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# Gods Behind Glass:
# Exploring Lived Religious Experiences in Museum Displays of Roman Britain

Antony Matthew Robert Lee

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
Durham University
Department of Archaeology

2022

Volume 1 of 2

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# Abstract

The archaeology of Roman Britain is commonly encountered in museums. Religion forms a significant element of not only those displays, but popular perceptions of life in the period. Though the scholarship of religion in Roman Britain has been vibrant, this research represents the first holistic study of its display and interpretation in museums, focussing on the lived religious experiences of ancient individuals and communities. This is achieved through a multidisciplinary study, centred upon a unique application of the Lived Ancient Religion rubric to museums alongside complementary theoretical approaches to material culture, museology, contemporary religion, and post-colonial Roman archaeologies. Qualitative and quantitative analyses of displays at 23 museums across Britain are presented, supported by curatorial interviews and an online survey.

This study challenges paradigms of archaeological presentations of religious material culture which forefront description and categorisation, instead promoting approaches based upon the situational needs, actions and multisensory experiences of ancient individuals and communities. I argue that material culture should be presented as not merely demonstrative of beliefs and practices but constitutive of them, and for the recentring of individuals as sensing, embodied, emotive and agentic religious actors operating within local and provincial social, economic and political networks. Moving beyond the detached, art-historical museum gaze requires new approaches to be embedded in documentation and display planning processes. More complex and culturally-specific definitions of 'religion' require greater recognition of the significance of non-overtly religious material culture and non-temple-based acts such as structured deposition.

Religious experiences can serve as a powerful catalyst for challenging popular perceptions of Roman Britain and the legacy of the Roman empire. This research explores the potential of creative 'storytelling' language, materiality, and multisensory experiences in the construction of engaging, emotive and ontologically challenging displays, culminating in 12 principles for museums wishing to revitalise their approaches to ancient religion.

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Words cannot express the deep gratitude I feel towards my family and friends, without whom this research could not have been completed. My dearest wife, Qin and my wonderful parents, Lynne and Bob, are the supportive rocks upon which all of my achievements rest, and I could not have done any of this without them. This thesis is dedicated to the memories of my loving grandparents and my father-in-law, Cao Qianming.

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# Chapter 1:

# Introduction

## 1.1 Ancient beliefs and modern audiences

> *"Seldom ... does one come away from a museum archaeological display feeling that one understands ancient religion on a personal and interior level."* (Paine 2019: 2)

The Frontier Gallery at Carlisle's Tullie House Museum displays a 2nd century copper alloy jug, an antiquarian discovery once owned by Charles Townley and now on loan from the British Museum (Fig 1.1). The jug's handle contains four vignettes of ritual activity, including the pouring of a libation onto an altar and a pig being prepared for sacrifice. These images were integral to the creation of the jug, not only depicting these religious acts but establishing precedents for how they should be performed. Some of the scenes, particularly those on the shoulder, have been worn by hands repeatedly holding the cold metal, perhaps across multiple generations; the physical appearance of the vignettes changed by the jug's involvement in the very acts they depict. The jug was likely donated to a temple by a devotee (perhaps anonymously represented in one of the scenes), whose generosity and piety might continue to be associated with it, maybe even after death. The jug likely played an important role in the ritual acts it participated in, perhaps witnessing hundreds of sacrifices, vows, prayers, and offerings large and small. The liquids it contained were selected to meet the specific requirements of each performance, representing connections with differing local or wider trade networks and providing the user with differing sensory experiences through their viscosity, colour and smell as they were poured, or the hiss and steam as they flowed into the altar's flames. The jug would then be returned to a stand, notably lighter since its contents had been successfully transferred to a divine recipient. Between uses, acts of respectful cleaning and careful storage kept it protected so that it might continue to perform well in future acts. The value of the jug today therefore goes beyond its surviving condition or the artistic interest of

the scenes on the handle, to enable consideration of the wealth of emotive, embodied and multisensory religious experiences in Roman Britain.

*Fig 1.1: Copper alloy jug from Carlisle. Author's photograph*

Religion was a fundamental aspect of life in the Roman world but has traditionally been portrayed as rather staid and ever-present, focussed on the passive worship of a lengthy parade of happily co-existing gods and goddesses, mostly classical in origin, at formal temple sites. Religious acts are reduced to civic duties; benign, unchanging, and apolitical, rather than dynamic social experiences which stimulated the senses and emotions, conducted to meet the specific and tangible worldly needs of individuals and communities. Such rationalisation of religion is rooted in post-Enlightenment views of the Roman world as practical and structured (Mol 2020: 72), diachronic and geographical diversities of beliefs and practices homogenised within a 'civilised' Roman religious landscape.

Widespread perceptions of Roman Britain centre around persistent narratives of 'the Romans in Britain' rather than the creation of a more complex hybrid culture existing within a broader north-western provincial context. For example, Museum of London visitors associated 'Roman' with "roads and walls", "civilisation", "architecture" and the "military" (Merriman 1996: 63). The period is generally seen as instinctively understandable to the point of becoming stale and

predictable (Mills 2013: 1; Hingley 2021a: 3); a homogeneous society with structured governance and towns featuring grand stone public buildings, where people used recognisable mass-produced commodities and wore clothing and jewellery familiar enough from popular media to not seem unusual. Revell (2016a: 1) highlights how museum activities in which visitors put their face (and by extension, their identity) into the 'body' of an ancient individual (Fig 1.2) rely on such assumptions of similarity.

*Fig 1.2: 'Cut-out face' activity at Retford Museum. Author's photograph*

As Beard and Henderson (1999) observe, modern relationships with Roman Britain are complex and contradictory, the period simultaneously British and foreign, both the origins of civilisation and an ignominious period of occupation. Studies rooted in post-coloniality have confronted both Britain's and Roman archaeology's complex imperial legacies (Webster 1996; Hingley 2000; Mattingly 2006), challenging identities based on dichotomous concepts of 'Romans' and 'natives' and assumptions that Roman imperialism was a justified civilising force (Mattingly 2006: 4; Hingley et al. 2018: 286; Hingley 2021a: 3–4). Studies of ancient religion have similarly explored the variety, regionality and social complexity of life and beliefs, highlighting the significance of individual agency in the competitive creation, maintenance and transmission of religious knowledge and practices, and the vibrant sensory

experiences they provided. Diverse definitions of ritual and religion have been promoted which include the burying of material assemblages under floors or in pits and the wearing of magical amulets. Religious beliefs and practices are increasingly recognised as fundamental to the creation and ongoing negotiation of social, cultural and economic realities, rather than simply being a result of them. However, a corollary of this complexity is an increased difficulty in communicating to non-specialist audiences what Roman Britain actually *was*. Despite the visibility of the Roman period within modern culture, including museums and heritage sites, the media, entertainment, and formal education, popular perceptions of Roman Britain and its religious landscape have not necessarily evolved with the academic consensus (Hingley 2015a; 2021a; Hingley et al. 2018; Hanscam 2019).

Outdated perceptions of the Roman world continue to be expressed within contemporary social and political debates, and to influence modern identities (e.g. Witcher 2015: 198; Gardner 2017a; 2018; Bonacchi et al. 2018; Bonacchi 2022; Mac Sweeney et al. 2019). This is not simply an academic concern. This research project has been conducted at a time in which reflexive and post-colonial approaches to the study of the past have come under considerable ideological political and popular assault, including the threatened and actual closure of university archaeology departments, anger at the National Trust's interpretative position on slavery, and museums facing political (which for government-funded museums also implies financial) pressure to present uncontroversial nationalist narratives (see e.g. González-Ruibal *et al*. 2018; Fowler 2020; Belford 2021). Some archaeologists have argued that archaeology itself must become more politicised in response (González-Ruibal *et al*. 2018; Hamilakis 2018; cf. Bonacchi 2022).

MacDonald's (2009: 99) observation that museums displaying ancient Egypt "must exploit the subject's popularity while questioning some of the assumptions on which that popularity is based" is equally valid for Roman Britain. Witcher (2015: 218) calls on archaeologists and museum professionals, among others, to proactively and cohesively challenge misconceptions about the Roman world: "We must do more than simply write better post-colonial critiques as part of an internal dialogue; we also need to influence wider public discourse and to address popular (mis)conceptions." He calls for closer relationships between archaeologists, heritage professionals, museum practitioners, journalists and TV producers, while Bremmer (2018) similarly cites a need for the distance between specialists and "the larger educated public" to be as small as possible. Museums, as places where the public are most likely to encounter

Roman material culture, have a vital role to play in challenging positivist and uncritical presentations of the Roman world. Yet though the need to engage the public with archaeological interpretative processes has perhaps never been greater, little scholarship has investigated how theoretical approaches to Roman Britain are presented in museums. Clarke and Hunter's (2001: 1) now more than 20-year-old observation that "despite the growing challenges to orthodox interpretations of Roman Britain, there has been surprisingly little commentary on the impact these may have on the presentations of the subject offered to a wider public by museums" remains depressingly valid.

Constructivist approaches to museum interpretation recognise that information is not simply transmitted from curatorial minds to visitors, but that individuals engaging with museum displays actively construct meaning based on their prior knowledge and experiences (e.g. Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Mason 2006; Moser 2010). Similarly, museum displays do not simply present pre-existing theoretical positions but contribute to their creation (Thomas 2010; Message and Witcomb 2015). Museum displays of religion in Roman Britain may therefore validate or challenge visitors' existing understandings but are never neutral. Exploring new approaches to displaying religion therefore offers the potential to introduce ontologically challenging interpretation aimed at reconceptualizing Roman Britain from a place of boring familiarity to somewhere more cognitively stimulating.

In this chapter I will introduce my specific research questions and provide contextualising discussions of scholarly discourses which underpin this research. I will explore the application of the terms 'religion' and 'ritual' in archaeology, the representation of archaeology in museums, previous studies of museum presentations of Roman Britain, and how lived religious experiences might be defined. Finally, I present the outline structure for this thesis.

## 1.2 Research Parameters and Questions

It is important to consider what this research is and, conversely, isn't. Museum displays do not change rapidly or regularly, and it is not only unfair to judge museums, often operating in precarious financial circumstances, on their adoption of recent theoretical developments but questionable that it is viable or desirable. The purpose of this research is not to critique individual museums or suggest that any specific display is objectively 'wrong'. Instead, it

investigates a representative range of displays of religion in Roman Britain, assessing how they collectively engage with notions of what 'religion' meant in an ancient context and how people experienced it. It explores the efficacy of established archaeological display paradigms for presenting hybrid religious practices, theoretical concepts of lived religious experiences, and embodied, multisensory approaches to material culture. Its focus is not about which objects have been chosen for display or how well they represent wider museum collections or the evidence for religion across Britain or in specific localities. Instead, it considers how those selected objects have been arranged and interpreted, and how they combine to contribute to local, national and international narratives of the contextualised religious experiences of individuals and communities in Roman Britain.

This research represents a snapshot in time, and due to the number of museums studied, it cannot consider the collecting histories of institutions or the development of individual galleries. It does, however, attempt to recognise where these influence current displays. It also does not have the scope to engage with museum visitors, either through seeking their opinions directly through interviewing, or indirectly through mapping their interactions with displays and each other, though these are recognised as significant areas for potential future research.

This research shares Achiam *et al*'s (2021: 3) ambition for an 'experimental museology' which aligns "museum professionals' actual expertise and academic discourse so that both groups are better positioned to illuminate contingencies and optimise joint risk-taking when exploring new vistas and courses of action." This means exploring opportunities for creating visitor experiences which are not only theoretically informed and cognitively challenging, but also engaging and emotive, presenting opportunities for realistically achievable and positive ways for re-energised engagements with ancient religious experiences in museums.

In order to explore the issues discussed above, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1) How is religion physically and conceptually integrated into museum displays of Roman Britain?

RQ2) To what extent are post-colonial perspectives of religious belief, identities and interactions reflected in displays?

RQ3) How are individual religious experiences in Britain and the wider Roman world defined and expressed?

RQ4) What potential exists for theoretical approaches such as ontological alterity, materiality, embodiment and sensory studies to provide new models for the display and interpretation of religious experiences?

## 1.3 Archaeologies of religion and ritual

> *"Religion is not – and has never been – a disembodied, abstract, or purely conceptual category … Rather, religion and its associated rituals leave indelible marks on landscapes, objects, buildings and bodies, providing tangible evidence of the intrinsic interconnection between medium and message, neither of which can be separated one from the other."* (Moser and Knust 2017: 1)

The application of terminology within archaeological discourse is central to interpretations of ancient beliefs and practices, and by extension to the narratives presented in museums. The terms 'religion' and 'ritual' have seen significant discussion within archaeology, religious studies, anthropology, sociology and cognitive studies. Though archaeology's input has often been overlooked by other disciplines, an increasing focus on materiality is leading to it playing a more significant theoretical role (Bell 2007: 277; Berggren and Nilsson Stutz 2010: 172–3).

Relationships between material culture and beliefs in the supernatural have long prompted discussion. Hawkes (1954), for example, placed it at the top of his 'ladder of inference', whereas Renfrew (1985: 1) conversely argued it should not be considered inherently problematic. Geertz (1973: 91–2) influentially framed the outward manifestations of religion (places, movements, objects etc) as symbols through which inner beliefs might be accessed. However, intense recent theoretical reconsiderations of the relationships between humans and such 'things' have rejected viewing objects and places as merely symbolic representations of human thought, but fundamental to their construction and maintenance (Moser and Knust 2017: 1), as explored further in Chapter 3. Despite this, elucidating the ontologies connected with

specific individual actions remains a daunting prospect. Etic observers of religious activity, whether in person or through the lens of archaeology, can still only access outward presentations of particular religious perspectives.

### 1.3.1 Religion

The applicability of 'religion' within anthropology and archaeology has been much debated. Despite its commonality, religion has been demonstrated to be an intensely cultural concept rather than a universal human norm (Insoll 2004a: 92–93; Masuzawa 2005: 1), reified by those attempting to study and define it as much as by its practitioners (Nongbri 2013: 1–3). Jonathan Z. Smith influentially argued (1998) that it must be recognised as a polysemic term which scholars should use for their own purposes rather than to expect cultures past or present to conform to any modern definition. Nevertheless, the ubiquity of the term in modern language means that its application remains complex and sometimes controversial.

Attempts to define and codify notions of beliefs in supernatural forces across societies past and present led to the influential 19th century conceptualisation of two broad categories: 'world religions' (e.g. Christianity, Islam or Buddhism) and 'ethnic/indigenous religions' (Bowie 2000; Masuzawa 2005; Rowan 2011; Nongbri 2013). The former are generally seen as expanding beyond geographic or ethnic boundaries, being based on scriptures or teachings, having notions of salvation, and demanding exclusivity from their adherents. They often present a 'problem' in the world (e.g. 'sin' in Christianity) to which they offer a unique solution (Prothero 2011; cited in Hodder 2016: 95–96). The latter are often defined as being based on oral transmission and confined to specific localised groups. They are seen as focussed on immediate mortal concerns such as fertility (agricultural and human), sickness, death and misfortune rather than more esoteric issues of an afterlife. A similar distinction has been proposed by Whitehouse (2009), whose 'modes of religiosity' include "doctrinal" (literate) and "imagistic" (non-literate) models of religious transmission.

Such distinctions have been criticized both for their inflexibility and for their 'othering' of non-western ontologies (Masuzawa 2005: 20). Many belief structures, ancient and modern, do not neatly fit such binary models, and some 'indigenous' communities have not considered their beliefs 'religious' until forced to reify them as such, often when encountering other, usually

'world', religions. Though belief systems accessed primarily through archaeology are traditionally considered within the 'ethnic' category (Rowan 2011: 3), this is not without complication. The cult of Isis, for example, was rooted in Pharaonic Egyptian belief systems but spread beyond those ethnic origins across the Graeco-Roman world, the goddess' 'exotic' nature an important factor in her success (Woolf 2014). Her cult offered salvific promises to adherents but did not demand exclusivity of worship (Apuleius 1924: bk. XI; Woolf 2014). Was it then a 'world' or 'ethnic' cult? Misic (2015; see also Graham 2020: 27) has similarly argued using the cult of Mithras that Whitehouse's 'modes' are not easily applicable to ancient religious contexts.

The origins of 'religion' in western late antiquity have led to criticisms that popular understandings of the term are inextricably connected with (Protestant) Christian concepts of religiosity, with other beliefs inevitably judged against this westernised 'standard' (Bell 2006; Houtman and Meyer 2012a; Nongbri 2013; Barton and Boyarin 2016: 7). In the 19th and early 20th centuries, scholarship grounded in evolutionary ideas of the innate superiority of Christianity led to other belief systems, particularly those whose deities were thought to manifest physically, being denigrated as 'primitive' (Houtman and Meyer 2012a: 1; Hutchings and McKenzie 2018: 7; Rives 2019; Kiernan 2020: 45; Jelinek-Menke and Franke 2022: 4). Sheldon (1932), for example, referred to the growth of Christianity in Roman Britain as the nation's conversion from "heathendom". As Adrych and Dalglish (2020a: 107) argue, the "monolithic normativity" of Christianity is likely more important to scholars with "mindsets framed by the expectations of the 'world' religions" than it was to ancient individuals.

Religion in the Roman world has suffered from definitional problems. The idea of a singular 'Roman religion' covering the geographic and diachronic span of the empire has been repeatedly criticised (Adrych and Dalglish 2020b: 58–59), yet the pluralised 'Roman religions' (e.g. Rives 2007: 5; cf. Scheid 2003: 18–20) remains vague and risks reifying the polytheistic religious landscape into a series of discrete and separate 'religions'. Though 'religion' is widely used in scholarship (e.g. Henig 1984; Watts 1998; Beard et al. 1998; Rives 2007; Rüpke 2018a), it is itself anachronistic to the ancient world (Rives 2000; Nongbri 2013: 8). The Latin *religio*, defined by Ando (2008: 2) as "the sum total of current cult practice", is often seen as the etymological root of 'religion' (Nongbri 2013: 26–34). However, the contemporary baggage of 'religion' distorts attempts to contextualise the ancient term, Barton and Boyarin (2016: 2) arguing that their differing cultural contexts make them "false friends".

This anachronism has led to various other terms being used to describe beliefs in the supernatural, though their contemporary nuances influence their value, potentially implying that the described beliefs are insufficiently significant to be considered 'religion' (Rowan 2011: 3). As Insoll (2004a: 5) observes, 'spiritual' is unspecific and conjures up images of faith healers, 'cult' is a weak term with connotations of the freakish, and 'magic' invokes superstition. Even 'belief' has been criticised for its relationship with the Christian prioritisation of inner piety (Morgan 2010a: 1–2; Meyer et al. 2010: 105). For the ancient world, 'knowledge' has been proposed as an alternative to 'belief' (Ando 2008; Rüpke 2018a; 2018b) on the basis that ancient religion valued practices and competencies, though (as considered further in Chapter 3) this serves to perpetuate narratives that Roman religion lacked genuine emotion.

There are also difficulties in determining what to call the supernatural beings who are the focus of religious activity, beyond the anthropomorphic expectations of 'gods and goddesses'. Cognitive theorists McCauley and Lawson (2007) suggest 'Counterintuitive Agents', however though they may have been perceived as mysterious by their adherents, this risks projecting post-Enlightenment cynicism onto the past; intuition is a relative concept. Rüpke's (2018a: 9; 2019a: 1202) similar use of "not unquestionably plausible agents" (*vel sim*) was received positively by Graham (2020: 149) as a means of moving beyond "the culturally-loaded terminology of gods and goddesses", but left Bremmer (2018: 108) "shaking (his) head" as it could mean anything "from aliens to fairies".

### 1.3.2 Ritual

The concept of 'ritual' is an equally important one across anthropology and archaeology, conventionally used to describe, to paraphrase Bell (1992: 19), what is *done* rather than what is *thought*. Later 20th century interpretations influenced by Durkheim and Marx restricted religion to a product of social and economic conditions, and ritual assemblages, by extension, were a means of accessing those social structures and power relations (Kyriakidis 2007a: 301; Swenson 2015: 331; Adrych and Dalglish 2020b: 74). More recent discourse has argued that ritual acts should instead be considered not merely reflective of inner beliefs but constitutive of them, central to religious communication, negotiation and transmission (Verhoeven 2012: 11). However, archaeological definitions of ritual remain contested, leading to confusion in its

cross-cultural application (Kyriakidis 2007a: 289). Some (e.g. Bell 2007; cf. Kyriakidis 2007a: 290) argue that the subjectivity of its application as a heuristic tool makes seeking a universal definition unhelpful. Elsner (2012: 4) mused that ritual is often treated as "religion, with the dread name and implications of 'religion' avoided." Material culture is viewed as central to understanding ritual (Rowan 2011: 1; Mol and Versluys 2015: 452), yet, as Elsner cautions (2012: 5), there is circularity in ritual being both the causal explanation for certain material culture assemblages, but also defined by such assemblages.

Ritual acts need not always be considered through a religious lens, and any routine activity might become personally, socially or culturally 'ritualized' (Bell 1992) without the actor appealing to supernatural forces, being able to adequately explain the origins of their actions, or questioning their efficacy; a concept related to Bourdieu's (1977) notion of 'habitus'. As Elsner (2012: 7) notes, however, ritualization is not usually taken to mean "any old repeated or repetitive practice" but things "valued higher than the mundane". Recognising the 'special' requires understanding what is culturally 'normal' (Kyriakidis 2007a: 297), yet both religious and secular ritualized activity may appear archaeologically identical. Swenson (2015: 333) argues that ritual is better understood not as an "essentialized thing" but a form of practice, "a quality or inflection of action that varies considerably from culture to culture". Rituals reframe certain places, times or actions as detached from the mundane; amplifying or transforming relationships between people, places, things or divine forces, to create, activate, strengthen or dissolve them (2015: 333). Some rituals are dependent on others having already taken place, and such "ritual depth" reinforces social authority (McCauley and Lawson 2007). However, the archaeological record was not always created through people "consciously constructing highly symbolic material-culture texts" (Garrow 2012a: 135) and, though meaningful, assemblages might also be "unintended and unintentional". The identification and interpretation of structured deposits within archaeological sites and landscapes is closely related to this observation (see Chapter 5.3.4).

Despite such theorising, 'ritual' is popularly ridiculed for describing archaeological features which defy functionalist explanations (Hodder 2012a: 159). Rather than being positively defined, ritual can become a catch-all for non-functional (and therefore unexplained) features and assemblages, a "dust-bin category for all kinds of not terribly precise sacred, mystical and emotional urges" (Elsner 2012: 5). The creation and refutation of definitional binaries of ritual have been central to much discourse, for example Durkheim's 'sacred/profane' (summarized

in Pickering 1984: 117), 'thought/action' (Bell 1992: 47), and 'ritual/everyday' (Garrow 2012a: 136). However, Brück (1999) argues that distinctions between broadly 'functional' and 'ritual' activity are intrinsically problematic, specific products of post-Enlightenment mindsets which relate ritual acts with irrationality. The Romano-British builder placing pots containing fish and shells into the foundations of a new hypocaust at Winchester (Zant 1993: 113) likely did not consider that offering to have been of no functional benefit when that hypocaust continued to perform well. Such an action will have seemed perfectly logical in accordance with their perception of how the natural and supernatural worlds interacted. It only appears unusual and in need of special explanation (as 'ritual') to the modern interpreter when it clashes with their perceptions of reality and the cosmological order. Brück (1999: 293) argues that it is insufficient to simply acknowledge that "ritual pervades all aspects of daily life", but it must instead be recognised that there might be no distinction to peoples with differing concepts of rationality and cause/effect. It is important, however, not to homogenise cultures or individual actors (Berggren and Nilsson Stutz 2010: 176) and to recognise the potential for ritual acts to have been subject to ambiguity and misunderstanding within their originating cultures (Chadwick 2012: 296).

The terms 'religion' and 'ritual' are therefore problematic, imbued with culturally-specific and often anachronistic meaning but lacking easily understandable replacements, especially when communicating such concepts with wider audiences. The terms must be used with caution and with regard for the specific cultural contexts to which they are applied, and their use within museums to discuss beliefs and actions regarding supernatural forces in Roman Britain is therefore of intrinsic relevance to this research.

## 1.4 Archaeological representation and museums

> *"Museum presentations are three-dimensional windows into the world of ideas. But while observers successfully perceive and contemplate the factual tidbits that are placed in focus by the 'window', they frequently fail to notice the presentation frame itself."* (Asma 2001: xii)

Asma's observation refers to natural history museums but is relevant across the sector. Displays of Roman Britain are not neutral but the result of networks of factors contributing to the

narratives presented to visitors and the meanings subsequently created. The 'unreality' of museum displays, reifying chaotic, subjective and multivocal pasts as homogeneous, ordered, and well understood, has been long recognised (e.g. Shanks and Tilley 1987: 68; Pearce 1990: 168; Swain 2007: 214; Skeates 2017: 13). Classen and Howes (2006: 219) compare museums to zoos, sites of cultural containment made to appear natural. Visitor understandings of the cultures encountered in archaeological displays, including Roman Britain, are likely to have been formed at school and through popular media, prioritising significant dates, places, events and individuals and perhaps underpinned by assumptions that Rome was a fundamentally 'good thing' (Hingley 2021a: 3–4). Many visitors will view archaeological displays through the lens of history rather than archaeology, perhaps considering that they differ only in their timescales. This might be reinforced in multidisciplinary museums, where journeys through galleries of fine and decorative art, ethnography, social history, and archaeology may not provoke consideration that each represents varied processes of collections formation and interpretation.

Museums presenting encyclopaedic collections are no less message-laden than those with focussed narratives (Moser 2010: 26). Though often perceived as methodologically static (Rees Leahy 2014: 287), museum displays are as much a product of their cultural contexts as the objects they contain (Pearce 1990: 149; Fyfe 2006: 35), simultaneously reflecting and creating interpretations of the past (Beard and Henderson 1999: 46; Preziosi 2006: 51; Shanks and Tilley 2011) and designed to meet the socially-contextualised communicative aims of the institution. Museums do not passively display objects but are actively ideological and, by extension, exert influence over aspects of contemporary local and national identities (Bennett 1995; Duncan 1995: 8; Message 2006: 26). Despite intense recent focus on the need for greater multivocality and decolonisation within museums (e.g. Minott 2019; Vawda 2019; Giblin *et al*. 2019; Golding and Walklate 2019; Hicks 2020; Tolia-Kelly and Raymond 2020; Coombes and Phillips 2020), there has been insufficient recognition of the influence of archaeology's disciplinary colonial imbalances in the structuring of archaeological knowledge in museums.

Uncritically positivist museum presentations of the Roman world, and Britain's place in it, have been influential in reinforcing narratives of white western cultural superiority and the role of empires in extending 'civilisation' (Beard and Henderson 1999; Hingley 2000; 2006a; Polm 2016; Goodwin 2020: 31–35). Roman archaeology has failed to sufficiently incorporate diverse voices into its disciplinary practices (Hanscam and Quiery 2018; Kamash 2021) and museum

representations of ethnic diversity in Roman Britain have been little explored. Tolia-Kelly's (2011) 'An Archaeology of Race' temporary exhibition in 2009 discussed concepts of ethnic 'otherness' in the Hadrian's Wall landscape and challenged notions of the homogeneity of 'Romanness'. It positioned Septimius Severus as a "violent imperialist oppressor" (2011: 80) and aimed to "disrupt the grammars of the Romans as usually encountered at the museum" (2011: 82). Goodwin (2020) similarly argues for greater contemporary inclusivity in museum practices. His wide-ranging research uses Romano-British archaeology and the history of its study as a lens to consider the multivocal social role of museums, concluding that, despite good intentions, museums continue to curate for the cultural expectations of white audiences. He calls for the sector to embed new approaches to representation and resist retreating to familiar narratives in the face of sector-wide instability and challenges to museal authority.

Moser (2001; 2003; 2006; 2009) argues that museum representations of archaeology do not simply translate academic research into easily accessible formats for non-specialist audiences, but are active agents in the creation of knowledge. Inherent assumptions that academic modes of representation are more important in shaping knowledge than 'popular' ones are unfounded, as she demonstrates in her discussions of the British Museum's influence on perceptions of ancient Egypt (Moser 2006). The agency of museum professionals – and the processes involved in the collection, cataloguing and display of museum objects – are therefore fundamental to the creation and perpetuation of popular opinions regarding Roman Britain and its religious landscape. Despite this, as Kamash (2021: 15, 28) highlights, museums only rarely feature at Roman archaeology conferences and in university archaeology curricula.

The histories of museums and archaeology are integrally connected, many antiquarian collections forming the foundation of public museums. The rise of the "disciplinary museum" (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 124–138) in the 19$^{th}$ and early 20$^{th}$ centuries saw institutions established with educational missions founded in positivistic beliefs that viewing cultural objects facilitated learning (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 2) and could encourage desirable social behaviours (Fyfe 2006: 35). Implicit in this is the role of archaeological interpretation in local and national identity construction. Roach-Smith's collection of Romano-British artefacts, for example, acquired by the British Museum in 1856, was created with the partial aim of connecting British history with Roman imperialism (Polm 2016: 214). Such developments occurred at a time when archaeological practices, though still broadly antiquarian, were evolving rapidly (Olsen *et al.* 2012: 37–38) and an increasing volume of archaeological

material was being unearthed and interpreted through the creation of typologies. These frequently stressed the comparative 'progress' (and by extension morality) of various cultures and time periods (Witcomb 2003: 105), a process through which the Roman period became increasingly prominent. Museums were central to the structuring of data and the authoritative historical narratives it produced into objectively verifiable and rational boxes, literal glass ones in the case of museums. They became visible and visitable monuments to the scholarly ordering of the past, a "disciplinary architecture" (Olsen *et al*. 2012: 41–43).

Such observations are not merely archaic disciplinary history but represent foundational orthodoxies of museum curatorial practice which exert ongoing influence on contemporary collections management and display agendas. Early typologies still form the basis of cataloguing systems, enforcing 'period' and 'classification' as key indexing fields and assigning objects to single cultural groups based on broad historical periods and on functional grounds (e.g. Cameron and Mengler 2009). Such processes serve to homogenise objects dating between the 1st and early 5th centuries CE as 'Roman'/'Romano-British', and to reify 'religion' as a definable category of material culture, inhibiting recognition of the ritual implications of otherwise prosaic objects.

Critical studies of museum collecting practices have come to the fore in recent decades (e.g. Pearce 1997; Gosden and Larson 2007; Cameron 2008; Byrne *et al.* 2011; Lubar *et al.* 2017). These highlight that complex and subjective formation processes, as much social as material, influence the objects available for display and their relevance to visitors (Nielsen 2015), and can even represent acts of aggression against objects and communities (Pearce 1997: 50; Classen and Howes 2006: 209, 211; Hicks 2020). Museum collections are not singular entities but represent networks of objects, people and information with complex and overlapping connections which shift through time and when viewed from different perspectives. They can be both tangible and intangible, related to material properties and abstract associations (Thomas 2016: 97). Far from the meanings of objects becoming stable upon entering the museum, they retain, and continue to develop, complex associations (Alberti 2005: 562). Meijer-van Mensch (2022: 222) argues that "we don't collect objects, we collect relationships".

