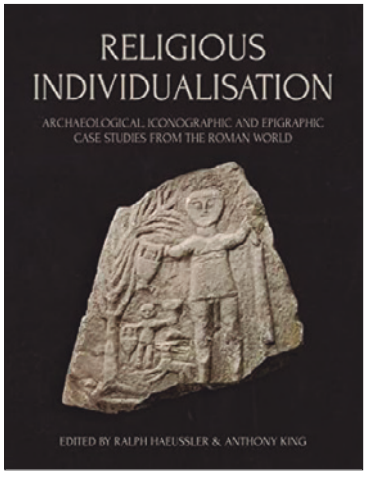
Religious Individualisation



HAEUSSLER, RALPH, KING, ANTHONY, MARCO SIMÓN, FRANCISCO & SCHÖRNER, GÜNTHER (EDS.) (2023). *Religious Individualisation. Archaeological, Iconographic and Epigraphic Case Studies from the Roman World*. Oxford: Oxbow Books. 322 pp., 63.95 £ [ISBN 978-1-78925-965-0]

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Certain topics are in vogue and are addressed by numerous researchers in the same period. This includes "Religious Individualization", on which the Max Weber Center at the University of Erfurt has set up a collaborative research group entitled "Religious Individualization in Historical Perspective" funded by the German Research Foundation (2008-2017), whose remarkable results, based on years of collaboration between internationally renowned researchers, have unfortunately not been included in this anthology.[1] Thus, this volume delivers what the subtitle

1. https://www.uni-erfurt.de/max-weber-kolleg/forschung/bisherige-projekte-/-forschungsergebnisse/bisherige-kooperationsprojekte/kolleg-forschergruppe-religioese-individualisierung-in-his-

promises: case studies from the Roman world that do not offer much that is new from a theoretical point of view, but do provide interesting aspects and insights into the topic of religious individualization.

After a short introduction by the editors (Chpater 1: "Introduction. The Dynamics of Religious Individualisation", pp. 1-3), Ralph Haeussler presents in Chapter 2 ("Religious individualisation. A bottom-up approach to religious developments in the Roman World") an extensive passage discussing the concept of "religious individualization" in the context of the Roman provinces from the 1st to the 3rd centuries CE (pp. 4-41). This notion is approached from a bottom-up perspective, emphasizing the role of personal choice and the multiplicity of religious expressions beyond the directives of magistrates, decurions, and municipal elites.

Above all, he emphasizes a diverse and pluralistic religious life. The Roman provinces had a complex and rich religious life characterized by tradition and innovation, both local and imperial. This diversity reflected the personal decisions of countless social actors. Traditional models that focus on elites as the sole drivers of religious organization fail to capture the individualization and diversification occurring during this period. On the other hand, there is evidence of individual agency. Particularly between the 1st and 3rd centuries CE, evidence points to individualization in social life, as seen in the differentiation of religious groups and personal choices in religious matters. Also, institutions and elites historically orchestrated civic cults for political and social cohesion. However, as social structures changed under Roman rule, the influence of these institutions was likely to decline in favour of more personalized forms of worship.

Haeussler argues, that in this new environment, individuals were more responsible for their own destiny, as manifested in their religious choices and expressions, which could potentially disrupt or transform existing belief systems. Although often enacted publicly, personal religious practices would be complementary to, but distinct from, traditional civic religion. They suggest a complex interplay between individual experiences and communal religion. Additionally, the rise in popularity of alternative cult spaces and deities outside traditional civic contexts would point to a competitive religious culture in which individuals made diverse choices and potentially competed for adherents.[2] Furthermore, Haeussler points out that factors contributing to an indi-

torischer-perspektive-gefoerdert-durch-die-deutsche-forschungsgemeinschaft-dfg. See, for example, Rüpke, 2011 and 2014; Rüpke & Spickermann, 2012; Rüpke & Woolf, 2013; Spickermann, 2013.

2. Here I miss a reference to Engster, 2001.

vidual's religious experience included family socialization, participation in various groups, exposure to cultural diversity through military service, and travel experiences. The Roman world offered a vast array of religious contexts, from local cults to pan-Greek mysteries, to Eastern cults and philosophical movements. Individuals navigated these varied options, crafting unique religious expressions. Methodologically, it would be difficult to identify individual agency in the archaeological and epigraphic record. The evidence predominantly captures collective practices, and unique or contradictory actions may be drowned out by the collective norm.

