephesos	Φλώρου
of the Sebastoi shared by	ὁ δῆμος ὁ Κερεταπέων
Asia.	ναῶι τῶι ἐν Ἐφέσῳ τῶ[ν]
	Σεβαστῶν κοινῶι τῆς
	Ἀσίας
(Set up) by Glykon, son of Aga- thokleos, the superintendent of works,	διὰ Γλύκωνος τοῦ Ἀγα- θοκλέους ἐργεπιστάτου,
when the high priest of Asia	ἐπὶ ἀρχιερέως τῆς Ἀσίας
(was) Tiberius Claudius	Τιβερίου Κλαυδίου
Aristio.	Ἀριστίωνος

There is much that could be written about this inscription from one of the subject cities of the province. For this paper it is sufficient to make three observations about hierarchies and ideology. First, most of the visitors to the precincts would not have been able to read this and the other inscriptions that graced the statue bases. They would have seen the statues above them and would have recognized many of those figures. We can assume it was common knowledge that the statues and bases came from various cities, but we cannot assume detailed knowledge of the inscribed texts. Public writing separated some people from most others.

Second, the text of this inscription sets up a hierarchy of elite and super-elite figures. At the top of this ranking was the reigning emperor Domitian, followed by the Roman senator currently serving as proconsul of the province, in this case L. Mestrius Florus. The next figure in the hierarchy appears near the end of the text: the current provincial high priest for this temple, Tib. Cl. Aristio, who was also listed like the proconsul as an eponymous official. Aristio was known in imperial circles in Rome, so it was an honor for Glykon – the local aristocrat from Keretapa who was not a Roman citizen – to be named in such company. As noted above, most people at the festival could not have read this inscribed text. But they would not have needed to do so in order to perceive the ranking, for it would have been played out before their eyes in rituals, visual adornments, and interactions at festivals. The absent emperor would have been the ritual focus, with the proconsul, the high priest of Asia, and the city representatives probably in attendance and playing their respective roles. The inscribed hierarchy on the stone object was embodied by persons around the objects, especially in the arrangement and decoration of those human bodies.

Third, the inscription attempts to naturalize the artificial political provincial boundary called “Asia”. The boundary is assumed in the rhetoric, and enforced through patterns of material exchanges. Cities inside that boundary arranged for their own aristocrats to fund and to procure statues to represent the cities at the precincts in Ephesos. Their representatives in Asia’s provincial council navigated regional politics to appoint a high priest for the temple for the year who would partially fund the festival and would officiate at many of the rituals. Thus, the rituals and objects interpellated the institutions they claimed to honor.

The “free cities” of the province, which had been granted limited autonomy under Roman rule, also set up statues in the precincts and their inscriptions reflect other ideological, hierarchical facets of seeing the god. The following example of a free city inscription was dedicated by the Aphrodisians.¹³ Double parentheses indicate reinscription after erasure of the original text naming Domitian.

¹³ *IvE* 2.233.

Reinscribed Text:

To Emperor	Αὐτοκράτορι
((God)) Caesar Se-	((θεῶι)) Καίσαρι Σε-
bastos ((Vespasian)),	βαστῶι ((Οὐεσπασιανῶ[ι]))
when the proconsul (was) Marcus	ἐπὶ ἀνθυπάτου Μάρκ[ου]
Fulvius Gillo.	Φουλίου Γίλλων[ς]
The Demos of the Aphrodisians, devoted to	ὁ φιλοκαῖσαρ Ἀφροδισι[έων]
Caesar, being free and auto-	δῆμος ἐλεύθερος ὦν κα[ὶ] αὐ-
nomous from the beginning by the	τόνομος ἀπ' ἀρχῆς τῇ τῶν Σε[βασ-]
grace of the Sebastoi, (because of) the Temple	τῶν χάριτι ναῶι τῶι ἐν Ἐφέσ[ωι]
in Ephesos of the Sebastoi shared by Asia,	τῶν Σεβαστῶν κοινῶι τῆς Ἀσ[ί]ας
set (this) up by their own grace because of	ἰδίᾳ χάριτι διὰ τε τὴν πρὸς τοὺς [Σε-]
reverence toward the Sebastoi	βαστοὺς εὐσέβειαν καὶ τὴν π[ρὸς]
and goodwill toward	τὴν νεωκόρον Ἐφεσίων [πό-]
the neokorate city of the Ephesians.	λιν εὐνοίαν ἀνέστησαν
(This was) accomplished by Aristo[son]	ἐπιμεληθέντος Ἀρίστω[νος τοῦ]
of Artemidoros of Kall[Jos,	Ἀρτεμιδώρου τοῦ Καλλι []
priest of Pluto [and]	ὡς ἱερέως Πλούτωνος [καὶ]
Kore and neopoios of the godde[ss]	Κόρης καὶ νεοποιῶ θεᾶ[ς]
Aphrodite, when the high pri[est]	Ἀφροδείτης, ἐπὶ ἀρχιερ[έως]
of Asia (was) Tiberius Claudius	τῆς Ἀσίας Τιβερίου Κλαυδ[ίου]
Phescinos [[]]	Φησείνου [[]]
[[]]	[[]]
[[]]	[[]]
[[]]	[[]]

