

INTRODUCTION

OVER THE LAST FIVE YEARS, there has been a real renaissance in studies dedicated to the history and archaeology of the rural world of the Mediterranean.¹ Partly as a result of this broader revitalization of interest and partly as a reaction to the ongoing project *Religion and Urbanity* (2018-),² the theme of religion in extra-urban contexts has also recently taken on a prominence that it previously lacked.³

As a natural development of the *Lived Ancient Religion (LAR)* paradigm on which it is based,⁴ the *Religion and Urbanity* projects suggests, on the one hand, con-

1. To mention just a few of the numerous works dedicated to this theme, see the first issue of the series *Gallia Rustica* (Reddé, 2017) and the new issue of the series *Rus Africum* (de Vos Raaijmakers & Maurina, 2019). See also Van Dommelen, 2019 and the project of the University of Manouba (Tunisia) on *Villes et campagnes en Afrique antique* (2020-2022).

2. The project, based at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies of the University of Erfurt, is directed by Susanne Rau and Jörg Rüpke, and funded by the German Science Foundation (FOR 2779).

3. See e.g. Valentino Gasparini, “Ancient Religion in the Rural Settlements of the Western Mediterranean” (*Habilitation* oral defense – University of Erfurt, January 9, 2019), published in this same volume, pp. 131-171. See also the forthcoming meeting on *Blurring Boundaries. Diffusing and Creating Urban Religion beyond Urban Space* (International Conference within the framework of KFG 2779 “Religion and Urbanity: Reciprocal Formation”, Schloss Ettersburg, Weimar, Germany, 23-26 November 2021), organized by Jörg Rüpke and Emiliano R. Urciuoli, and the new research project *Religiones rurales en la Hispania tardoantigua* (ss. IV-VII) (PID2020-117597GB-I00), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities (2022-2024) and led by Clelia Martínez Maza and Antón Alvar Nuño (University of Málaga), also presented in this volume, pp. 329-352.

4. During and immediately after the five-year project *Lived Ancient Religion. Questioning “Cults” and “Polis Religion”* (2012-2017), supervised by Jörg Rüpke at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies of the University of Erfurt and funded by the European Union Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2013, n° 295555), around 180 publications (more or less directly linked to the project)

ceptualizing the city as a lived space conditioned by and conditioning specific social relationships, and, on the other, conceptualizing religion as (at the same time) stimulating processes of urbanisation and being shaped by urbanity.⁵ Within this conceptual framework, the “citification” of religion (in Emiliano R. Urciuoli’s formula)⁶ is now presented as a phenomenon that pressed religious actors to “adopt and adapt city features”,⁷ to engage with the socio-spatial conditions of city life, including through the appropriation of city-spaces, localising or de-localising religious practices, providing specific infrastructures in order to attract, collect and host crowds of people (theatres, for example), and facilitating processes of the “intellectualisation” of religion, authorship, and, more generally, competition.⁸

The concept of “citification” seems to us an excellent starting point from which one can also explore rural areas as lived spaces and investigate the peculiarities of *non-urban* religious practices and related social configurations.

In order to carry out such a project, at least one methodological clarification is required: we need a distinction between *urban* and *non-urban*. Yet, as for the ancient Western Mediterranean (that is the Roman Latin-speaking world), recent research has cast light on the great variety of difficulties involved in drawing a sharp dividing line between the “urban” and its (natural or presumed) antithesis, the “rural”.⁹ The impossibility of tracing a clear-cut border line between cities and rural environments does not entail that significant differences cannot be detected in the specific strategies of religious (urban and non-urban) investment, but rather stresses the fluid integration and interaction among them.¹⁰ So what are the main features and differences of cities and rural settlements?

The project *Religion and Urbanity* suggests that a starting point for defining a city is as “a spatial form that organises and regulates phenomena of density on a larger scale”.¹¹ It is likely to be inferred that rural areas, by contrast, are characterized by a much less dense concentration of people and buildings, unevenly distributed in the territory (divided, during the Roman period, into administrative units

have been published by the project’s work team. Among them, see especially the first (Rüpke, 2011) and the last (Albrecht *et al.*, 2018; Gasparini *et al.*, 2020), with further bibliography.