Overall, Haeussler argues for a comprehensive understanding of religious development in the Roman provinces that recognizes the pivotal role of the individual in shaping and responding to the religious landscape. He argues that the dynamic interplay between personal decisions, collective practices, and societal changes led to a society in which religion was not merely a tool wielded by elites, but a multifaceted tapestry influenced by a diverse range of social agents. This concept of "religious individualization" highlights the agency of individuals ranging from wealthy benefactors to sub-elite worshippers, each contributing to the unique religious fabric of the Roman world.

It should be noted that this chapter seems to make a great effort to conduct a scholarly discussion, particularly against the model of the *polis* religion, without taking note of the fact that this field is already well established. As a result, much remains superficial or can only be briefly outlined. This is particularly evident in the anachronistic use of the term *Zeitgeist* (pp. 9, 11, 12 and 16), whose definition is traced back to an essay published in 2020,[3] but which seems to be far too problematic and imprecise in its reference to Johann G. Herder and Georg W.F. Hegel in order to conceptualize the phenomena described by Haeussler. That there exists such a phenomenon as a "*Zeitgeist*" can be clearly doubted today, following Karl Mannheim (1893-1947).[4] Obviously, this term here refers to a "common spirit" of a larger group. Furthermore, the comparison with modern Indian conditions (p. 19) ignores the corresponding years of research within the above-mentioned group of fellow researchers, which had precisely this as its content.[5]

Chapter 3 ("Discrepant Behaviour. On Magical Activities in the Latin West", pp. 42-62), by Francisco Marco Simón, discusses the role of magicians in the cultural and religious landscape of the ancient Roman Empire, detailing how their practices

3. Haeussler & Webster, 2020, p. 17.
4. Cf. Jung, 2015, pp. 151-172.
5. For example, cf. Fuchs *et al.*, *2020*.

contributed to a form of "religious globalisation". These ritual specialists blurred the boundaries between regions, cultures, religions, and languages, creating a cultural community (*koinê*) rooted in ancient Egyptian traditions that harmonized diverse knowledge for practical purposes. Magicians operated outside traditional temple structures, often travelling, and their workshops became mobile centres of religious activity. This magical-religious technology was not uniform, but adapted to local cultural traditions, emphasizing the multidimensional, adaptable nature of polytheism. Variations in ritual, appeals to less common deities, and surprising continuities of divine figures previously thought to be merely mythological emphasize the individualistic nature of magical practices. Some ritual texts even suggest that offerings were made to specific individuals as sacrificial victims. The chapter concludes by suggesting that these practices, often referred to as "magic", are better understood as "unlicensed religion" or "instrumental religion". These terms highlight the practitioners' individual agency and the practical, goal-oriented nature of their religious acts.

Chapter 4 ("Individual Religious Choice. The Case of the 'Mystery' Cults", pp. 63-75), by Jaime Alvar Ezquerra, discusses the dynamics of religious practice and conversion within the Roman Empire, with a particular focus on the integration of the "mystery" cults into society and the nature of individual religious choice. Mystery cults were deeply integrated into Roman society, allowing for familial transmission of religious practices rather than just through individual conversion or selection. While there were notable instances of personal religious expression and the foundation/establishment of individual sanctuaries, these should not be seen as typical but rather as isolated cases. The Roman religious landscape was a complex and integrated system in which individual choice was exercised within a wider context of family tradition and social norms. The idea of a "religious free market" does not fully capture this complexity; while individuals had choices, these choices were still influenced by a wider competitive and communal religious environment.

Chapter 5 ("Sons and Mothers. The *Matres*, the Military and Religious Choice in Roman Britain", pp. 76-107), by Elizabeth Blanning, debates the religious practices of Roman soldiers in Britannia, particularly their veneration of maternal deities known as the *Matres*, as well as other related deities such as the *Suleviae*, the *Parcae*, and the *Campestres*. While these deities were worshipped by both civilians and soldiers, they held a special significance for soldiers, especially those stationed along the northern frontier. In summary, the *Matres* and related deities played a significant role in the lives of Roman soldiers in Britannia, offering a means of expressing both collective and individual identities within a military context that was open to a blend of Roman and native religious practices. These deities served as tutelary

figures for the troops, providing a sense of unity as well as a counterpoint to the official cults of the emperor and state gods. She argues that *Matres* and *Matronae* are not exactly the same, "but that an element of propitiation of deities who held sway over life, death and fortune was likely in the minds of their worshippers" (p. 102).