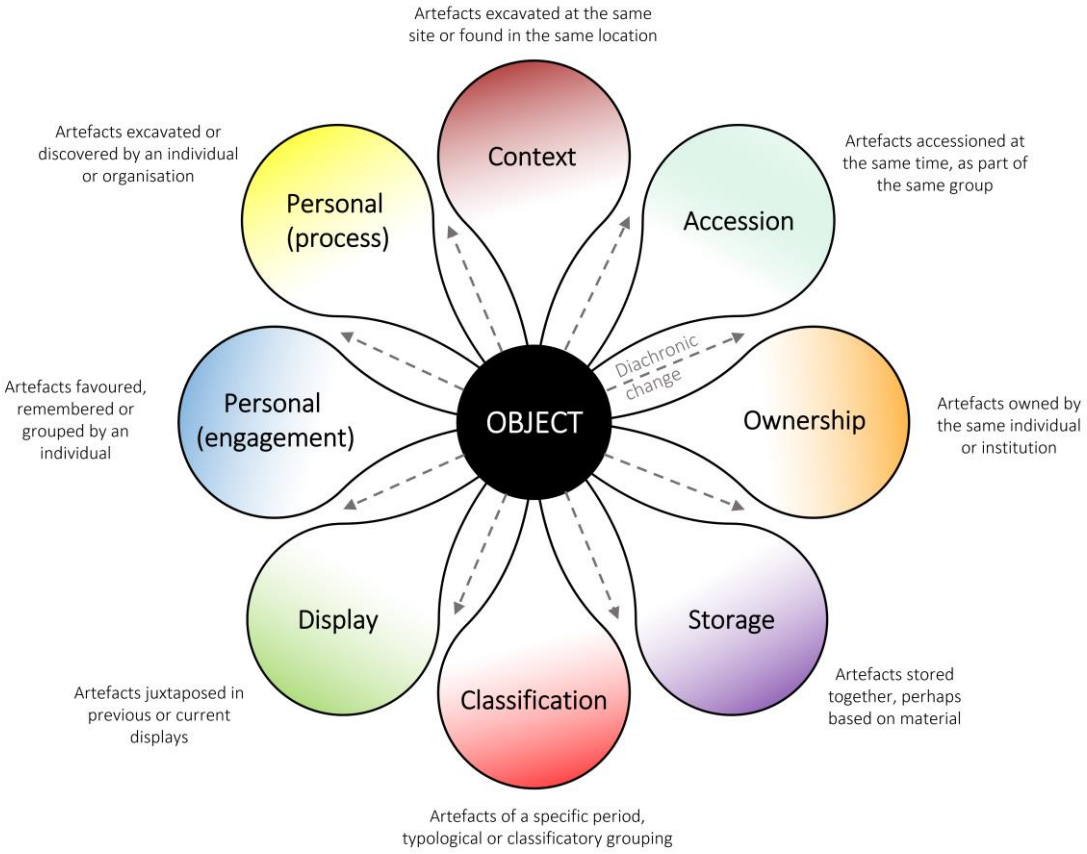



*Fig 1.3: Object association networks diagram*

Despite perceptions such as that expressed at the opening of the Fishbourne Roman Palace museum in 1968 that it was "not a conventional museum where a selection of the finds is simply thrown together" (Current Archaeology 1968: 223), museum displays represent unique and complex assemblages of connections and decisions. These include idiosyncratic collections formation processes, financial and political constraints, information management systems, and curatorial knowledge. Archaeological collections also involve relationships formed through excavation, post-excavation research, or previous ownership prior to museum acquisition. The selection of objects for display, described by Thomas (2016: 101) as the "canonical curatorial act", is therefore an intensely subjective process. A curator might be variably influenced by their personal connections with specific objects, sites or collectors, their theoretically-informed understanding of certain periods, the relative quality and prominence of object cataloguing,[1]

[1] Antiquarian or metal-detected 'casual finds' are more likely to be individually catalogued and photographed, possess detailed reports, and have undergone conservation. Excavated finds, in contrast, are usually group-accessioned, not photographed or conserved to display-level, and require understanding of archaeological project archives to access related information

and their familiarity with 'star' objects or previous displays. Figurative objects or inscriptions might be artificially elevated through cultural expectations of the Roman period (Aldhouse-Green 2004: xvi), and be better studied and published. Other objects may be more visible, and therefore selectable, simply through being in a prominent storage location. An external exhibition designer or educator might have their own opinions on an object's significance and appeal. Such assemblages of personal and institutional connections, visualised in Fig 1.3, are unique and dynamic but must be recognised as tangible elements in selection processes. As discussed above, every museum possesses significant social power to create, challenge or legitimise narratives about the past, and whose voices and values are represented. It is therefore at these formative stages of exhibition planning that concepts of lived religious experiences should be considered.

## 1.5 Studying Roman Britain in museums

> *"The world's museums preserve many thousands of representations of gods and goddesses from the Roman Empire, which in turn provide some of our most salient evidence for ancient myth and religion. These representations ... were not just decorative, but were worshiped as divine things. These objects were idols."* Kiernan (2020: 1)

Beard and Henderson (1997: 65) observe that museum displays of Roman Britain exist on two levels: as part of local or national historical chronologies, and as the British aspect of the larger-than-life 'Roman Empire'. British archaeology more generally has not featured prominently in museum studies in comparison with Egyptology, ethnography, social history or art. Despite the prevalence of Romano-British material culture in museum collections and displays, therefore, studies specifically focussing on the presentation of Roman Britain in museums represent a restricted subset and none have given considered attention to the presentation of religion. Studies that have been conducted on displays of Roman Britain have focussed on national and London-based institutions, and in the sections below I discuss critiques of the British Museum, Museum of London, and National Museum of Scotland (NMS).

### 1.5.1 The British Museum

The existence of a dedicated Roman Britain Room at the British Museum can be traced back to 1918 (Netzer 2014: 200; Polm 2016: 219). The current display, the Weston Gallery (Room 49), opened in 1997 and was updated in 2010 (Fig 1.4). Two recent critiques are of relevance, by Netzer (2014) and Polm (2016), though their overviews of the formation and previous displays of the Romano-British collections will not be addressed here. Both consider the implications of the positional relationship between the Roman Britain display and those of classical Greek and Roman antiquities. While Polm (2016: 228) suggests that their location on the same floor indicates parity, Netzer (2014: 203) argues that the distance between them reflects the inferiority of Roman Britain in the museum's hierarchies. She criticises the "densely packed" Roman Britain gallery for its "stronger instructional narrative" compared to the classical displays' "formal installation principles prizing balance, symmetry, and the creation of grand vistas".

*Fig 1.4: The Weston Gallery at the British Museum. Author's photograph*

Netzer's perspectives are art-historical and demonstrate an unfamiliarity with Romano-British archaeology. She suggests that the "melding" of indigenous and Roman material culture has been insufficiently explored (Netzer 2014: 195), despite copious scholarship in this area (Chapter 5). Her critique of the British Museum displays is based upon them not reflecting a "distinctive Roman provincial artistic identity for Britannia" (2014: 205), perceiving the development of distinctive regional art styles as crucial to "understanding what it meant to be Roman in the province" (2014: 207). Though she challenges Toynbee's earlier perspective that high quality artworks from Roman Britain must represent continental imports (2014: 202; see also Polm 2016: 220), she is critical of objects not being grouped to reflect regional artistic styles or juxtaposed with classical art (2014: 205–6). She argues that the gallery's structure blurs distinctions between art history and archaeology, juxtaposing cases "designed to highlight aesthetic achievement with others conceived to display visual evidence of life in the province" (2014: 204), implying that these should remain separate. She connects English national identity with Anglo Saxon rather than Celtic or Roman heritage (2014: n. 3), and suggests this has led to lack of appreciation for Romano-British craftsmanship. Her argument that the displays are a missed opportunity for the national museum "to build identity and broadcast a nationalistic message" of Roman Britain (2014: 207), fails to appreciate the influence of the Roman Empire in shaping and justifying Britain's own imperial ambitions (e.g. Hingley 2000; 2008).

Polm's (2016) discussions, in contrast, are more securely situated within post-colonial archaeological frameworks. He argues that generally positive "grand narratives" of the Roman world are presented with little consideration of nuanced interactions or individual experiences. The prominent positioning of precious metal hoards, for example, promotes a narrative in which Britain is not inferior to the continent, but part of a wealthy, multicultural empire. He notes that agency for change and 'progress' is entirely given to external sources (2016: 230) and that the Roman army is presented as a benign and industrious presence, with potential oppression or resistance overlooked (2016: 230). The narrative, he argues, is of what Rome brought to Britain but not what was taken through wealth, taxes or resources (2016: 231). Many of those resources came from rural areas, but Polm also considers that the displays, partly due to the London-centric nature of Roach Smith's foundational collection, insufficiently consider life outside of towns and a small number of high status villa sites (2016: 238), a particularly problematic bias for a gallery with a national representation.

### 1.5.2 Museum of London

The Museum of London's 'Roman London' gallery has, along with the adjacent prehistoric gallery, been subjected to greater scholarly scrutiny than any other British archaeological display space, particularly following the installation of the current layout in 1996 (Fig 1.5). As Beard and Henderson note (1999: 49), the museum occupies a unique position, simultaneously local museum and museum of the nation's capital. As with the British Museum, an institutional history is beyond the scope of this discussion, but is provided elsewhere (e.g. Hebditch 1996; Polm 2016), as are discussions of the precursor Roman gallery (1976-1996) (Merriman 1996; Beard and Henderson 1997; see also Shanks and Tilley 1987: 74–76), and the influential temporary exhibition 'High Street Londinium' (2000/1) (Grew 2000; Swain 2004; 2007: 252). However, discourses surrounding previous displays cannot be entirely overlooked due to their influence on the interpretative approaches to the current gallery. The prehistoric 'People before London' gallery (1994-2000), for example, was a prominent but controversial example of post-modern interpretation, the openly reflexive approach both praised for its curatorial honesty and criticised for undermining the museum's authoritative voice (see Skeates 2002).

*Fig 1.5: The Roman London Gallery at the Museum of London. Author's photograph*

The curatorial ambition for the current Roman gallery was to similarly avoid authoritative narratives and demonstrate that "the process of interpretation is a much more complex and subtle one than it often appears in most museums" (Merriman 1996: 62). However, Beard and Henderson (1999) argue that this was not achieved, Roman Britain instead presented as well-understood and uncontroversial. This, they suggest, is perhaps due to increased Roman textual evidence, with Roman administrative literacy a central and recurring theme within the gallery, connected with economic progress (1999: 59) and narratives of the benefits of benign imperialism and a non-repressive military presence (Polm 2016: 231–234).

Beard and Henderson's critique specifically relates the gallery's narratives to the, then fledgling, Romanization debate (Chapter 5) and the increasing complexity of conceptualising the Roman world. They note that (1999: 61), though Roman London is presented as more closely connected with other north-western provinces than Rome itself, this reinforces the holistic narrative running throughout the Museum of London's galleries, that of London as a (seemingly tension-free) cultural melting pot. The Roman city is portrayed as the direct precursor to the modern metropolis, not only in location and economic significance, but also in its entrepreneurial spirit and bustling, hybrid and tolerant multicultural communities (see also Grew 2001: 12; Polm 2016: 227); Roman London "was not only born, but born modern" (Beard and Henderson 1999: 54). However, Goodwin argues (2020: 117–118) that the realities of ethnic diversity are insufficiently explored.

The gallery's chronological narrative headlines are couched in the modern language of real estate, financial investment, and economic boom and bust, reinforced by the prominent models of the port and forum. Its focus, Beard and Henderson (1999: 62) argue, is therefore towards the future rather than reflecting continuity from the prehistoric past, with the native population playing a lesser role in both the life of the city and in providing for its needs through associated rural agricultural processes. The inclusive multicultural city is disconnected from both its hinterland and the rest of Britain, reinforcing wider preconceptions of the significance of the minority of town-dwelling, inscription-writing individuals in Roman Britain over the rural majority.

The 'A New Start?' panel at the end of the preceding 'London before London' prehistoric gallery foreshadows this narrative by presenting the coming of Rome as choice for the native population. It suggests that the adventurous and more adaptable native youth recognised the

opportunities available, while their conservative elders, stuck in their "tribal ways", could not. The choice is therefore unrealistically presented as a generationally-informed one between "assimilation or uncompromising conservatism" (Polm 2016: 233–234). The 'Harper Road burial', for example, contained a mix of local and imported goods which the interpretation says is indicative of a "new identity founded on the hopes, fears and beliefs of someone drawn to a new life in a new city". Central to this, though not overtly observed by either Beard and Henderson (1999) or Polm (2016), is that this 'new identity' is specifically that of a 'Londoner', as Roman London's inhabitants are directly referred to throughout the displays, insinuating that it formed a universally significant, and indeed dominant, identity. The interpretation of Lucius Pompeius Licetus's tombstone, for example, is titled 'A Roman Londoner', despite the inscription highlighting his connections with Arezzo in Italy. The core message is therefore that London was a magnetic place of unique opportunities and exotic experiences, interpreted through a prescient lens of the future. That exoticism was in part religious, as Beard and Henderson (1999: 65–66) observe. They note that the religion displays, awkwardly positioned between the 'Tightening Recession' and 'Changing Fortunes' sections, forefront the popularity of eastern religions: "just the kind of weird cults to become popular in cosmopolitan London".

### 1.5.3 National Museum of Scotland

Studies of other displays of Roman Britain are more sporadic and often take the form of curators describing their displays rather than external critique. Clarke and Hunter's (2001) discussion of the, then newly opened, Roman displays at NMS, for example, highlighted that museums in the north and west have to portray a different relationship with Rome to the more urban south, one grounded in the workings and consequences of imperialism (2001: 1). They note that the gallery (Fig 1.6) does not attempt to tell "the story of the Romans in Scotland", but presents a more selective narrative through the lens of material culture, highlighting where objects are similar or differ from those found in local prehistoric contexts, though the authors are keen to stress that notions of Roman technological 'progress' are avoided (2001: 5). They also state that the displays were designed to portray complex topics and theoretical issues, such as associations between literacy and power, hoarding and depositional acts, and the complexity of Roman/native interactions. However, the generally authoritative approach to text has been criticised (e.g. Skeates 2002: 216) as has the use of deliberately "imaginative and provocative" language (Clarke and Hunter 2001: 4) which I discuss further in Chapter 9.

*Fig 1.6: Early People's Gallery at the National Museum of Scotland. Author's photograph*

## 1.6 Defining lived religious experiences

This research centres, as discussed above, not upon critiquing how museums describe temple architecture, distributions of deities, or the representativeness of the objects selected for display, but upon exploring presentations of lived religious experiences. As Knibbe and Kupari (2020: 169) argue, studying religion creates an "ontological conflict" between the production of detached academic discourse and the "rich variety of lived experiences of angels, spirits, auras, and gods that inform the lives and practices of people". Though Gasparini *et al* (2020: 4) argue that ancient religious experiences remain generally insufficiently studied, recent years have seen increased interest in the experiential aspects of ancient religion, informed particularly by developments in cognitive and sensory studies (Patzelt 2020: 15).

The language of 'religious experiences', however, is imbued with Christianised, western concepts that the essence of religiosity is individual, internalised, spiritual revelations which transcend the experiences of daily life (Sharf 2000; Taves 2009). Sociological, material, anthropological, cognitive and post-human perspectives have promoted embodied approaches to religious experiences that recognise the mutually-affective connectivity between humans and the worlds they inhabit; that religious experiences are "culturally learned and socially

evoked" (Patzelt 2020: 12–14; see also Grieser and Johnston 2017: 2). Taves (2009: 8–9) observes that "we can neither simply invoke the idea of 'religious experience' as if it were a self-evidently unique sort of experience nor leave experience out of any sensible account of religion".

'Religious experiences' are therefore more accurately defined in this research as 'the experiences of *doing* religion', and my focus is on how museums are, or might, seek to engage visitors with how religious activity and beliefs operated within a post-colonial envisioning of Roman Britain; how ritual acts were experienced by adherents, physically, emotionally and sensorially; how individual choices contributed to creating and maintaining religious identities; how material culture was embodied in a range of religious, ritual and magical contexts; and how religious organisations and individuals established and maintained themselves within social, political and economic networks.

The exploration of museum presentations of religious experiences in Roman Britain is therefore, by necessity, a multidisciplinary endeavour, and this research exists at the intersection of a number of complementary and dynamic strands of scholarship: post-colonial archaeologies of Roman Britain, lived and material religion in both the contemporary and ancient worlds, theoretical considerations of how humans engage with the world around them in culturally- and ontologically- specific ways, and the impact of material, sensory and embodied approaches to archaeology and museology. The interconnections between these as they pertain to this research are envisaged in Fig 1.7, and in the following section I will set out how they will be engaged with in this research.

## 1.7 Thesis structure

In this chapter I have introduced the research project, considered the definitions and scholarly complexities of the key terms 'religion' and 'ritual', discussed the representation of archaeology in museums, examined previous studies of museum displays of Roman Britain, and considered how lived religious experiences might be defined. In Chapter 2 I introduce the methods and primary data used in this research: analyses of museum galleries, interviews with museum curators, and a heritage sector survey. I also contextualise the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic on this research.

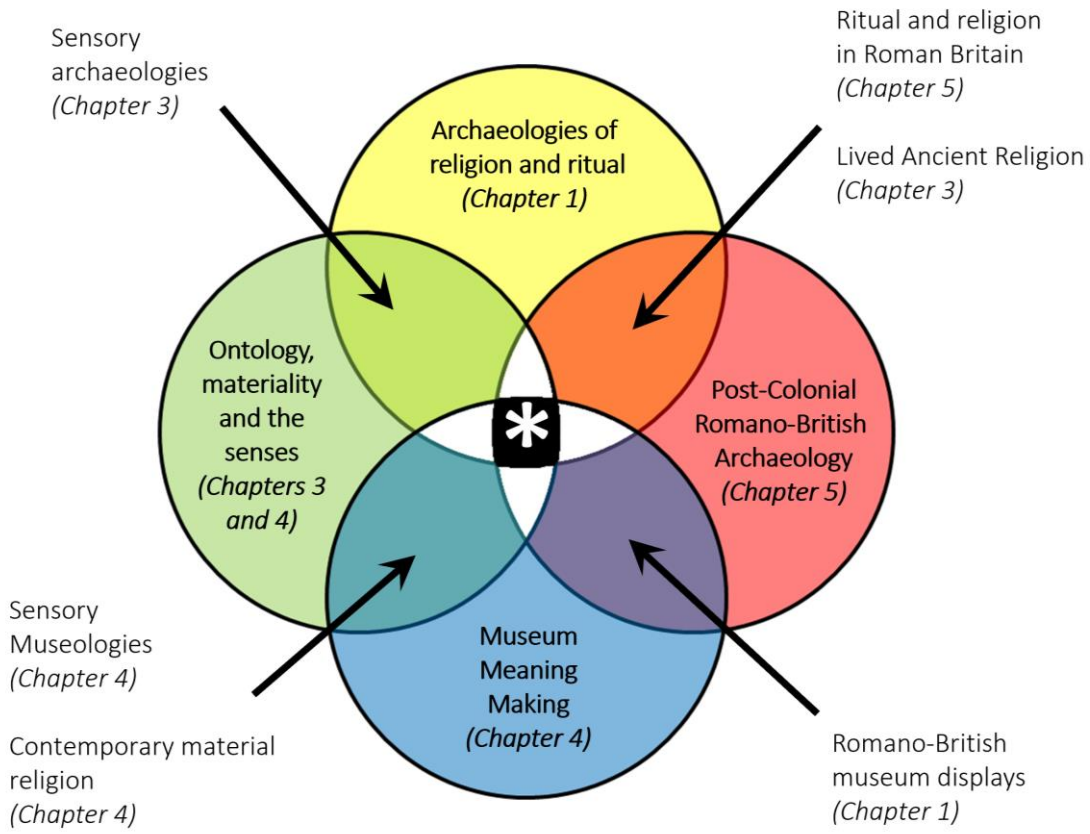



*Fig 1.7: Thesis theoretical positioning diagram*

The body of the research is divided into two parts. Part 1 (Chapters 3, 4 and 5) presents my theoretical framework, critically examining the considerable quantities of relevant and complementary recent scholarship through which I will explore lived religious experiences within both archaeologies of religion in the Roman world and museum studies (Fig 1.7). As both the concept of 'lived experiences' and analyses of museum displays are inherently subjective, it is essential to create a benchmark against which displays at museums of varying scales, foci, and interpretational approaches can be assessed. The discussions in Chapters 3, 4 and 5 therefore facilitate the creation of ten benchmark 'Analysis Statements' (§1-§10), introduced at the culmination of each chapter and collated in Chapter 5.6. These Statements form the structural framework for the analyses of museum displays presented in Part 2 (Chapters 6-10).

Chapter 3 explores 'lived religion', an approach which prioritises individual religious agency over institutionalised perspectives. This has been recently applied to the Roman world through the 'Lived Ancient Religion' rubric, which offers valuable new understandings of individuality, religious authority, and perceptions of religion as a dynamic phenomenon in need of constant social maintenance. The centrality of material culture to the formation and expression of religious identities then is discussed through the material and ontological turns in archaeology, the latter particularly significant for promoting consideration of divergent religious worldviews. Finally, I consider the increasing body of scholarship into how religious acts in the Roman world provided intense multisensory experiences for both participants and observers, and the significance of embodied movements and gestures.

Chapter 4 explores recent museological approaches to religion and the creation of meaning by visitors. I first consider sensory museology, and how museums might move beyond the traditional 'aesthetic gaze' to consider how engagement with the sensory affordances of objects can evoke new appreciations of their original users and contexts. I then discuss contemporary material religion in museums, which offers comparanda for considering ancient religious objects in museums as retaining their active numinous power. This includes the potential for tension between secular museums and the presentation of 'irrational' religious beliefs and the, often-hidden, visitor responses to religious displays. Finally, I consider how the use of creative interpretational language ('storytelling') can provide a means of 'critical disruption', challenging established ontological perceptions of religion in Roman Britain.

Chapter 5 discusses post-colonial archaeologies of Roman Britain, religious hybridity, and the rejection of the Romanization paradigm. I then build on the theoretical discussions in previous chapters to consider two areas of specific recent scholarly interest: votive and structured deposition, and the definitionally difficult concept of 'magic', particularly through the use of amuletic devices and the creation and deposition of curse tablets. At the end of the chapter I collate the Analysis Statements created in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

Part 2 of the research presents my analyses, beginning in Chapter 6 with consideration of the physical juxtapositioning of religious narratives within museum displays. This is achieved through adopting the principles of Space Syntax to consider the *configuration*, *centrality* and *depth* of Romano-British religious material, focussing on the prominent positioning of religious objects, the integration of religious material culture into wider narratives of life in Roman

Britain, and exploring the relative significance of iconography and context in interpretations of religious material culture.

Chapter 7 analyses narratives of religious interactivity and hybridity in Roman Britain, including the interactions and relative beliefs and practices of 'Romans' and 'natives', and concepts of religious change, diversity, resistance and tolerance. I then consider how religious activity and beliefs manifested in polysemic and multifocal ways such as through religious activity in non-temple settings, the wearing of protective charms and amulets, and how structured deposition is engaged with as a specific manifestation of ritual activity.

Chapter 8 explores how the concepts of 'lived religion' and the integration of religion into social networks are interpreted, firstly though narratives of individual choice and creativity, and then through connectivity between religious activity and political and economic power. I discuss museum engagement with the intense multisensory nature of religious experiences, not only considering the five classical senses but also the significance of proprioception, kinaesthesia and the emotions.

Chapter 9 considers the influence of museographical techniques through discussion of the language and terminology used to describe and define religious activity, and its impact on the creation of meaning. Related to this is a discussion of the use of creative 'storytelling' language to engage and challenge visitors' existing ontologies. I then consider reconstructions of religious acts through drawings, physical models and digital installations, specifically how they depict religious architecture, and convey concepts of religious movement/gestures and multisensory experiences. I examine interactive exhibits to explore their potential for engaging with religious experiences for audiences of all age groups. Finally, I consider how the materiality of objects and embodied engagement with them are presented as being significant to their religious functionality.

Chapter 10 returns to my research questions and considers how my analysis discussions in previous chapters have addressed them. These demonstrate that, despite the quantity of material culture evidence for religion and its ubiquity in displays, many of the experiential considerations discussed in this research are not currently exploited to their full potential. Religion is often presented as a discrete phenomenon, narrowly considered to relate to the worship of named deities, and the iconography of objects prioritised over their use and

deposition. However, I also discuss significant display changes which have occurred at some museums since my surveying was conducted, and which demonstrate both the potential and a desire to present religion in a more integrated, engaging and emotive manner. I propose key principles for consideration by museums developing displays of religion in Roman Britain, and suggest areas for potential further research.

# Chapter 2:

# Materials and Methods

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter details the primary data used to address the research questions set out in Chapter 1, and the methodologies employed for its collection and analysis. The global Covid-19 pandemic affected the way in which the study had to be conducted, requiring dynamic and adaptive methodologies to be adopted as the research progressed, and these are also detailed here.

My career as an archaeological museum curator has offered some advantages during this research, such as an understanding of collections management practices, display construction processes, the writing of gallery interpretation, and the challenges faced by those carrying out these tasks in current cultural and economic museum contexts. Several of the curatorial interviewees introduced below were personally known prior to the interviews, helping to facilitate open and congenial conversations. However, being a sector 'insider' can hamper the ability to view displays through the eyes of non-specialist visitors and can lead to harsher criticisms than visitors themselves might make. My lack of religious beliefs also means that the mental construction of certain religious experiences and worldviews is difficult. Therefore, though I have attempted to be consciously reflexive throughout the research process and to recognise and mitigate for these biases, true research neutrality is neither possible nor desirable.

Ethical approval was granted by Durham University's Archaeology Department Ethics Committee in July 2019. In accordance with the Standards of the British Sociological Association (2017), all human participants gave informed consent (Lune and Berg 2017: 46–48) for their participation, and were informed how their data would be used and how to retract their contributions at any time (Appendices C and D).

The museum analyses presented in this research are based on three strands of primary data collection. Physical analyses of case study museum displays form the major data source, supported with data from interviews with museum curatorial staff and an online heritage sector survey, each of which are discussed below.

## 2.2 Museum surveying

### 2.2.1 Case study museums

The physical surveying of museum displays forms the largest and most significant dataset for this research. Due to the widespread inclusion of Romano-British archaeology in museum collections and the detailed analyses necessary to investigate the research questions, a representative selection of case study museums was required.[1] Utilising data from various museum and heritage governance bodies (Arts Council England, Museums Galleries Scotland, Historic England, Historic Environment Scotland, Cadw, National Trust), individual museum websites, and my own experiences of working within and visiting museums, an initial long-list of 204 potential museums was compiled (Appendix A).

Though the subsequent process to reduce this list to a final selection was severely disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, as discussed below, 23 museums were surveyed (Table 2.1). The selection prioritised the ambition to survey a representative sample of museums containing significant displays, reflecting a range of museum governance types, geographical distribution, and visitor demographics. Previous studies of museum displays have unduly focussed on larger and/or London museums (Chapter 1.5) and obtaining a representative selection which also included archaeological site museums,[2] independent museums and regional museums was imperative. The surveyed museums represent four categories, as set out in Table 2.2. Despite the restrictions imposed by the pandemic, the selected museums therefore provide a sufficiently large and varied dataset (both geographically and of governance) to enable significant discussion, reflective of patterns in the wider sector (Lune and Berg 2017), to be conducted. The final selection forms a northern group of 12 museums and a southern group of 11 museums (Table 2.2; Fig 2.1).

