

Budget Cuts and Material Expression of Religion

Kristine Iara

This paper derives from my larger research project on Rome's sacral topography in Late Antiquity,¹ a period of profound transformations in political, social, economic and religious terms, affecting both the physical appearance of the city and the civic and religious life of its inhabitants.² In this period, Rome's topography has been affected by three major circumstances or developments: (1) the absence of the emperor,³ (2) Christianization,⁴ and (3) changing economic and social conditions.⁵

The paper sheds light on the interdependence of 'budget cuts' in the funding for Roman religion and its material expression with a focus on the 4th century.⁶ This time span seems particularly appealing for an examination of the reciprocity of economic conditions and the material manifestation of religion, given that the bulk of investment and resources dedicated to the traditional religion lapsed, especially after the emperor's interest turned to the new Christian religion. The paper focuses on three specific questions within the overall of transformations affecting the city of Rome. (1) First, can we detect an impact of decreasing economic resources on activities of religion? If so, is this due to a general decline of available economic resources or rather to the 'budget cuts' that came with the imperial legislation that restricted Roman religion? (2) Second, who were the persons or the groups of persons who had an ongoing interest in investing into religious objects? (3) Third, how did all this affect topography, and to which extent did it become visible?

(1) Can we detect an impact of decreasing economic resources on Roman religion, both material appearances and activities? Three different contexts are considered in the following.

First, temple buildings: The monumental evidence testifies to ongoing funding of religious buildings or other materials as well as religious festivals, on an official level. No new buildings for religious purpose have been erected in this period, but there are several cases of restorations or the rebuilding of temples. Although it *seems* that the evidence for such activities, even more: for such *religiously* motivated activities is numerous, we have to keep in mind that restorations, maintenance, erection and rebuilding of the city's public buildings were among the usual responsibilities of a magistrate within his secular office. Even when contemporaneously the activities within Roman religion were more and more restricted, temples remained public property, and as such, they were protected from structural damage. Thus, maintenance work on the temples of Rome was carried out as much as on any other kind of public building.

Several studies on the amount of non-private construction undertaken in Rome in the 4th century have shown that the evidence regarding works carried out on religious architecture is fully in line with the general picture regarding Rome's urban fabric. In general, we cannot get hold of a direct impact that affected specifically and selectively

the material appearance of Roman religion. In any case, there is an indirect impact, a side-effect of the general developments, by which the city of Rome as a whole was affected and, as a result, religious architecture as part of the public architecture was co-affected: It has been noted in other studies that, especially in the first part of the 4th century, not only the quantity of public investment into construction, but also the quality thereof have decreased. This may be determined jointly by two factors: First, the emperor's interest, beginning with Constantine, turned towards the Christian religion, which soon became the only legitimate form of religion. Second, with the foundation of the new capital Constantinople, the emperor's interest focused on his new city, conceived as a Christian city from the outset. These new enterprises absorbed means and manpower. It was, therefore, rather a question of religious and geographical priorities than of generally decreasing economic resources: the available resources were being diverted into the new capital and to build monuments of the new Christian religion. This resulted in a draining of resources from the city of Rome. The weight of the emperor's attention as a determining factor is all the more significant if taking into consideration the impact of the emperor's favor and his patronage, ever since, on the flourishing or sliding into oblivion of one or another cult, even without Christianity.

It appears, thus, that resources were made available for necessary repairs within Rome, but new construction from official side must have been curtailed in favor of the Christian church and Constantinople. Thus, the city of Rome was affected as a whole, but not selectively and specifically the buildings for Roman religion, because there was no difference between religious architecture of this level and any other kind of public architecture.

The second context to be considered to find an answer to the first question consists of archaeological material from the sanctuary of Magna Mater on the Palatine Hill. This evidence adds further information to the general picture that is provided by large scale architecture. The archaeological material from this site shows congruency with the progressive withdrawal of funding for Roman religion. Roman religion, still receiving official support from Constantine and his immediate Christian successors, was affected especially by the measures issued by Gratian and Theodosius I.⁷ The used space within the sanctuary was more and more downsized and more and more of its structures and rooms fell into decay, reflecting thus a decreasing frequentation for religious purpose. The definite end of its use for religious purpose at the end of the 4th century is contemporaneous with the laws of 391/392.⁸ It seems that the gradual decrease in the use of the facilities of this sanctuary goes hand in hand with the measures that were directed against Roman religion, either by withdrawing official financial support, or by prohibiting religious activities.

The third context to be considered are activities within the *sacra privata*. The evidence from the Mithraic cult⁹ in late antique Rome as well as from Magna Mater's Phrygianum on the Vatican Hill both testify to ongoing religious activities in the 4th century: the last piece of epigraphic evidence from the Phrygianum dates from 390, thus, when all cult

activities within the Roman religion were prohibited. The Mithraic activities continue somewhat further. We may assume that activities and cultic facilities within the *sacra privata*, even though ending with or shortly after the turn of the 4th to the 5th century, did have a longer time of support and continuation than the official cults and the *sacra publica* because they neither required nor depended on public funding. Presumably the slight difference in persistence between the Mithraic and the Metroac cult respectively derives from the different exposure to the public.