Chapter 6 ("Pre-Roman Deities along the North-Eastern Adriatic. Continuity, Transformation, Identification", pp. 108-126), by Marjeta Šašel Kos, discusses the religious landscape of the north-eastern Adriatic following the Roman conquest. Northeast Adriatic were diverse and became known to us through Roman records after the indigenous (Celtic) people adopted the habit of writing ("epigraphic habit"). The religious practice(s) in the north-eastern Adriatic region during the Roman era featured a rich tapestry of indigenous, Roman, and Greek elements. The indigenous deities were acknowledged and sometimes assimilated into Roman and Greek religious systems, showing a degree of religious flexibility and syncretism that allowed for the coexistence and development of diverse/different cults within the Roman Empire. The chapter is written in a very interesting and knowledgeable way, but unfortunately the reference to the topic of "religious individualization" is hardly made.

Chapter 7 ("Private Devotions at Temples in Central and Eastern Gaul", pp. 127-145), by Isabelle Fauduet, provides an analysis of the religious practices at Romano-Celtic temples, drawing on archaeological and epigraphic evidence to make several observations about the nature of cults during this period. The evidence primarily indicates personal and individual religious activities rather than collective or civic ceremonies at Romano-Celtic temple sites. Finds do not seem to reflect group religion or state-sponsored religious gestures. Unfortunately, there is a scarcity of archaeological or epigraphical data that clearly points to communal religious events conducted at these temple sites. Even when members of the elite, including Roman citizens or foreigners (*peregrini*), made dedications at temples, they did so in a personal capacity. Phrases such as "*de suo dedit*" (gave from his/her own resources), "*ex monitu*" (by the admonition), and "*ex visu*" (by the vision/sight) in dedicatory inscriptions suggest direct and individual encounters with deities. In summary, the religious life in Romano-Celtic temples seems to have been characterized by a strong emphasis on individual worship and personal devotion, with the elite making personal dedications to the gods. While there was a diversity of cult practices, many of them show signs of Roman influence. The evidence suggests a complex picture in which individualized religious experiences coexisted with, and were perhaps influenced by, larger cultural and religious forces, including the broader Romanization of local customs.

Chapter 8 ("Tradition, Diversity and Improvisation in Romano-British Cremation Burials in South-East England", pp. 146-161), by Jake Weekes, addresses commendably the area of the funerary cult, which is otherwise often separated from religion. It explores the interpretation of burial practices in Romano-British cremation rituals, focusing on how these reflect both a general structure and individual variation. Burial rituals are seen as individual interpretations or "translations" of the existing "rules", each potentially influencing and generating new elements through emulation and the development of traditions. The heterogeneity of burial practices in Roman Britain is an essential aspect of archaeological research. These practices reflect a balance between the common framework and individual variations, suggesting that mortuary rituals were subject to the influence of wider cultural patterns as well as the personal choices and innovations of those involved in the burial process. Researchers should accommodate and investigate this diversity (in order) to gain a comprehensive understanding of past societies and their cultural practices.

Chapter 9 ("Individual Choices in Burial Ritual and Cult Activity in and around the Iron Age and Romano-British Town of Baldock, Hertfordshire, UK", pp. 162-180), by Gilbert. R. Burleigh, highlights the diversity of religious and funerary practices in a "small town" of Roman Britain, specifically Baldock, Hertfordshire, and its surrounding area. The main focus is on individual expressions of cult activity and choices made within the religious context of this period. Baldock and its hinterland have recently been defined as a sacred landscape, implying a concentration of religious significance and activities in the area. The author has identified specific individuals based on their burial practice, such as a woman and her triplets, and distinctive scenarios observed in the burials, which emphasize personal stories within the wider context of Roman Britain. Examples of individual choices in burial practices include a cremation when inhumation (burial) was the norm, the unique instance of a burial with a mirror, and a child's cremation grave with a flint shaped like a human face. Inscribed dedications on votive offerings from the Ashwell temple treasure hoard point to individual names, showing a personal dimension to religious worship. The individual religious behaviours and choices thus include unique burial practices with significant personal touches, dedications to specific deities, and various offerings that reveal a complex and meaningful religious landscape.