[1] Accurately quantifying the percentage of the c.1800 Accredited Museums in Britain (https://www.museumsassociation.org/about) containing Romano-British archaeology is almost impossible
[2] Site museums excludes any external interpretation of archaeological remains

| Museum Name and survey code | Survey group | Governance | Museum foundation | Gallery created (updated) | Survey date/s | Romano-British content |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A1:<br><br>Clayton Museum, Chesters | North | Historic England | 1896 | 2016 | 28/9/20 | Three rooms displaying John Clayton's collection, arranged thematically |
| A2<br><br>Roman Army Museum (Hadrian's Wall) | North | Independent | Unknown | Unknown, (2009) | 4/3/20 | Dedicated Roman army museum with two main gallery spaces, arranged thematically |
| A3:<br><br>Verulamium Museum | South | Independent | 1939 | 1980s (unknown) | 15/10/20 | Dedicated open plan museum on Roman Verulamium, arranged thematically |
| A4:<br><br>Canterbury Roman Museum | South | Independent | 1961 | Mid 1990s (c.2015) | 13/4/19 | Dedicated Roman museum based around an excavated town house, with three main gallery spaces, arranged thematically |
| B1:<br><br>The British Museum | South | National | 1753 | 1997 (2010) | 17/12/19; 13/2/20 | Weston Gallery of Roman Britain (Room 49), arranged chronologically and thematically |
| B2:<br><br>National Museum of Scotland (NMS) | North | National | 1851 | 1998 | 19, 24, 27/2/20 | Early People Gallery, multi-period thematic displays |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| C1:<br><br>Grosvenor Museum (a: Newstead Gallery, b: Stories in Stone) | North | Local Authority | 1886 | Newstead Gallery 1950s (2012); Stories in Stone 1990s (2010) | 7/11/19 | Two galleries dedicated to Roman Chester, both arranged thematically |
| C2:<br><br>Tullie House Museum (a: Frontier Gallery, b: Border Gallery) | North | Independent | 1893 | Frontier Gallery 2011; Border Gallery 1991 | 9/11/19 | Two galleries on Roman Carlisle and Hadrian's Wall, both arranged thematically |
| C3:<br><br>Colchester Castle Museum | South | Local Authority | 1860 | 2014 | 12/2/20 | Mezzanine level displays of Iron Age and Roman Colchester, arranged chronologically ('Roman invasion', 'Roman heyday' and 'Roman decline') |
| C4:<br><br>Corinium Museum | South | Independent | 1856 | 2004 | 20/9/20 | Roman Military gallery (closed at time of survey), Hare gallery (mosaics), and main Roman galleries (Main and Upper), arranged thematically |
| C5:<br><br>Hunterian Museum | North | University | 1807 | Unknown | 14/12/18; 13/3/20 | Antonine Wall gallery, arranged thematically |
| C6:<br><br>Museum of London | South | Local Authority | 1826 | 1996 (2018) | 17/12/19 | Roman London gallery, arranged chronologically |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| C7:<br>Great North Museum | North | University | 2009 | 2009 | 3/9/20 | Hadrian's Wall gallery, arranged thematically |
| C8:<br>Ashmolean Museum | South | University | 1683 | Unknown | 18/11/19 | Sackler Gallery (Gallery 13), displays from Roman Oxfordshire as part of wider Roman Empire displays, arranged thematically |
| C9:<br>Durham University Archaeology Museum | North | University | 1833 | 2014 (2017) | 28/1/20 | Two display cases of Roman Britain within gallery of local archaeology, arranged chronologically |
| C10:<br>Wiltshire County Museum | South | Independent | Unknown | Early 1990s | 18/9/20 | Roman Britain gallery, arranged thematically |
| D1:<br>Senhouse Museum, Maryport | North | Independent | 1990 | 1998 | 20/8/20 | Site museum with two display galleries, arranged thematically |
| D2:<br>Housesteads site museum | North | Historic England | Unknown | 2012 | 24/5/19 | Site museum with display gallery and display / cinema room, arranged thematically |
| D3:<br>Corbridge site museum | North | Historic England | 1983 | 2018 | 24/5/19; 27/7/20 | Site museum with single room gallery of site finds, arranged thematically |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| D4:<br>Vindolanda site museum | North | Independent | 1975 | 2009 | 04/3/20 | Site museum in a Victorian house, arranged thematically |
| D5:<br>Richborough site museum | South | Historic England | 1991 | 1991 | 14/4/19 | Single room museum of site finds, arranged thematically |
| D6:<br>Bloomberg Mithraeum | South | Independent | 2017 | 2017 | 17/12/19 | Purpose-built display space beneath office building. Three level display: Entry Level (objects), Mezzanine Level (interpretation), Lower Level (temple remains), arranged thematically |
| D7:<br>Roman Baths Museum, Bath | South | Independent | 1897 | 2008 (Temple precinct 2014) | 18/9/20 | Site museum located within Roman remains over 2 levels, arranged thematically |

*Table 2.1: Surveyed museums*

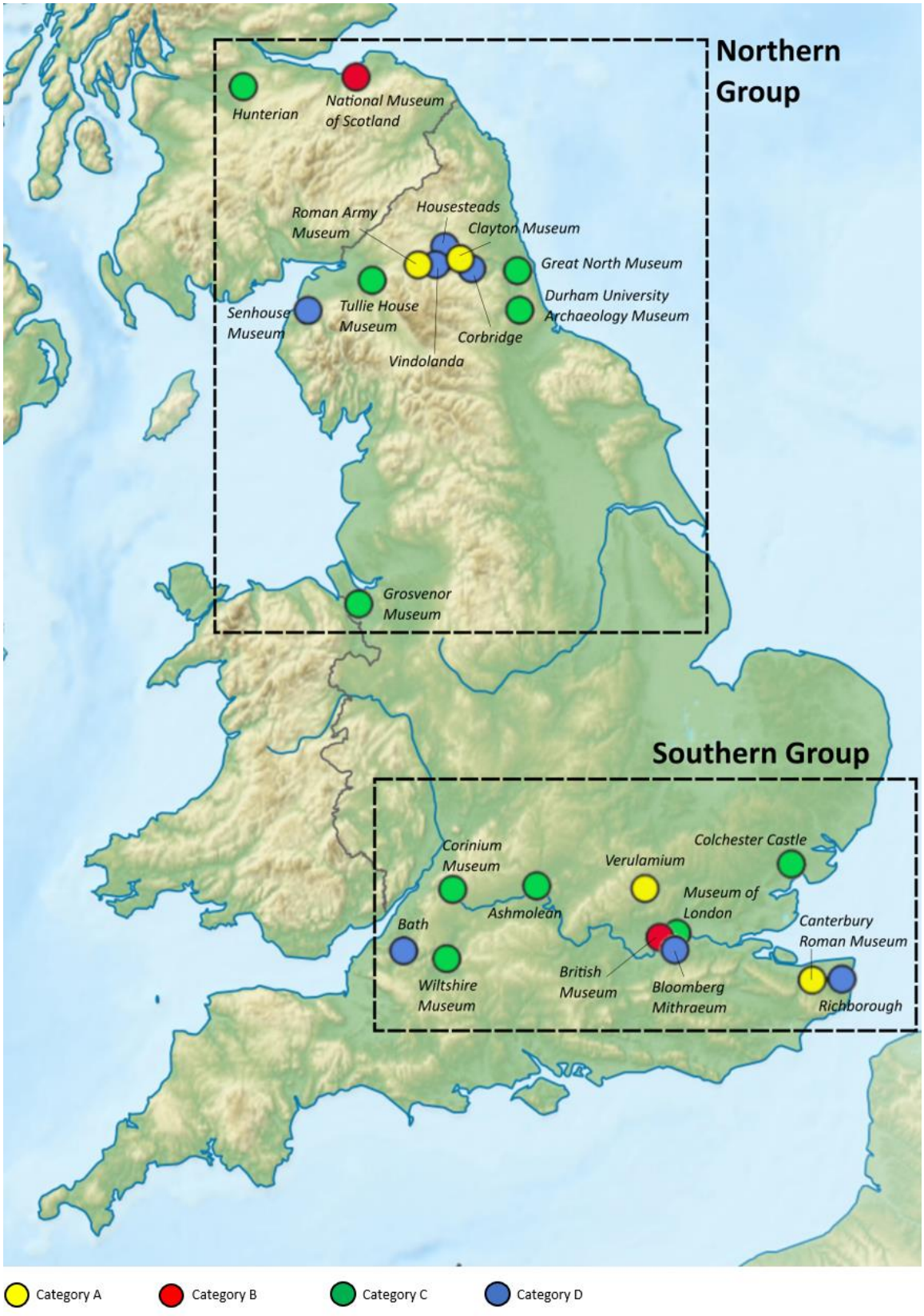



*Fig 2.1: Surveyed museums map*

| Surveying category | Total Museums | Northern group | Southern group |
|---|---|---|---|
| A. Specialist Roman museums | 4 | 2 | 2 |
| B. National museums | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| C. Local, regional and university museums | 10 | 5 | 5 |
| D. Site museums | 7 | 4 | 3 |
| **TOTALS** | **23** | **12** | **11** |

*Table 2.2: Surveyed museums quantified by survey category and geographical group*

The analysed displays at each museum are the permanent galleries presenting the primary narratives of Roman Britain (Table 2.1). Other Romano-British content, for example numismatic galleries or references in prehistoric displays, may be discussed comparatively but have not been systematically analysed. Discussion of interpretation focusses on printed material, with supplementary devices (e.g. audio guides) only used where they provide core interpretation, such as at Bath. Surveying visits took place between December 2018 and September 2020.

An important element of my comparative approach is that the surveyed museums are not discussed as discrete entities, nor are their institutional or collecting histories specifically considered. To facilitate exploration of presentations of lived religious experiences against my 'Analysis Statements' (addressed below), specific objects, displays and interpretation will feature in relevant discussions, some returned to repeatedly to be considered from different perspectives. Through this approach, the content of displays can be dynamically considered, and dogmatic descriptions which isolate individual institutions avoided. The focus of this research is not to critique individual museums, but to consider holistic approaches to lived religious experiences across the sector.

Appendix B presents schematic plans of the surveyed museum galleries which should be referred to as contextualising accompaniments to discussions. Footnotes in the text refer to specific displays which can be located on these plans. My analyses involve dividing displays into categorised 'display units', but for ease of comprehension the methodology for these is described when they are introduced in the analysis (Chapter 6.2).

### 2.2.2 Museum analyses: Space syntax

Most of my analyses are qualitative and therefore necessarily subjective, however Chapter 6 presents quantitative analyses of museum spaces and display layouts. There is no dominant methodology for analysing museum displays, and Moser (2010) notes a dearth of structured approaches for studying how disparate display elements and their arrangement coalesce in the creation of meaning. Fyfe (1998), for example, applied Bernstein's (1975) concepts of 'classification' and 'framing' to museums, while Pearce (1990: 149–150) proposed the concepts of 'depth', 'rings' and 'entropy'. As this research is based on the study of a larger number of museums of varying size and architecture, the methodology employed must be capable of meaningful analysis across all surveyed institutions, and Space Syntax was adopted since it offers the requisite scale and flexibility.

Space syntax is an architectural analytic methodology developed in the 1970s by Bill Hillier to analyse relationships between spaces and the movement of people, and subsequently applied to museums (e.g. Hillier and Tzortzi 2006; Tzortzi 2011; 2017; Lazaridou 2014; Rees Leahy 2016). Tzortzi (2017: 5) identifies three key spatial morphologies: the structure of the building, the arrangement of displays, and the behaviour of visitors, the first two being 'independent' or 'design' variables and the third a 'dependent' or 'functional' variable. It is the second of these morphologies that is of primary interest to this research.

Three connected principles of space syntax have been adopted to support my quantitative analyses of displays: *configuration, depth* and *centrality*. *Configuration* (Hillier and Tzortzi 2006; Forrest 2014; Tzortzi 2015: 3–4) considers the relative relationships of display spaces, and is adopted to consider the narrative relationships between religion and other facets of life and work in Roman Britain; interpretative meaning being produced not merely through the presence or labelling of objects but through their juxtaposition. *Depth* (Tzortzi 2017: 108) considers visitor journeys through displays and when they encounter specific elements. Although this research does not employ visitor monitoring, I investigate when visitor encounters with religious narratives occur within Roman Britain displays. Finally, *centrality* (Kweon 2002; Tzortzi 2011), considers the significant architectural spaces around which other galleries orientate. I adopt this concept to explore the prominent positioning of religious objects

both within and outside gallery spaces; objects specifically highlighted to attract visitors' attention and deliver core messages.

### 2.2.3 Museum analyses: Discourse analysis

Qualitative analyses of museum interpretation in this research are conducted using the principles of discourse analysis, which recognises that language, and the meanings produced through its use, are undetachable from specific social contexts (Wood and Kroger 2000; Dunn and Neumann 2016). This is of significance in museums as interpretative texts are social documents, created with deliberate communicative intent for defined audiences, but mitigated by conventions of tone, format, length and readability. However, the voices permitted to create museum texts have been traditionally restricted to curatorial ones. As discussed in Chapter 1, the creation of museum displays and interpretative texts involves the wielding of social authority through control of communal historical narratives requiring recognition that introductions of bias are inevitable (Flowerdew and Richardson 2018). Such influences may be subconscious, for example language which carries culturally-specific semiotic social signifiers (see Yakin and Totu 2014), adhering to the expectations of audiences from dominant cultural groups, but unreflective of other diverse contemporary or historic ontological perspectives.

## 2.3 Curatorial interviews

Interviewing is widely accepted as a valuable tool in the social sciences (Alshenqeeti 2014), and the interviewing of museum staff with responsibility for the curation and display of Romano-British collections forms an important strand of this research. It enables the investigation of personal and professional opinions and knowledge surrounding contemporary scholarly approaches to Roman Britain and its religious activity, alongside gaining an understanding of specific institutional contexts and challenges. The research takes a postmodern approach to knowledge, recognising that there are no universal truths to uncover, and each individual curator's opinions are equally representative of their perceptions of reality (Davidsson Bremborg 2011: 311).

Interviews were conducted with relevant professional staff at as many of the case study museums as possible. An invitation email explaining the project was sent directly to potential interviewees and/or to generic museum email addresses, with at least one follow-up sent if no initial response or holding response was received. Those that agreed to be interviewed are listed in Table 2.3. 11 interviews were conducted, covering 13 of the case study museums (three museums on Hadrian's Wall being discussed in one interview). All the interviewees work in curatorial or collections management roles and have responsibility for Romano-British collections. Although the original intent was to conduct face-to-face interviews, Covid restrictions meant that all were conducted online using either Zoom or Microsoft Teams, and each lasted approximately an hour. All but one interviewee was in their own home, which is likely to have presented an unintended benefit through creating a more relaxed and private atmosphere for conversation. Interviews were recorded for transcription purposes, and the data subsequently coded to extract key themes using the analysis software NVivo.

In terms of interest in Roman Britain, three interviewees were Roman specialists, four expressed particular interest in the period, while four specialised in other subjects. Regarding religious beliefs, six held no beliefs, four said they didn't hold active beliefs but had affinity with the Christian culture they were raised in, and one was a practising Catholic. In the interests of openness, I informed interviewees of my own atheism during these discussions.

The interview questions (Appendix C) encompassed four strands of questions:

A. Personal / academic background (3 questions)
B. Current displays of Romano-British archaeology/religion (6 questions)
C. Religion in museums (3 questions)
D. Multisensory experiences and storytelling (4 questions)

Interviews were semi-structured (Alshenqeeti 2014; Adams 2015) to allow the conversation to flow after a question was asked and with some follow-up prompts if the conversation did not naturally cover key topics of interest. Questions were not designed to test knowledge of Roman Britain, religious practices, archaeological theory, or to seek justification for display decisions. They instead aimed to gather benchmarking information on the interviewees' backgrounds, the current displays at their museum and their collaborations with other colleagues and communities. They also investigated their personal and professional opinions on the

opportunities and risks associated with displaying religion in museums, and adopting multisensory and creative approaches to display and interpretation.

| Code | Museum Name | Interview conducted? | Interview date |
|---|---|---|---|
| A1 | Clayton Museum, Chesters | Yes | 08/09/2020 |
| A2 | Roman Army Museum (Hadrian's Wall) | No | N/A |
| A3 | Verulamium Museum | No | N/A |
| A4 | Canterbury Roman Museum | Yes | 27/08/2020 |
| B1 | The British Museum | Yes | 02/12/2020 |
| B2 | National Museum of Scotland | Yes | 20/07/2020 |
| C1 | Grosvenor Museum | Yes | 21/05/2020 |
| C2 | Tullie House Museum | Yes | 22/09/2020 |
| C3 | Colchester Castle Museum | No | N/A |
| C4 | Corinium Museum | No | N/A |
| C5 | Hunterian Museum | No | N/A |
| C6 | Museum of London | Yes | 30/11/2020 |
| C7 | Great North Museum | Yes | 07/10/2020 |
| C8 | Ashmolean Museum | No | N/A |
| C9 | Durham University Archaeology Museum | Yes | 28/05/2020 |
| C10 | Wiltshire County Museum | Yes | 10/12/2020 |
| D1 | Senhouse Museum, Maryport | No | N/A |
| D2 | Housesteads site museum | Yes | 08/09/2020 |
| D3 | Corbridge site museum | Yes | 08/09/2020 |
| D4 | Vindolanda | No | N/A |
| D5 | Richborough site museum | Yes | 25/09/2020 |
| D6 | Bloomberg Mithraeum | No | N/A |
| D7 | Roman Baths Museum, Bath | No | N/A |

*Table 2.3: Curatorial interviews*

Although complete anonymity is difficult due to the specialised nature of museum collections work, interviewee identities have been anonymised and interview transcripts are not reproduced. Relevant aspects of the interviews are cited to support various discussions in forthcoming chapters, but the honest and thought-provoking discussions should also be recognised as having a significant underlying influence on the development of this research beyond specific quotations.

## 2.4 Online survey

The online survey was intended to gather data and opinions on perceptions of Roman Britain, religion and museums from a wider range of stakeholders in the heritage and archaeology sectors. It was hosted on the JISC Online Surveys platform between 3 October 2019 and 27 April 2020 and received 172 completed responses. The survey was promoted through my own social media channels, kindly boosted through circulation by others, and also featured in the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies' *Epistula* newsletter (Lee 2019).

The anonymous survey consisted of 22 questions (Appendix D), divided into three sections, 'About you', 'You and Romano-British religion' and 'You and museum visiting'. To promote opportunities for the expression of diversities of opinion, questions were a combination of multiple choice, free-text, and Likert scale. Opportunities to give 'other' responses or provide free-text explanations of responses were offered throughout. Holistic response data is presented in Appendix D, with specific and detailed analyses referenced in relevant discussions in forthcoming chapters, though not all the analysed data provided results of direct interest to the research. As with the curatorial interviews, the survey was not intended to test respondents' theoretical knowledge, but to investigate awareness and perceptions of pertinent issues. Most respondents were aged between 30 and 69 (Q1), worked within the heritage sector, mainly in museums or universities (Q2), and were educated to at least degree level (Q4). Though most had not formally studied Roman Britain (Q5), all expressed at least some level of interest in the subject, over half describing that interest as 'serious'. Respondents were frequent museum visitors, making multiple visits a year (Q14), often specifically to see Romano-British displays (Q15). All but three respondents expected to see religion feature in museum displays of Roman Britain (Q17), and 70% thought that increased public understanding of religion in Roman Britain would benefit contemporary society (Q8).

The respondents can therefore be seen to represent a highly engaged and knowledgeable dataset. However, the respondents were self-selecting, and it must be acknowledged that they are not reflective of the wider population of the UK or of museum audience demographics: the data must be viewed as primarily reflecting perspectives within the heritage sector rather than those of the general public. In Chapter 10.7 I will consider the potential for future research to directly focus on museum visitors' understandings of and attitudes towards religion in Roman Britain. Some online survey respondents, however, did not actively work in the heritage sector and, as discussed in Chapter 10.1, the strongly negative opinions expressed by some indicate that the online survey would have produced significantly different results had the survey sample been targeted to achieve a more reflective cross section of British society.

## 2.5 Covid impact statement

This research was partly conducted during the global Covid 19 pandemic, with the major initial impact on the UK and the most significant national lockdowns occurring during 2020 when the museum surveying was scheduled to happen. Though some museums were surveyed prior to the pandemic, the museums available for surveying and the visitor experience at surveyed museums were impacted. Museums such as the Yorkshire Museum and the Lydney Park site museum, for example, did not reopen at all during the surveying period and therefore could not be included despite their relevance to the research. Some museums which had received preliminary visits had to be removed from the final selection as detailed surveying visits were no longer possible. Travel to some museums was also extremely difficult due to restrictions on non-essential travel and accommodation, particularly travelling to the midlands and south of England from my Edinburgh home.

When museums were open, health and safety restrictions meant that some areas were inaccessible, visitor routes were changed or one-way systems imposed, and interactives deactivated. Some museums limited visit durations, affecting the time available for surveying, while in others there was social pressure from other visitors not to linger at certain displays or in more confined spaces. This was particularly notable at Bath, where some key audio guide 'stops' were deactivated to avoid bottlenecks, and the Death and Burial section and some of the religious displays were inaccessible. Thankfully, the use of video recording and copious photography helped alleviate some of these issues, as did the fact that I had previously visited

some museums and had photographs that enabled reconstruction of closed areas where there was certainty that things had not been substantially altered. However, these restrictions meant that consideration of the displays and their interaction had to be done after the visit and detached from the gallery atmosphere.

Some museum staff were furloughed, making them unavailable for interview. Others who weren't had restricted capacity to engage with research requests. As referenced above, interviews were conducted remotely.

Despite these challenges, I am extremely grateful to the staff at all the museums I was able to survey for their professionalism, hard work and good humour (Fig 2.2) in making their sites available, and the valuable experiences they continued to offer their visitors at a time of unprecedented personal and institutional stress.

*Fig 2.2: Masked Venus at Verulamium Museum. Author's photograph*

# Chapter 3:

# Archaeologies of Lived, Material and Sensory Religion

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter considers recent theoretical approaches to the definition and study of Roman religion, particularly the impact of anthropological approaches to religion in the Roman world and the influential concept of 'lived religion'. This has recently been applied to the ancient world through the Lived Ancient Religion rubric, and its considerations of religious individualisation, choice and authority. I then consider the material and ontological 'turns' in archaeology and the impact of their reconfigurations of the complex relational networks between humans and non-human 'things' on studies of Roman religion. Finally, I consider the impact of embodied and sensory archaeologies on studies of religious experiences in the Roman world, moving beyond the five Aristotelean senses to also consider senses such as movement, gesture and emotions.

## 3.2 Approaching religion in the Roman world

The relationship between archaeology and the beliefs of cultures of all places and periods is complex (Chapter 1.3), influenced as much by the educational and socio-religious background of the scholar as by archaeological data (Insoll 2004b). However, archaeology offers the potential to obtain a more balanced view of provincial religion than that provided by the elite perspectives which pervade ancient literature and which have dominated traditional scholarly approaches to Mediterranean religion (Hingley 2011; Raja and Weiss 2015: 138; Woolf 2015: 467; Hunter-Crawley 2020: 435).

Detailed analysis of the scholarship of ancient religion is beyond the scope of this chapter, but to build on my discussions in Chapter 1, it is important to consider developments in the study of religion in the Roman world. Roman religion was perceived in the late 19th century in terms of evolutionary progress (e.g. Frazer 1890), occupying a transitional space between prehistoric belief systems, characterised as animistic (Tylor 1871) or rooted in ancestor worship (Spencer 1876), and Christianity. Perceptions that Christianity represented the pinnacle of religious achievement continued well into the 20th century (e.g. Otto 1950; Wallace 1966). Religions were seen as inextricably tied to cultural or ethnic identities, with change only conceptualised through military influence (Rüpke 2018b: 133); models with implications for the antiquarian study of Iron Age and Roman Britain.

The development of 20th century Roman religious scholarship has been usefully summarized by Lipka (2009: 1–6) as beginning with Wissowa's exhaustive 1902 (second ed. 1912) *Religion und Kultus der Römer*, which consciously moved away from Frazer's (1890) popular comparative approach. Wissowa's study remained a scholarly bedrock until it began to be challenged by sociological approaches to religion in the mid 20th century, influenced particularly by the work of Durkheim. These were reluctant to narrativize religious change in terms of conquest and dominance, but instead envisaged it through processes of transformation and adaption, such as Nock's concepts of "conversion" and "adhesion", defined respectively as "the taking of a new way of life in place of the old" and "an acceptance of new worships as useful supplements and not as substitutes" (Nock 1933: 7). The recognition that individuals could change their religious perspectives during their lifetime (or even be critical of such beliefs (Whitmarsh 2017)), merging elements of differing but complementary belief systems, is a subtle and important one, recognising individual agency and enabling religions to be acknowledged as complex social phenomena.

Rüpke (2013: 3–4) describes 20th century scholarship as focused on the identification and reification of specific cults, whereas Ando (2008: x) perceives a preoccupation with the perpetual demise of Roman religion, first its corruption by Greek ideas, then by mystery cults, and finally Christianity. Recent decades have seen greater emphasis on 'place' in religious studies, moving away from grand narratives of state religion to more localised manifestations of religious authority and practice (Ando 2008: 123), recognising the increasing range of legitimate religious options available in the Graeco-Roman world (Ando 2013: 100). This latter

phenomenon has developed alongside anthropological approaches to religious identities, such as 'lived religion'.

## 3.3 Lived Ancient Religion

'Lived religion' is rooted in a focus on individual believers rather than religious institutions. It explores the personalised religious assemblages people create from the varied religious and cultural environments they inhabit, revealing a surprising diversity of belief and practice.[1] Lived religion reflects the wider anthropological concept of 'vernacular religion' (Primiano 1995) which rejects western-dominated concepts of belief which view Christianity as the pinnacle of religious achievement and relegate pre-Christian and other belief systems to folklore and superstition (Chapter 1.3.1). Vernacular religion "focuses on ritualised practices and the contextual analysis of material culture, rather than basing interpretation on assumed ethnic characteristics or other dichotomous categories" (Goldberg 2009: 37). Primiano (2012: 387) identifies ambiguity, power and creativity as central to vernacular religion, concepts which are also fundamental to lived religion.

Lived religion developed in the 1990s (Hall 1997; Primiano 2012: 383; Knibbe and Kupari 2020), with McGuire's (2008) study of everyday religion in the USA particularly influential. The embeddedness of religious practices into social, political and economic networks, and the recognition of personal definitions of religiosity (and spirituality) represent a significant perceptional shift in the sociology of religion. It decentres religious scholarship which has prioritised religious texts and institutional theologies and challenges secularization theory's claim that modernity and religiosity are incompatible (Knibbe and Kupari 2020).

The application of lived religion's concepts to ancient Mediterranean religion was the focus of a project at the Max Weber Centre at the University of Erfurt, led by Jörg Rüpke, between 2012 and 2017.[2] The 'Lived Ancient Religion' (LAR) project aimed to re-examine traditional grand narratives of "co-existence, then competition, and finally suppression of religious traditions"

[1] Knibbe and Kupari (2020: 161) argue that 'lived religion' suffers from a lack of clarification, used to describe individual activities, as a modality of religious practice, and as a descriptor for the nature of religion: both methodological approach and "conceptual stance"

[2] Successor projects (2018-2022) 'Urban Religion' at the University of Erfurt and 'Lived Ancient Religion in North Africa' (LARNA) at the University of Madrid, are exploring social and religious dynamics within developing urban environments.

(Raja and Rüpke 2015a: 11–12). Alongside a prodigious publication output,[3] the project led to the establishment of the 'Religion in the Roman Empire' journal, promoting multidisciplinary research utilising the principles and methodologies of LAR. The project specifically identified archaeology, often overlooked in Mediterranean religious scholarship (Adrych and Dalglish 2020: 55b), as having the potential to both offer new perspectives and benefit from incorporating LAR's principles into its own theoretical discourses (Rüpke *et al*. 2015). The dissemination of LAR's principles to the wider public through museum and other heritage presentations, however, is notably absent from the published literature.

A central focus of LAR has been to adopt lived religion's criticism of religion as the domain of institutions, particularly 'polis religions', promoting instead "the actual everyday experience, on practices, expressions, and interactions that could be related to religion" (Rüpke 2011: 196).[4] Polis religions are defined as the autonomous religious systems of urban settlements, the festivals and common rituals of which contributed to defining a sense of belonging to that community. Criticisms of the model include difficulty in identifying specifically polis deities (Häussler 2011: 394), its promotion of religion as static and elite-dominated, and that it does not reflect the diversity of religious activity evidenced across the Roman world, marginalising practices not associated with public ritual (Woolf 1997: 76–77; Woolf 2000a: 617; Rüpke 2013: 3–6; Albrecht et al. 2018: 2).

The LAR approach also aims to firmly situate religion within the social, political and economic networks which it required and required it; to see it as precarious and shifting, in need of constant human action (Albrecht *et al*. 2018: 2). This means, for example, challenging long-established dichotomies of 'public' and 'private/domestic' religion as distinct entities conducted respectively by the state and individuals (Ando 2008: 97–8; Bowes 2015; Arnhold 2015; Parker 2015; Rüpke 2018a: 255; Graham 2020: 13; cf. Berg, Coralini, et al. 2021), and instead viewing them as highly contextualised aspects of the same holistic religious landscape. Dickenson (2021) similarly argues that the religious urban/rural distinction in Britain should be reassessed in favour of a model recognising religious sites as networked phenomena. The embeddedness of religious activity within economic networks has been highlighted, not only through procurement processes of ritual paraphernalia and consumables, but also in the social

[3] The project produced more than a hundred publications and several conferences (Gasparini *et al*. 2020: 3)
[4] Though Rüpke has still described polytheism as "the sum of cult acts performed in individual cities" (2014: 171) and seen urban centres as drivers of religious innovation (2018a: 320–323)

value of religious votives and the impact of religious traditions on the practice and ethics of wider economic activity (Moser and Smith 2019; Rieger and Stöger 2022).

Despite LAR's prolific publication output, the north-western provinces have so far been generally overlooked and LAR has only cautiously begun to impact upon studies of Romano-British religion. However, some studies which pre-date LAR reflect aspects of its approach. Revell (2007), for example, stressed the prioritising of social relationships over institutions, and Goldberg (2009) applied the principles of vernacular religion to his discussion of syncretisation. The LAR project has been recognised in some recent research and publications (e.g. McKie 2017: 37–38; McKie and Parker 2018: 3–4; Smith 2018: 121). Although polis religions are not perceived as part of the religious landscape of Roman Britain (Dickenson 2021), other concepts underlying the LAR approach are of great interest to the post-colonial study of Romano-British religion (Chapter 5), particularly its focus on interpersonal relationships, religious transmission and social structures. The purpose of the LAR project was not to deny the authority and power of religious institutions, but to draw attention to the way individuals appropriated and adapted practices to suit their needs and situations (Gordon 2015: 173). In the sections below I explore four key aspects of the LAR approach.

### 3.3.1 Individuality and religious options

Exploring individual religious experiences requires consideration of what being an individual meant in the Graeco-Roman world; how ideas of the 'self' manifested and how individual agency was culturally and cognitively perceived. Concepts of religious change during the late Roman Republic and Empire are irrevocably connected with growth in religious choice and individualisation, as mobility increased and religious identities became a form of cultural articulation beyond default adherence to ethnic traditions (Rives 2011a; Woolf 2013; Ando 2013: 88). However, restricting expressions of individuality solely to elective mystery cults or Christianity (discussed further in Chapter 5.2.2) is to lend false legitimacy to outdated views of religious progress (Woolf 2013: 138–139); traditional polytheism was replete with choices to be made such as which deity to offer to, how, when and where (Woolf 2013: 137; North 2013: 68). Rüpke (2015: 444–5) categorizes opportunities for individual expression as "cult pragmatic individuality" (dedications to unusual juxtapositions of deities), "expressive

individuality" (changes in religious status leading to new lifestyles or behaviours) and "visionary individuality" (religious action legitimised through direct divine revelation).

Modern concepts of individuality, however, are difficult to shed when studying the ancient world, and intrinsically tied with the growth of western modernism (Rüpke 2013: 7; 2015: 439; 2019b: 974–5). The 'Religious individualisation in historical perspectives' working group at the University of Erfurt (2008-2018) explored concepts of individuality and its influence on religious change, overlapping and mutually-influential with the LAR project (Rüpke and Spickermann 2012; Fuchs *et al.* 2019). It perceived religious individuality as a heuristic tool rather than a "distinct semantic signifier of social dynamics" (Fuchs *et al*. 2019: 8), recognisable in the past through evidence of enhanced ranges of individual options or choices, self or creativity, deviance and critique, and (inward) experience (Otto 2017; Fuchs *et al.* 2019: 9–10). Scheid (2016: 39) criticises scholarship of ancient individuality for minimising the roles of social and institutional frameworks within which choices are made, arguing that people should not be imaged to have "circulated and acted as they pleased without regard for the administrative and political frameworks of the empire". However, the frameworks to which Scheid refers were themselves the dynamic result of myriad individual actions. Religious individuality does not envisage deviant or wilfully defiant lone actors, but promotes consideration of sensing, interacting, and agentic individuals who simultaneously constitute, influence and were influenced by various communities. Individuality should not be viewed as the opposite of communal religion (cf. Graf 2013) but communal religion the aggregate of multiple individuals experiencing and communication their religious knowledge. However, studies of individuality often fail to acknowledge post-human perspectives (Graham 2020: 20–21) and the deities themselves (Bremmer 2018: 109).