Three additional observations are in order on the basis of this text. First, notice the jockeying for position among the cities within the province. The inscriptions naturalized the provincial boundary “Asia”, and also provided opportunities for the cities to negotiate the hierarchy of city status within that provincial boundary. The Aphrodisians signaled their status as free and autonomous “from the beginning”. They also recognized the status of Ephesos as neokoros (“caretaker, temple warden, trustee”) of the Sebastoi, but then the Aphrodisians elevated themselves by highlighting their grace and goodwill toward Ephesos. Grace and goodwill are both common terms from the vocabulary of benefaction normally indicating a party of higher status.¹⁴ It is difficult to know whether this hierarchy was also played out for the illiterate participants in this particular ritual setting, but the politics and economics of autonomy inscribed on these stone objects would have implications in the economy and politics of their everyday lives.

Second, the free cities used the inscribed formula to emphasize and to promote their direct connections to the emperor. They were *philokaisar*, devoted to the caesar, friends of the emperor. Their freedom and autonomy were granted

¹⁴ For further discussion of these issues, see Friesen 1993, 32–41.

by the grace of the Sebastoi for whom they had *eusebeia* (“reverence, worship, veneration”).

Third, the elite men who made sure Asia’s provincial temple operated properly were some of the same men who saw to the functioning of local religious institutions. Thus, the local nobleman who helped the Aphrodisians express their *eusebeia* toward the emperor was also a *neopoios* (a superintendent) for the city’s municipal deity Aphrodite. The same holds true for men mentioned in other inscriptions: of the 17 local aristocrats who appear in the city inscriptions, four mention other religious offices, and 10 mention their service in local governance.¹⁵ The imperial aristocrat Tib. Cl. Aristio likewise held numerous offices in Ephesos and elsewhere, and was one of the leading figures in western Asia Minor in the late first and early second centuries CE.¹⁶

Thus, the accumulation of objects that helped people see divinity promoted a ritual-centered visuality, but it was not an intimate encounter with the deity that pushed aside the discourses of everyday life. The institutions associated with the Temple of the Sebastoi promoted a visuality of the elite, and specifically of elite males. The rituals created and sustained a cosmos where the powerful looked down on the rest, just as the deities hovered above the mortals. A few noblemen played leading roles in the rituals while the crowd followed their lead. The discourses of everyday life were not suspended here. On the contrary, the irony of the festive intermission in everyday life that was provided by the holy day was that its objects and activities reinforced – indeed, generated – the societal taxonomies, hierarchies, and spaces of everyday life.

3. The Vision of the Heavenly Throne in Revelation 4–5

I turn now to a different phenomenon – not a peripteral temple of marble, but rather a long papyrus scroll filled with apocalyptic visions for small groups meeting in the cities of Asia around the same period of time. Again, we are not dealing with a classical visuality, nor a ritual-centered one as defined by Elsner. But neither was it an elite visuality like that of the Temple of the Sebastoi. With the scroll there were different material conditions for seeing the god and different ideologies at work.

3.1 *Ritual Context and Objects*

John’s Revelation was written from a ritual context and for a ritual context. The intended context of reception is made clear in the introductory prologue (1:1–3), where a blessing is pronounced on the ritual participants: “Blessed is the one

¹⁵ Friesen 2001, 58.

¹⁶ Scherrer 1997, 113–139.