

Calling upon Gods, Offering Bodies
Strategies of Human-Divine Communication in the Roman Empire from
Individual Experience to Social Reproduction
Málaga. 20-22 May, 2020.

Organizers

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Call For Papers

The Department of Historical Science at the University of Málaga and the Institute of Historiography “Julio Caro Baroja” at the University of Carlos III of Madrid are organizing an international conference titled “**Calling upon gods, offering bodies. Strategies of human-divine communication in the Roman Empire from individual experience to social reproduction**”. Researchers of Ancient History, History of Religion, Archaeology, Anthropology, Classics, and other related fields are invited to present their research on this topic.

The conference aims at analysing how self-experience of religious communication becomes a reflexive phenomenon reproduced in time and space to constitute a collectively shared narrative. While human agency has been a paramount concept in recent scholarship of religions in the classical world, the conference organizers invite the participants to direct their attention to the processes of social reproduction that *validate* individual experience. On the one hand, though human agency (understood as accountable action) is a useful heuristic category for functionalist thought, it tends to evade the temporal dimension, as it mostly highlights a specific action set in a particular moment and place. On the other hand, a diachronic analysis of religious phenomena creates the illusion of a linear, sequential process of progressive ‘movements’. Following Anthony Giddens’ remarks on the importance of embedding social systems in time and space, the success of social action is found in its subsequent replication over time, modelling routinised actions. The issues to be addressed during

the conference should investigate how individual, creative religious micro-strategies of communication with the gods became established patterns of behaviour, to what extent individual behaviour was mediated by cultural constraints, or why individual biographies of divine experience became *exempla* and identity markers.

Within this general methodological framework, a first panel (corresponding to the “Calling up gods” part of the title) will specifically deal with processes of selection and construction of divine epithets within Roman (Republican as well as Imperial) polytheism. On the one hand, the analysis of the epicleris by which the devotees identified and addressed their gods opens to the understanding of strategies of ‘mapping’ divine power relationships (thus creating a sort of hierarchy), locating them on a topographical level, underlining (or occluding) some of the divine prerogatives in order to make the human invocation more effective, and consequently strengthening and enlarging individual agency. The absence of a normative regulation created spaces for innovative, fluid, and flexible religious experience and communication. On the other hand, belonging these individuals to smaller or wider social groups (families, neighborhoods, associations, cities), such strategies could have significant consequences in the process of structuring ‘collective’ identities and empowering groups, and, at the same time, could be influenced and shaped by the local socio-political context, up to the possibility of normalizing on the *longue durée* what had represented, in a first time, a deviant behavior.

A second panel (corresponding to the “Offering Bodies” part of the title) will focus on how intense individual bodily experiences related to the divine, reify and mutate into archetypes that become objects of collective consumption and can be tactically manipulated in different social contexts. Once individual experience of the suffering body as a way to contact the divine enters into social memory through narrative (be it literary or iconographic), it can be subsequently evoked in an infinite range of action fields that nurture the social memory creating dense narrative flows. Special attention should be paid to 1- narrative and meta-narrative strategies of the suffering body in Late Antiquity, notably in martyrdoms and ascetic accounts, 2- how the literary descriptions of the painful body in Classical literature are used as a conceptual grid for descriptions of the body in Late Antique literature, and 3- how the individual body is perceived as a means to gain religious knowledge.

Paper presentations should be approximately 25 minutes in length and can be delivered in Spanish, Portuguese, English, German, French, or Italian. They must be original works that have neither been published nor presented before. **Interested speakers** should send an abstract of their proposal (200-300 words), a short curriculum vitae, and contact information before October 30, 2019, to the following address: anton.alvar@uma.es

The organizers aim to publish the conference proceedings. The editing and publication costs will be covered by the Conference organizers but due to strict public budget controls, **the contributors should send their manuscripts before October 1, 2020**. In exchange, the organizers will commit to publish the Conference volume during 2021.