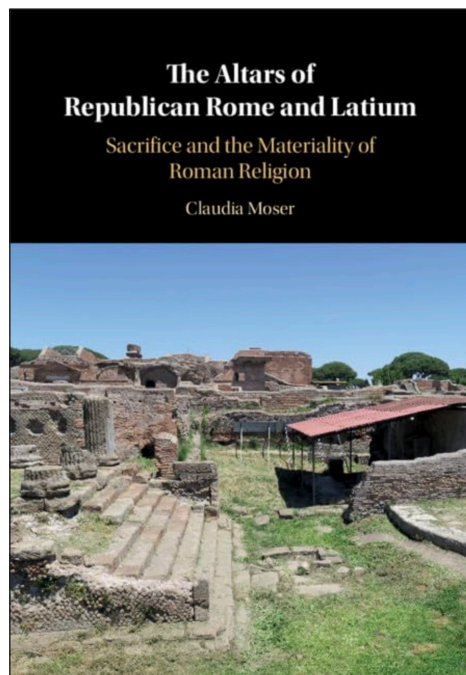


Book Review

Moser, Claudia. 2019. *The Altars of Republican Rome and Latium: Sacrifice and the Materiality of Roman Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 978-1-108-45113-0 paperback £22.99.

Claudia Moser's book published in 2019, appearing in paperback in 2023, is a long-awaited monograph on the complex relationship of Roman Republican altars, religious experience, sacrifice and the materiality of religion. Moser's book appears at a time when Roman religious studies are proliferating, with over 320 monographs on Roman religion since 2013 (see Szabó in press). There is also an intensification of interdisciplinary dialogue between Roman archaeology, religious studies, cognitive studies and natural sciences. Moser (2020) argued in a separate article that given the material and spatial turn in Roman religious studies, the existing material evidence of Roman religious communication can be and should be interpreted through new, provoking questions provided by an interdisciplinary approach. This aim, expressed briefly in her review article of my book, is partially fulfilled by *The Altars of Republican Rome and Latium*, although some case studies in her book are more convincing than others: archaeozoological sources, well-documented objects and a complex analysis of the architectural landscape is possible only in the latest excavations (especially in the case of Sant'Ombono).



The methodological introduction of the book is thought-provoking (p. 1–13), asking several questions useful not only for the case studies analysed by Moser, but for all archaeologists dealing with the challenges of the archaeology of religion. In her view, altars have a leading role as primary, authoritative mediators in the crafting and channelling of sacrifice, while sacrifice itself can be interpreted as a site-specific phenomenon (p. 5 and p. 13). Moser argues that sacrifice cannot be understood as a general or universal phenomenon, but rather as a local, however conservative, form of religious communication (p. 2). Her major focus is the impact of religious rituals and experience on local levels and their impact on the material evidence. Space and all its elements play a role in this process of ritualization and experience including the landscape, the architectural atmosphere, the altars, their inscriptions, the figurative monuments, the portable and static objects, the archaeozoological and botanical, organic sources. Such a complex view on space sacralization is possible, however, only in the exceptional cases that are excavated with modern field methods and an interdisciplinary approach. Such sanctuaries are rare, even in the abundant corpus of sacralized spaces of Latium.

Moser chooses five case studies to argue her methodological thesis: the Sant’Ombono Area in Rome, the Sanctuary of the Thirteen Altars at Lavinium, Area A at Fosso dell’Incastro at Ardea, the Sacred Area of the Republican Temples at Ostia and the Largo Argentina in Rome. Although, at first sight, the five case studies seem to be a very selective and inevitably subjective sample, Moser’s approach focusing on the local aspects of religious experience and the site-specific nature of the sacrifice gives her freedom to limit her focus in this way. The selected examples are well-documented case studies with an abundance of literature. The novelty of Moser’s work is her methodological and theoretical approach focusing on ‘the site-specific character of communal animal sacrifice in Republican Rome’ (p. 1–2) and the role of altars as active mediators in religious communication and the impact of religious experiences on materiality of religion.

The first main chapter of the book presents the organization and boundaries of sacred places. Moser uses Robert McCauley’s work on boundaries (p. 122), focusing on the possible forms of use of McCauley’s cognitive methods in sacred spaces (McCauley 2014). Moser suggests that it might be useful to see if McCauley’s discussion of domestic settings can be applied to sanctuaries: ‘imposing some order on objects in a domestic environment is a good means for ascertaining whether someone has violated that space’ (p. 157, footnote 123). She rightly observes that boundaries of sanctuaries (external and internal) are not only legal ideas (properties of gods: *consecratio*, *templum*), but also active agents in religious communication, resulting in a great variety in the building

complexes analysed in the monograph (p. 17). The case study of the Republican temples of Ostia shows that the altars from the Republican era seem to be preserved in the Imperial period, even if the architectural atmosphere and environment changed in the meantime. Spatial rearrangements in these exceptionally enduring sanctuaries are presented by Moser as ‘negotiations of the past and present’ (p. 31), where Republican altars are reoriented in time and not only in space, even if they lost their original functionality in many cases.

