

# Appropriating Space in Rome

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This contribution is part of my larger research project on the sacral topography of the city of Rome in Late Antiquity.<sup>1</sup> The focus of the contribution is on the question of how sacred space was constituted within Rome's urban space, or rather, how, within urban space, sacredness was generated to various degrees or was activated as needed. In the following, the term 'sacredness' is used in the broadest range of meanings and in full consciousness of its vagueness, and the term 'Roman religion' refers to the 'pagans' as opposed to the Christians.

The following mechanisms to generate and to increase sacredness of a space are examined.

1. Permanent elements and accumulative mechanisms to generate and increase sacredness of a space (permanent elements such as monumental temples, cultic spots, altars; the density of these elements, adding to an intense aura of sacredness; architectural conglomerations; visual axes; innumerable statues, reliefs and other pictorial elements).
2. The appropriation of space for religious purpose by means of ephemeral elements (dynamic features such as festivals, processions; in particular, the festivals of Dea Dia, the Lupercalia, the festival of Mars in March and the festival of Mater Magna in March have been examined).
3. Mechanisms of appropriation of city space used by the Christian religion by material and immaterial means (appropriating sacred space; appropriating sacred time).

The conclusions resulting from the discussion of the available material (archaeological, epigraphical, literary evidence from the city of Rome) are the following: The two most important notions that emerge from the distinct pieces of evidence are (a) the fluctuant character of Rome's sacral topography and its pliability in many aspects, and (b) mechanisms of appropriation by immaterial means.

Although material and permanent elements, such as buildings, shrines, altars, and sanctuaries were fixed in space and the Roman gods usually had their topographically fixed cultic spots, the sacral topography of the city was as much constituted by ephemeral, dynamic and temporary elements as by the permanent ones. When a festival featuring processions took place, more urban space was involved than the fixed spots of a cult, and this space became thus an essential part of the micro-topography of that particular cult, appropriated for a specific time span by the practitioners of that cult. Thus, sacral topography, mapped each time anew, never looked exactly the same. Specific areas could be activated as sacred on occasion and as, when and by whom required. In the case of the Saturnalia, the area of religious activity enlarged considerably and was flooded with sacredness and participants, paralyzing the everyday business on the Forum Romanum for a specific time span. In the case of Dea Dia's festival, there is the juxtaposition of the narrow limitation of the action itself both in spatial terms (the

sanctuary in the *suburbium*) and in terms of the agents (the activities took place without the participation of the people) on the one hand, the extensiveness of the agency of the activity and its impact on the other, again both in spatial terms (the whole *urbs*) and regarding the beneficiaries (its entire populace). And here again, we see 'sacred space on demand': the *domus* of the *magister* became temporarily sacred space when needed for the rituals. The Lupercalia provide a good example for the fluctuating character of sacral topography. The actual mapping of this part of Rome's sacral topography not only was made up in the very moment, but it was different each year. More than by fixed elements, its micro-topography was determined by the people, the audience's gathering. Further, this festival showed to a particular extent the combination of stable ritual elements and pliability of interpretation, which allowed adopting different meanings over time.

The two mechanisms of appropriation by the Christian religion that have been examined brought the following results. In the very center of Rome, Christianization of urban space in a material sense advanced slowly and relatively late. The Church, at this rather early point in Late Antiquity, did not occupy systematically the center. In fact, it was in the outskirts where the first monumental buildings of the church were erected: the giant Constantinian basilicas, attracted by the martyrs' tombs in the *suburbium*. The religious focus moved outside, the city's geographical periphery became the new religious center. Thus, in the mid-term, the cultic-ritual center was relocated from the city center to the outskirts, dissociating the one from the other. This appropriation of space went hand in hand with another mechanism of appropriation by immaterial and ephemeral means: Not the appropriation of space, though: at this point there was, between the Christian and the Roman religion, no actual competition for space by means of temporal events such as processions. This other mechanism of appropriation was rather one of time. The systematically furthered appropriation of sacred time in Rome by the Christian religion not only progressed much faster than the appropriation of urban space, but proved itself also as highly effective: the flooding of Rome's civic calendar by Christian festivals, celebrations and holidays, purposely disembarking, progressively, the festivals of the Roman religion.

The seamless and relatively quick progress of the transformation of the sacral topography with advancing Christianization is partly due to the topography's fluctuant character and its pliability (even though the effects of greater changes and mechanisms in the background must be acknowledged). Here, we also see the subjectiveness of the perception of centrality and periphery on the one hand and their slideability, and, on the other hand, how, by this, the geographical center vs. periphery and the cultic center vs. periphery drifted into incongruity.

Thus, as important as the mentioned fixed structures are the ephemeral connections between these, constituted by the processions: they are indispensable for the generation, the development and the continuous mutation of the sacral topography and then, for its reconstruction. These connections gain even more significance in Late Antiquity, with the prohibition of other important elements of cult, first and foremost the sacrifice;

the permanent and ephemeral generators of sacredness helped preserve religious memory in times where religious activity could not take place.

The well-known statement of Livy can neatly serve as a summary of these findings, and it does so in two distinct regards: Livy says: ‘No corner of it [meaning the city of Rome] is not permeated by ideas of religion and the gods; for our annual sacrifices, the days are no more fixed than are the places where they may be performed’.<sup>2</sup> This not only highlights the importance of the immaterial elements, alongside the fixed structures, for the sacral topography. It also highlights the importance of sacred time, both for the Roman religion (which Livy had in mind), and for the successful Christianization (of which Livy did not think): using the appropriation of sacred time for the own religious purposes, for promoting Christianization, was a full success. As a result, the sacral topography was transformed. The ways and means of appropriation were the same: the combination of fixed points, ephemeral connections, buildings and people, in the dimension of time and space.

### Notes

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<sup>2</sup> Livy 5.52.2: *nullus locus in ea non religionum deorumque est plenus; sacrificiis sollemnibus non dies magis stati quam loca sunt, in quibus fiant*. Translation from B. O. Foster, Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge MA 1940.