5. Urciuoli & Rüpke, 2018; Rüpke, 2019; Rüpke, 2020a-b; Urciuoli, 2020.

6. Urciuoli, 2020, building in particular on Orsi, 1999.

7. Urciuoli, 2020, p. 5. Cf. also Urciuoli & Rüpke, 2018, pp. 127-128.

8. Urciuoli & Rüpke, 2018, p. 120; Rüpke, 2020b.

9. Urciuoli & Rüpke, 2018, pp. 122-123 (with further bibliography at n. 30).

10. As for Roman religion, see North, 1995.

11. Urciuoli & Rüpke, 2018, p. 125.

called *pagi*) under the different forms of villages (differently called *vici*, *fora*, or *conciliabula*), fortified hamlets, *villae*, small farms, *mansiones* (that is way stations), extra-urban sanctuaries, etc.

The second proposed feature suggests that “city is a place inhabited by a substantial population of non-food-producing individuals pursuing different trades (including intellectual occupations) on the basis of an agricultural surplus”.¹² By contrast, rural areas are mainly occupied by a small population whose occupation primarily consists in the production of food and livelihood resources (mostly agriculture and livestock).

Thirdly, “city is a place that is recognised as city and defined contrastively against (culturally variable forms of) non-city, (...) a place offering specific opportunities and evoking distinctive hopes”.¹³ In this respect, rural areas could also be culturally constructed in contrast with the lifestyle of the city and could develop their own peculiar aspirations. A self-evident example is the imaginative literary construction (in Ptolemaic times – see Theocritus’ *Idylls* – as well as during the Augustan period – see Tibullus’ *Elegies* and Virgil’s *Eclogues*) of the simple but peaceful bucolic lifestyle that contrasts with the stress produced by the urban (and highly politicized) lifestyle.¹⁴ As a medium of communication and social display, there is no doubt that religion was and is still affected by these different, antithetic cultural constructions.

Fourthly, and finally, “city is a place engendering diversity and endemic conflict”.¹⁵ Without denying that this could also be partially true for extra-urban, ex-centric areas, there is no doubt that the rural territory was much more socially homogenic, and could not compete with urban centres in terms of cultural diversity and plurality, adaptability, and social mobility.

Once clarified such methodological approach, we need to stress the theoretical premise that provides the starting point for this study, that is the assumptions that, in the ancient world: 1) people were not equally religious;¹⁶ 2) religion was not just restricted to a fixed and largely standardized set of institutionalized practices, uncriti-

12. *Ibidem*.

13. *Ibidem*.

14. Cf. North, 1995, p. 142: “The countryman of this stereotype is hard working, lives a simple life, keeps to an old-fashioned morality and worships the gods in an unchanging, traditional way. He has to be contrasted all the time with the town dweller, characterized by his degenerate tastes and habits and – it goes without saying – by his lack of piety and his contempt for the gods”; Hirt, 2020, pp. 261-264, with further bibliography.

15. Urciuoli & Rüpke, 2018, p. 125.

16. Albrecht *et al.*, 2018, esp. pp. 569 and 573.

cally accepted and mechanically reproduced by an established (urban as well as rural) community, but was also a resource available to self-styled bricoleurs;¹⁷ 3) accordingly, individual actors constantly elaborated strategies of religious appropriation by, on the one hand, reproducing schemas belonging to past habits while, on the other, reconfiguring them in response to emerging (historically variable) present situations and future aspirations;¹⁸ 4) the heterogeneous spaces in which these social networks were embedded were highly individualized “lived places” in which environment, human/animal beings, and “social goods” relentlessly interacted;¹⁹ 5) finally, and consequently, “[a]ctors who are positioned in complex matrices of political, economic, and religious relations and differently structured networks (e.g. cities and metropolises) can develop greater capacities for creative and critical intervention, while a smaller availability of cultural resources (e.g. in countryside and outskirts) can inhibit actors’ ability to build new creative trajectories of action and revert the agentic action to more routinized (eventually local) patterns. Group-styles of religious gathering in cities can deeply differ from those taking place in non-urban contexts”²⁰

This monographic volume of *ARYS* intends to contribute to research on these topics. We want to dedicate this book to the memory of a seminal scholar, Mario Torelli, who passed away last year. This journal owes him an immense debt. From the very first volume (published in 1998), Mario was part of *ARYS*’ Scientific Committee and always offered his enthusiastic support.

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17. Albrecht *et al.*, 2018; Fuchs *et al.*, 2019 (esp. the editors’ “General introduction”, pp. 1-31); Gasparini *et al.*, 2020 (esp. the editors’ introduction “Pursuing Lived Ancient Religion”, pp. 1-8).

18. Gasparini, 2021 (esp. pp. 58-68) building on Emirbayer & Mische, 1998.

19. Gasparini, 2020 (with further references).

20. Gasparini, 2020, p. 310 (including a reference to Lichterman *et al.*, 2017, p. 4).

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