The second chapter, ‘The Economy of Ritual’, focuses on the standardization and heterogeneity of votive offerings with particular interest in the role of *arulae* (miniature altars). Moser looks especially at the *arulae* of the Largo Argentina sanctuaries and the miniature votives from the discussed sites, interpreting them as mediators for a larger audiences which were also portable. These objects fulfil the three dimensions of temporality: they represent the continuity of a past ritual, they are accessible and portable, often individualized by the present, and they are made also for future generations. Moser details the notion of miniaturization of votive objects (p. 80–81), a topic which has been intensively researched recently (Begemann et al. 2023).

The third chapter presents the particularities of the seasonality of ritual. Animal sacrifice is presented here in a radically new interdisciplinary approach: historical climatic changes, astronomic features, repetitive and unique rituals are used to highlight the particularity and locality of sacrifices and their seasonality (temporality). Moser summarizes the extensively excavated sanctuary of S. Omobono, where almost 2100 faunal remains were documented (p. 93), detailing the infrastructure of the sacrificial procedure in a masterful case study. She shows a balanced combination of literary sources, archaeological material, topographic features and cognitive theory, also detailing the seasonality of the sacrifice based on the vegetal assemblage (2000 finds, mostly seeds, nuts, olive pits, grapevines, etc.). Based on an interdisciplinary approach combining landscape features, historical hydrology, climate and archaeozoology and botany, Moser concludes that the sanctuary at S. Omobono had an annual sacrifice between the autumnal equinox and winter solstice. Such calculations are very popular in recent studies on archaeozoology, however, in most of the cases they are presumptions without certain evidence: seasonality of animals and their presumed age is hard to contextualize through archaeozoological material.

The fourth chapter presents the so-called material memory of religion, focusing especially on the famous case study of the 13 altars from Lavinium (which today may number 15 altars). The chapter presents in detail not only the history and memorialization of space and religious experience in Lavinium, but also in several other case studies from Latium and Rome.

In her epilogue, Moser returns to her initial question: how can we use the archaeological record to reconstruct the experience of Roman sacrifice? This question has recently been addressed by several studies also focusing on ancient lived religious experience in the Mediterranean and Central–Eastern Europe (Rüpke 2018; Szabó 2018). Moser’s approach, however, surprisingly avoids the idea itself: the notion of ‘lived religion’ does not appear in her work, although some of her research questions are compatible with the lived ancient religion approach. Neither does religious glocalism appear, although she does briefly address the problematic issue of Romanization and the tendencies of global aspects of Roman sacrifice (p. 58). Her work is, therefore, based almost exclusively on the local specificity and temporal aspects of sacrifice. Although Moser did not discuss the problematic notion of ‘material religion’ or ‘materiality of religion’ (Morgan 2016), or the nuances between agents and actants in objects in rituals, her approach on the temporal aspects of religious experience and material religion is nonetheless ingenious. Moser argues that altars and interactions with them can be interpreted as mediators between the remembered ritual past and the experiential present, having an impact on future practices as well (p. 6). Following the idea of Hamilakis (2010), Moser argues that ‘all archaeology is about memory’ and interprets sanctuaries (the architectural landscape, the material religion related to these spaces and maintained sacralized places) as memories of emplaced ritual movements, while altars ‘play a pivotal role in the coalescence of centuries of ritual memory’ (p. 7). Repetition, ritual tradition and memory of rituals consist of the *longue durée* aspects of Roman religion and sacrificial spaces and objects. Discussing the present, Moser gives an authoritative role for altars, interpreted as powerful agents in religious communication. I found this approach to lack nuance, particularly because she did not present the detailed debate in material studies and religious studies between the difference of actants and agents (Pitts and Versluys 2021). Despite this, Moser rightly argues following the idea of Smith (2004), that it is impossible to have one map to cover all the various territories of Roman sacrificial experiences and examples known from late Iron Age Latium (p. 13.).

This uniqueness of this book — oriented far from the lived ancient religion paradigm and focusing almost exclusively on the local — makes it unusual and provocative in the recent ‘market’ of religious studies. Moser’s examples and case studies are presented in a well-balanced style, combining the archaeological material and results of excavations with several theoretical approaches. Her examples from the Republican period, however, cannot offer the same range of examples and facets of Roman religious communication as provided by some well documented examples from the Imperial era. Although she chose to focus on the interdisciplinary analysis of the sacrifice, it would have been good if she had also been able to address several questions raised by the recent works on

Roman religion (e.g. Rüpke and Woolf 2021). She is aware of this, presenting ‘wish lists’ asking what we can learn from the limitations of the evidence. In many of her cases, the examples focus exclusively on the material aspect of sacrifice, however, one needs to ask the question: where is the human and divine agency in this ‘markedly site-specific timelessness’ of the Roman sacrifice and religious experience (p. 149)?

This will be answered perhaps, in the future. Moser’s book ends with a rich collection of endnotes, which add valuable information to each chapter. The book also has a rich bibliography and a general index. The 47 black and white illustrations (photos, plans of sanctuaries and maps) are often very small or too dark to see the details, however, this is certainly not the fault of the author, who personally visited all the case studies presented in her book.

Moser’s book aims to be a methodological experiment to understand the locality of Roman sacrifice and the agency role of altars and material religion. Her innovative ideas and the rich, theoretical approaches presented in the work fulfils this aim and can serve as an innovative map for further research in this field.

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