



THE ATHENS GREEK RELIGION SEMINAR, Wednesday, November 13, 2024

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The Sacred Home: Rethinking Household Religion in Ancient Greece

ABSTRACT

In models of Greek religion, household religion has been described as *polis* religion in miniature or has had its existence disavowed altogether. Recently, these models have been critiqued for their failure to account for the agency of the household and the individual as well as religious activity that falls outside the purview of the *polis*, such as magic. In contrast with the picture painted by major models, household rituals were not simply civic rituals in miniature but addressed needs specific to the members of the *oikos*. These needs were also reflected in the nature of sacred spaces within the house. This talk explores the means by which domestic sacred spaces were constructed and how these spaces interfaced with the social relationships within the household and between the household and society.

I adopt a spatial approach to analyze the effects of portable objects, such as miniature altars and vessels, and architectural features, such as built altars, to study how the practice of religion affected the physical and social landscape of the household. Their miniature scale distinguished them from other quotidian objects, creating a distance between the gods and humans and imbuing the object with an aura of wonder. I argue that these objects were engaged in sacred place-making within private spaces, but in different ways. Rituals using portable altars generated a liminal space for divine presence and anchored the performance of ritual in physical space, temporarily creating a sacred space for the duration of the ritual. Their portability allowed for a flexibility of votive practice that is consistent with the emphasis placed on spatial versatility in private architecture. In contrast, the foundation ritual of *egainio* created a permanent ritual deposit within the fabric of the house. Their burial permanently but invisibly altered the character of the household's space. They tied the worship of the gods to specific nodes within the architecture of the home, imbuing it with sacred significance while not impeding daily activities. Together, these objects activated the potential for sacrality inherent in household space and created the liminal space in which the divine could be contacted.

Alternatively, some houses in the archaeological record have evidence for built stone altars in their courtyards. I argue that that the monumentalization of a permanent ritual space was a method of social display, demonstrating the homeowner's membership in the religious community of the *polis*. The lived experience of these spaces gave practitioners the opportunity to negotiate relationships among themselves, the gods, and society. These practices blurred the boundaries of sacred and profane within the house, encouraging a reevaluation of the terms as they apply to the Greek house and sacred space in the Greek world writ large.

The seminar takes place online via Zoom WEDNESDAY, November 13, 2024, at 17.00 (Athens).

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