(2) Considering the second question regarding the persons or the groups of persons who had an ongoing interest in investing into religious material, we can state that a wide range of different persons had an interest, even the emperor although being Christian. Different forms of investment have been carried out by the emperor, by the senate, the *praefectus urbi* and by 'ordinary Romans' alike. Regarding building activities on an official level, however, we cannot distinct the motivations behind the activities, because we cannot distinct 'public architecture' and 'religious architecture': Given that religious architecture as well as religious statuary were protected by law, the buildings were maintained in their capacity as public architecture, as part of Rome's cityscape, as part of cultural property; the statuary was maintained, at a later point and after some legislation, as objects for the embellishment of the city. From the evidence for activities within the cult of Mithras and Magna Mater, we can get hold of individuals acting privately, on their own expenses, pursuing activities within the *sacra privata*. Most of the persons attested to by the evidence belong to the senatorial aristocracy. However, both the nature and the significance of this evidence are limited in more than one sense: it has been produced by a very small number of the total of Rome's 4th century inhabitants. Therefore, it is not representative neither of the entire populace of Rome in this period nor of the full spectrum of possible production of religious material. It rather represents a small group of very wealthy people¹⁰ producing an elite form of material manifestation of religion. For many reasons we simply can *assume* – but not prove – the ongoing participation of the same social groups of Romans as in previous times, additionally to the evidence produced by the members of the senatorial aristocracy. In sum, we can get hold of people or groups of people involved in both maintaining the physical infrastructure for religious practice and in practicing this religion, on an official or a private level. We cannot get hold of the motivations behind the activities on the one hand, and relative numbers within the whole population on the other.

(3) How did all this affect topography in terms of visibility? We have seen that the temples were maintained, even if the religious activities gradually ceased. This notion is further confirmed by the Regionary Catalogs, in which many of these temples are listed. The Calendar of 354 further lists many of the religious festivals. This means that, at least to this point, the buildings were not (yet) the empty settings for activities that did not take place any more. In sum, the temples, integral part of Rome's architectural

landscape, still determined as much as ever since the visual appearance of the city. They were part of Rome's glorious past and monumental present, thus being an object worth of maintenance of general interest, independently of one's religious affiliations. Even more, they were unchallenged in the monumental center of Rome: the impact of the new Christian religion became monumentally manifest initially not within the city center, but at the outskirts: the huge Constantinian basilicas were erected, beginning with the 4th century, in the *suburbium* beyond the city walls. All in all, it does not seem that there was a direct impact onto the cityscape of Rome as early as in the 4th century.

We can draw at least one final observation even though the evidence is fragmented, scattered and diverged. In this period, there are many developments, determining factors and circumstances, often contradictory and non-linear: the emperor and his direct impact by means of laws and patronage; the same emperor's indirect impact by means of appointments of persons with the 'right' religious affiliation, favors, and patronage; the enormous wealth of the senatorial elite in late antique Rome¹¹, who were willing to spend own means lavishly on games, but not on public buildings and infrastructure¹²; contemporaneously, less public funding for Rome; legislation restricting religious activities on the one hand, protecting the buildings on the other; and many more. It seems that there are no straightforward, clean cut answers to the questions put forward. Rome in the 4th century was a dynamically transforming city, and the transformations took often place in high speed, with mutual influence. It seems that, whereas the course for most developments was set in the 4th century, in some cases even earlier, the tangible and perceivable effects and visible impact onto Rome's topography and urban fabric occurred later, in the 5th and 6th century.

Notes

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² On the immense topic of the transformations of Rome in Late Antiquity: Bauer 1996; Harris 1999; Aurea Roma 2000; Salzman 2002; Meneghini 2003; Bauer 2011; Cameron 2011; Salzman et al. 2015.

³ Mayer 2002; Bauer 2011; Gwynn 2011, 145; Behrwald – Witschel 2012, 17–24; McEvoy – Moser 2017.

⁴ Concisely, with older literature: Praet 1992; Behrwald – Witschel 2012, 18–24.

⁵ Marazzi 2000; Behrwald – Witschel 2012, 13–24.

⁶ 'Roman religion' (instead of 'pagan religion', 'paganism' etc.) will be used throughout in the text as opposed to Christian religion.

⁷ Gwynn 2011, 136. 382: Gratian withdrew the funding for pagan priesthoods, notably the Vestal Virgins (but cf. Lizzi Testa 2007; see also Salzman 2002; Cameron 2011); in 391–392 Theodosius I. passed a series of laws that systematically outlawed pagan cult.

⁸ On the sanctuary on the Palatine Hill most recent Pensabene 2017.

⁹ Mithras in late antique Rome: Bjørnebye 2007 and 2016; Phrygianum and the related evidence: Cameron 2011; Liverani 2008; Pensabene 2008.

¹⁰ Behrwald 2009, 132.

¹¹ Especially Smith 2003, 150.

¹² Behrwald 2009.

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