Linkenbach and Mulsow (2019: 335) describe various "regimes of belonging" such as families, ethnic groups and religious communities, each demanding physical or emotional commitments and requiring constant negotiation, particularly at times of stress or transition. Mol and Versluys (2015) see communities as fluid and socially-constructed, arguing that religious experiences create non-physical "symbolic" or "imagined" communities. Rebillard (2015: 432) observes a distinction between the availability of a religious identity and an individual's 'activation' of it, exercising control over the projection of their religious identities within their communities. Understanding processes of religious self-identification is more important than seeking individual religious affiliations (Rebillard 2015: 434). No individual could access

every deity attested across the Roman world, nor would they desire to. Their available options were socially constrained (Woolf 2013: 154), varying depending on their geographic and social circumstances and shifting through time; those in urban centres were exposed to more religious communities than someone in an isolated rural farmstead.

Ancient concepts of religious choice should therefore not be interpreted through modern concepts of libertarian free will, but neither should it be assumed that individuals either possessed no religious options, or that they remained static over time. Individuals were also not "rational choice actors, calculating their every move" (Rüpke 2018b: 146), but utilised available religious options to meet their needs as part of dynamic physical and imagined communities.

### 3.3.2 Orthodoxy and orthopraxy

Rüpke has argued (2014: 2) that the most significant religious shift during the Roman period was that "from a world in which one practiced *rituals*, there emerged a world of *religions*, to which one could belong" (Rüpke 2018a: 1). This is to say, a change from a religious landscape dominated by orthopraxy (the primacy of correct ritual performance) to one focused on orthodoxy (the primacy of personal piety and intellectual discourse) with individual worshippers at its core.

The relationship between, and relative significance of, orthopraxy and orthodoxy has influenced approaches to Graeco-Roman religion for centuries. Sir Francis Bacon argued in 1612 that the ancient world lacked the religious strife of his own time as "the religion of the Heathen consisted rather in Rites and Ceremonies than in any constant belief" (Spedding *et al*. 1860: 86–87). William Warde Fowler (1911: 114) opined that "the Romans were not a thinking people, and probably thought very little about the divine beings whom they propitiated". Perspectives that Roman religion was without orthodoxy continue to be influential (Scheid 2003: 18–19; Scheid 2016: 113; see also Beard *et al*. 1998: 217). Smith *et al* (2018: 120), for example, suggest that the nature of the archaeological evidence for religion in Roman Britain means that a scholarly focus on "the practice and context of ritual acts, as opposed to beliefs and doctrines" is entirely appropriate in a Roman world where orthopraxy dominated.

Ando (2008: xi, 13) argues that rather than Christianised definitions of 'faith', the Romans possessed 'knowledge', defined as confidence in the demonstrable efficacy of repetitive ritual acts rather than intellectual discourse. However, it was not an emotionless process or one lacking in theological rigour, though its emotional aspects can be harder to access (Patzelt 2020: 15). Scheid (2003: 18) suggests that rather than emotion being absent, its control was considered a virtue. However, orthopraxy and orthodoxy need not be seen as dichotomous. Hunt (2016: 209–211) sees the distinction as "artificial and misleading", arguing that it is rooted in later Protestant criticisms of Roman Catholicism as founded on the unthinking performance of 'rites'. Rives (2019: 4) proposes that "all practice necessarily presupposes belief and belief is in all cases both communicated by and more importantly shaped by practice". Harvey (2014: 101) discusses the Epicurian Lucretius' opinion that true piety lay in tranquil contemplation rather than sacrificial acts, evidencing the existence of cognitive approaches to religion in the ancient world.

A focus on ritual activity over theological discourse should not therefore lead to perceptions that religion in the Roman world was insincere or lacking in contemplative or emotional investment. After all, the correct and timely performance of rituals remains important for modern monotheisms.

### 3.3.3 Religious authority

Knowledge of the existence of gods was not innate or universal, but required the transmission of specific information about their abilities and communicative requirements (Gordon 2020a: 988). Religious practitioners therefore wielded some control over innovation and conformity, and religious and social authority were intimately connected (Lipka 2009: 67–70; Revell 2016a: 68). The socio-political power that enabled individuals to assume positions of religious authority was reinforced through their privileged relationship with the gods. Provincial socio-political power might have been additionally strengthened in this cycle if the religious authority related to a state cult, for example that of the Imperial Cult (Hingley 2011) or a dominant local ethnic (tribal?) deity. Max Weber termed the conservatism displayed by Roman elites in order to legitimise their position through maintaining tradition the "theodicy of good fortune" (cited in Lipka 2009: 174; see also Gordon 2013: 263), though as Derks (1998: 18) observes, politically-minded actions should not be cynically assumed to lack genuine religious

motivations. The wielding of religious authority was not without risk, however. Altering precedent might cause both religious and socio-political power to be challenged or rejected, and tensions might exist between traditional and innovative knowledge.

Though cataloguing Rome's various priesthoods has been a mainstay of classical scholarship, research into religious authority has increasingly considered their social as well as religious roles, such as their restricted accessibility for the average worshipper requiring pastoral care and the economic and political opportunities presented by entry to elite priesthoods (Rüpke and Santangelo 2017). Though priests were publicly visible role models at public rituals and were undoubtedly influential, they did not possess a monopoly on religious knowledge. Various individuals possessed and dispensed religious knowledge, doing so as more of a 'profession' than those holding formal priestly titles, and perhaps offering the means to exert a level of social influence otherwise denied them. The landscape was likely competitive (Waldner 2013: 218–219), and Gordon (2020a) has explored the continuum between dominant ("legitimate") and subordinate ("illegitimate") religious knowledge; grouping the wide diaspora of the latter into wise women, rhizotomists (herbalists), urban ritual specialists (diviners) and "advocates of the power of the marvellous". Gordon (2017a) also considers the influence of charismatic entrepreneurs, "mystagogues", in creating and controlling religious communities, with Rüpke (2014: 2; 2018a: 324) further suggesting that such individuals achieved success "when their explanatory models found confirmation in the contexts of their clients' precarious lifestyles", and that they could go to great lengths to erect and safeguard group boundaries.

### 3.3.4 Religion 'in the making'

> *"Religious agency … is not about the whimsical decisions of lonely individual actors. Rather it is concerned with the insight that traditional action is kept alive by individuals repeating it, that even written instructions are powerless if not enacted by individuals, and that basically every repetition, re-enactment, or even copying, is an act of appropriation that modifies its models."* (Rüpke 2018a: 144)

Religious rituals represent a form of discourse through which people communicated with divine beings and with each other (Revell 2008: 146; Rüpke 2014: 5; 2018a: 300). They

comprised bespoke combinations of time, place, human and divine actors, sounds, gestures, and offerings to accomplish the desired goal, or at least transfer responsibility for its success to the divine agent. Such ritual assemblages were simultaneously created within and served to define social, cultural and religious relationships and environments and required constant negotiation between religious authorities, worshippers, and deities (Rüpke *et al*. 2015; Rüpke and Degelmann 2015).

Woolf (2013: 147–148) sees ritual acts as simultaneously conservative and creative, repetitive but never routinized, and reflecting tension between the timelessness of ritual action and implicit claims to the uniqueness and immediacy of each performance. Religious change begins with the actions of individuals, not organisations (Gasparini *et al*. 2020: 3), and every ritual act was a creative performance, sanctioned by precedent but possessing the capacity to influence future acts, contextualised within and subsequently judged by the real or imagined communities in which it occurred. This concept of religion as something perpetually 'in the making', a phrase adopted from Whitehead (1926), is central to the LAR approach's understanding of religion as "a precarious practice, whose referents ('gods') and communicative strategies are constantly in need of investment-labour of different kinds in order to maintain their plausibility" (Albrecht *et al*. 2018: 2).

Though religious change might be stimulated by ineffectiveness or objectionability (e.g. Woolf 1998: 236; Ando 2008: xiv, 13), creativity should not be perceived only as dissent or a response to failure. Kiernan (2020: 6, 145) discusses the elaboration of religious offerings at temples over time, earlier offerings even becoming foci for later donatives; previous acts thereby influencing future performances. Some religious communities expressed their identities through deliberately playing with the boundaries between tradition and exotic innovation through clothing and unique sensory experiences, including followers of Isis (Alvar Nuño, Alvar Ezquerra, and Martínez Maza 2021) or Cybele (Sierra del Molino and Campos Méndez 2021); adapting to specific local religious contexts through being excitingly exotic without becoming dangerously different. Sensory decadence risked being perceived as moral decay (Harvey 2014: 103).

The transmission of religious knowledge has been argued to have been facilitated through repetitive observation, imitation and experience rather than formal instruction (Revell 2007: 226–227; Raja and Rüpke 2015b: 14–15). In provincial contexts with lower literacy rates, the

encountering of religious truths through such experiences would have been particularly significant (Revell 2007: 226–7; 2008: 116). Graham (2020: 22–25) explores the personal experiences of such constantly negotiated communication through her concepts of "distal" and "proximal" religious knowledge. The former represents knowledge obtained through witnessing ritual events or depictions of them, whereas the latter is knowledge attained through direct personal embodied and sensorial experience. One individual's proximal experience is another's observed distal knowledge. Distal knowledge concerns the structure of religious practices, what to do, when, where and how, while proximal knowledge is highly contextualised and constantly evolving, and it is here that the potential for individual ritual creativity is most prevalent. However, Graham (2020: 28) argues that proximal and distal experiences should not be disconnected, instead viewed as "the entwined products of an active relationship between multiple scales of experience" which produce nuanced understandings of disparate religious experiences. She sees materiality and embodiment as crucial to the centring of individual experiences, and I will now consider the material turn in archaeology, and its impact on studies of religion.

## 3.4 The material and ontological turns

Since the 1980s, there has been increased interest in material culture across the humanities and social sciences, to the extent that it has been considered a meta-discipline (Carp 2011: 474; Houlbrook and Armitage 2015a: 4; Bräunlein 2016: 368), with archaeology fundamental in theorising this 'material culture turn' (Meskell 2005: 1; Hicks 2010: 4; Hicks and Beaudry 2010: 2; Bräunlein 2016). The ubiquity and familiarity of the material world has often led to the scale of its impact on human life being overlooked (Miller 2005: 5; Knappett 2013), focus placed instead on the form and consumption of objects and their ability to illustrate literary-derived narratives; the 'cultural' aspects of material culture privileged over the 'material' (Graves-Brown 2000: 1; Conneller 2012: 24, 26; Hodder 2012b: 2; Gardner 2017b: 203). However, "people are socialized into particular material worlds which exist prior to their birth" (Gosden 2005: 197), and material culture is not only culturally fluid but fundamental to understanding people's lives, social interactions and multiple identities (Eckardt 2014: 2), subject to various, context-dependent interpretations (Eckardt and Müldner 2016: 206), and possessing its own agency (Gosden 2005).

Representation has been a key issue in the materiality debate, challenging the restriction of the production and consumption of objects to simple proxies for identities, economic activities or beliefs (Olsen 2010: 4; 2012: 22; Barrett 2016: 1682; Van Oyen and Pitts 2017: 4); "pots equalling people" (Buchli 2008: 180). While some have argued against fully anti-representational approaches in which "meaning only resides in the affordances of the medium" (Knappett 2007: 22; see also Hurcombe 2007: 539; Hamilakis 2013: 88–89), others (e.g. Ingold 2007a; Olsen 2010), argue that the properties of the 'matter' material culture studies hoped to bring into focus require greater prominence. Hurcombe (2007: 538) argues for a more nuanced approach in which the properties of materials, technological processes and functional performance are not "boring sidelines to the goal of social meanings ... but ... crucial pathways towards this goal". Such a consideration is key to new approaches to materiality, in which 'things' become viewed as intrinsically significant and not merely inert canvasses for human expression (Graves-Brown 2000: 3; Olsen 2012: 22–23; Maldonado and Russell 2016: 8–9; Hodder 2016: 13).

This 'new materiality' challenges the lingering anthropocentrism of material culture studies, decentring human agency and recognising the significance of non-human matter in the creation and maintenance of identities (Bräunlein 2016: 377–8; Govier and Steel 2021: 301). Paralleling the wider philosophical 'ontological turn',[5] it rejects essentialist Cartesian dualisms such as culture/nature, animate/inanimate and subject/object, viewing humans and 'things' as mutually-influencing actors (Conneller 2012; Ingold 2012; Knappett 2013: 4702; Thomas, Julian 2015: 1288; Malafouris 2016; Hodder 2016: 17; Harris and Cipolla 2017: 28–32; Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018: 3).[6]

Post-humanist approaches such as Deleuze and Guattari's (1983; 1988) 'assemblage theory' propose that 'things' traditionally separated as being cultural (e.g. language, buildings, objects), natural (e.g. plants, weather conditions, body parts) or immaterial (e.g. divine entities, magnetic forces, radio waves), actually comprise unruly tangles. This relational model stresses the

[5] 'Ontological' refers to questions of reality as opposed to 'epistemological' concerns about knowledge (Alberti 2016: 164–165; Harris 2016: 18; Harris and Cipolla 2017: 27). This approach is also known as 'symmetrical archaeology', referencing the equality of humans and non-humans (see e.g. Witmore 2007; Olsen *et al*. 2012: 12–14; cf. Ingold 2012: 430; Hodder 2016: 13).

[6] The use of 'thing' in material culture studies attempts to avoid dichotomies of naturally-occurring and man-made 'objects' (Henare *et al*. 2007: 4; Olsen 2010: 156). However, the term lacks definition (Miller 2005: 7; Govier and Steel 2021: 303), and Govier and Steel (2021) argue that emphasising 'things' over 'matter' continues anthropocentric perspectives.

connectivity between such elements. No element, either human or non-human, dominates but all are mutually influencing and their relationships inherently unstable (Fowler 2013; Hazard 2013: 65; Witmore 2014; Alberti 2016: 166; Crellin 2017: 118; Crellin *et al*. 2021: 7). Attempts to subsequently conceptualise these elements and relationships include Actor Network Theory (Latour 2005), 'meshworks' (Ingold 2006: 13–14; 2007b: 35; 2008), 'material vitality' (Bennett 2010), 'entanglement' (Hodder 2012b; 2016), 'Object-Oriented Ontology' (Harman 2018) and 'enchainment' (Graham 2017; McKie 2019). Key differences in these approaches surround the relative centrality of the elements, the variable strengths and outcomes of the relationships, and the extent to which they are in flux (Barrett 2016; Harris and Cipolla 2017: 185–188; Harris 2021; Govier and Steel 2021). These theoretical perceptions of ever-shifting relationships both formed by and expressed through material culture, of "constant change the norm not the exception" (Crellin *et al*. 2021: 46), are extremely compatible with LAR's concept of religion 'in the making'.

That various non-human elements in assemblages can be as agentic as humans have been significantly influenced by theories of 'personhood' (Fowler 2010) and 'Indigenous thought' (Alberti 2016: 171–2; Crellin *et al*. 2021: 7). Who or what might possess personhood is a cultural construct (Bräunlein 2016: 387–8), and perceptions of 'how the world works' are not universal. When faced with anthropological or archaeological evidence contradicting the researcher's worldview, the 'other' worldview should not be presumed mistaken or deviant, such as with studies of 'fetishism' (Keane 1998; Meyer 2010; Harris and Cipolla 2017: 184; Howes et al. 2018: 317–319). Such a mindset is particularly apposite when considering communicating with supernatural agents in the ancient world, and the 'othering' inherent in dichotomies of 'world' and 'ethnic' religions (Chapter 1.3.1).

Museums have a role to play in exploring such concepts. Knappett (2013: 4703) considers them "good laboratories" for considering ontological approaches to material culture, forcing us to "stand back" and objectively consider our relationships with objects. However, museums have been slow to adopt such thinking. Thomas' (2016: 50) claim that, in a museum, "a sword, a pot, a blanket, a ring or a mask all bear material properties that do not change, are recognisable across cultures and epochs" is unsupportable through the lenses of new materialism and alternate ontologies. The concepts underlying the material and ontological turns require greater integration into museum theorisation, something considered further in Chapter 4.

## 3.5 Material, embodied and sensorial religion in the Roman world

### 3.5.1 Materiality

The new materiality has begun to significantly influence the study of religion in the Roman world, though the differing scholarly priorities of archaeology, art history and ancient history have hindered its development (Adrych and Dalglish 2020b). However, Geertzian views of religious material culture as symbols transmitting knowledge about inner beliefs for those able to decode them remain influential. Berg *et al* (2021: 9), for example, describe domestic Roman religious objects as "material proxies reflecting ... ephemeral acts of speech and gesture". Graham (2020) criticises the reduction of material culture to visual representations of (usually literary-derived) beliefs. She argues instead for applications of assemblage theory to religious practices, proposing that, as discussed above, affective agency should be viewed not as inherently possessed by either humans or things but emergent from the relationships between them. Such relationships include the divine beings which might make otherwise prosaic assemblages 'religious' (Graham 2020: 29–30, 37). Mol and Versluys (2015: 452) similarly argue, using the cults of Mithras and Isis, that deliberate assemblages of space, architecture, decoration, objects, clothing and music served to simultaneously constitute and express these specific religious identities.

Plants have become increasingly recognised as significant components of religious assemblages, exerting active agency on human and non-human elements, despite often being considered passive environmental indicators (Pitt 2015; Lodwick 2017; Graham 2018). Beyond specific associations between deities and plants (e.g. Cybele/Attis and pinecones) or their sensory affordances (e.g. colour and smell), their geographic and seasonal availability, varying growth cycles, symbiotic relationships with other plants and animals, and affective properties when touched or ingested, made plants influential for what they did, not just what they were. Webb and Selsvold's (2020) discussion of Ephesian Artemis demonstrates how her imagery represents an assemblage incorporating living beings (humans, plants and animals), divine beings, mythical hybrid beings, and non-living beings (including monuments and minerals).

### 3.5.2 Embodiment and the senses

> *"Religions are as much felt, sensed and experienced as they are thought and believed, ... sensory practices are not merely expressions of belief and doctrines; rather religion/s consist of sensory practice."* (Grieser and Johnston 2017: 3)

Embodiment is the study of the human body as a social construct; as much a 'thing' in ongoing processes of 'becoming' as a natural substance or human-made artefact (Merleau-Ponty 1945; Mauss 1973; Crossland 2010: 3–4; Ingold 2012: 437–8). Embodiment in archaeology investigates the significance of sensorial, intellectual and symbolic engagements between humans and non-humans; how or by whom a thing was worn or held (perhaps sanctioned through formal or informal social and religious rules), how it affected the user's social interactions, or how individuals perceived themselves and others. Lived religion is an inherently embodied approach (McGuire 2008: 216, 324; Graham 2020: 20; Knibbe and Kupari 2020: 161). Criticisms of applications of embodiment have included its focus on individuals over groups (Skeates 2010: 19), and preoccupations with representation; viewing the body as a surface onto which cultural markers are placed rather than humans being mutually affected by dress, adornments, cosmetics or bodily modifications (Meskell 2000; Joyce 2005: 144–145; Hamilakis 2013: 7–8), echoing the materiality debate.

The senses are the interface between the body and the external world. Early archaeological sensory studies were pioneered through landscape phenomenology (Tilley 1994; Betts 2017: 1–2; Harris and Cipolla 2017: 95–104), though its impact was muted by adverse reactions to its subjectivity and insufficiently critical methodologies (Skeates and Day 2020a: 1–2). Subsequent research, however, has embraced post-humanist perspectives, forefronting the ubiquity of embodied sensorial experiences and challenging traditional definitions. The Aristotelian 'five senses' (exteroceptors) of sight, touch, taste, smell and hearing have been deconstructed, and greater consideration given to senses such as proprioception and kinaesthesia (awareness of the position and movement of the body respectively), intuition, memory, and the passage of time (Tarlow 2000; Skeates 2010; Harris and Sørensen 2010; Hamilakis 2013: 24–34, 73–75; Howes 2020: 22, 28; Alvar Nuño, Alvar Ezquerra, and Martínez Maza 2021: 394).

The senses are culturally shaped and mediated (Joyce 2005: 147; Skeates 2010: 18–21; Hamilakis 2013: 9; Betts 2017: 1; Howes 2020: 22). Cultural groups possess their own "ways of sensing" (Howes and Classen 2014) which relate to their wider ontologies; "social norms are sensory norms" (Howes 2006: 163). The asymmetry and disproportion of heads and hands in Iron Age and Romano-British imagery, for example, might be viewed not as artistically deficient, but as a communicative device focusing attention on and empowering specific body parts and their sensory affordances (Aldhouse-Green 2004: 13).

Post-Enlightenment western ocular-centrism has dominated interpretations of the past, elevating the significance of visual stimuli (Ingold 2000: 155; Day 2013: 3–4; Betts 2017: 3; cf. Smith 2007: 8–18) and even creating a 'sensory anaesthesia' which represses other sensory experiences; over-reliance on smell, taste or touch historically perceived as irrational or even animalistic (Classen and Howes 2006: 206; Smith 2007: 2; Hamilakis 2013: 55; Alvar Nuño, Alvar Ezquerra, and Woolf 2021). However, the world is experienced, understood and remembered through a complex sensorium and the simultaneous interplay of the senses (synaesthesia) (Butler and Purves 2014; Patzelt 2020: 12; Alvar Nuño, Alvar Ezquerra, and Woolf 2021: 17). Hamilakis (2013: 126–128), considering the role of the senses within wider assemblage theory, proposes specifically "sensorial assemblages" which "produce place and locality through evocative, affective and mnemonic performances and interactions". Though accessing ancient sensoria is challenging (Baltussen 2020: 35), evocations of past sensory experiences are as important as exact reconstructions (Skeates and Day 2020b: 560). Bradley (2021: 131) observes:

> *"It is important to think beyond sensory studies as a sort of reconstruction exercise in which we imagine what it would be like to experience the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of the ancient world. We need to question why sense and sensation matter in these contexts."*

The centrality of sensory stimuli to religious experiences makes ancient religion a productive field of study for sensory archaeologies (Harvey 2014: 96; Hunter-Crawley 2020: 443; Alvar Nuño, Alvar Ezquerra, and Woolf 2021: 21; Bradley 2021). Alvar Nuño (2021: 9) argues that approaching religion through the senses further dismantles artificial dualities between mind (belief) and body (ritual). Grand-Clément (2021: 147) suggests three primary ritual sensory

regimes: *multisensory* (specific combinations of non-everyday sensory effects), *hypersensory* (sensory overstimulation) and *hyposensory* (sensory deprivation).

Revell (2008: 139–140) argues that religious sites contributed to the multisensory experiences of urban life through the noises of animals and the smells of burning meat and wafting incense, though Weddle's (2013) comparative study of Islamic animal sacrifices suggests that faeces may have overpowered more refined scents. Kamash *et al* (2010: 104) conversely consider the temple *temenos* as a sensory barrier, restricting not only sight but also sounds and smells to those permitted within. It is the *control* of access to specific sensory assemblages which is significant to the maintenance of religious authority, olfactory and auditory experiences as privileged as those which were visual. Each participant or observer experienced differing sensorial stimuli depending on their position and role in the ritual (Graham 2020: 86–88), which might be determined by social status or gender (Várhelyi 2015). Clothing might also enforce sensory restrictions, the pulling of the toga over the head (*capite velato*), for example, limiting peripheral vision and muffling sound (Graham 2020: 103–4).

Although artificial divisions of the senses have been criticised (e.g. Hamilakis 2013: 14; Hunter-Crawley 2020: 444), presenting complex synaesthetic experiences in writing risks confusing more than illuminating. Individual senses have distinct cultural and scholarly histories and for clarity I employ a similar sensory separation to most major scholarship in the following sections.

#### *3.5.2.1 Place and movement*

Kinaesthesia and proprioception are historically under-studied, but have prompted new perspectives on ritual places and activity, such as through considerations of dance (Fless and Moede 2007; Naerebout 2015) and processions (Bernstein 2007; Luginbühl 2015; Stavrianopoulou 2015). Graham (2020: 48–9) suggests that religious motion might be *explicit* (e.g. pilgrimage, dance, prostration) or *implicit* (e.g. bending to make an offering, washing hands). Sensory studies have begun to explore religious places as not merely the settings for religious acts, but integral to their performance and experiences (Graham 2020: 47), constantly in a state of becoming through seasonal change or the addition and removal of offerings. As Moser and Feldman (2014: 1) argue, "sacred space does not exist *a priori*", it is the combination of place and activity that creates ritual experiences. Dickenson (2021: 285), for example,

observes the use of nominally commercial and governmental spaces such as *fora* as places of public assembly for religious festivals or processions. The environmental and landscape settings of religious acts, movement to and around them, and the bodily positions adopted, therefore contribute to unique sensory assemblages. As Elsner (2017) cautions, however, care must be taken not to imbue ancient religious travel with later Christian concepts.

A street traversed daily presents a different sensory assemblage when walked during a religious procession, not only through clothing, sounds and smells, but the emotion of being observed by peers. Changing surfaces might be significant, such as transitioning from smooth paving slabs to the crunchy sand of a temple *temenos*. Graham (2020: 57–66) discusses the steep steps and dramatic ramps at Praeneste's sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia which perhaps distinguished pre- and post-experience visitors. Those ascending did so under covered walkways, restricting their view and perhaps intensifying emotions, while those descending had freer movement and sight of the wider landscape. Movement might therefore be intimately connected with emotions, reflecting changes in health, personal circumstances or social status.

#### *3.5.2.2 Touch*

Touch should be broadly defined to include such sensations as surfaces under the feet, clothes against the body, wind in the face, or the anticipatory tingling of the skin. Though often considered a low sense compared with sight or hearing (Classen 2012: xii), it may have held greater significance in the ancient world. Aristotle and Pliny the Elder, for example, considered touch able to discern the truth of reality (Purves 2017a: 5). However, though archaeology has much to offer studies of touch, the Ancient Senses series 'Touch' volume (Purves 2017b) only features one chapter (Platt and Squire 2017) not based on literary texts.

Touch was a significant element of religious practices, with various offerings (living and inert) handled during ritual acts. Madigan (2013) argues that the carrying of statuary in processions was strictly prescribed, and Graham (2020: 95) similarly considers the complex sensorial experiences of holding, processing with and ultimately opening incense boxes. Both Seneca and Ovid described cult statues being treated as if human, being bathed, anointed, garlanded, perfumed, having their hair coiffed and even presented with mirrors to approve their appearance (Kiernan 2020: 13, 203–4). Weddle (2010: 1) described such touch as "regular", contrasting it with "irregular" touch which might include "sexual and violent" contact.

However, while washing and anointing may have been 'regular' in terms of repetition, its restriction to specific individuals made it a highly contextualised and privileged act not reflective of the sensory experiences of the majority.

Hughes (2018) considers three ways in which mortals and divine forces might interact through touch: "transgressive touch" (contact with forbidden objects and bodies), "punitive touch" (deities punishing transgressors) and "asynchronous touch" (mortals and divinities both touching offerings). She notes an inscription from Asia Minor which required physical contact during oath-taking to demonstrate purity. Lennon (2017) similarly discusses the holding of altars during offerings, and prohibitions on certain individuals or professions from specific places or acts through perceived pollution; restrictions on touch thereby reflecting both social and religious authority and status.

#### *3.5.2.3 Sight*

Though post-Enlightenment privileging of the visual has been challenged, the culturally-specific and multisensory contexts of sight remain important. Rituals, for example, might involve both seeing and being seen by the deity (e.g. Jenkyns 2013: 236; Kiernan 2020; Muñiz Grijalvo 2021: 201). Elsner (2007: 22–26) stresses the significance of this reciprocal gaze, what he terms "ritual-centred viewing" (in contrast to "naturalistic (aesthetic) viewing"), being seen by the god not just representing the culmination of ritual acts but their very purpose.[7] Other forms of sight were less desirable or required active avoidance, such as the envious gaze of the evil eye (Chapter 5.4.2).

The deliberate use, or restriction, of light should be considered an important visual stimulus within religious environments, providing dramatic highlights and suggestive shadows, causing disorientation or heightening attention (Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2007: 237; Albrecht *et al.* 2018: 13; Skovmøller and Hildebrandt 2019: 53–55). Materials such as chalk (Aldhouse-Green 2004: 107) or applied paintwork (Campbell 2020) may have been dramatically visible in reduced-light environments. Oil lamps are often considered primarily domestic objects, yet greater quantities in Britain have been found in non-domestic contexts (Hutchinson 1986). As "religious instantiations of the first order" (Albrecht *et al.* 2018: 13), they may have particular

[7] This is paralleled in darsan, the Hindu concept of the reciprocal gaze of deity statues (Carp 2011: 484; Dudley 2015: 51; Kiernan 2020: 18)

associations with mystery cults (Eckardt 2011: 191; Ferris 2012: 57; Walsh 2018a: 10; Kiernan 2020: 141–142), such as through the dramatic use of light created by perforated altars to Mithras (Fig 6.11). Possible interactions between light and water, creating mesmerising reflections and obscuring depth, have been argued with regard to Rome's fountain of Anna Perenna (Graham 2020: 184–5) and the sacred spring at Bath (McKie 2017: 57).

Colours also bore significance in the Roman world, such as black being symbolic of "night, death and ill-omens" (Eckardt 2014: 124), the golden glow of amber representing fire or the sun (Davis 2018: 73), or certain colours of animals being preferred for sacrifice (Mantzilas 2016). The prominent placement of a silvered brooch and red bead atop the structured deposit at Wattle Syke (Chadwick 2015: 51) is unlikely to have been accidental. The reflective, shimmering qualities of inclusions such as mica must also be considered as a deliberately sought effect influencing material selection (Aldhouse-Green 2012: 205; Eckardt 2014: 95). As Bradley (2014: 128) cautions, however, "classical colours ... do not always make sense in our own sensory repertoires".

#### *3.5.2.4 Hearing*

Hearing has, alongside sight, been traditionally associated with intellect and culture (Howes and Classen 2014: 2–3). Ritual sounds can be considered as both deliberate and ambient, and though the former has prompted greater interest the latter could be equally affective. Hutton (1991: 205) described the gush of blood as the "great emotional centrepiece" of sacrifices, yet Weddle (2013: 145) expressed surprise that it was the sound rather than the sight of arterial blood hitting the floor at an Islamic sacrifice which provided the overriding sensory stimulus. Ritual sounds, including vocalisations, might have summoned or symbolised the presence of the supernatural (Skeates 2010: 40), repelled malevolent forces (Crummy 2010: 53), or masked inauspicious or unwelcome intrusions (Beard *et al*. 1998: 129; Aldhouse-Green 2012: 202; Graham 2020: 104). They therefore represent powerful aspects of communication with the divine, and the ability to create or control timely and appropriate sounds was to possess religious (and therefore social) authority. Ritual sounds have been the focus of some Romano-British religious studies, including the use of bells (Crummy 2010: 53–54; Eckardt and Williams 2018) and rattles (Esposito 2019: 54–56). Aldhouse-Green (2012: 195) suggests that statues depicted with open mouths may represent acts of speaking or chanting.

Holistic soundscapes have been explored across entire urban sites such as Ostia (Veitch 2017) and within specific structures such as bath houses (Laurence 2010: 67), and the uniquely identifiable sounds produced during ritual performances likely formed part of ambient soundscapes (Belayche 2021). That soundscapes could reflect specific religious groups and contribute to group identity has been considered with regard to the cults of Cybele (Sierra del Molino and Campos Méndez 2021) and Isis (Alvar Nuño, Alvar Ezquerra, and Martínez Maza 2021). Ovid wondered why Cybele "delight(ed) in continual din", and instrumental specialisations may have informed internal cult identities (Sierra del Molino and Campos Méndez 2021: 260).

