

A Spectacle to Behold: Sensory and Visual Elements in Roman Religious Processions

The public presentation of religion, especially in displays like processions, conveys powerful messages to participants and bystanders alike. In Ancient Roman society, since religion often functioned together with the state, such presentations often had layers of meaning. Because of this, and because politics is more visible in the public sphere today than religion due to the separation of church and state, recent work done specifically on religious processions tends to focus on the political and propagandistic elements of such processions. Among these recent works are two books, *The Moving City: Processions, Passages and Promenades in Ancient Rome*, 2015, and *Performance, Memory and Procession in Ancient Rome: The Pompa Circenses from the Late Republic to Late Antiquity*, 2016. While political and propagandistic elements were an important part of these processions, as much recent research rightly notes, I believe that an overlooked aspect of these processions is how the visual and sensory elements in Roman religious processions contributed to the participant's and to the onlooker's experience and understanding of religion. If we understand these elements, I believe that we can understand better why religion was a natural part of the Romans' lives and why people would freely choose to embrace such beliefs beyond reasons such as political convenience.

Through identifying and defining several sensory and visual elements of Roman religious processions in my research, such as ritual starting points like the Basilica Hilariana for the *Arbor intrat* procession (Iara, 2015), I will investigate how each of these elements interacts with the others to comprise an experience that engages a person on multiple levels. Though significant in themselves, elements like carrying a pine tree during the *Magna Mater* Festival (Iara, 2015), take on additional meanings when combined with other symbols. Then, I will explore how that

symbolism comes to life in a religious procession by looking at the symbolism of each of these elements within its context in the procession.

I will focus on pagan processions of the Late Republic to the Early Empire (roughly 100 B.C.- 100 A.D.), but will compare elements from both pagan and Christian Roman processions, since Christian processions borrowed visual and sensory elements from their Roman counterparts. For primary sources, I intend to use documents such as the historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus' *Antiquitates Romanae*, and visual representations such as the relief on the *Ara Pacis* Altar in Rome. I plan to draw from other topographical and archeological evidence, noting similar and dissimilar elements between the written evidence and the archeological evidence. Secondary sources such as Richard Billow's article "The Religious Procession of the Ara Pacis Augustae: Augustus' Supplication in 13 B.C." will help to place the topographical and archeological evidence in context. I also will reference the recent scholarship of Sylvia Estienne on Roman religious processions in her "*Aurea Pompa Venit: Presences Divines dans les Processions Romaines*" (2014) and her "*La Construction du Divin au Prisme des Processions a Rome*" (2015) .

Bibliography

Iara, Kristine. "Moving in and Moving Out: Ritual Movements between Rome and its Suburbium." *The Moving City: Processions, Passages and Promenades in Ancient Rome*. London, New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.