

EDITED BY

BONNA D. WESCOAT • ROBERT G. OUSTERHOUT



# ARCHITECTURE OF THE SACRED

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SPACE, RITUAL, AND EXPERIENCE  
FROM CLASSICAL GREECE  
TO BYZANTIUM

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CAMBRIDGE

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*Space, Ritual, and Experience from Classical  
Greece to Byzantium*

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BONNA D. WESCOAT

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## ARCHITECTURE OF THE SACRED

### *Space, Ritual, and Experience from Classical Greece to Byzantium*

A distinguished team of scholars explores how architecture and ritual interact to construct sacred experience. Bringing together case studies from ancient Greek, Roman, Jewish, early Christian, and Byzantine sacred architecture, this book reaches beyond the cultural formulation of the sacred to articulate overarching themes in the creation of sacred experience across multiple religious traditions of the eastern Mediterranean. The authors probe our understanding of the nature (and recoverability) of ritual and the role of architecture as an active agent in the magnification, elevation, and ritualization of actions in sacred cause. Addressing key issues including the reciprocity of architecture and place; negotiation of social and spatial boundaries; passage of the body and the eye; interaction of space and iconography; construction of sacred topography; and the vitality of text, history, and memory in the accumulation of sanctity, the authors demonstrate the powerful ways buildings were enabled to perform as spiritually transformative environments.

Bonna D. Wescoat is Associate Professor of Art History at Emory University and director of excavations at the Sanctuary of the Great Gods, Samothrace, Greece. Her research concentrates on ancient Greek sacred architecture and iconography. Recent works include *Temple of Athena at Assos* (2012) and volume 9 of *Samothrace: Excavations Conducted by the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University*, *The Monuments of the Eastern Hill* (forthcoming).

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Christian churches and saints' shrines. Her current work explores various aspects of the materiality and temporality of Roman and early Christian buildings, examining the shifting meanings of ancient structures as they are used, appropriated, altered, and/or forgotten over time.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although the coeditors have long been interested in the reciprocity of space, experience, ritual, and architecture, the idea for collaborating on this volume emerged from a session we organized for the annual meeting of the College Art Association in 2005 entitled “Ritual and Sacred Space in Pre-Modern Architecture.” A second colloquium held at the annual meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America in 2006, “Circular Space and Performance,” was also important to the formation of ideas presented here. We are grateful to the participants in these colloquia, Lisa Victoria Ciresi, Meredith Cohen, Mary Hollinshead, Vasileios Marinis, Margaret Miles, and Caroline K. Quenemoen at CAA, and Chrysanthos Kannelopoulos, Charalambas Kritsas, Rush Rehm, Peter Schultz, and Bronwen Wickkiser at the AIA, for generously sharing their ideas. While we have an interest in premodern sacred architecture generally, this volume focuses on the architecture of several historical religious traditions centered in the eastern Mediterranean.

We are grateful to Emory University and the Williams Fund of the History of Art Department at the University of Pennsylvania for their generous subvention for the illustrations. We wish to thank Alexandra Morrison, SIRE research student at Emory, for her help in assembling the manuscript, and Kathleen Carroll, who helped in numerous ways. We very much appreciate our editor Beatrice Rehl’s support of this book project, the advice of the anonymous reviewers, and the patient assistance of Amanda Smith in seeing the manuscript through. To the authors of this volume we offer heartfelt thanks for their contributions.

November 2010

## PREFACE

In the Western world, it is nearly impossible to think of sacred actions without conjuring up some image of accompanying architecture, be it the altar, temple, synagogue, mosque, basilica, or church. In fact, until the twentieth century, almost the entire history of architecture could be recounted in terms of sacred structures, for they played the dominant architectural role in fixing social and cultural identity. Despite the obvious connection between architecture as a creator and signifier of sacred space and the actions that concretized religious belief, archaeologists and historians of architecture of the historical, premodern Mediterranean world have lagged behind scholars in other disciplines in mining the rich interplay of architecture and ritual actions. Partly in reaction to nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century trends of the Cambridge School to invest ritual with meaning reflective of contemporary circumstances, archaeologists in the second half of the twentieth century aimed for less invested and more value-neutral description, explication, and historical precision – that is to say, what and how took definite priority over why. The attitude toward ritual theory often resembled the medieval opinion of pagan statuary: while the subject intrigues, it is regarded as vaguely malevolent, potentially dangerous, and best avoided. In 1981, Bryony Orme could write, “Ritual and religion are taboo subjects in archaeological circles, denounced by the brave and avoided by the sensible; only a perverse few continue their studies in this dangerous field.”<sup>1</sup>