#### *3.5.2.5 Smell*

Smell was a particularly denigrated sense during the 18th and 19th centuries (Classen *et al*. 1994: 3–4), yet smells were crucial to the deliberate creation of religious environments (Bradley 2015: 12; Rubio 2021: 185) and a means of communicating with the divine (Clements 2015: 50–53). Newstead and Casimiro (2020) argue for an increased focus on "the smell of things" in material culture studies.

Archaeologically, smells are generally detected through their containing vessels. Derrick (2018) argues for greater consideration of the ritual as well as cosmetic uses of glass *unguentaria*. Bacchic scenes on a copper alloy *balsamarium* from Kent (Worrell and Pearce 2013: 376–379) suggests its use in that cult's rituals. Eckardt (2014: 44) discusses bucket-form pendants containing traces of animal fats, suggesting they perhaps contained a substance serving an apotropaic or healing function; Aldhouse-Green (2004: 225) suggests that bucket motifs more generally may relate to hidden knowledge and memory. Ceramic incense burners (*tazza*) are well-attested archaeologically, and Aldhouse-Green (2017: 331) discusses an inscribed example from a possible house-shrine at Chartres, France, suggesting the ritual use of smoke and perhaps hallucinogens.

Archaeobotanical evidence increasingly demonstrates the presence of organic substances which might produce not only smells, but more extreme, even hazardous, sensory experiences. A well at Dalton Parlours villa, for example, produced deadly nightshade, henbane, hemlock, purging flax and self-heal (Chadwick 2015: 41). It has been argued (e.g. Hamilakis 2013: 50–1; Lodwick 2019) that production processes and nutritional studies have taken precedence over

the appearance, taste and smell of plants and animals, and the bodily sensations and changes in consciousness caused by their ingestion.

The concept of 'smellscapes' (Porteous 1985; 1990) considers how smells interact with their environments to influence people's perceptions and actions. Derrick's (2017) study of Vindolanda suggested that the smells of the temple of Jupiter Dolichenus and the shrine of the standards might have affected the experiences and behaviours of people moving through the site, perhaps offering respite from the fort's other smells. As discussed above, however, not all ritual smells were pleasant. Graham (2020: 157) suggests that even cult statues presented a mixture of aromas:

> *"the metallic scent of bronze, the earthiness of terracotta, and the tang of oils and paint ... fresh and decomposing organic matter [,] ... with the aroma of incense clinging to the clothes of participants, the dress of the statue, or other fabrics adorning the cult space."*

The smellscape of hot springs are particularly notable: "while not all hot water is sulphurous, all sulphurous water is smelly" (Edlund-Berry 2006: 172). Encounters with the sensory affordances of such water (including heat and steam) would have differed between open-air and confined spaces, and its structural containment, for example at Bath (Chapter 5.4.3.2), would have increased the intensity of such experiences.

A significant aspect of smell is its tendency to linger. Weddle (2013: 154) noted the lasting whiff of blood and excrement following Islamic sacrifices, and McKie (2017: 52) suggested that smells lingering in the Bath temple courtyard might remind subsequent visitors of previous acts. Participants likely carried ritual scents with them into other aspects of their lives, perhaps influencing how others perceived them. Scents could also be used to influence attitudes and emotions, Plutarch describing how the cult of Isis used scents throughout the day, to purify the air in the morning, dispel disease at midday and calm in the evening (Alvar Nuño, Alvar Ezquerra, and Woolf 2021: 20; Alvar Nuño, Alvar Ezquerra, and Martínez Maza 2021: 411). The economic availability of particular smells and their culturally-specific reception have been considered by Nuño *et al* (2021: 408), who observe that smells associated with the Isis cult are likely to have varied geographically based on local supply networks. The scents associated with specific cults, the ability to identify them, and what was considered 'exotic' or conjured

images of certain places therefore varied across the Roman world. Toner (2015: 158–9) and Harvey (2006: 2) argue that Christian attitudes to ritual smells changed from them being shunned as indicators of indulgent pagan immorality, to later becoming central to ritual practices and an important element in identity formation.

#### *3.5.2.6 Taste*

Taste is irrevocably connected with smell, and these combined senses are particularly emotive. Rudolph (2017) explores the complexity of taste and its associations with social status, health, and even morality. The tasting organ, the tongue, was associated in the Graeco-Roman world with speech and the ability to influence, and therefore also culture and education, and even oracular prophecy (Mastrocinque 2021). Taste was important in defining social and ethnic groups (Gowers 2017: 92), with religious communities particularly influential in regulating food intake, often for moral reasons (Caseau 2017: 228–9). The sharing of ritual meals meant consuming not only food but its social and symbolic meaning, creating relationships between providers and consumers, and even enabling the crossing of mortal/divine boundaries (Warren 2017; Robinson 2020). The denial of taste through fasting could be a form of purification or heighten sensitivity to other ritual experiences (Rubio 2021: 180).

Harvey (2014: 93) argued that religious taste should not be restricted to ritual meals or sacrificial meats, but also harvested crops which demonstrated successful human-divine relationships. Livarda (2017: 182) identified 56 condiments, fruits, vegetables and nuts which became available in northern provinces through Roman trade networks and inevitably influenced ritual flavour profiles. Dates seem to have become associated with ritual contexts, especially the Isis cult where they contributed to the creation of Nilotic landscapes (Livarda 2017: 184–5; Alvar Nuño, Alvar Ezquerra, and Martínez Maza 2021: 412). Kamash (2018) discusses the ritual prioritising of sweet (e.g. honeyed cakes) and salty (e.g. *mola salsa*) flavour profiles. Through analysis of animal remains from mithraea, she playfully suggested specific ritual menus:

> *"Mithras fried chicken, spit-roasted suckling pig and lamb served with salsamenta, elder and lentil broth. Hazelnuts are available for snacking. Under no circumstances may beef be eaten at this festival!"*

## 3.6 Summary and Analysis Statements

In this chapter I have discussed the significance of the LAR approach for conceptualising religious activity as the result of myriad influential ritual acts, entangled within social, political and economic networks. Religious activity has been demonstrated to have been dynamic, adaptable to the changing circumstances and needs of individuals, and influenced by differing levels of religious authority. I then considered the significance of the material and ontological turns in conceptualising religious activity, the creation of religious assemblages, and challenging perceptions of the mutually-influencing and agentic relationships between humans, 'things' and divine actors.

I then turned to the complex and expanding discourse on the senses in scholarship of religion in the Roman world. This demonstrated that religious actions in the Roman world were intensely sensorial, not only in terms of sights, sounds and smells, but also the significance of less traditionally considered senses such as taste and embodied movements and gestures. Such sensory experiences were not isolated but formed part of complex assemblages which served to create and maintain distinct religious identities and underpin relationships between individuals, communities and divine entities.

Based on the discussions presented in this chapter, Table 3.1 sets out the Analysis Statements which will be used in my analyses of displays.

| |
|---|
| “Religion is a dynamic social construct, ‘always in the making’, individual decisions make every religious act a contextually specific, creative performance with the agency to influence future performances.” |
| “Embodied, sensory and emotional stimuli were central to individual lived religious experiences and the creation and maintenance of religious identities, communities and relationships.” |
| “Social, political, economic and religious power are intrinsically entwined and require constant negotiation as part of both tangible and imagined communities.” |
| “The materiality of objects is as significant to understanding their ritual significance and functionality as their form and iconography.” |

*Table 3.1: Chapter 3 Analysis Statements*

# Chapter 4:

# Multisensory and Material Religion in Museums

## 4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 centred upon archaeological approaches to religious material culture and the senses, conceptualizing the culturally-specific experiences and interactions of individuals and things. In this chapter I consider parallel developments within museum studies and increased scholarly focus on moving beyond museums as spaces of purely visual appreciation. I first consider the creation of meanings by museum visitors and the application of multisensory museologies, before discussing the scholarship of contemporary material religion in museums. Finally, I discuss the use of creative language in museum interpretation to 'critically disrupt' visitors' ontological preconceptions of religion in Roman Britain.

## 4.2 Museum meanings beyond the aesthetic gaze

This section considers the impact of sensory studies on museums, and how multisensory interactions between museum displays and visitors contribute to the creation of myriad meanings. How objects are displayed and contextualised is fundamental to how they are understood and interpreted (Chapter 1.4), yet the primacy of visual engagement with material culture is so ingrained in museum display methodologies and behavioural expectations that the paradigm was rarely questioned until recently. The significance of objects is so directly related to restrictions on non-visual engagement with them ('look but don't touch') that Shanks and Tilley (1987: 79) considered the aesthetic commodification of objects a form of voyeurism. This is heightened by the ubiquity of glass vitrines and the physical, psychological and ideological barriers they present (Witcomb 2003: 106; Classen and Howes 2006: 218; Foster 2013: 371, 378; Berns 2016). This can be particularly significant for religious objects, the glass

becoming a spiritual as well as physical barrier, turning vivacious religious objects into lifeless museum pieces and preventing authentic interactions (Berns 2016).

This was not always the case. Aristocratic cabinets of curiosity centred around multisensory object engagements; hearing, smelling and touching crucial to understanding (Classen 2007; Hamilakis 2013: 47; Foster 2013: 372; Howes 2014a: 288). Sophie de la Roche, for example, imagined a personal connection with the deceased while touching cremated human remains and holding a Roman mirror at the British Museum in 1786 (Classen and Howes 2006: 201–202; Classen 2007). During the 19th century, however, associations between visual appreciations of culture and rationality (Krmpotich 2020: 96), combined with growing numbers of (working class) visitors, led to interactive museum visiting habits becoming inappropriate, what Bennett termed the "exhibitionary complex" (Bennett 1995; Classen and Howes 2006: 207; Classen 2007: 897; Howes 2014a: 288; Rees Leahy 2014; Rees Leahy 2016).

Even interpretation was deemed a distraction from the understanding gained through the power of the pure aesthetic gaze (Kistler and Tattersdill 2019: 377).[1] Museums became, and in many ways remain, "empires of sight" (Classen and Howes 2006: 200; Classen 2017: 117–122). As Dudley (2012a: 1; 2015: 43) suggests, it is ironic that museums, for whom material culture is central, have made encounters with objects antithetical to 'real life' experiences. Museographical techniques such as contrasting colour schemes, isolated displays and dramatic lighting serve to reposition cultural objects as 'art' (Whitehead 2012: 25) irrespective of their original contexts. As Kiernan (2020: 279) observes:

> *"The value of (Roman) idols as objects possessed of divine agency greatly exceeded their aesthetic, artistic and iconographic qualities to which we attach so much weight and importance when we view them in museums today."*

Museum scholarship has experienced an early 21st century sensory turn paralleling that in archaeology; what Howes terms "sensory museology" (Howes 2014b; Howes et al. 2018: 333). Various edited volumes (e.g. Pye 2007a; Dudley 2010a; Dudley 2012b; Levent and Pascual-

[1] This mindset retains power. Ouzman (2006: 275) writes of the "tyranny of text" inhibiting experiences and Schultze (2014: 51) discusses text-free displays of contemporary material culture at Berlin's Werkbund-Archive

Leone 2014a) have explored the subject though, as Krmpotich (2020: 95) notes, focus has been on displays rather than practices such as documentation. The following sections discuss how multisensory and embodied engagements with museum objects influence the creation of meanings, not simply through touch or smell, but also through emotional connections and the act of moving through gallery spaces.

### 4.2.1 Creating meanings in museums

Museum displays are complex cultural constructs, the products of various decision-making processes (Chapter 1). Museum interpretation exists to bridge cognitive gaps between visitors and objects, and constructivist thinking since the late 1980s has argued that visitors do not simply passively receive curatorial wisdom imparted through displays and interpretation, but actively construct complex and highly individualised meanings through pre-existing understandings (see e.g. Silverman 1995; Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 116; Ravelli 2006: 14; Macdonald 2006: 3; Mason 2006: 22–4; McCall and Gray 2014: 20; Wood and Latham 2014: 19–20; Thomas 2016: 21; Skeates 2017: 13–18). However, perceptions of interpretation as a didactic process between creator (curator) and receiver (visitor) are pervasive (see e.g. Laneri 2003: 183; Bünz 2017: 400), and constructivist approaches to interpretation have received criticism (see O'Neill 2006: 96–97). Meszaros (2008: 163), for example, dismissively refers to meanings created by visitors as "whatever interpretation".

Constructivist scholars have recognised various agentic elements active in the creation of meaning, whether focussed on visitors ("personal-centred"), environments ("setting-centred") or a combination ("interaction-centred") (Bitgood 2014: 18–22). Wood and Latham's (2014) "Object Knowledge Framework" perceives encounters with museum objects as the intersection between the visitor's "lifeworld" and the context, materiality and museographical setting of the object – its "objectworld". Berns (2015; 2016) employed Actor Network Theory (Chapter 3.4) to acknowledge various elements present in religious museum encounters, including display cases and even supernatural entities, while Pallasmaa (2014: 241) and Tzortzi (2017: 2) highlight the influence of gallery spaces and the ambient environment. Bal (1996; 2007) and Ravelli (2006) distinguish between the meanings created from moving through spaces and those created from engagement with specific objects and their interpretation. Schorch (2015: 441), however, considers "narrative engagements" between visitors and museums to be a

"continuous entanglement" encompassing museum spaces, objects, interpretation and people, arguing that it is crucial to not only consider *what* meanings are made, but *how* they are made.

Museum studies grounded in materiality (Chapter 3.4) have increasingly considered the role of objects in the creation of multisensory and polysemic meanings and the challenging of didactic interpretation. Objects are often restricted to their representational values (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 108–111), relegated to illustrations accompanying text, perhaps of independent aesthetic value but otherwise mute (Dudley 2010b; Dudley 2012a; see also Pearce 1997: 50; Skeates 2002: 210–211). Dudley (2012c: 9) argues for a refocussing of visitor-object interactions "to facilitate a wider or deeper sensory and emotional engagement with an object, rather than to simply enable intellectual comprehension of a story or set of facts presented by the museum". Graham's (2020) concept of distal and proximal religious knowledge (Chapter 3.3.4) presents an interesting parallel here, and we might consider the contrast in experiences obtained through viewing objects through glass (distal) and being able to engage with their multisensorial qualities and considering the differing ontologies of their original users (proximal). Just as Graham recognises that distal and proximal experiences are mutually influencing, Schorch (2014) argues that emotive and intellectual responses to objects are inextricably entwined.

The post-Enlightenment western aesthetic gaze is as alien to Graeco-Roman Europe as it is to more recently colonised lands, but studies of sensory museology and materiality-based object experiences have generally centred on ethnographic, social history and art collections (e.g. Cassim 2007; Johnson 2007; Golding 2010; Christensen 2011; Herle 2012; Howes *et al*. 2018).[2] This focus on aesthetically appealing and charismatic objects disguises the difficulty in applying such approaches to other objects. Archaeological material has been omitted from the discourse, and despite an acceptance they should be reflexive, archaeological displays generally remain didactic (Merriman 1999: 302; Beard and Henderson 1999; Swain 2007: 48, 215; Mills 2013: 1; see also Skeates 2002). Though authoritative curatorial voices are undesirable, contextualising information remains an essential component in the creation of empirically legitimate interpretations of archaeological material.

[2] E.g. a Native American mask depicting "the first ancestor riding on the back of a sea monster" (Johnson 2007), an elaborately carved African headrest (Golding 2010), or Native American snow goggles, Lord Kelvin's Japanese mirror, a marble Buddha and a Whistler painting (Howes *et al*. 2018)

Archaeological displays commonly provide overarching information on text panels and specific interpretations of objects or object-groups through in-case labels. Though interpretative text length is restricted, many labels are particularly minimalistic, providing little more than a classificatory name (e.g. Figs 4.1; 8.4) and thereby elevating objects' aesthetic values over their context. Shanks and Tilley (1987: 70) perceived minimalist interpretation as "fetishized objectivity", the viewer expected to apply intuitive or pre-existing (e.g. through education or popular media) knowledge to understand function and cultural context, reinforcing rather than challenging presuppositions of the universality of material culture.

*Fig 4.1: Minimalist interpretation at Verulamium Museum. Author's photograph*

McClusky (2011: 298) imagined a confused visitor standing before an artwork asking "what on earth is this, why is it here, how do I make sense of it?" Viewers of Romano-British archaeology displays are not generally assumed to experience such quandaries. Donnellan (2015: 270), for example, interviewed a visitor confident in their ability to mentally reconstruct the Roman world:

> *"Well it took me back in time, to the Roman times ... I can take myself back to what I'm looking at ... If I see anything old ... If I see anything that's been knocked down or something like that, I don't see it as that, I see what it used to be like."*

Is such certainty warranted? An enamelled brooch (Fig 4.2), for instance, might prompt understandings based upon the viewer's prior experiences of brooches as functional and decorative items. Knowledge that they easily fall off might lead to presumptions about its biography. Assessments of its significance and desirability may be based on culturally-relative perceptions of the quality of artisanship, the value and rarity of its materials, and the attractiveness of the zoomorphic form. Contextualising information, however, places its discovery within a ritual context (an offering at Coventina's Well on Hadrian's Wall), providing empirical foundations for the construction of further, enriched, meanings about the role of material culture in forming and maintaining relationships with the supernatural in Roman Britain.

*Fig 4.2: Zoomorphic brooch from Coventina's Well, Clayton Museum (Chesters). Author's photograph*

Introducing religious experiences that are ontologically unfamiliar must occur in a manner that is not alienating or disconnected from the visitor's own, ontologically-informed, understanding of the world or, in this case, of Roman Britain. Challenging the dominance of the western schema of the five senses (Foster 2013: 384) or how relationships with deities might be established and maintained is central to material and multisensorial approaches, but requires some form of mediated and contextualising interpretation. Lindauer's (2006) concept of the "critical museum visitor" is of value here; empowering visitors to not merely absorb content, but to consider the processes underlying display creation. Contextualising information is

therefore a significant element in the creation of meaning, yet often relegated to a subsidiary status in models of meaning-making. Wood and Latham's (2014) "Object Knowledge Framework", for example, subsumes it within the object's "lifeworld" as if inherent to the object rather than subjective. A tripartite model might be instead envisaged (Fig 4.3), giving equal weight to the viewer, the object, and the contextualising interpretation, each of which is influenced by a range of context-sensitive factors.

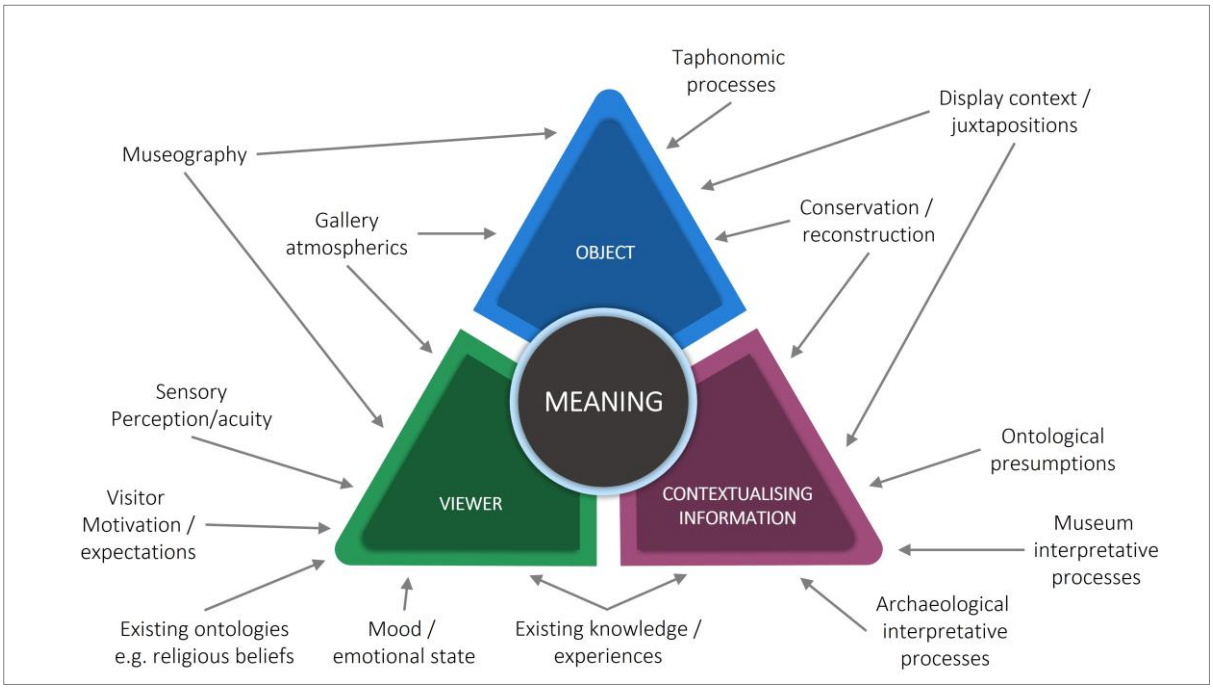



*Fig 4.3: Viewer-object-context diagram*

Emotional and materially-informed relationships between viewers and objects are crucial, but are predicated on the visitor initiating the encounter. Schorch (2014: 23) argues that initial engagements with objects are always on a sensory, emotive level, and therefore occur before contextualising, perhaps ontologically-challenging, information is encountered. The power of objects to attract attention has been variously described as "wonder" (Greenblatt 1990), "capture" (Bitgood 2010; 2014), "fascination" (Dahl *et al*. 2013), and "awe" (Luke 2021). Some visitors, "numen-seekers", actively seek transcendent experiences with objects (Kurin 1997; Gatewood and Cameron 2004; Latham 2013; 2016). Visitor observations at the British Museum have noted that visitor decisions are guided by the attractiveness of objects rather than interpretation panels, leading to the museum relating key interpretational messages to "gateway objects" (Buck 2010). The impact of objects, however, is mediated through the museography of displays and a range of permanent or transient personal and environmental factors

('atmospherics') such as background noise, crowds of visitors, time restrictions, visitor motivations and expectations (Falk 2009), distractions such as ongoing conversations, and the sensory perceptions and attentiveness of the viewer.[3] Neither the opportunity nor the ability to engage with an object are therefore entirely the visitor's own, but mediated by circumstance, museum display techniques, and the gallery environment.

The subsequent consulting of contextualising information may lead to a reassessment of the initial response, and the incorporation or rejection of new interpretational perspectives, completing the hermeneutic cycle. In the example of the plate brooch (Fig 4.2), this would mean reconsidering it as a ritual offering, and the embodied and emotive act of removing it to give to the deity as part of a vow which may have involved words, gestures and possibly other offerings. The materiality of the object, the viewer's and gallery's shifting and idiosyncratic circumstances, and the contextualising information are all therefore factors in the creation of personalised meaning, avoiding the extremes of decontextualized materialistic fetishism and the object serving as mere illustration for didactic text.

The physical and psychological effects of object encounters can be extreme, including sensations of "being transported", of time standing still, or the outside world receding (Latham 2013: 10–15). Pearce (1990: 153–154) distinguished between "didactic" and "evocative" exhibitions, but such a distinction is artificial; any display or object has the potential to elicit personal emotional responses. Though such responses are empathetic rather than recreating the emotions of ancient individuals, their power to promote consideration of lived experiences is valuable (Endacott and Brooks 2013; Watson 2015: 290). Pallasmaa (2014: 241) considered eliciting emotional responses the hallmark of a great exhibition, yet what is desired are not manufactured emotional responses (Gadsby 2011) but the creation of gallery environments conducive to their natural occurrence and symbiotic with cognitive responses based on contextualising interpretation. As Levent and Pascual-Leone (2014b: xviii) observe, museum visits are always multisensory experiences, but museums can actively attempt to control and utilise the multisensory environments in their galleries.

[3] Museography includes gallery colour/s and temperature, lighting, object juxtapositions, display furniture, reflections, shadows, plinth quality or colour, and visitor proximity to the object. Even mundane objects might attract attention when prominently placed, and charismatic ones overlooked in dark or overcrowded displays.

### 4.2.2 Touch and interactivity

Touch is the most widely recognised form of non-visual sensory engagement within museums, through self-guided or staff-mediated handling activities. However, these can be physically and conceptually disconnected from primary displays and are generally restricted to a limited repertoire of common and robust objects. They have attracted criticism for offering participants little choice in what they engage with (Candlin 2007: 90), having unclear purpose (Pye 2007b: 25), and being perceived as children's activities providing limited intellectual engagement with material culture (Pearce 1990: 165; Owen 1999; MacDonald 2007: 108).

Some scholars have argued for greater promotion of "real" (Pye 2007b: 25–26) or "meaningful" (Levent and McRainey 2014: 62) touch experiences. Embodied engagement with archaeology is often restricted to small and robust objects,[4] with experiential consideration reduced to physical properties such as weight, texture and decoration, perhaps alongside a sense of wonder at holding something of significant age. More intimate cognitive and embodied engagement is usually prohibited by overt handling guidelines or general museum behavioural expectations. The handling of a Romano-British jet gorgoneia pendant (Parker 2016), for example, may focus on the feel of the smooth jet, but is less likely to explore emotive and embodied experiences of wearing it and engaging with its culturally-contextualised magical, emotional, material or social amuletic functionality (Chapter 5.4.2).

Prohibitions against touch are fundamental to post 19th century museum etiquette,[5] display cases playing an important role in reinforcing museum authority (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 130–131; Witcomb 2003: 106; Classen and Howes 2006: 218; Foster 2013: 371,378; Dudley 2014). However, visitor contact with objects is commonplace. Classen (2017: 1–2) defines seven forms of museum touch: inquisitive, playful, reverent, caressing, defiant, photographic, and incidental. Latham (2013), discussing 'numinous' engagements with objects, notes a frequently expressed desire to touch objects to increase a sense of connection, while Candlin (2017: 254) argues that the compulsion to touch should be considered genuine and enthusiastic rather than disrespectful. Berns (2015: 141) records some visitors' overriding desire to touch the sacred

[4] An object's scale influences embodied responses, smaller objects becoming precious or personal, but larger ones imposing or threatening (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 113)
[5] The primary advice in an 1832 guide for the 'working man' visiting a museum was 'Touch Nothing' (Rees Leahy 2016: 7–9)

Islamic *sitara* fabric in the British Museum's 2012 'Hajj' exhibition despite prohibition signage. When I (as curator) acquired a Romano-British phallic amulet in 2012, it arrived at the museum worn around the finder's neck on a leather thong, but left the room wrapped in low-acid tissue inside a plastic box. The pendant's new status as 'museum object' instantly restricted how it could be touched and by whom, yet the finder's experience of it was undoubtedly more authentic and emotive.

Interactives require physical contact to operate and are often supplementary to object-based displays, even distracting from them. Though perceived as more efficient at engaging with visitors (Shanks and Tilley 1987: 91), interactives can reinforce the dominance of visual and didactic communication (Classen and Howes 2006: 216; Witcomb 2003: 131; Foster 2013: 374). As with handling activities, they are often child-focused and have been accused of offering bursts of enjoyment but little lasting cerebral engagement (Huhtamo 2015: 259–260). Ascherson (2000: 83) records a Press Officer at the opening of NMS defending its heavy content, saying "this will not be a hands-on museum. It's a brains-on museum". Witcomb (2003: 131) calls for 'interactivity' to be reconceptualised to include any imaginative, conceptual or emotive activity. This broader definition is valuable for displays in which a wider range of visitors might be engaged with ontologically challenging concepts through 'proximal' experiences.

### 4.2.3 Sound

Museums are not silent. The most stereotypically austere museums echo with footsteps, the crackle of radios and visitors' hushed whispers (Cox 2015). The influence of environmental soundscapes on visitor experiences have been explored by Voegelin (2014), and discussed briefly above as an aspect of the viewer-object-context relationship. Here, however, my focus is on intentional auditory interpretation.

Though the introduction of sound into galleries is not new, the difficulty and expense of stopping audio intrusively 'bleeding' into other displays limits its practical application and it remains generally underused; the ancient world being particularly silent (Both 2019: 427). Auditory interventions generally present reconstructions of sounds made by specific objects (e.g. musical instruments) or ambient soundscapes of periods, places or activities. Sounds

produced during the everyday use of objects through their material affordances (e.g. the clink of ceramics or the creak of leather) are rarely engaged with directly, though may appear within ambient soundscapes. However, these are particularly valuable sounds in the creation of immersive and emotive experiences; hearing sounds associated with actions triggers the same brain activity as if the action were being performed (Aglioti *et al.* 2014: 303). The authenticity of musical instrument reconstructions, however, highlights the dangers in interpreting sound (Lamb 2007; Both 2019; Rognoni 2019). Hearing the noise an instrument makes is not the same as experiencing it being played. This might include culturally relative appreciations of music, the embodied and symbiotic movement of musician and instrument, or the social sensations of being in a theatre. The potential use of 3D-printed replica instruments in Romano-British education has been recently discussed (Swift *et al.* 2021), but Roman Britain does not appear to have a defined soundscape in the popular imagination, except perhaps the regimented crunch and clank of Roman legionaries. Engagement with spoken language is also minimal despite Latin and literacy commonly featuring.

### 4.2.4 Smell and taste

Smell is a powerfully emotive sense, and its role in the recall of memories makes it valuable for engaging with immersive, emotive, experiences (Stevenson 2014: 155; Drobnick 2014: 188). Unlike visual reconstructions which are not convincingly original, smells *are* smells, and therein lies their authentic emotive power (Keller 2014: 172). Smells are generally used within ambient experiences (e.g. WWI trench dioramas) or at dedicated 'smell stations' (Fig 4.4). At the latter, visitors can experience specific scents, usually knowing in advance what the smell is and even the expected response. However, these are often decontextualised, detached from related objects and themes, and unrealistically pungent. Smells are highly culturally-relative and instinctive individual responses to certain smells may be overwhelming. The 'bad' smell of manure might remind someone of happy days in the countryside, while the 'good' smell of flowers might remind another of sickness and death (Drobnick 2014: 188). Scents might be deliberately employed to affirm previous associations, particularly religious experiences. Stevenson (2014: 160) notes sensory tours of the Vatican Museums which include linen infused with myrrh and aloe, while Dobbin and Michelsen (2019) argue that the vibrant and emotive scents associated with Islamic rituals are lost as the vessels which produce them are displayed as dormant.