Chapter 10 ("Religious Individualisation *in Extremis*. Human Remains from Romano-Celtic Temples in Britain and Gaul", pp. 181-207), by Anthony C. King, discusses the religious practices associated with the human remains found at Hayling Island and other related sites in Roman Britain. The chapter addresses the speculation as to whether some of these remains may be evidence for human sacrifice and

how they are interpreted within the context of religious practices during the Late Iron Age and Roman period. The research suggests that while it is challenging to identify human sacrifices with certainty, the more ritualized burials of skeletons or fragmented bones are readily apparent and can be explained within the associated cult practices of temples and shrines. Individuals involved in these rituals, often of high status, might be venerated or even deified within a cult, or conversely, lose their individuality by becoming anonymous parts of sacrificial offerings, such as foundation deposits or amidst other ritual debris. Evidence of human remains being used as trophies or showing *post mortem* damage indicates a loss of individual identity as a result of ritual practices. Full-scale trophies might have been more common in the Iron Age, but the practice of using individual skulls illustrates a potentially diminished continuation of this tradition into the Roman period. King emphasizes the complexity of interpreting archaeological evidence relating to human remains and religious practices, and the importance of understanding these practices within their historical and cultural contexts. He underscores the need to discern local variations in rituals and the potential evolution of these practices over time, from the Late Iron Age to the Roman occupation. Additionally, he highlights the nuanced role that individual human remains might have played in the religious life of the period, ranging from honoured ancestors or heroes to anonymous sacrificial victims.

Chapter 11 ("Indigenous *Arae* and *Stelae*. Symbolic Landscapes and Individualisation in North-West Roman Hispania", pp. 208-229), by Fernando Alonso Burgos, provides an analysis of the interaction between Roman authority and local religious practices (*res sacrae peregrinae*) in the provinces of the Roman Empire. He highlights the legal and cultural nuances that characterized sacred spaces and the influence of local customs on religious expression. Burgos argues that the diversity of religious and funerary practices in the Roman provinces was not simply a by-product of Roman tolerance but was actively produced by local communities. These practices illustrate the complex interaction between Roman imperialism and local autonomy, in which local elites and communities navigated the imperial context to forge new identities and enhance their social and political status.

Chapter 12 ("Indigenism and Identity Shaping. The Case of the *Irrico* Group in Central Spain", pp. 230-253), by Jesús Alberto Arenas-Esteban, discusses the role of architecture, particularly the case study of the villa at Cuevas de Soria, in shaping social identities during the late Roman Empire. It considers how architectural forms are not only physical structures, but also expressions of cultural and social values. The villa at Cuevas de Soria is such an illustrative case of how architecture can materialize and express social identity. In this instance, the construction and embellishment of the

villa provided an opportunity for the local elites to assert their heritage and distinct social status. The incorporation of traditional and indigenous elements into the architecture reflects a conscious choice by these communities to celebrate and promote their collective identity within the evolving Roman provincial society. The passage suggests that such choices were not mere continuations of the past, but were part of a broader strategy to establish new social hierarchies and reaffirm group cohesion in times of social transition. This and the previous chapter also deal with very interesting aspects that go far beyond regional phenomena, but strictly speaking they are more related to group identities than to individual religion.

Chapter 13 ("The Religious Construction of 'Household' in Roman Italy. The Case of the *Casa dei Vettii*", pp. 254-263), by Günther Schörner, discusses the use of space syntax analysis in the study of room functions and layouts within ancient Roman houses, specifically in the context of domestic religious practices. Hereby, the methodology of space syntax analysis provides an objective framework for understanding interaction densities and availability within a space – in this case, the *Casa dei Vettii* in Pompeii. The analysis circumvents subjective interpretations based on "common sense" or anachronistic assumptions. The study underscores the embedded nature of domestic cults within the Roman house, involving a complex arrangement of spaces that were unique to each *domus*. This individuality can provide insights into the religious behaviours of the owners and inhabitants. Through an objective space syntax analysis, the study reveals that domestic religious practices in Roman houses were not only a shared experience for the entire household but were also subject to the individual preferences and decisions of the house owner. The spatial analysis of religious shrines within the home can thus provide a deeper understanding of religious individuality during the Roman Empire. The case study of the *Casa dei Vettii* illustrates the potential of architectural analyses to uncover cultural and religious nuances within domestic spaces in the ancient world.

