The religious sites of the Eastern Roman Empire: competitive sharing in Late Antiquity?

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In the early 2000’s, the American anthropologist Robert M. Hayden developed the concept of competitive sharing to describe places visited or claimed by more than one religious group. Tapping into observational data collected in central India as well as in the Balkans – an area ravaged by armed conflict since the 1990’s – Hayden set to identifying the occupancy dynamics of religious sites in relation with changes of political and religious authority. By doing so, he sought to propose a model applicable to all times and all settings. His research largely contributed to popularize the notion of the “shared sacred sites”, as attested not only by a growing number of academic papers on this topic but also by a recent exhibition in France.

Such studies, however, rarely tackled ancient evidence. With a few exceptions, references to Antiquity only serve to contextualize later cases, without being included in systematic analyses.

Nevertheless, in Late Antiquity, some sites were visited by individuals who claimed different religious identities. This diverse array of visitors came to perform various rituals, simultaneously or successively. Examples are Antiochian Daphne, an incubation site where, during the 4th century CE, people went regardless of their religious affiliations; or Gadara.

4 E. Soler, Le sacré et le salut à Antioche au IVe siècle après J.-C. Pratiques festives et comportements religieux dans le processus de christianisation de la cité, Beirut, 2006, 59-60; M. Attali, F. Massa, “Sharing Divine Powers...
(Palaestina secunda) where a series of private and public inscriptions attests to religious cohabitations inside the baths and the healing sanctuary\(^5\). Similarly, at Mambre near Hebron, a panegyris commemorating a divine apparition was celebrated every summer by pilgrims of various identities\(^6\).

The workshop to be hosted at the University of Fribourg aims to test the relevance of R. Hayden’s concept of competitive sharing in the multicultural and multireligious context of the Late Roman Empire. To facilitate comparison and to draw up models of occupancy dynamics, we will focus on a limited geographical and chronological area: the Eastern provinces from the 4\(^{th}\) century onward, a turning-point in the Empire’s religious transformations\(^7\). We welcome contributions that focus on a single site at a specific point in time or that retrace its evolution over a longer time frame, as well as studies that undertake an overview of competitive sharing within a region, a province or a diocese. In all instances, we aim at identifying patterns of attendance in shared religious sites as well as at laying out their topography, the legal status of their buildings and their architectural evolutions insomuch as they lead to or reveal community interactions.

The workshop seeks to underline three distinct but intertwined factors:

1. First, visitors: is the notion of competition useful in defining the presence and the interactions on the same religious space of individuals from diverse religious backgrounds? Were visits to these sites made on an individual, a family or a community basis? How were intercommunal relationships affected by the arrival of people who claimed a different religious affiliation? Did it alter visiting patterns and contexts?

2. Secondly, religious and political authorities: at the time when the groundwork of the Empire’s institutional Christianization was lain, in what respect did the political powers’ change of religious identity lead to modifications in the spatial hold of communities? Were Christian authorities (both political and ecclesiastical) ever able to set themselves as the regulatory party responsible for preexisting religious sites and to control access to them?

3. Finally, ritual practices and their potential transformation by competitive sharing: did the “hybridization” of religious practices serve to impede or, conversely, to reinforce the construction of multiple religious identities within the same space?

Such undertakings call for a reflection on the definition of spaces – here designated for convenience as “religious sites” – and on their legal status. Putting together all contributions could thus lead to the drafting of a new typology.

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\(^7\) Following Late Ancient terminology, provinces included in the following dioceses: Egypt, East, Asia, Pontus, Thrace, Macedonia and Dacia as well as the province of Achaea.
To answer these questions, we rely on the clues left by the visitors regarding their own community affiliations. We shall not immediately assume a clear-cut distinction between pagans, Jews and Christians, since this tripartition resulted from ideological and polemical discourses progressively developed during the period. The contributions may use all kinds of available source material. Polemical discourses may be intersected not only with legal documents, but also with epigraphy, iconography, and archeology – including architecture and artefacts.

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