*Fig 4.4: Museum small stations. A) Durham University Archaeology Museum. B) Dewa Roman Experience, Chester. Author's photographs*

Smells are often employed to provoke specific responses rather than promote greater understanding of their cultural contexts or challenge ontological presumptions about differing smellscapes. One prominent supplier offers museums the scents of "Burning Witch", "Cannibal's Cave", "Dinosaur", "Dungeon", "Chlorine Gas", "Wartime Underground", "Ship's Cannon", and "Smugglers", perpetuating stereotypes that the past 'smelled bad'. A 'foul smells' activity at Durham University Archaeology Museum, for example, rightly highlights that Medieval Durham would have "smelt very differently" yet contextualises this as streets overflowing with sewage and poor personal hygiene (Fig 4.4A). Chester's Dewa Roman Experience (Fig 4.4B) similarly reinforces the contemporary cultural values of smells: smoke ("choke on the stifling odour"), lavender ("breathe in deeply the sweet smell of exotically fragranced cleansing oils"), latrines ("marvel at the stink of a sixteen-seater toilet") and feet ("smell, if you dare, the stench of 6,000 pairs of unwashed feet after an all-day march"). The Jorvik Viking Centre is renowned for its ambient smellscape (Addyman and Gaynor 1984; Sunderland 2014), though it has attracted criticism for undue claims of authenticity (Shanks

and Tilley 1987: 86–90) and perpetuating notions of a "stench-ridden past" (Smith 2007: 120). Aggleton and Waskett (1999), however, noted positive connections between Jorvik's smells ("burnt wood", "apples", "rubbish acrid", "beef", "fish market", "rope/tar" and "earthy") and visitor recall of their experience. At the time of writing, a new Roman museum in York (provisionally titled 'Eboracum') based on the same experiential principles as Jorvik, is planned (Lewis 2020).

The sense of taste is intrinsically entwined with smell, though it is the least explored of the major senses in museums and generally approached tangentially through the production and consumption of food. Displays of Roman life often reference recipes or provoke reaction through ingredients such as *garum* or atypical dishes such as stuffed dormice. Taste is valuable in experiencing alternative cultural preferences. Mihalache (2014: 198) notes how increasing modern interest in 'exotic' foods represents a desire to engage with the tastes and experiences of 'others', something which might be exploited within museums to engage visitors with the differing practices and preferences of past cultures. Some museum cafes have menus themed around past cultures, whether simply giving dishes historically-themed names or actively attempting to recreate historic food.

As with sound and smell, however, citing ingredients or even recreating recipes does not reconstruct cultural contexts or explore lived individual experiences. Indeed, highlighting the ontological impossibility of recreating a past individual's taste experiences would be a valuable interpretational message (Smith 2007: 124). Taste is both an intimate and a social sense. Things cannot be tasted at a distance, and the experience of eating with others differs from eating alone. The ability to obtain or appreciate certain flavours or food preparation techniques is a cultural marker (Mihalache 2014: 201). Although directly associated with eating, perceptions of taste should not be restricted to that partaken for sustenance. The eating of ritual meals or the ingestion (or restriction) of specific and perhaps exotic or transformative substances such as hallucinogens, should not be overlooked in considerations of religious taste.

### 4.2.5 Movement and juxtaposition

This section considers the experiences of visitors moving through galleries. Museums create rather than merely present, value, significance and meaning (Bennett 1995; Casey 2003: 2;

Ravelli 2006: 125; Moser 2009; Moser 2010; Bacci and Pavani 2014: 18; Tzortzi 2017: 70–76; Classen 2017: 125), but are inherently artificial (Chapter 1). The spatial juxtapositions of galleries and objects are a highly influential aspect of visitor experiences and the creation of cognitive associations, and therefore central to how objects, cultures and periods are perceived (Psarra 2005). For example, encountering Roman military displays at the beginning of a Roman Britain gallery, though chronological, can reinforce narratives of the entire period as militaristic and imperialistic. Museums have generally focussed on individual displays as points of interest rather than considering how visitor movements between them influence the meanings they create, particularly if they omit displays or go in the 'wrong' direction (Rees Leahy 2016: 5, 75). Space Syntax (Chapter 2.2.2) considers how the relative relationships of display spaces influence visitor behaviours and perceptions. Displays presented in large, imposing galleries as opposed to smaller, intimate spaces, or those on higher floors rather than in basements, serve to present cultural markers which influence visitor perceptions of the relative significance and accessibility of their contents (Moser 2010: 25; Gazi 2014: 6). Even the value of the aesthetic gaze can be compromised if the eye is attached to a confused or weary body, and visitor movements through displays reflect complex networks of influence, including architecture, display design, museography and psychology. Beyond museum fatigue (Falk 2009: 25; cf. Bitgood 2009), the active agency of individual visitors in their chosen route and the objects and displays they engage with leads to dynamic and unexpected interactions. As Thomas (2016: 106) highlights, even a chronological display in a corridor will result in varied visitor experiences. Forrest (2014: 28) envisages the interaction between visitor and displays as dance-like, "freeflowing, patterned but not quite predictable".

Detailed consideration of museum architecture is beyond the scope of this discussion but its significance to display design must be recognised, whether through the restrictions or previous associations of historic buildings, or the creative affordances of purpose-built museums. Giebelhausen (2006: 230) describes museum buildings as "symbolic containers" framing their contents, and cultural spaces have the potential to create emotional and secularly-spiritual experiences (e.g. Britton 2017). Buggeln (2017) proposed four 'modes' through which museum architecture might connect with religious displays or create appropriately contemplative ambiences: associative mode (architecture reflecting religious structures); magisterial mode (awe-invoking spaces); therapeutic mode (architecture inviting contemplation); and redemptive mode (architecture reinforcing emotional messages such as resilience or victory over trauma).

Many displays of British archaeology are chronological, conforming with visitor expectations of the flow of time and recognisable points of reference through defined archaeological periods (Black 2005: 191). However, chronologies can reinforce perceptions of a "march of progress" (Forrest 2014), periods evaluated not only against earlier events, but with foresight of the future. While such prescience is unavoidable (and might be positively harnessed through reflexive interpretation), perceptions of the relative cultural paucity of prehistory and the Early Medieval period reinforce stereotypes of a comparatively 'civilised' Roman Britain. Swain (2007: 227) notes examples of constricted displays of prehistory and the 'Dark Ages' compared to open and inviting Roman galleries. Culture-historical modes of thinking about the past are thereby reinforced, and opportunities for more complex narratives of cultural interaction reduced (Brysbaert 2012; Witcomb 2013).

The postures adopted and gestures made by museum visitors are also significant in the creation of meaning, particularly with regard to interactions with religious objects. Berns' (2016) observations of visitors viewing Catholic relics at the British Museum's 'Treasures of Heaven' exhibition, for example, included display cases being touched with hands, foreheads, lips or objects. Conversely, her observations of Biblical tours (Berns 2015) featured specific prohibitions on bending over before non-Christian objects, even to read labels, lest it be accidentally idolatrous. The Henry Moore Institute's 'A Sense of Heaven' exhibition (1999) deliberately challenged museum behavioural expectations by displaying personal devotional items such as rosaries in boxes which forced visitors to kneel as if in prayer to view them (Rees Leahy 2016: 113, Fig 27). With these thoughts in mind, I will now consider contemporary religion in museums in more detail.

## 4.3 Contemporary material religion in museums

The material turn, introduced in Chapter 3, has profoundly impacted the study of contemporary religion. McDannell's Material Christianity (1995) is recognised as the first 'material religion' study, and the early 21st century has seen a flurry of influential publications (e.g. Arweck and Keenan 2006; Morgan 2010b; Houtman and Meyer 2012b; Houlbrook and Armitage 2015b; Bremmer and Boschung 2015; Plate 2015; Hutchings and McKenzie 2018) and the founding of the Material Religion journal. Studies have challenged definitions of religion based on internalised piety (Chapter 1.3.1) in favour of the perspective that "religion itself is largely

unintelligible outside its incarnation in material expressions" (Keenan and Arweck 2006: 2–3; see also Carp 2011); not simply bringing 'things' back into frame but fundamentally reconsidering what materiality means within religious studies (Houtman and Meyer 2012a: 8). However, the growth of material religion has not been without internal critique. Buggeln (2009: 358) cautions that objects and structures risk becoming lost as they are subsumed in post-humanist webs of connections, while Hazard (2013) and Ioannides (2013) conversely argue that material religion remains unduly anthropocentric.

Relationships between museums and the religious objects in their collections have been a notable focus of material religion scholarship, though Paine (Meyer *et al*. 2010: 6) argues that material religion's reach has been unduly academic, insufficiently influential on museum practice. Though perceptions of museums as places of rationality and order creates tension with the supposed emotional irrationality of religious beliefs (O'Neill 2006: 101), the distinction between museums and places of worship is complex (e.g. Mairesse 2019), affecting religious institutions with historic architecture and objects as much as 'secular' museums. The difficulties inherent in presenting contemporary religion to universal satisfaction is notably demonstrated in the discourse surrounding Glasgow's St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art (Lovelace et al. 1995; Arthur 2000; Kelly 2005; O'Neill 1995; 2011; Minucciani 2013a: 17–18; Paine 2013: 31–32; Gray 2016).

### 4.3.1 Covert devotion?

The museumification of religious objects has been the subject of much debate (e.g. Edwards and Sullivan 2004; Minucciani 2013b; Gualdrini 2013; Roque 2013), museums serving to "mute rather than celebrate the religious, spiritual or erotic meaning of objects in collections" (O'Neill 2006: 101). Bräunlein (2016: 391–2; 2022: 59–65) considers that within its German museum home a statue of the Hawaiian war god Ku is simultaneously both a 'thing' (during storage, cataloguing, conservation etc) and a god (during public events and in publications). He argues that through the lens of ontological alterity it can simultaneously be both god and artefact, a dual identity also argued for Roman religious imagery (Aldhouse-Green 2004: 2; Henig 2012: 155–6; Kiernan 2020: 279). The dislocation of religious objects into museums may be variously perceived as the distressing captivity of a venerated relic (e.g. Thomas 2016: 88); as promoting disagreeable religious beliefs (e.g. Lovelace *et al.* 1995: 73; Kelly 2005: 436;

Candlin 2015; Berns 2015: 200–201); as an opportunity to understand other worldviews; or of little or no interest. Recent focus group research by the Museum of London reveals that some visitors were concerned at children being exposed to differing religious traditions or preferring chronological displays so they could see the "progress and development of religious ideas". One parent stated that they preferred "things from the past, like Romans and Druids" as "because they don't exist anymore my children won't be brainwashed".[6] Such a statement not only reflects perceptions of the Roman past as unproblematic and easily knowable (Chapter 1), but also that it is disconnected from contemporary religious identities.

Studies of material religion have not generally engaged with visitor interactions with religious objects (Berns 2015: 11), yet they might manifest in myriad ways and need not be restricted to adherents or antagonists of specific beliefs. Wingfield (2010) notes non-religious visitors being drawn by the charismatic Sultanganj Buddha at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, while Candlin (2017: 258) records anecdotal evidence of people touching the Rosetta stone's case as if it were a relic. Berns' (2012a; 2012b; 2015; 2016) observations of visitor interactions with displays at the British Museum's 'Treasures of Heaven' (2011) and 'Hajj: Journey to the Heart of Islam' (2012) exhibitions revealed a wide range of interactions with religious displays, often conducted covertly and hidden from the museum and other visitors. However, though some museums prohibit religious rituals and performances in their galleries (Berns 2016: 8), others have actively engaged with them, allowing offerings to accumulate on altars or placing objects on open display to facilitate prayer (e.g. Mino 2004: 98–99; Candlin 2015: 285; Berns 2016: 163–164; Nooter Roberts 2017).

### 4.3.2 Interactions with Romano-British religious sites and displays

The museumification of religious objects is also relevant to archaeology; whether the religious sites and objects of Roman Britain are considered to retain religious significance or to have relinquished it in becoming secular 'archaeological finds'. Zuanni (2017) argues that in displays of classical archaeology the contexts of religious objects are generally secondary to issues of national identity, while Paine (2013: 45) observes that nobody has argued for the return of the Parthenon sculptures on religious grounds. Research into modern pagan interactions with archaeological sites and objects has been preoccupied with prehistory (e.g.

[6] Unpublished report produced in September 2020 and kindly shared by the curatorial interviewee

Blain and Wallis 2006; 2007; Wallis and Blain 2009; Rathouse 2021), and interactions between pagan beliefs and museums almost entirely restricted to the ethics of storing and displaying human remains (e.g. Rathouse 2021). Roman Britain is unlikely to be forefronted in discussions of modern paganism, prehistory seemingly more attractive as a source of spiritual inspiration. Bowman's (1998) research into neo-Pagan narratives of the origins of Bath, for example, demonstrates the promotion of 'Celtic' aspects of the site over the Roman or Romano-British.

Though museum displays of Romano-British religion seem unlikely to provoke contemporary religious reactions, engagements with ancient religious objects do occur. Jehovah's Witness 'Bible tours' of the British Museum, for example, utilise displays of ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern religion to validate the success of their own beliefs over 'dead' gods, rejecting museum narratives as "secular propaganda" (Paine 2000: 166; Berns 2015: 176–210). Romano-British religious sites also receive interactions, whether visitors actively venerating ancient gods, recognising places of ancient spirituality, or seeking to undermine pagan beliefs. The Carrawburgh mithraeum's replica altars regularly attract offerings such as coins, pebbles and flowers (Fig 4.5). Hingley (2015a: 177, Fig 9.4) records the placing of two Christian tokens seemingly intended to undermine any lingering traces of Mithraic power perceived by other visitors. In November 2021 I observed damage to the interpretation panel at the temple of Antenociticus at Benwell, scratches focussed on the reconstruction drawing of the statue of the deity (Fig 4.6). Was the image targeted randomly, or specifically because it was anthropomorphic, nude, or represented a pagan deity?

Interactions with museum objects occur more rarely due to staff presence and behavioural expectations. A visitor to the Housesteads museum in 2011, however, photographed coins in the focus of an altar (Fig 4.7). Senhouse reported in the Museums Journal (October 2008) that they had been "approached by pagan groups to do ceremonies" at the museum's 'serpent stone'. The curator's response that "it's a phallic shape. Its very attractive to pagans. We put them off nicely", contrasts with the embracing of religious performances in some museums and reinforces Romano-British religious objects as invalid foci for contemporary religious activity. More positively, Manchester Museum's Lindow Man exhibition (2008-9) included an "offering box" for visitors to show their personal respect to the ancient remains, likened by the curator to candles being lit at Christian sites (Sitch 2009: 52).

*Fig 4.5: Contemporary offerings in an altar at Carrawburgh, May 2019. Author's photograph*

*Fig 4.6: Damage to the interpretation panel at Benwell, Newcastle, November 2021. Author's photograph*

*Fig 4.7: Offerings in an altar in the Housesteads site museum. Photograph by Damian Entwhistle, April 2011. Used under a CC BY-NC 2.0 license. https://www.flickr.com/photos/damiavos/5632094347/*

Evidence for personal emotional engagement with Romano-British religious displays is more commonly found in personal blogs than academic papers, such as one describing the 'Celtic' stone sculpture at Tullie House Museum:

> *"I'd seen many sketched in Anne Ross's Pagan Celtic Britain and wasn't prepared to see them all together at once. It was overwhelming and rather peculiar seeing them packed into four cabinets; some headless, limbless, or defaced. I managed to get my act together and speak their names, those I knew, those I didn't. Images of deities sculptured 2,000 years ago, revered, now viewed in an entirely different context."* (Smithers 2016)

The visitor's emotional response and need to "speak their names" shows that their significance lies deeper than simply being archaeological objects, yet such interactions generally remain unknown to museums.

## 4.4 Challenging ontologies through 'storytelling'

> *"Museums' goals are to do more than just 'translate' objects in exhibitions. This means going beyond restating an object's history, composition or origin. Instead, it means working to promote visitor experiences that activate stories and emotions about or with the object."* (Wood and Latham 2014: 31)

"Communication is at the heart of everything a museum does" (Nielsen 2017: 441); interpretation exists to create connections between visitors and past peoples. However, this forces archaeologists to confront the limits of their incomplete and ambiguous evidence. As discussed above, the creation of contextualised interpretation is a crucial aspect of the viewer-object-context relationship, and all interpretation is the result of specific decisions (Chapter 1.4).

Smith (2015) argues that visitor motivation studies (e.g. Falk 2009) insufficiently consider that visits are driven by identities as much as 'learning' or 'entertainment' (see also Paris and Mercer 2002). Doering (cited in Falk 2009: 215) considers that museums exist to "confirm, reinforce and extend the visitor's existing beliefs", yet this may influence what displays are engaged with and result in the erection of cognitive barriers to avoid those beliefs being challenged. Open dialogues and the management of visitor expectations are therefore important to the success of creative or challenging interpretation. Lindauer's (2006) "critical museum visitor", referenced above, is one encouraged to understand display construction and interpretative processes to reduce the potential for confusion and the undermining of scientific data presentation (Pollock 2015).

Bitgood (2000: 31; 2014) argues that, despite professional cynicism regarding public attitudes to interpretative text (see Skeates 2002: 211), well-devised interpretation is generally engaged with. Challenging visitor perceptions of religion need not require the installation of more museum text, and certainly not more complex, academic text, but reconsidering what information is presented and how. Below I consider the concept of 'storytelling' and how it might be used to 'critically disrupt' existing ontological positions.

### 4.4.1 Museums and storytelling

Museums often highlight that they tell stories and develop narratives about the past, yet museum interpretation has been criticised for a lack of variety in pace and mood (Black 2012: 92) and for futile attempts at impartiality which lead to dispassionate and emotionless texts (Watson 2015: 289). The terminology of museum communication has often been poorly defined (Nielsen 2017), but narratives and stories are not synonymous. Nielsen (2017: 445) defines narratives as structural devices which articulate understanding through evoking "feelings, memories and curiosity". This structure takes the form of stories, whether deliberately created through interpretation or by the visitor as part of their own personal meaning making processes. Stories and storytelling are therefore crucial to the communication of narratives (Pluciennik 1999: 653; O'Neill 2006: 107), providing "the context for the meanings of objects, without undermining their aesthetic power" (O'Neill 2006: 107).

The production of meaningful stories, however, centres upon not just *what* is said, but *how* it is said (Nielsen 2017: 443). Language is "a resource to be drawn upon in endlessly creative ways" (Ravelli 2006: 11). Museums exert considerable social authority through their interpretive texts, yet often employ the language of "curatorial conceptual frameworks" (Gazi 2014: 5). Mills (2013: 1) accuses curators of being unwilling to engage with imaginative interpretation, arguing that they deride it as "dumbing down", and equate "storytelling" with "fairytales".

A creative turn can be observed in archaeological publication, despite suspicions around making academic writing "interesting" (Thomas, J.T. 2015: 169). Explorations of creative interpretation began in late 20$^{th}$ century North American historical archaeology (Gibb 2000; McCarthy 2003; Van Dyke and Bernbeck 2015), but have begun to gain traction in other archaeological fields (van Helden and Witcher 2019a; Gill et al. 2021). Creative language in publications about ancient Britain has mainly taken the form of introductory first-person vignettes (e.g. Moorhead and Stuttard 2012; Witcher 2017; Wragg Sykes 2020). Others have used modern site experiences to discuss ancient comparanda (Given 2019), or presented excavation results as graphic novels (Rajic and Howarth 2021), while conversational author dialogues have been used to explore multivalent theoretical opinions (Preucel and Hodder 1996; Joyce 2002; Hodder and Lucas 2017; Crellin *et al*. 2021). Evaristo's (2001) poetic imagining

of Roman London was particularly influential, while Hopkins used fictional time-travellers to explore pagan and Christian experiences, engaging directly with critics of his approach who argued that "stories tyrannise and infantilise their audience" (Hopkins 1999: 151).

These publications share a recognition that creative language is not detached from 'official' interpretation but an aspect of structuring understandings of the past; not simply an output methodology but constitutive of understandings (Olsen 2012: 27; Van Dyke and Bernbeck 2015: 10; Alberti 2016: 12; Witcher and van Helden 2021: 177). Though some (e.g. Swain 2007: 10; Sagona 2015: 93; Harding 2016: ix) suggest that undue empathy transgresses the limits of archaeological evidence, it can also positively influence interpretive processes and generate new insights (van Helden and Witcher 2019b: 117; Witcher and van Helden 2021: 185–188). The incorporation of multisensory experiences form an important aspect of emotive, evocative writing (Skeates and Day 2020b: 560–1; Pursell 2020), though Elliott (2020) notes the limitations of text as a medium for conveying multisensory experiences.

All interpretation is subjective, and the distinction between factual and imaginative interpretation is not dichotomous, but a continuum. Bonnie Rough stated that "nonfiction writers imagine. Fiction writers invent" (cited in Pollock 2015: 281). Museum storytelling should therefore not entail the creation of invented fictions, but explore empirically-valid interpretations of archaeological data, combining the powerful cognitive stimulation of creative prose with the immediacy of material culture to challenge ontologies and stimulate dialogue. Though the integrity of archaeological interpretative processes is paramount, more archaeologists (and indeed museum professionals) were drawn to their specialism through creative and engaging representations of the past (Chapter 1.4) than through dry data (Williams and Heath 2003: 113). The power of creative language to engage the emotions and imaginations of visitors must be recognised (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 143); specialist knowledge used to "facilitate" such experiences for others (Pluciennik 2015: 59–60). Stories are more influential on attitudes than academic writing (Nielsen 2017: 446), and readers engage more with content that surprises, amuses, emotionally affects, or titillates them (Black 2005: 195; Dahl *et al*. 2013: 161); Bitgood (2000: 36) terms this "cognitive-emotional arousal".

Museum storytelling should be created with defined goals, complementing other interpretation. As with interactives, discussed above, it should be child-accessible without being child-focused, encouraging interaction and discussion and presenting opportunities for multivocal and cross-

temporal representation through dialogic, even dissenting, voices. Wood and Latham (2014: 151), for example, discuss a display in which a Spanish helmet and a South American headdress conduct an audible conversation. Though what Pluciennik (1999: 667) termed "anti-narratives" might challenge cultural stereotypes and subvert the dominance of traditional voices, placing words in the mouths of characters (real or invented) does not automatically represent a new voice. Creative interpretation written by a curator remains the curatorial voice, and the creative process should be transparent (Van Dyke and Bernbeck 2015: 11; Thomas, J. T. 2015; Pollock 2015: 281). Bernbeck (2015: 260–2) cautions that first-person narratives can imply disrespect, even colonization, of the original individual or culture.

An example of first-person narrative storytelling is the 2010 'Lived Experience in Ancient Judah' exhibition at the Bade Museum of Biblical Archaeology in California (Foster 2013: 375–377). This presented the experiences of a single fictional girl, Hannah, and her interactions with people and places in her Israeli hometown. Traditional labels were combined with first-person narratives, and object displays supplemented with tactile, olfactory and audible activities. Emotional and sensory impact was delivered through specific experiences, such as taking offerings to a family tomb:

> *"The tiny lamp in my hand barely illuminates my footsteps and in its flickering, the shadows seem to dance before me as I move deeper inside. The smell of stale incense and rotting flesh mingle with the sweetness of the pomegranates and figs in my hand."* (Foster 2013: 376)

The unpopularity of text-based interpretation with some visitors has been noted (e.g. Cotton 1997: 12; Skeates 2002: 211), though storytelling texts might be innovatively presented, such as through recreations of diaries (Levent and McRainey 2014: 76) or a personal guide carried by the visitor offering additions and challenges to the core interpretation. Storytelling might alternatively be employed through various media such as graphics, audio-visuals, virtual or augmented reality, dioramas, or live actors (see e.g. Gibb 2000) to suit the transmitted content.

Reconstructions, particularly illustrations, have been influential in representations of Roman Britain since the 19th century (Hodgson 2004; Greaney 2013). They possess powerful potential for creating engaging and thought-provoking narratives of the past, and are popular with visitors, often looked at before or instead of accompanying text. However, they have been

criticised for presenting undue certainty, representing singular interpretations, distracting from objects, and perpetuating popular myths and stereotypes (Lucy and Herring 1999: 84; Moser 2001: 273–9; Swain 2007: 229–231; James 2013: 26; Greaney 2013: 38; Goodwin 2020: 92). However, artistic techniques can reflect archaeological uncertainty (Greaney 2013), and their popularity means that they can be used to forefront challenging and unexpected interpretations, particularly through the interactivity offered by digital media.

New applications for digital interpretation are constantly emerging (Dobat *et al*. 2013; Giannini and Bowen 2019), and Paine (Meyer *et al.* 2010: 108) suggests that the "digital revolution" offers particular opportunities for religious displays. The Emotive Project,[7] an EU-funded research project (2016-2019) to develop digital tools and methodologies promoting greater emotional engagement with cultural sites (Emotive Project 2019), explored the Hunterian's Antonine Wall displays through two interactive products, though neither involved religion. The Ebutius' Dilemma app explored relationships between the Roman military and local communities, as Centurion Ebutius decides whether to desert the army to remain with his local family, perhaps inspired by Kipling's poem 'The Roman Centurion's Song'. The second product was a facilitator-led experience employing virtual reality and augmented reality. Titled Views on Verecunda's Life: A Digital Window to the Scottish Roman Past, it centred on a Caledonian slave girl in the commander's house at the Bar Hill fort, exploring her identities and relationships through objects in the gallery.

Virtual reality offers the potential for powerful immersive experiences and new interpretative perspectives originating outside of the heritage sector (Spearman 2013: 120). Mol (2020) highlights its potential to decentre human experiences, present nonhuman perspectives, and challenge ontological presumptions of Roman religion, and divisions between human and divine. However, such immersion can override users' recognition of the hypothetical aspects of the experience and recalibrate concepts of museum authenticity (Favro 2006: 326; Parry 2007: 58–81). Mol (2020: 77) believes that the focus should not be to produce "realistic" experiences but "transform perceptibility". A small number of virtual reality projects have focussed on the north-western Roman provinces, such as at Aalen on the German *limes* (Kemkes 2013), and within Britain at Vindolanda (Carillo *et al.* 2007), Carrawburgh

[7] https://emotiveproject.eu. See also Devine (2013) for a precursor project

mithraeum (Mayers 2018), and a smell-enhanced tour of Silchester (Ewart 2016; Sensorymaps.com n.d.).

### 4.4.2 Critical disruption

Storytelling through creative interpretation presents opportunities for intellectual and emotional stimulation, disrupting the gallery flow (Watson 2015: 294) to pose critical questions of archaeological evidence, and challenging visitors to consider multivocal and emotive past social and religious contexts (Ouzman 2006: 289; Van Dyke and Bernbeck 2015: 4). In his influential "principles of interpretation", Tilden (1977: 9) observed that the primary aim of interpretation was "not instruction, but provocation". This goal has been subsequently echoed through, for example, Simon's (2010) "social objects", Black's (2005; 2012) "engaging museum", and Schorch's (2015: 450) "narrative engagement".

Bal (2021: 100) considers that "shaking visitors up, shocking them into an active engagement with artworks" is "the most important aspect of curating". Ravelli (2006: 154) terms such deliberate challenging of comfortable narratives "critical disruption", puncturing the visitor's sense of familiarity with the subject. This concept has also been called "hot interpretation", and particularly employed in presentations of colonial encounters in South Africa and Australasia (Ballantyne *et al*. 2012; Isselhardt and Cross 2020: 574) to encourage visitors from other cultural backgrounds to emotively engage with differing perspectives. This need is relevant to a Roman Britain which is commonly perceived as being well-understood, as discussed in Chapter 1 (Mills 2013: 1; Hingley 2021a: 3).

Serrell (1996: 105) opined that "the best questions are those that visitors themselves ask". However, challenging ontological presuppositions means asking questions that visitors did not realise *could* be asked, and encouraging consideration of materiality, embodiment and lived religious experiences. Simon (2010: chap. 4) suggests that questions should prompt discussion rather than present a test, "if there's a right answer, it's the wrong question". Ravelli (2006: 56) notes that texts closer to spoken word modes have a lower lexical density and are easier to understand. Using creative language to challenge narratives therefore has the potential to not only be engaging but more effective, encouraging greater dialogic relationships between visitors and objects.

The discussions above highlight the potential for creative storytelling to introduce emotive, multivocal and dynamic interpretation, enabling greater consideration of experiential archaeologies, lived religious experiences and the materiality of objects. This need not result in either longer, more complex interpretation or 'dumbed down' experiences, but rather allow for the inclusion of complex emotional discussion in a manner more easily and effectively engaged with by visitors. This is particularly important at a time when questioning deeply-held certainties about identities based upon established understandings of the past can elicit negative and very public responses (Hingley 2021a: 15).

## 4.5 Summary and Analysis Statements

In this chapter I built upon discussions of materiality (Chapter 3) to consider scholarship into multisensory museology, and the creation of meanings by visitors. I have challenged the dichotomous approaches often adopted when considering viewers and objects in museums, proposing a tripartite relational model between viewer, object and contextualising information. This encompasses not only the materiality of the object and the pre-existing and situational influences on the viewer, but that ontologically challenging interpretation based on archaeological context can enable viewers to expand their own cognitive landscapes to consider new meanings for otherwise familiar objects.

I discussed the generally restricted applications of touch, smell and sound in museums, and argued for broader applications of 'interactivity' which offer opportunities for increased 'proximal' visitor engagement with religious experiences. I then examined the material turn within contemporary religious studies and its relevance to museums through the ideological relationships between museums and religious material culture, and the often hidden but emotive and meaningful interactions between museum visitors and religious objects.

Finally, I discussed how challenging interpretation might be achieved through creative multivocal storytelling language, 'critically disrupting' perceptions of Roman Britain and the cultural relativity of concepts such as religion and ritual.

Based on the discussions presented, Table 4.1 contains the statements which will be used in my analyses of displays.

| |
|---|
| “The language used to describe religious activity is critical in the creation of meanings. Storytelling approaches can be valuable in promoting emotive, multisensory and ontologically challenging interpretation.” |
| “Museum display design decisions are as significant in creating meanings as interpretational text, and the juxtaposition of objects and interpretation key to integrating religion into wider cultural narratives.” |
| “Multisensory interactivities offer the potential for challenging and emotive ‘proximal’ engagement with religious experiences for visitors of all age groups.” |

*Table 4.1: Chapter 4 Analysis Statements*

# Chapter 5:

# Beyond Romans and Natives: Religious hybridity in Roman Britain

## 5.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on the theoretical studies discussed in Chapters 3 and 4 to consider approaches to religion and religious experiences in Roman Britain. I discuss the scholarly rejection of dichotomised conceptualisations of 'Romans' and 'natives' in favour of more nuanced models of religious interaction, transmission and hybridity. I then consider how greater emphasis on the senses, materiality and embodiment have influenced scholarship through discussions of two areas of vigorous recent discourse; the votive and structured deposition of material culture and the slippery, even controversial, concept of magic, specifically the wearing of amuletic devices and the creation and deposition of curses.

## 5.2 Post-colonial archaeologies of religion in Roman Britain

The 'post-colonial' turn represents the most significant theoretical shift in Romano-British archaeology in recent decades. Millett's The Romanization of Britain (1990) is recognised as an important catalyst, and the history of subsequent debate has been frequently summarised (e.g. Webster 2001; Mattingly 2004; Hingley 2005; Gardner 2013; 2016a; van Oyen 2015; Dench 2018). The rejection of linear narratives from native to colonially-imported or sanctioned religious beliefs and practices has seen religious change increasingly perceived as central to social and economic processes rather than the result of those processes (Woolf 2000b: 615–616; Aldhouse-Green 2004: 215).

