

Pagan Pasts, Christian Futures

Memory Manipulation and Christianisation in the
Cities of Western Asia Minor

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Abstract

Title: *Pagan Pasts, Christian Futures: Memory Manipulation and Christianisation in the Cities of Western Asia Minor*

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Religion has always impacted how we structure the physical world around us, and the Roman world was no exception. Roman cities were constructed and shaped around religious life and religious practices. Religious art was omnipresent, and religious architecture monumental. When Christianity displaced all traditional cults and became the primary state religion in the Roman Empire during Late Antiquity, religious life and religious practices changed significantly. This study investigates how changed religious life and religious practices in Late Antiquity reshaped Roman cities in Western Asia Minor, concentrating on the three cities Ephesus, Aphrodisias, and Hierapolis.

Written sources from Late Antiquity – laws and saints’ lives – can create the impressions that pagan material culture was violently destroyed, and that pagan statues and temple buildings were the main foci of Christian destruction. The fate of pagan material culture during the Christianisation has traditionally mainly been investigated using textual rather than archaeological sources. This has led to a persistent view of the religious transformation as characterized by polarisation, violence, and intolerance. Further, investigations have focused mainly on the types of material culture most frequently described in these texts: pagan temples and statues. The present study falls in line with several recent critical studies arguing that the Christianisation process was more complex and dynamic, and that the rapidly growing archaeological record should be used to reassess and nuance persisting narratives of destruction and decline.

The study analyses how material culture can be used as agents of societal change, and what part pagan material culture played in the religious transformation in Late Antiquity (c. 350–620 CE). The analytical concept memory manipulation is employed in order to 1), reassess Christian responses to pagan material culture that are established in scholarly debate, such as conversion and destruction, and 2), reassess the categories of pagan material traditionally associated with the Christianisation, such as temple buildings and imagery. Rather than destroying pagan material culture, memory manipulation entails altering how material things are perceived and how material things interact with their surroundings through small and large alterations. Ultimately, memory manipulation alter how material culture is remembered by a society. By employing the concept of ‘memory manipulation’, the Christianisation process can be understood as constructive and future-oriented rather than expressions of intolerance and anger.

Beyond temple buildings and statues, the study encompasses a wider range of material manifestations of cult than the traditional foci, and included monuments, sacred spaces, imagery, and inscribed materials in the public areas of the cities in the analysis. The study considers removal, mutilation, spoliation, disposal, appropriation, and reconfiguration as memory manipulation strategies in addition to destruction and conversion,

The study demonstrates that Roman cities in late antique Asia Minor actively used pagan material culture to shape Christian presents and futures. Memory manipulation strategies were not restricted to temple buildings and sanctuaries, but were performed in the entirety of public space. Material culture from sanctuaries were moved into the cityscapes, and into Christian buildings. As a result, memory manipulation reached a larger audience than if manipulation had been restricted to the confines of the sanctuary temenos. Imagery, smaller monuments, and gates in public spaces were subject to Christian manipulation alongside the material culture in the sanctuaries. Streetscapes, thoroughfares, and necropoleis were likewise important arenas for memory manipulation.

The aim of the religious transformation in Late Antiquity was to establish Christianity as the only religion, through making paganism and pagan cult practice a thing of the past. In social memory, the purpose of the past is to identify a group, define their past, and their aspirations for the future. An important issue during Christianisation was therefore to establish how paganism and pagan cult practice should be remembered, and how it could be used to define and realise a Christian future. Individual images, monuments, and environments played different roles in the social memory of the three cities Ephesus, Aphrodisias, and Hierapolis, and the same was true for the pagan cults and pagan practices they were associated with. Therefore, the social memory of each of the three cities differed from the others.

The present study provides a foundation for the continued analysis of how material culture affected and shaped societal change in Late Antiquity. The concept ‘memory manipulation’ is a fruitful and stimulating concept that highlights the complex and changeable relationship between humans and material culture in the past. The study has shown that the entirety of our material surroundings is imbued with meaning, and that they are vital to our understanding of late antique attitudes towards the past.

Keywords: Christianisation, Late Antiquity, Materiality, Memory, Asia Minor, Hierapolis, Aphrodisias, Ephesus, Urban Archaeology, Roman Religion, Early Christianity