RELIGIOUS SPACE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

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Temples

Much has been written about the disuse and destruction of temples in Late Antiquity, but there has been far less interest in temples as working cult centres in the 4th to 6th c. A.D. This is partly because of the nature of the evidence. Some regions have not so far produced a single trace of Late Roman evidence for pagan cult, as a result of poor excavation strategies and the neglect of rural sites where continuity was greater. New temples of the 4th c. are very few, though two important new examples of early 4th c. date are known from tetrarchic imperial estates at Split and Romuliana. Within cities, a handful of new examples are known: at Hispellum, Argos and Constantinople. Urban repairs are attested, especially in Africa, Italy and Greece, but often depend for their visibility on local epigraphic habits. Urban restorations are also known from archaeology (at Rome, Ostia, Ephesus and possibly Athens), and from literary sources for the East. Such repairs are generally confined to the 4th c. Rural shrines show signs of repair and use later than those in cities, in both East and West, up to a century after the closure of urban temples (Horne (1981), Caseau (2004)).

The destruction or re-use of many urban temples has affected the survival of pertinent archaeological evidence for their use as cult buildings, though the sunken nature of Mithraea has assisted preservation. Rural shrines survive much better, though they have only been excavated in a few regions, such as Britain, Gaul, Spain and Greece. This means that votive and other religious deposits are largely unknown in urban contexts. They are known on mountain / cave sanctuaries in Greece and at rural shrines and holy wells in the West. No complete buried temple treasures have so far been recovered; however, cult statues carefully buried in Late Antiquity are known in some regions. Some behavioural epigraphy exists, in the form of 4th c. curse tablets from sanctuaries. Depictions are few, and tend to concentrate on sacrifice before altars, either animals in the case of tetrarchic emperors, or incense in most other cases.

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Literary sources, though providing some compelling details on changes in religious practice, are not wholly reliable: pagans, after the late 4th c. had little reason to publicise their ceremonies and much of what we know about some cults is based on the résumés of Christian commentators, who inevitably look at temples with a Christian agenda. Nevertheless, we possess some pagan descriptions of ceremonies, and accounts of specific events, which provide details of rituals or cult objects found in shrines. Some Christian literary sources provide brief descriptions of the caches of ritual objects uncovered during Late Antiquity, mainly relating to Mithraea. Otherwise, one is obliged to refer to earlier documents, such as inventories of Egyptian temples, which last up to the mid-3rd c. A.D.

Whether it is wise to rely on documents from earlier centuries is an open question; pagan cult did not only show continuity with earlier practices, but also much change. This was sometimes as a result of internal developments, as much as from competition with Christianity and imperial interdictions. However, it remains necessary to use Middle Imperial religion as the starting point for 4th c. developments, especially as the traditions of earlier times were often cherished by late antique pagans. Cult buildings can still be divided into a number of types: public temple complexes with aedes in a temenos, or private cult rooms, such as those of Mithras, perhaps hidden within the urban fabric. In most public cults, the ordinary public was confined to the temenos, whilst mithraea etc were intimate meeting halls for participatory ceremonies. The public temples were, already in the mid-4th c., less often the scene of animal sacrifices, as the popularity of such practices declined in favour of acts such as incense sacrifice, and the recital of hymns. In his Misopogon, Julian gives a memorable description of what he hoped an Antiochene sacrifice might resemble, and of the contrasting reality which he encountered during his stay in the city.

From the end of the 4th c., pagan ceremonies were no longer possible in urban cult buildings, though this was not true of the countryside. A number became museums, with cult statues retained or assembled within them. Spoliation and demolition were common throughout the empire, though far from universal. Sometimes positive decisions were made to preserve temples as monuments (e.g. Cod. Theod. 16.10.8 (A.D. 382)). In some regions, deliberate conservation allowed some temple ornament to be retained into the 6th c.—as was most obvious at Rome. In a few cases (such as Ghirza and Philae) major temples survived longer, with Philae retaining its cult statues, to the 530s.