Post-colonial approaches are most closely associated with the critical rejection of Haverfield's (1915) 'Romanization' paradigm, through which immobile conquered peoples

were perceived as being on a fixed trajectory to adopting proactive and inherently superior (i.e. 'civilised') Roman culture (Fowler 2010: 3; Conneller 2012: 26; van Oyen 2015: 210). Haverfield's model is rooted in cultural evolutionism, though as Fowles and Heupel (2013: 13) elegantly put it, "primitivity is an ideological creation of civilization; civilization is not an evolutionary product of primitivity".

### 5.2.1 Rejecting Romanization

Critique of Haverfield's model of the replacement of 'native' culture with 'Roman' began with Collingwood (1932) and is now mainstream, though the response has often been anti-colonial rather than post-colonial as other disciplines might recognise (Versluys 2014: 3; Stek 2014: 34).[1] Roman theoretical archaeology has been insulated from wider post-colonial discourse (Witcher 2015: 207; Gardner 2016b: 6) and the Romanization debate primarily confined to British and Dutch scholarship (Belvedere 2021: 9). It is also doubtful that the rejection of Romanization has impacted upon popular perceptions of Roman Britain. Non-specialist audiences generally still seem to view the Roman presence in Britain as positive and linked to a civilising mission (Mattingly 2006: 4; Hingley 2015a; 2021a: 3–4), and Romanization and its acculturation models have underpinned generations of museum displays.

Nativist approaches to Roman colonialism recognised the problem of Romano-centric narratives, yet envisaged homogenised 'native' cultures defined in response to Rome, often reducing Roman influence to an insincere and easily-shed urban veneer (Beard and Henderson 1999: 49; Hingley 2005: 41; van Oyen 2015: 214). A notable response to this was creolisation, an approach with its origins in linguistic studies which reconceptualises cultural exchange as the production of unique hybrids (Webster 2001), though this also risks perpetuating homogenised cultural groupings (Goldberg 2009: 41; Mattingly 2011: 203–4). The related creolage has attempted to address this through stressing the dynamism of the blending cultures (Häussler and Webster 2019). Consequently, there has been greater consideration of individuals over cultural systems (Woolf 1998: 12), such as Mattingly's (2011: 213) "discrepant experience", promoting heterogenous, multifaceted and dynamic responses to Rome.

[1] Hingley (2017) considers the uncritical use of 'colonial' in Roman studies and its interchangeability with 'imperial', arguing for recognition of three distinct processes: the establishment of 'colonies', the large-scale movement of people, and new cultural influences

‘Identities’ became central within discourses conceptualizing a more fluid, hybridized Romano-British society; how individual identities might have been defined, expressed, adapted or enforced beyond timeless, essentialist (Gardner 2011: 12) and generally androcentric (Revell 2010: 3; 2016a: 147; Sherratt and Moore 2016) constructs of ‘Romans’ and ‘natives’. Though identity is often viewed in terms of ethnicity, politics, gender or sexuality, categorising the fluid and situational identities of individuals is not easy (Meskell 2007: 23; Maldonado and Russell 2016: 2; Hingley 2021b: 181). Rigid categorisations risk becoming proxies for the problems of Romanization (Pitts 2007: 698; Pitts and Versluys 2015: 6; Ivleva and Collins 2020: 4), while modern western identities do not necessarily reflect those of the ancient world and are additionally restricted by a lack of diversity within Roman archaeology as a discipline (Kamash 2021). Line (2019), for example, observes that the identities expressed on Romano-British curse tablets include dichotomies of male/female, slave/free and even civilian/soldier, but not ethnic distinctions. Pitts (2007: 696; see also Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 11) cautions that without critical application and definition, identity can become merely a search for “diversity for diversity’s sake” and Gardner (2011) argues that acknowledgement of fluid identities is less important than understanding how and why identities might change.

An influential model for the spread of Roman culture has been ‘elite emulation’ (e.g. Haverfield 1915; Millett 1990; Woolf 1998), a process of cultural mimesis whereby high-status provincial elites were complicit in social change through the competitive adoption of Roman material culture and concepts of *humanitas* (Woolf 1998: 55; 2021). Expressions of elite status changed from “charismatic authority” (Gardner 2016a: 491) to the holding of urban magistracies, the adoption of new architectural styles and luxury goods, and appreciation of art and literature. However, the model remains underpinned by Roman/native and elite/non-elite dichotomies, and an assumption that Iron Age societies were hierarchical (see e.g. Moore 2011; 2016: 277; Santos Cancelas 2019: 269; Millett 2021: 68) with members at all levels desiring to become more Roman to advance socially (Webster 2001: 216; Mattingly 2006: 14; van Oyen 2015: 210; Gardner 2016a: 497). Elsner (2007: 256) argues that while narratives of military resistance to Rome are readily accepted, notions of cultural resistance meet with less enthusiasm. Localised adoption or rejection of Roman material culture reflected complex social, ideological or economic factors (Webster 1997a: 327; Millett 2021: 66) and “appropriations of Roman iconographies of power cannot be equated with aspirations to *be* Roman” (Dench 2018: 57). There has been recent interest in

how variable manifestations of power might emerge through encounters with the Roman world, new dynamics perhaps subverting traditional power structures (Woolf 2020; 2021: 21; Versluys 2021: 40) and expressed through political, ideological, economic and military "webs of influence" (Woolf 2020), though remaining inherently "asymmetrical" (Fernández-Götz *et al*. 2020).

Woolf (2021) argues that searching for a single replacement model for Romanization risks perpetuating 'empire' as the ultimate agent of change. However, globalisation (and its portmanteau offspring glocalisation) has become increasingly central in theoretical discourse, focussing on the connectivity between the intensely local situations revealed by archaeology and events occurring on a continental scale (Versluys 2014; 2021; Pitts and Versluys 2015; Hingley 2015b: 32). The predominantly local existence of individuals could be influenced by forces outside of their control and even understanding (Pitts 2008: 494; Woolf 2021), with identities and economic activity on both scales intrinsically entwined (Hingley 2005: 41; Witcher 2017: 639; Knappett 2017). As Terrenato (2005: 70) argues:

> *"The main cultural tensions in the Roman Empire were between small conservatism and global trends, between customary power and Mediterranean-wide political games, between traditional forms of surplus circulation and elements of market economy – more than between Romans and natives or colonizers and colonized."*

Globalisation challenges the dominance of provincial archaeologies, often rooted in the fundamentality of nation states (Versluys 2014: 11; Witcher 2015; Hanscam 2019). However, critics have questioned its applicability to the pre-modern world due to, for example, insufficient technologically-derived "time-space compression" (Naerebout 2006: 163–5; Morley 2015: 53–9; cf. Versluys 2015: 162), considering it an imperial expansionist model echoing Romanization (Naerebout 2006: 154–163; Woolf 2021: 24; cf. Versluys 2021: 35), and being descriptive rather than explanatory (Naerebout 2006; Witcher 2015: 199; Gardner 2016b: 6). However, as Witcher (2017) argues, rather than debating whether the globalisation label 'fits', it is more productive to consider how temporally and geographically disparate globalisation discourses can benefit studies of connectivity in the Roman world.

Hingley (2005: 46; 2015b: 40; 2021b: 187–188; cf. Versluys 2021: 40) argues that globalised narratives should not exonerate imperialist systems from accountability, and the military and administrative violence inherent in cultural change has been rightly highlighted (Mattingly 2006: 91–92; Fernández-Götz *et al*. 2020: 1653; Hingley 2021b: 187–188). Though some view the Roman invasion of Britain as a "black moment" (Pryor 2003: 429), perceptions of Roman imperialism should not simply shift from 'good' to 'bad'. (Gardner 2013: 6; Witcher 2015: 218; Fernández-Götz *et al*. 2020: 1654; Versluys 2021: 37; Millett 2021: 66). Replacing a colonial 19th century paradigm with an equally ideologically-motivated and culturally self-referential one based around colonial guilt is unproductive (Hingley 2017: 9–10, 65), though the legacy of the Roman world on the modern societies and scholars studying it must be recognised (Hingley 2000; 2008; 2015b; Witcher 2017).

### 5.2.2 Post-colonial approaches to religion

The Roman/native dichotomy has been central to discourses about religious change and the influencing of pre-existing beliefs and practices by imported ideas. The Romanization paradigm influentially assumed both the hierarchical superiority of classical deities and imported modes of representation, and direct connectivity between ethnic and religious identities. For example, Hutton (1991: 240) saw the "wealthiest and most cosmopolitan" occupants of Roman Britain being least likely to worship native gods, while Rudling (2008: 124) suggests that the owners of Bignor villa "may not have been of native stock" and were therefore "receptive to new religious ideas". Henig (1984: 36) considered that the religious "conservatism of the local peasantry" was of little concern to scholars as "sculpture and inscriptions were set up only by Romans and by articulate Britons who sought to adopt Roman ways".

Religion was neglected in the early Romanization debate (Millett 1995a; Derks 1998: 241; Woolf 2000b: 615; Revell 2008: 110–113), traditional foci on temples (e.g. Lewis 1966) and the classification of deities (e.g. Birley 1986) remaining generally unchallenged. Classical literary tropes regarding the barbarity of 'Celtic' religious practices retained undue influence (Häussler and King 2007: 7). Studies of religious change in Gaul by Woolf (1998) and Derks (1998) were influential in promoting more complex conceptualisations of religion as central to wider cultural change. Woolf stressed the heterogeneity of the 'Roman' culture against

which provincial traditions were measured (1998: 6–7) and saw religious identities and practices ceasing to represent a native/foreign dichotomy and instead becoming status markers within Gallo-Roman society (1998: 206). New ideas influenced rather than replaced Gallic ontological perspectives. Derks (1998) highlighted the agency of cult communities and regionally varied responses to new religious stimuli, arguing that traditional religious ideas were transformed rather than obliterated, finding expression in new materials and iconographic forms. Both saw religious change as intrinsically connected with social, economic and political networks, foreshadowing the integration at the heart of LAR (Chapter 3.3).

Webster (2001; 2015) stresses the significance of agents beyond native elites and the Roman military, arguing that the colonial contexts of religious change and power inequalities have often been overlooked. Change not only manifested in the worship and representation of certain deities but more fundamentally within systems of religious authority, through the prohibition of some roles (e.g. druids), or the severing of connections between their religious and social influence (Häussler and King 2007; Esposito 2019: 6–8). Dench (2018: 32, 39), however, argues that imperial oversight of local religious authority was weak, and that even the reproduction of Roman ritual and symbolism was performed to meet local needs and ambitions.

Sculptural representations provide significant evidence for new modes of religious expression, though the classical world's pre-eminence within post-Enlightenment Europe has resulted in generally negative perceptions of non-classical artistic paradigms (Elsner 2007). Millett (1990: 114–6) argued that Romano-British art should only be compared with other periphery provincial comparanda, and that the selection of Roman forms of representation was more significant than the quality of the end product. Aldhouse-Green (2004: 195; 2018: 155) criticises the dismissal of 'native' artistic representations as merely "primitive and technologically impoverished scrawlings" (e.g. Henig 1984). She argues that sculpture not demonstrating classical realism was indicative of differing ontological priorities or acts of ideological resistance. Moat (2017) proposes "assertive mimesis" as a strategy through which the adoption of colonial models provided opportunities for subversion and the retention of power over the constructed image and its interpretation. However, it has been argued (Häussler 2008: 14–15; Kiernan 2020: 87–90) that such narratives of resistance often overlook that a majority of 'native' religious iconography dates to the 2nd and 3rd centuries,

not the immediate post-conquest period. They seemingly therefore represent a resurgence of earlier artistic priorities and their associated identities and values.

Syncretism, the fusing together of deities of differing cultural origins, has also been subject to post-colonial critique, though it was relatively uncommon. Zoll (1995a: 35) calculated that only 8% of deities recorded in British inscriptions were double-named. Syncretic agency has traditionally been attributed to either the Roman state (e.g. Henig 1984) or native elites (e.g. Derks 1991), often based on Tacitus' *interpretatio Romana* (*Germania* 43.4) and narratives of Roman tolerance towards newly encountered deities (Webster 1995). Suppositions that syncretism was the frictionless result of benign polytheism between cross-compatible pagan belief systems have been challenged (Webster 1995; 1997a; 1997b; 2001; 2015; Aldhouse-Green 2018: 217), as has the presumption that the Roman and native 'component' deities were clearly defined and ethnically uncomplicated (Zoll 1995a; Lipka 2009; Goldberg 2009; Revell 2008; Häussler 2012; Esposito 2019). In some instances the native name may not even represent a pre-existing deity but an epithet highlighting a particular aspect of divine functionality or connections to a place (Häussler 2012; Webster 2015: 135; Häussler and King 2017; Kiernan 2020: 86–7). Individuals creating or encountering syncretised deities might interpret them in myriad ways (Moat 2020), and acts of syncretisation have been seen as the result of power imbalances (e.g. Webster 1997a; Revell 2007: 227; Goldberg 2009: 38). Webster (2015: 135–6) argues that they represent the adaption of the native deity to the ontological norms of the Roman world, but others (e.g. Watts 1998; Aldhouse-Green 2004: 216; Häussler 2012) perceive syncretisation as the continued expression of native beliefs and a subversion of Roman religious authority. Perhaps more valuable is the concept that syncretisation does not simply create a conglomeration of two originators, but a new hybridised deity capable of acceptance in equally new social and religious contexts (Webster 1997a: 337; 2015: 138; Kiernan 2020: 89).

The so-called mystery cults are often categorised as a 'third strand' of religious phenomenon alongside classical and native deities, with the cults of Mithras, Isis and Cybele most prominent. The mystery-cult categorisation, instigated by Cumont (1906), is based on perceptions of cults sharing a model of restricted salvific knowledge ('mysteries'), leading to them being viewed as representative of new modes of personalised and intensely-experiential religiosity which ultimately aided the rise of Christianity (Adrych and Dalglish 2020a: 81). However, such perceptions have been criticised for being underpinned by Christianised

definitions of ‘religion’ centred upon internalised piety, transformative initiation and salvation (Chapter 1.3), and for assuming that such cults were cohesive and consistent entities (Alvar 2008: 383–421; Revell 2008: 110; Waldner 2013: 216; Quack and Witschel 2017: 6; Walsh 2018a: 15; Adrych and Dalglish 2020a: 85–89, 97, 107).

Further difficulties lie in associations between their ‘eastern’ origins and oriental mysticism (Said 1978; Revell 2008: 113; Quack and Witschel 2017: 6; Alvar Nuño *et al*. 2021: 389–90). Dichotomies between vibrant and exotic ‘eastern’ and dry legalistic ‘Roman’ religious traditions disguise that the cults as they existed in the western provinces were firmly part of, and highly adapted to, the Graeco-Roman religious sphere (Burkert 1987; Ando 2008: 105; Alvar 2008: 21; Quack and Witschel 2017: 6; Sierra del Molino and Campos Méndez 2021: 1). Rüpke (2014: 2) argues that the presence of Isis or Serapis was “perhaps a more certain sign of Roman influence than the name of Jupiter”. Though different communities of worshippers shared broadly recognisable imagery, mythology, architecture or rituals, each community was idiosyncratic, the elective nature of membership requiring them to be attractive to specific local audiences and adaptable to changing circumstances (Gordon 2017b: 283; Quack and Witschel 2017: 8; Walsh 2018a: 38–41; Rüpke 2018a: 315–6; Kiernan 2020: 137; Adrych and Dalglish 2020a: 107). Intense initiation rituals have been a particular focus of interest, thought to reflect the symbolic death and rebirth of the initiate (Rubio 2021), though these may also have varied between communities (Gordon 2017b: 282).

The growth of Christianity and its interactions with other religious communities have been similarly re-evaluated, with narratives of a homogenised Christian theology triumphing over polytheistic beliefs recognised as overly simplistic. Archaeological evidence has led to dramatic literary descriptions of pagan temples, particularly mithraea (Boon 1960; Watts 1998: 10; Smith 2008: 172), being destroyed by zealous Christians to be reconsidered as specific and localised events (Ando 2008: 152; Caseau 2011; Toner 2015; Walsh 2018a: 1–2). The adoption of Christianity is increasingly viewed as part of holistic processes of religious change and negotiation. That polytheistic and Christian ritual practices were not mutually exclusive is suggested in Britain by combinations of Bacchic imagery and Christian inscriptions on the Mildenhall great dish (Hobbs 2012) and the Thetford Treasure (Nash Briggs 2017), and a silver plaque in the Water Newton hoard which utilises a pagan votive formula (Jackson and Burleigh 2018: 139).

Various arguments have been proposed regarding the social, political and intellectual status of late Roman Christianity and the traits that enabled it to spread (e.g. Watts 1998; Faulkner 2001; Dark 2002; Petts 2003a; Perring 2003). These include the privileging of verbal communication, the lack of a single ethnic origin or cult centre, simplified ritual activities, and the self-sufficient and universal functionality of the deity (Lipka 2009; Nongbri 2013: 63; Rives 2019). Caseau (2011: 484) highlights a letter written by a Christian called Publicola to St. Augustine in 398CE, asking whether formerly pagan wells could be drunk from, springs where offerings had previously been made bathed in, or fruit and vegetables grown on pagan land eaten. Though traditional focus has been on grand religious narratives, such intimate and localised concerns, both practical and spiritual, are of greater interest to considering the lived experiences of Christians in Roman Britain.

## 5.3 Votive and structured deposition

The making of physical offerings to supernatural forces, whether through sacrificing animals, pouring libations, burning incense and plant matter, or placing objects into the ground or water, was central to religious practice. Relationships with deities throughout the Roman world echoed social obligations of *fides* (trust) and reciprocity (Derks 1995: 125–126; Morgan 2017: 5). If the dedicant offered due respect and support to their divine patron, they might expect to receive favour in return. The making of vows (*nuncupatio*) and the resulting offerings to complete the dedicant's obligations (*solutio*) were central to this process (Smith 2016: 642). Relations with divine forces were therefore "founded upon a feeling of interdependence and not upon servile submission" (Scheid 2016: 115), and vows might be made at times of specific need or as part of ongoing calendrical requirements. The Latin phrase *votum solvit (laetus) libens merito*, (VS(L)LM), meaning '[the dedicator] gladly, willingly and faithfully fulfilled their vow', appears frequently in inscriptions. Though the detail of the vow is not usually recorded, the quantity of offerings and inscriptions from Roman Britain and the wider Graeco-Roman world attests that divine actors were frequently perceived to have responded to requests. However, as Rüpke (2007: 164) notes, "failed vows produce no votives; the system renders its failures invisible".

Altars, as the main vehicles for sacrificial offerings, occupied a complex socio-religious role, simultaneously functional tools through which sacrifices were made, votive offerings in their

own right, and lasting articulations of human/divine relationships (Revell 2007: 219; Esposito 2017: 157; Rüpke 2018c: 216). They provided a substantial and enduring social memory of previous ritual acts and the dedicator's piety, offering religious instruction to future dedicants through reinforcing ritual processes and forms (Revell 2007: 220). Lipka (2009: 156) proposes three sacrificial categories: "supplicatory" (petitioning for future well-being), "expiatory" (punishment for unfulfilled obligations), and "lustrations" (acts of cleansing or atonement). The ritual processes required to successfully perform sacrifices were mostly generic; it was the combination of the offering and spatial and temporal foci that related the act to a specific deity (Lipka 2009: 103). Revell (2007: 214; 2008: 117, 148) observes a scholarly tendency to combine idiosyncratic British site practices into normative provincial ritual narratives, but "shared experiences should not be confused with a homogeneous experience" (Revell 2007: 227).

### 5.3.1 Votive objects

Finds assemblages from temples and shrines indicate that, aside from sacrificing animals (King 2005), the most common offerings were coins and jewellery, though regions and sites produce distinct assemblages (Smith 2016: 644, Table 33.1). Ovens at the Springhead (Andrews 2007) and Great Chesterford (Medlycott 2011: 79) temples may have produced bread or cakes, highlighting the potential for non-surviving organic offerings. The consecration of everyday personal items as votives provides a window into individual religious agency. Dedicants, religious authorities, and even deities may have determined the suitability of offerings, and Hughes (2017: 198) suggests that the "conspicuous void" left by the offered object was an ongoing reminder of the act. What were the social connotations of offering intrinsically low value (but perhaps emotionally-charged) personal items compared to more expensive (but impersonal) specially-made votives? How influential were colours, forms and materials in object selection (Puttock 2002: 115), and how did objects serve as proxies for body parts, actions, emotions or desires?

Ferris (2012: 34) highlights that visual literacy was an important aspect of experiencing religious sites, and iconography on objects such as coins and intaglios (Marshman 2015) may have been significant to their selection. Coins featuring Minerva feature in significant quantities in the probably votive Snettisham 'jeweller's hoard' (Potter 1986; Cool 2000: 37)

and the Harlow temple assemblage (Black 2008: 20), though coins must be considered in relation to wider patterns of circulation. Coins deposited into the waters at Piercebridge contained greater ratios of silver denarii, counterfeits, exotic mints, and Britannia imagery than the adjacent settlement (Walton 2016: 191; Eckardt and Walton 2021: 130–140), and perhaps also a bias towards imagery of imperial women (Hutton 2013: 255; cf. Eckardt and Walton 2021: 139–140). Explicit associations between plate brooches and specific deities have also been suggested, particularly those featuring animals/objects which were the attributes of deities. Crummy (2007: 225), for example, associates cockerel, fly, purse and shoe-sole brooches with Mercury (see also Eckardt 2013: 221; cf. Makreth 2011: 241; Ferris 2012: 35), while horse and rider brooches are generally accepted as representing a Romano-Celtic rider deity which might have related to hunting, warfare or horse breeding (Bayley and Butcher 2004: 175–176; Makreth 2011: 241).

The miniaturisation of votive offerings has its origins in late prehistory, and recent interpretations have challenged notions that they represent the substitution of valuable objects with more affordable surrogates (Farley 2011: 106). Miniatures are seductive, actively inviting touch (Langin-Hooper 2015: 68) and offering a sense of control (Frankfurter 2019a: 669). Handling them may have been inherently empowering, particularly if access to the full-scale object was restricted or dangerous, perhaps even condensing its potency (Bailey 2014: 97; Graham 2020: 97). The fragmentation or mutilation of offerings also has prehistoric precedence, and damaged objects are known from Uley (Henig 1993: 131–133), Woodeaton (Henig 1984: 150), Bath (Henig *et al*. 1988), Hayling Island (Briggs *et al*. 1992: 2) and Piercebridge (Eckardt and Walton 2021: 58, 138, 140–143). Kiernan has discussed the ritual mutilation of coins (2001) and also how the fragmentation of religious statuary might reflect respectful decommissioning or even punishment of the statue by worshippers as well as antagonists (2020: 267; see also Croxford 2003). Fittock's (2015; 2017) study of pipeclay Venus figurines has suggested that the commonly-attested breakage of their heads was likely a deliberate ritual act, the heads perhaps continuing to serve an alternate function after the deposition of the body.

### 5.3.2 Anatomical votives

Anatomical votives, fragmentary representations of internal and external human body parts, are a particularly emotive category of votive offering. Attested across the Graeco-Roman world, they are known in significantly smaller quantities from Britain than the Mediterranean or even Gaul. Ferris (2012: 65) estimated that between 67 and 117 items from 19 separate British sites might be plausibly interpreted as anatomical votives, suggesting that their comparative rarity in Britain may reflect differing conceptualizations of the body and its fragmentation (Ferris 2003: 22). However, the use of anatomical votives largely peaked in the Mediterranean by the turn of the 1st millennium (Graham and Draycott 2017: 14), and British finds therefore represent late examples of a declining phenomenon.

Anatomical votives are often ascribed a healing function (Graham and Draycott 2017: 11), demonstrating the inseparability of medicine and religion. However, their homogeneity has been questioned, and their various uses explored through the lenses of embodiment, phenomenology, material religion and gender (Graham and Draycott 2017: 7, 13–15). Schörner (2015: 408) cautions that anatomical votives should not be perceived as simply imitations of healthy or ill/deformed body parts and may have been metaphorical proxies: eyes representing visions or desires to be seen by a deity (Ferris 2012: 69), ears the deity hearing prayers (Forsén 1996; cited in Schörner 2015: 399), and hands the physical act of beseeching (Eckardt 2014: 175). The deposition of anatomical votives was also a social act, the possibly public offering and any subsequent display testifying to the efficacy of the shrine (Schörner 2015: 409) and the donor's desire to re-enter 'normal' society (Ferris 2012: 71). The fragmented body part might therefore be illustrative of the unwell individual's sense of fractured incompleteness, a form of "ritual prosthesis" (Hughes 2008; Adams 2017: 199; Graham 2020: 132).

Ferris (2012: 70) argues against automatically designating religious sites producing anatomical offerings as healing shrines. This is particularly notable at Bath, where a combination of isolated anatomical votives, the classical Minerva's healing role, and more recent perceptions of the restorative powers of the waters have influenced interpretations (Revell 2007: 219; 2008: 128; Goldberg 2009: 43; Hutton 2013: 244; Cousins 2014: 56, 60; 2020: 37, 131–2; cf. Davenport 2021: 75). The temple complex to Nodens at Lydney has seen

similar interpretative uncertainty, with arguments for a healing function based on a small number of finds (a miniature arm, bone figurine and a collyrium stamp) and the presence of dog imagery, argued by some to have had healing connotations in the Graeco-Roman world (Smith 2006; Hutton 2013: 250; cf. Cousins 2020: 42–45).

### 5.3.3 Deposition at religious sites

The deposition of objects and assemblages at significant locations is widely attested in Iron Age and Roman Britain and Gaul (Smith 2016: 641). The placing of objects into the ground might form a specific votive act, but alternatively conducted as part of routine/cyclical temple object management or to decommission sacred objects. The identification of ritual deposits relies on the specific context of the deposit and the frequency, type and patterning of finds assemblages (Smith 2016: 645). Here I consider deposition at recognised religious sites, and below the wider phenomenon of structured deposition. It is important, however, that the two are not artificially dichotomised, as they represent manifestations of holistic communication strategies with supernatural forces. Rigid definitions of religious places have been increasingly challenged, as discussed in Chapter 3.5.2.1 (Moser and Feldman 2014; see also Graham 2020: 45–6). Their separation here reflects their differing scholarly histories.

Deposited objects and the 'waste' products of sacrificial offerings, including animal bone and burnt fuel, required management. They might be directly placed into the ground or a watery place by the dedicant, or subsequently put into suitable repositories such as *favisae* pits by religious authorities as part of site maintenance (Ferris 2012: 54,73; Kiernan 2020: 258). This perhaps followed a period of public display during which offerings were simultaneously visible to the deity and other worshippers (Rüpke 2019a: 1216). Deposition might also occur as part of the decommissioning of religious sites, as perhaps was the case at Coventina's Well and the London mithraeum.

Depositional activity offers insights into the ways ritual spaces were perceived and engaged with, such as highlighting internal zoning and ritual foci (and perhaps restrictions), and key places of transition and movement around and between ritual places (Smith 2001; Revell 2016b: 773). At Chanctonbury Ring, West Sussex, animal skulls were deposited at the temple but other remains disposed of elsewhere: the *temenos* ditch for ox and sheep/goat, the

'polygonal building' for pig, and an area west of the temple for oyster shell (King 2005: 343–344). At Hayling Island, the south-eastern corner of the *temenos* was a focus for depositional activity (King and Soffe 1998), worshippers possibly entering the courtyard and turning to the right to process around the *cella* before depositing their offering and leaving the sacred space. At Marcham/Frilford, the *temenos* seems to have been swept clean, with votive offerings and animal bone from sacrifices and feasting deposited into a single pit. Concentrations of coins at the *temenos* entrance have been interpreted as votive offerings by those who did not or could not cross the sacred threshold, or as entry tokens by those who did (Kamash *et al*. 2010: 103–105). At other sites, Claudian-period concentrations of Iron Age coins have been noted in front and to the left of the cult focus (Haselgrove 2005: 417; Wythe 2007). The ritual significance of liminal spaces such as thresholds and watery places seems to have related to the control or placation of such powerfully charged locations (e.g. Rykwert 1988: 137; Crease 2015: 251; Esmonde Cleary 2005; Mac Mahon 2003). Roman votive depositions at prehistoric monuments (Rudling 2008: 120; Hingley 2009), or of prehistoric artefacts at Roman religious sites (Turner and Wymer 1987; Burnham *et al*. 2006: 412; Jackson and Burleigh 2018: 300–313), similarly suggest reverence for, or a need to exert control over, more ancient landscapes and objects, something which seems to have become particularly prevalent in the later Roman period (Williams 1998; Smith 2001: 163; Hutton 2011; 2013: 271–272).

The burial of fragmented religious statuary represents a related phenomenon. Though traditionally considered through the lens of Christian iconoclasm (Croxford 2003: 82), such burials are generally consistent with other contemporary acts of deposition such as silver and pewter hoards (Petts 2003a: 124–127; 2003b: 116; Perring 2003: 122), and less violent interpretations are now given greater credence. The burial of sculpture within the London mithraeum, for example, likely represents the respectful actions of worshippers, perhaps to remove their power or reflecting a change in the building's religious orientation (Croxford 2003; Kiernan 2020: 259). It has been suggested that the head of Mercury from Uley (Fig 8.44) may have had a second life as a representation of Christ prior to its respectful burial in a pit close to a 7$^{th}$/8$^{th}$ century chapel (Aldhouse-Green 2018: 193; de la Bédoyère 2007: 224–225). Davenport (2021: 206) suggests that Bath's Sulis Minerva statue was decapitated and damaged shortly before the 370s, the head possibly buried in a pit in a similar manner to Uley. The complexities of understanding the intent underlying the burial of ritual objects are evidenced by changing interpretations of the Maryport altars. They are now not believed to

have been deposited in pits as a form of ongoing (perhaps annual) decommissioning, but buried in or after the late 4th century as packing stones in post-pits for a substantial structure (Hill 1997: 98; Haynes 2020). As Ferris (2021: 162) notes, however, their original religious functionality may still have played an ideological role in their selection for this new use.

### 5.3.4 Structured Deposition

Unusual finds assemblages in pits, ditches, shafts, watery places or beneath buildings have long attracted archaeological attention (e.g. Ross 1968), and the scholarship of structured deposition originated in prehistoric archaeology (Richards and Thomas 1984; Bradley 1990; Hill 1995; Garrow 2012b).[2] Structured deposits are generally defined as being discrete and deliberately constructed deposits that were not returned to or curated over time (cf. Kyriakidis 2007b: 17), and located at significant, often liminal, locations. Metalwork hoards (see e.g. Johns 1995; 1996a; Lee 2009; Guest 2014) and grave goods (Cooper *et al*. 2020) are often treated as separate phenomena, though their composition often implies comparable processes of creation and deposition (Manning 1972; Hingley 2006b).