Chapter 14 ("Types of *Interpretatio* and Their Users in the *Keltiké*. *Explicationes* and *Translationes* vs. *Identificationes* and *Adaptationes*", pp. 264-293), by Patrizia de Bernardo-Stempel, provides an in-depth analysis of the *interpretatio* (an interpretive process where foreign deities are identified with Roman or Hellenic deities) within the context of Celtic and Roman religious syncretism. The practice of naming local deities with classical theonyms mixed with Celtic dialects (*explicatio* and *translatio Celticae*), shows that there were fewer deities than the multiplicity of Celtic divine names would suggest. Four modalities of *interpretatio* are outlined based on the amount/degree of individuality involved, from *explicatio vel translatio Celtica*, to *adaptationes Latinae a lingua celtica*, to *explicatio vel translatio Latina a lingua Celtica*, and finally

identificatio Romana vel indigena. The chapter highlights the dynamic process of syncretism in the western Roman Empire, where Celtic and classical deities and religious practices intermingled. This process shows not only how Roman and Greek deities influenced local religions, but also how Celtic societies adapted, translated, and integrated these influences. Through *interpretatio*, different names and attributes associated with classical deities gave rise to a broader and more intricate panorama of religious worship, reflecting regional adaptations and innovations in the religious landscape of the ancient West. The linguistic approach and the analysis of the material alone make it very clear that the *interpretatio* is less an individual act than a collective one initiated by a group.

Chapter 15 ("Religious Individualisation in an Entangled World. How to Pick and Mix Favourite Deities in the Roman *Keltikê*", pp. 294-323), by Ralph Haeussler, on the other hand, attempts to re-establish the link to religious individualization at the end. The concluding section of this passage assesses the diversity and complexity of religious practices in the western provinces of the Roman Empire, using examples from the Gallic provinces, particularly *Gallia Narbonensis*, to emphasize the role of individual agency and the multitude of social actors in shaping religious life. While Roman cults have sometimes been seen as instruments used by the elite to enforce social cohesion and identity within municipalities, a comprehensive examination of the evidence reveals a diversity that suggests more than top-down control. For example, many individuals, particularly women and sub-elite groups, found ways to express their religiosity and potentially challenge the *statu quo* through cults that were exclusive to their demographic or that resonated with their personal experiences. Potential sacred locations in nature provided opportunities for various segments of society to invest new meaning and achieve a degree of religious emancipation independent of civic religious institutions. In summary, the religious culture in the Roman West was not monolithic but was characterized by a high degree of diversity fuelled by individual choices and expression. This diversity undermined the notion that religion served simply as a vehicle for political ends, instead revealing a rich tapestry of personal, communal, and very different religious expressions across social strata. Religious practices in the Roman world cannot therefore be understood solely in terms of elite political strategies, but must also consider the agency and creativity of individual believers in shaping their religious landscape. This chapter is very similar to Chapter 2, so that the author and editor would have been better off opting for a single contribution. With regard to the examples given, it should be critically noted that there is more than one Nehalennia sanctuary and

that the dedicants of inscriptions were not only salt merchants (so p. 302),[6] and that "creolisation" and "creolage", as already mentioned in Chapter 2, is a similarly problematic term as "*Zeitgeist*" with a post-colonial connotation unless it is very narrowly defined (so p. 310) and that Sucellus has a Paredra Nantosvelta with which he is depicted several times (p. 314), to name but a few.

Despite all the criticism, the volume does justice to its purpose: it is an anthology of mostly very readable contributions, including those that only marginally touch on the main topic, most of which illustrate the topic of "religious individualization" in case studies. It is a pity that no index has been included.

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6. See the edition of the epigraphic sources: http://gams.uni-graz.at/context:fercan.