Studies of ritual are now front and center, as Jaś Elsner lays out in this volume. But within the ever-burgeoning archaeological literature addressing excavated sacred sites and the standing remains of Mediterranean temples, sanctuaries, churches, and monasteries, only a few attempts have been made to situate the sites and physical remains within a broad theoretical or ritual context. Whereas emphasis has been placed recently on the domestic, civic, or funerary setting of ritual, as well as on the significance of pilgrimage, sacred contexts remain in the “dangerous” category.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, the assumption that sacred architecture frames ritual appears so obvious as to not warrant comment; while on the other hand, the ritual actions have vanished to the point that their re-creation would seem to be a hopelessly speculative process. Discussions of specific ritual contexts or actions in the context of architecture are usually offered as brief and tentative speculations at the end of extensive “solid” discussions of the archaeological and architectural tangibles. By the same token, many excellent explorations of ritual, both theoretical and practiced, are often discussed in a nonspatial and non-site-specific context. Current ritual studies addressing sacred space focus on its political construction, its social and hierarchical dimensions, the dichotomy of status and power; it serves as the backdrop for change.<sup>3</sup> When the specific architectural setting of ritual is discussed, however, it is usually limited to the organization of levels of purity or sanctity, and the movement of human participants through space. These aspects are, to be sure, important, but exploration of ritual too easily devolves to the negotiation of boundaries, with architecture appearing simply as the passive setting of actions. It is therefore a matter of some urgency that we again attempt to examine the interaction of architecture and ceremony in sacred places for its sacred value.<sup>4</sup> The contributors to this volume, primarily archaeologists and architectural historians deeply rooted in the primacy of physical evidence, desire to make sense of that evidence in terms of the ritual actions that animate and give meaning to it in a sacred context.

The issues we address are basic to the discussion of sanctity and sacred ritual. How did a place or space become sacred? What or who were the active agents involved in the process of sanctification? How does the idea of inviolability become manifest in the built environment? By what process of invention and response do architects and patrons develop

architectural forms and craft spaces that meet ritual needs? How does architectural form shape ritual actions? How does it define them?

We contend that in premodern historical societies the architectural setting was an active agent in the ritual process; architecture did not simply house or frame events, it magnified and elevated them and it could also interact with them and engender the construction of ceremonial. In this volume, we hope to reassert the connection of ritual in architecture through close archaeological and architectural analysis of particular places and buildings. Each brings its constellation of questions; collectively, they may serve as building blocks to larger theoretical concerns. In the Sanctuary of the Great Gods at Samothrace or the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem (to cite two examples studied by the editors) the ceremonial settings developed in direct response to the changing nature of the rituals and the sacred presences they housed. Although the benchmark of ritual is its recognizability and repeatability, ritual itself was never static; neither was its setting. The complex relationship of ritual to sacred space, and particularly the ways in which each had the power to transform the other over a long history, deserves closer scrutiny.

In this volume, we propose to examine the active agency of architecture in the ritual processes of premodern historical societies of the Mediterranean, focusing on the archaeological evidence from the Greek, Roman, Early Christian, Jewish, and Byzantine civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean. Architecture is interpreted broadly to include individual structures, complexes of buildings, and other forms of human intervention in the landscape (and in one instance, the landscape of the human body). In examining ritual and sacred space across cultures and religions with fundamentally differing bases and goals, we aim to demonstrate the centrality of architecture and reassert its claim to shape the human experience of the sacred.

## Notes

1. Orme 1981, p. 218. An outlier in the study of architecture and ritual is, of course, Thomas Mathews's 1971 account of the interaction of architecture and liturgy in the early churches in Constantinople.
2. For domestic, see Parker Pearson and Richards 1994; civic, Goldhill and Osborne 1999; for studies characterizing scholarship of the 1990s, note Schechner 1993, Ahlbäck 1993; for later work see Elsner, this volume. For pilgrimage, Eade and



- Sallnow 1991, Morinis 1992, Elsner and Rutherford 2003. For changes and transformations, Chanotis 2005, Mylonopoulos 2008.
3. Notably, Smith 1987.
  4. See Jones 2000 for an exploration of the sacred in architecture, although as intrinsic to the architecture and not in active relation to ritual practice.

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