

The Bacchus Temple at Baalbek:

Defining Temple Function and the Language of Syncretism

The Bacchus temple in Baalbek, Lebanon provides a modern audience with an excellent example of the translation of Roman religion and culture in one of the most religiously diverse regions of the Roman world. Situated in the Beqa'a Valley between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountain ranges some 86 kilometers northeast of Beirut, the temple has been inconclusively identified as one to Bacchus, the result of one archaeologist's tenuous interpretation of iconographic features along the door of the temple, and on either side of the temple's adyton. However, simply labeling the building as a monument to Bacchus is to miss a rare opportunity to examine one of the best preserved extant Roman temples. Using the language of syncretism and religious assimilation, I propose an interpretation of the Bacchus temple that moves past simply identifying and labeling it based on traditional religious and architectural systems, and instead focuses on how the temple functioned, both in relation to the other buildings of the Baalbek complex, as well as in its own right. More than merely identifying the temple, I examine the building as a center for Roman multiculturalism and acculturation, a symbol, both of the power and majesty of Roman religion, and Rome's equally important success at marrying its religious systems with systems from other eastern and local traditions. My investigation proposes that the temple is a place where a new religious sensibility comes into existence, where abstract ideas like synthesis, and creolization become physical reality. The Bacchus temple represents a tremendous and

invaluable example of Roman religious translation, a place which synthesizes and codifies the various religions of the Roman Empire, and presents them under one roof.

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