Though structured deposition has long been recognised in Roman Britain (Chadwick 2012: 284; Cool and Richardson 2013: 191), it has not featured prominently in syntheses of religion (e.g. Henig 1984; de la Bédoyère 2007; Aldhouse-Green 2018). Dominant expectations of 'organised' religion conducted in overt and specific locations to named and typically anthropomorphic deities have restricted recognition of broader ritual activity (Merrifield 1987: 7; King 1990: 220). De la Bédoyère (2007: 42), for example, states that he would rather "focus on places and deposits where we are in a good deal less doubt about what is going on". However, the extensive evidence for the creation and significance of structured deposits makes them an important element of the lived religious experiences of individuals in Roman Britain.

Assemblages often contain unusual items or combinations of items, discussed below, sometimes deliberately damaged, fragmented, or oriented in specific relation to other elements of the deposit. The power of depositional acts appears to have reflected a combination of the composition and juxtaposition of object assemblages and depositional

[2] Also termed formalized, odd, unusual, deliberate or special deposition

locations, which often contrast with 'normal' site and landscape depositional patterns (Hingley 2006b: 239; Garrow 2012b; Cool and Richardson 2013). Contextual relationships are therefore as significant as any individual items (Haynes 2013: 11), and include the active agency of the form and nature of the pit and any rituals associated with its creation, conversion from a previous function, and/or closing. However, the act of deposition should not be assumed to have been the most important element to the creator/s (Fontjin 2012: 121), or that all depositions represent 'successful' ritual acts.

Assumptions that Romano-British structured depositions represent direct continuity of prehistoric ritual activity (e.g. Ross 1967; 1968) have been increasingly challenged (e.g. Webster 1997c: 140; Goldberg 2009: 44; Cousins 2020: 54; cf. Fulford 2001), viewed instead as a hybrid practice influenced by both native and Graeco-Roman practices. Romano-British structured deposits are heterogenous and should be recognised as unique acts (Hingley 2006b: 239), yet some broad trends can be discerned. There is a prevalence of articulated animal skeletons, particularly dogs and corvids (Morris 2011; Serjeantson and Morris 2011; Smith 2006), and either complete or perforated ceramic vessels (Fulford 2001; Aldhouse-Green 2012). Others have noted the significance of iron objects (Dungworth 1998; Hingley 2006b), pewter (Allen *et al*. 2017), shoes (van Driel-Murray 1999), and both Roman (Walton 2011) and Iron Age (Creighton 2000) coins. The incorporation of organic materials in structured deposits is evidenced through such survivals as the numerous wooden objects from Rothwell Haigh (Cool and Richardson 2013), and a life-sized and gracile arm carved from a single tree branch in a well deposit at Raunds (Cooper 2019; Beeson 2019). Aldhouse-Green (2004: 90–102) suggests that the affordances and properties of wood, such as its decay in water, may have made it a suitable surrogate for human sacrificial offerings. Archaeobotanical remains from structured deposits have, however, generally been treated as palaeo-environmental indicators rather than as active elements of ritual assemblages (Livarda 2013; Lodwick 2015).

Evolving interpretations of Romano-British structured deposits are demonstrated by the series of pits containing exceptional artefactual and faunal assemblages from Newstead. These have been successively interpreted as the panicked disposal of equipment following a military disaster, ritual pits containing offerings to native deities, and rubbish disposal (Clarke 1997). Finding these interpretations unsatisfactory in isolation, Clarke suggested that the pits were most likely functional features (possibly wells) requiring closing deposits at the end of their lives. He argued (1997: 8) that despite depositional activity on military sites often being seen

as entirely functional, the assemblages' combinations of everyday materials (including kitchen waste) and objects with symbolic potential (e.g. fragmented weapons) demonstrate the blurred boundaries between traditional distinctions of 'functional' and 'ritual' deposits (Chapter 1.3.2).

## 5.4 Magic

### 5.4.1 Defining magic in the Graeco-Roman world

Graeco-Roman and Egyptian magic has long elicited academic interest, particularly through literary evidence such as the Greek Magical Papyri (Betz 1997; Dieleman 2019), though earlier scholarship often viewed it as a malicious perversion of religion (e.g. Barb 1963). Henig (1984: 32), for example, described magic in a Romano-British context as "a debased offshoot [of religion] which assumes that the gods can be controlled by man." Such views were grounded in definitions which saw it in opposition to religion: secret/public, coercive/supplicative, night/day, and anti-social/social (Bremmer 2015: 11). Such binaries have mostly been rejected, with magic now generally perceived as having culturally-specific manifestations and complex symbiotic relationships with religion (Merrifield 1987: 3; Versnel 1991a: 181; Moretti 2015: 104; Frankfurter 2015: 11; 2019b: 720; McKie 2017: 20; Gordon 2017c: 121; Sanzo 2020: 28; Alvar Nuño 2019: 400–401; 2020: 47). Magical practices were formed from the same networks of actions, materials and places as religious activities, drawing upon (or subverting) its language and symbolism (Wilburn 2012: 13; Stratton 2013: 254; Frankfurter 2015: 12–13; Graham 2020: 198–9). As Versnel (1991a: 177) observed, "magic does not exist, nor does religion. What do exist are our definitions of these concepts".

The weighty historical and cultural baggage which 'magic' carries has led some to argue against its continued scholarly value (e.g. Aune 2007; 2014; Otto 2013; 2017; see also Frankfurter 2019c: 10–12; Sanzo 2020). A majority, however, continue to see it as useful mainly due to its ancient provenance (cf. Frankfurter 2019c: 4–5), though recognising its problematic connotations and need for definition (Stratton 2013: 244; Houlbrook and Armitage 2015a: 8; Alvar Nuño 2020: 28–29). Gordon (2020b: 4; 2020a), for example,

avoids terminology such as ‘magicians’ and ‘witches’, instead categorising practitioners as “subordinated religious specialists” (Chapter 3.3.3).

Recent scholarship shares a recognition that magic does not define any classifiable ritual activities but was a heuristic label. One person’s solemn religious ritual could be another’s deviant heretical magic, and usage of the term often reflected “discourses of exclusion and inclusion” (Otto 2013: 315), used to delegitimise certain practices and practitioners, and reflecting contested socio-religious authority (Rives 2011b: 8; Stratton 2013: 245; Otto 2013; Chadwick 2015). Gordon and Simón Marco (2009: 5) accept a definition of magic as “unsanctioned religious activity”, yet the crucial issue remains one of power dynamics. Who possessed the social and religious authority to define what was ‘sanctioned’? (Stratton 2013: 245; Bremmer 2015: 10–11; McKie 2017: 18–19; Frankfurter 2019c: 6). It is therefore magical practitioners who have increasingly come into focus, particularly their social and political ‘othering’ in the Graeco-Roman world due to perceptions of the foreign, liminal, origins of magical practices (Asirvatham and Pache 2001: xiv; Rives 2011b: 2–3; McKie and Parker 2018: 2–3; Gordon 2020b: 7; 2020a: 987–9), which included British and Gaulish druids (Gordon 2020a: 7).[3] Pseudo-histories of magic were created which cast it as simultaneously “immensely powerful” yet “utterly ineffective” (Gordon 2020b: 14).

A material turn (Chapter 3.4) in the study of magic (*materia magica*), reflecting wider conceptual shifts of magic from an intellectual to a practical phenomenon (Frankfurter 2019d: 280), was prefaced by Merrifield’s (1987) pioneering work and initially most prominent within historical archaeology (e.g. Fenell and Manning 2014; Houlbrook and Armitage 2015b). Material approaches to magic have proved particularly valuable in the north-western Roman provinces, countering scholarly biases towards literary evidence and the Greek speaking world (e.g. Faraone and Obbink 1991; Dickie 2003; see also Bremmer 2015: 8). Despite their often engaging descriptions, ancient literary accounts of magical practices represent a restricted social sphere, presenting rhetorical portraits to the authors’ literate social peers rather than reflecting lived reality (Stratton 2013: 254; Gordon 2020b: 9). Gordon (2020b: 15–16) disparages the interpretation of archaeological data without supporting literary evidence as “verg(ing) on arbitrary”, yet materially-focused

[3] Pliny the Elder (Natural History 30.4) considered that “Britain practices magic in awe, with such grand ritual that it might seem that she gave it to the Persians”

archaeological approaches offer valuable perspectives for exploring the lived realities and physical manifestations of magical practices for individuals and communities. After all, almost all literary references to spells culminate in the creation of an object (Frankfurter 2019a: 659).

Wilburn's (2012) seminal study of magic in Roman Egypt, Spain and Cyprus argued that the recognition of magic in the archaeological record, particularly the efficacious significance of specific depositional contexts, was central to understanding magical processes and interpreting its social roles. Though magical assemblages might comprise distinct material juxtapositions (Frankfurter 2019a: 666–667), Graham (2020: 176–181) highlights, using the assemblage from Rome's fountain of Anna Perenna, that there is no clear ontological distinction between 'formal' ritual offerings (e.g. inscribed dedications and votive offerings of coins, ceramics and figurines) and magical ones (e.g. lead binding curses and poppets). Individual depositional acts reflect unique assemblages of need, divine beliefs, material affordances and place, conducted without the depositor "needing to self-identify as a practitioner of magic or religion" (Graham 2020: 184). Such approaches are echoed in Parker and McKie's (2018) edited volume on *materia magica* in Roman Britain and the western provinces, which aims to bring discussion of the materiality of magical practices into mainstream Romano-British religious discourse.

### 5.4.2 Amuletic devices

Amuletic devices are anything worn or carried about the body, or placed on an animal, object or structure,[4] with the purpose of evoking tangible effects such as warding off misfortune (*apotropaic*) or promoting health and wellbeing (*eudaemonic*). Dasen (2015) suggests three main amuletic spheres of influence: medical (protecting against illness), social (characterising status and gender), and religious (e.g. rites of transition). Amulets might be simple or complex, produced by 'professionals' or home-made, and created for longer-term passive protection or to proactively meet immediate needs. They might be organic materials (e.g. Parker 2019; Frankfurter 2019a: 664),[5] purpose-made objects (e.g. Parker 2016), or otherwise prosaic items transformed through applied imagery or inscriptions (e.g. Johns 1996b: 9–12; Fulghum 2001; Aldhouse-Green 2004: 38; Gordon and Marco Simón 2009: 33; Crummy

[4] Bohak (2015: 87) argues against terming apotropaic protection for non-living things 'amulets'
[5] Pliny the Elder lists natural amulets and their affects, see Bohak (2015: 85)

2011: 67; Sagiv 2018; Dasen 2015: 185; Dasen and Nagy 2019), perhaps contained in phylacteries (e.g. Tomlin 2014; Dasen 2015: 194; van den Hoek *et al.* 2015). Once used, they might have been saved for re-use, passed on, or decommissioned.

Though identifying any individual object as amuletic can be problematic (Bohak 2015: 83), they are well-attested enough in Britain to suggest widespread confidence in their efficacy, offering insights into beliefs in the ability of malevolent forces, such as the envious gaze of the 'evil eye', to adversely influence individuals' lives (Dasen 2015: 181–4; Whitmore 2017: 47; 2018: 24–26; Bailliot 2019: 180–1; Parker 2020: 92). Though women and children appear to have had particular need of amuletic protection (Taylor 1993; Crummy 2010; Parker 2015; Dasen 2015; 2018) and some amulets were restricted to certain wearers (Dasen 2018: 129), literary and archaeological evidence suggests that their benefit was acknowledged across genders and social classes. Though there is ambiguity regarding how amulets were perceived to have worked (Stratton 2013: 253; Bohak 2015: 91), physical contact and public visibility seem to have been factors in their efficacy (Wilburn 2012: 19; Dasen 2015: 185; 2018: 128).

#### *5.4.2.1 Phallic imagery*

The disembodied phallus is the most readily identifiable apotropaic image in Roman Britain, though its functionality was highly contextualised (Lee 2021). It is attested in stone carvings (Parker 2017a; Collins 2020), on ceramic vessels (Parker 2021: 185–6), and through a variety of small finds, particularly finger rings (Johns 1989: 63, pl.10), antler roundels (Greep 1994) and, considered specifically here, pendants. The phallus seems to have been potent in countering the evil eye, distracting its malevolent intent. Phallic imagery sometimes occurs in scenes of the 'all-suffering eye' being attacked by various apotropaic devices, and in others it directly attacks the eye with ejaculate (Parker 2017b; 2020: 91; 2021). Other apotropaic imagery appears alongside phalli, perhaps increasing their power or extending their efficacious capacity, including fists making the *manusfica* gesture, scallop shells, horns, wings and *lunulae*; all of which have been interpreted as combining masculine and feminine apotropaic symbolism (Crummy 2010: 51–52; Parker 2015: 139–143).

Despite the masculinity of the image and noted connections with military sites (Greep 1983: 139–140; Parker 2015: 147; cf. Allison 2013: 87), it is not conclusive that phalli were

predominantly worn by men. Phallic pendants are known from infant burials but rarely as adult grave goods (Parker 2015; Whitmore 2017: 50–52). Dasen (2015: 187) suggests that clubs were symbolically interchangeable with phalli and suitable for women to wear. Phallic pendants have been found in association with animals and harness fittings and might, therefore, have been used to protect animals, particularly horses (Allison 2013: 86–88; Whitmore 2018: 23).

Pendants are generally assumed to have been worn singly around the neck (Parker 2015: 139–140), though it has been suggested that soldiers wore them on belts (Eckardt 2014: 161). There is general acceptance, supported by Plutarch (*Quaest. Conv.* 5.7.681-683), that their efficacy required some degree of public visibility (Whitmore 2017; Parker 2017a; 2020; Collins 2020). The social 'shock factor' created by wearing an erect phallus, positioned un-anatomically around the neck (Whitmore 2018: 26), may have marked out the wearer as touched by misfortune, perhaps prompting a complex amalgam of sympathy and revulsion from observers. Whitmore (2017) suggests that the orientation of the worn phallus perhaps indicates differing urgency of apotropaic need, some laying passively against the body but others projecting proactively outwards. Her experiments with a replica pendant demonstrate its near-constant movement while worn, its kinetic motion responding to the wearer's movements and perhaps reminding and reassuring them of its constant vigilance on their behalf.

#### *5.4.2.2 Materiality and amuletic devices*

Concepts of materiality (Chapter 3.4) are particularly relevant to amulets, the properties of certain materials as intrinsic to their efficacy as their form and any applied inscriptions or imagery. Such magical material properties include sympathetic associations with colour, such as blood and red gems (Dasen 2018: 131), or body parts, such as animal tooth amulets for teething (Dasen 2015: 185). Others might conversely be antipathetic, such as deer products protecting against snakes (Bohak 2015: 89; Miller and Sykes 2016).

Two materials, amber and jet, are of particular interest. Jet, a type of lignite, is characterised by its smooth finish, light weight and deep black colour (Allason-Jones 1996a; Eckardt 2014: 111). Jet, and jet-like materials, were used for a variety of objects such as hairpins, beads,

bracelets, rings, bangles, furniture fittings and pendants (Allason-Jones 1996a). Though not all jet objects would have been perceived as magical (Parker 2016: 109), some, such as a small but broadly iconographically consistent group of pendants featuring the piercing apotropaic stare of the gorgon Medusa, can be more positively suggested (Eckardt 2014: 112–115; Parker 2016). Jet produces a small electrostatic charge and a smell when warmed, such as when rubbed, which may have influenced its perceived apotropaic value (Eckardt 2014: 112, 124; Parker 2016). That some Gorgoneia pendants show signs of use-wear suggests that rubbing, an intensely embodied act, may have activated their amuletic power (Parker 2016: 107). Amber shares jet's electrostatic properties but occurs much less frequently archaeologically, and generally in 1st and 2nd century contexts compared with jet's later popularity (Eckardt 2014: 106, 125; Davis 2018: 73).

### 5.4.3 Curse tablets

Curse tablets are thin sheets of (predominantly) lead or lead alloy,[6] often bearing inscriptions and deposited at meaningful locations as a means of influencing divine forces to act on the behalf of the creator against others. Approximately 630 Latin curses are currently known (Gordon 2020b: 11), almost 300 from Britain, two thirds of which are from Bath and Uley (Tomlin 2021: 19).

Though scholarly interest has traditionally focussed on them as literary texts, their materiality and contextualised cultural/geographic use have been increasingly considered (McKie 2016: 21; Alvar Nuño 2019). Though curses may also have been written on organic materials, that the majority surviving are on lead alloys is significant to their embodied use. Its weight and malleability, the physicality of carving into its dull surface and the brighter lettering created by doing so, combined with subsequent rolling, folding, or piercing, were fundamental to experiences of cursing; abnormal acts heightening the sense of rituality (McKie 2017: 102). Sympathetic connections have been drawn between the "cold, poisonous metal" and the curses carved into it (Moretti 2015: 107), though Cousins (2014: 60; 2020: 140) suggests that the pewter (lead/tin alloy) tablets most common at Bath (Tomlin 1988: 82; McKie 2017: 100; Cousins 2020: 135), might be more positively perceived as "a wishful version of silver". However, no gold or silver curse tablets are known (Sanchez Natalias 2018).

[6] The term *defixio* is common, but has definitional issues (Adams 2006: 1; Versnel 2009: 329; McKie 2017: 12; Tomlin 2021: 23) and is not used here

#### *5.4.3.1 Cursing as a social act*

Across the Graeco-Roman world, curses were created for a variety of, often malicious, purposes (Vitellozzi 2019), though in Britain their use almost exclusively related to the theft of personal property (Tomlin 2002: 168). They were predominantly not proactive social or economic attacks against rivals (Faraone 1991: 5; Kiernan 2004: 131; Tomlin 2021: 24–5) but reactionary pleas for retribution, termed 'prayers for justice' by Versnel (1991a: 192; 1991b: 60–61; 2009: 275; cf. Gordon 2020b: 12). The tablets therefore straddle traditional categorisations of 'religion' and 'magic' (Moretti 2015: 107; Gordon 2020b: 11); if the intent to cause harm is removed their ritual creation and deposition seem commonplace (McKie 2019: 441). However, though prayers for justice are closer to 'ordinary' religious practices than binding curses (Ogden 1999: 39; Versnel 2009: 327), Versnel (1991b: 61; 2009: 288, 342–348; see also Gordon 2013: 266) argues that they do not represent reciprocal votive offerings as the gift was immediately ceded to the deity rather than vowed as a conditional future act; the deity became the owner of the stolen items and therefore the victim. Consequently, cursing engaged with complex webs of social and divine relationships.

The punishments desired for the thief were often severe, including death, insomnia, mobility restrictions, insanity, memory loss, blindness, and injury to internal organs (Kiernan 2004: Table 1). As Line (2019: 240–243) observes, even children were not exempt from such punishments and may have been able to create curses. Deities interpreted as healers, such as Sulis Minerva, could also be removers of health (Green 1996: 35). Cursing presented opportunities to subvert social power structures and regain emotional control over injustices (Gordon 2013: 269; Cousins 2014: 58–59; McKie 2017: 210; Sanchez Natalias 2018: 10). Ogden (1999: 59) suggests that prayers for justice carried "no shame or danger", yet belief in the power of cursing might have intense social and wellbeing implications for all parties involved (Eidinow 2017; Line 2019: 242). Attributing illnesses to curses perpetuated their efficacy (Tomlin 1988: 101–105; 2021: 24; Kiernan 2004: 126; Gordon 2013: 265, 272; Bremmer 2015: 12), and knowledge of the creation of a curse might have repercussions.

### *5.4.3.2 Creating and depositing curses*

For inscribed curses, the content and composition of the message was crucial. Handwriting analysis suggests no single author was responsible for multiple British tablets, so literate petitioners likely wrote their own (Tomlin 2002: 170; 2021: 25; Revell 2007: 220; 2008: 123–4; cf. McKie 2017: 60; Graham 2020: 190). Consistencies in formulation, however, mean the process was probably assisted by religious officials. This includes phrases like "whether man or woman, whether free or slave" when the identity of the culprit was unknown (Tomlin 2002: 170; Line 2019),[7] or using *similia-similibus* (Versnel 2009: 309; Kropp 2009: 369), creative metaphors to describe the desired punishment, such as the victim becoming "as liquid as water" (Fig 8.41) (Sanchez Natalias 2018: 15). Not all curses were inscribed, however. Of the 86 tablets known from Uley, 140 are blank (Tomlin 2021: 22), suggesting that some pleas, perhaps by illiterate petitioners, were verbal.

An inscription's power might be enhanced through 'pseudo-paragraphia', the distortion of text through writing backwards, upside down, using alliteration, mirroring, or anagrams (Tomlin 2002: 174; Gordon 2015: 166; Raja and Weiss 2015: 143), or through *voces mysticae*, unreadable magic languages (Line 2019: 47–8). These made the curse harder to read and may have enhanced the twisting, binding effect on the victim, similar to the subsequent rolling and folding of the tablet itself (McKie 2017: 107). Piercing tablets with nails might have enabled their display prior to deposition but also served to 'fix' the curse (Versnel 2009: 323–330; Tomlin 2010: 249; 2021: 22; McKie 2017: 117; 2019: 446–7; Bailliot 2019: 194).

The deposition of tablets formed the emotional ritual climax (Moretti 2015: 110; McKie 2017: 95). In the western provinces, watery deposition seems to have been particularly significant, accounting for a third of tablets (Sanchez Natalias 2019: 4650). In Britain this includes those at Bath and four others to Neptune (Tomlin 2021: 21), though Line (2019: Table 3.3) argues that other deposition sites may have unrecognised watery associations. The disappearance of the curse beneath the dark waters provided a powerful metaphor for its transference to the deity (Cousins 2014: 55, 58; 2020: 116; Graham 2020: 168).

[7] Line (2019) argues that such formulations offer insights into perceptions of social identities

The atmospheric environment for some depositions may have been emotionally intense (Salvo 2020: 166). The sacred spring at Bath was enclosed in the later 2nd or early 3rd century (Cunliffe and Davenport 1985: 179; Cousins 2020: 111–114; Davenport 2021: 118), replacing depositions witnessed, or even made, by bathers in the adjacent baths with a controlled, dark, hot and steamy space (Fig 5.1, see also Fig 7.32). This was conducive to more secret, emotive and intensely sensory experiences (Cousins 2014: 55; 2020: 149; McKie 2016: 19; 2017: 56–58) and it is perhaps no coincidence that cursing seems to begin at this time (Tomlin 2002: 166). Depositions were likely accompanied by other offerings or libations, the speaking/chanting/singing of the curse or other prayers, and perhaps the wearing of certain clothing, all enhanced by the claustrophobic atmosphere. One tablet from Bath references a group (possibly a family) who swore an oath at the sacred spring, promising to pay in their own blood if they subsequently broke it (Hassall and Tomlin 1981: 375; Line 2019: 255). At Uley, however, there seems to have been no such dramatic depositional focus. The agriculturally-related appeals to Mercury may therefore have been made in less emotionally-charged circumstances, a reminder of the heterogeneity of ritual sites and acts (Tomlin 1988: 80–81; 2021: 25; McKie 2017: 73–77).

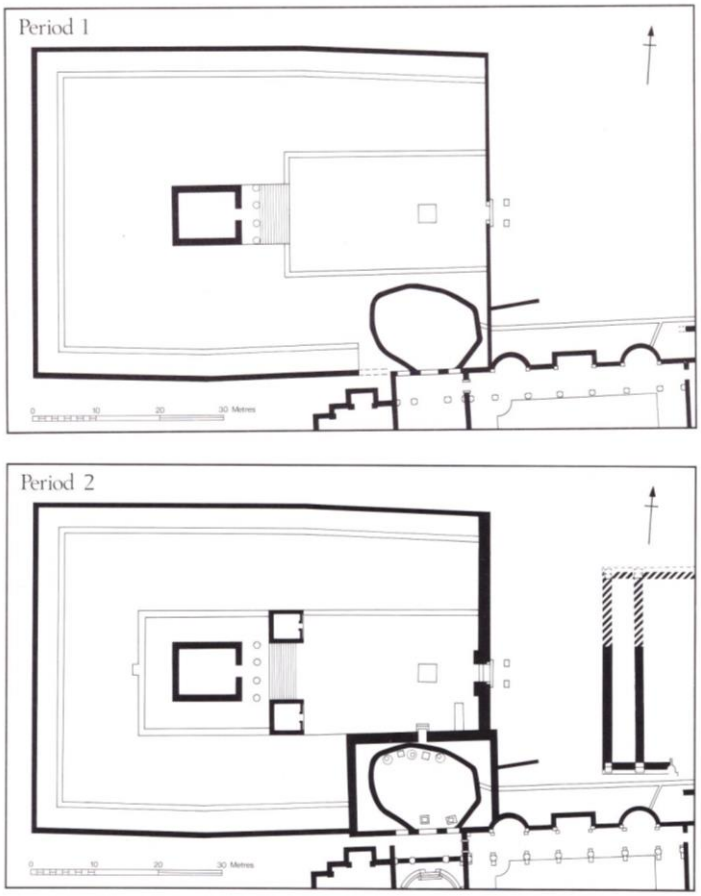



*Fig 5.1: Enclosure of the sacred spring at Bath (Periods 1 and 2). Reproduced from Cunliffe and Davenport 1985: Figures 100 and 101.*

## 5.5 Summary and Analysis Statements

This chapter has discussed how post-colonialism has brought new perspectives to conceptualising religious change in Roman Britain. Models prioritising either Roman or native agency have been increasingly rejected in favour of hybrid practices, conducted in colonial contexts, which were uniquely local but influenced by wider events. I explored how materiality and embodiment have influenced studies of ritual deposition and magic, challenging traditional categorisations of religious activity and place, and considering ritual acts as part of a continuum of practices conducted to meet specific needs in a variety of locations. These acts provided intensely personal sensory, embodied and emotive experiences and carried social implications, as demonstrated through acts of wearing amuletic devices and creating curses.

Based on these discussions, Table 5.1 contains the statements which will be used in my analyses of displays. The discussions in this chapter also serve to reinforce the significance of embodied and material approaches to archaeological evidence, discussed in Chapter 3.

| |
|---|
| "Romano-British religious activity was the result of complex cultural interactions occurring in specific physical and social contexts, and was integral to wider cultural change rather than a result of it." |
| "Romano-British religious beliefs, practices and iconography were not static or homogeneous, but idiosyncratic, culturally diverse, and diachronically dynamic." |
| "Religious activity should be defined to include a variety of communicative strategies at traditionally non-religious locations, including the use of amuletic devices and the creation of structured deposits." |

*Table 5.1: Chapter 5 Analysis Statements*

## 5.6 Analysis Statement Consolidation

This chapter brings the first part of this research to a close, and in the following chapters I present my museum analyses. In Chapters 3, 4 and 5 I have demonstrated the complexity of religious experiences and practices in Roman Britain and the vibrant and complementary academic discourses which attempt to engage with them. Lived and material religion, materiality, post-coloniality, and embodied and sensory archaeologies and museology have been shown to offer new paradigms for museum displays of religion in Roman Britain.

The Analysis Statements created from these discussions, and which form the structural underpinning for the analyses in Part 2, are consolidated in Table 5.2, arranged in the order they will be addressed in subsequent chapters.

| Chapter | Analysis Statement | Analysis Statement |
|---|---|---|
| Space and Design<br>(Chapter 6) | §1 | "Museum display design decisions are as significant in creating meanings as interpretational text, and the juxtaposition of objects and interpretation key to integrating religion into wider cultural narratives." |
| Romano-British religious hybridity<br>(Chapter 7) | §2 | "Romano-British religious activity was the result of complex cultural interactions occurring in specific physical and social contexts, and was integral to wider cultural change rather than a result of it." |
| | §3 | "Romano-British religious beliefs, practices and iconography were not static or homogeneous, but idiosyncratic, culturally diverse, and diachronically dynamic." |
| | §4 | "Religious activity should be defined to include a variety of communicative strategies at traditionally non-religious locations, including the use of amuletic devices and the creation of structured deposits." |
| Lived and multisensory religion<br>(Chapter 8) | §5 | "Religion is a dynamic social construct, 'always in the making', individual decisions make every religious act a contextually specific, creative performance with the agency to influence future performances." |
| | §6 | "Social, political, economic and religious power are intrinsically entwined and require constant negotiation as part of both tangible and imagined communities." |
| | §7 | "Embodied, sensory and emotional stimuli were central to individual lived religious experiences and the creation and maintenance of religious identities, communities and relationships." |
| Language, interactivity and materiality<br>(Chapter 9) | §8 | "The language used to describe religious activity is critical in the creation of meanings. Storytelling approaches can be valuable in promoting emotive, multisensory and ontologically challenging interpretation." |
| | §9 | "Multisensory interactivities offer the potential for challenging and emotive 'proximal' engagement with religious experiences for visitors of all age groups." |
| | §10 | "The materiality of objects is as significant to understanding their ritual significance and functionality as their form and iconography." |

*Table 5.2: Analysis Statement consolidation*

# Chapter 6:

# Analysing Space and Design

## 6.1 Introduction

This chapter begins my display analyses by examining the gallery contexts of displays of Roman Britain, specifically the juxtaposition of religious narratives within galleries and their relationships with other aspects of life in Roman Britain. This chapter explores the analysis statement:

> §1: "Museum display design decisions are as significant in creating meanings as interpretational text, and the juxtaposition of objects and interpretation key to integrating religion into wider cultural narratives."

The discussions presented here are structured around the space syntax principles of *centrality, configuration,* and *depth,* introduced in Chapter 2.2.2. I first consider the context of Romano-British displays within museums, using the concept of *centrality* to discuss the positioning of religious material in prominent locations, and the dispersal of religious assemblages across galleries and even between museums. I then delve deeper into displays to investigate *configuration,* the integration of discussions of religion into wider narratives of life and activity. Finally, I consider *depth,* how and when religious narratives are encountered by visitors during gallery experiences. Taken holistically, these discussions are fundamental to understanding how and when visitors are presented with religious narratives and underpin discussions of more specific aspects of lived religious experiences in subsequent chapters.

## 6.2 §1: "Museum display design decisions are as significant in creating meanings as interpretational text, and the juxtaposition of objects and interpretation key to integrating religion into wider cultural narratives."

Key to my analyses in this chapter are the concept of 'display units', a means of dissecting displays at the diverse range of studied museums into individually categorizable and cross-comparable elements. These are the fundamental analysis blocks throughout the discussions below. I define a display unit as:

> *"A discrete interpretative group encompassing a single narrative message, consisting of any combination of objects, labels, wall panels, replicas or interactives."*

A display unit might therefore be a single object, a group (e.g. a plinth or shelf) of objects within a larger display case, an entire display case, or a group of open display objects. It includes any associated interpretation, and indeed a display unit might only consist of a text or graphic panel. The central concept is that each forms a cohesive narrative unit intended to be understood as such by viewers. The integration of religious narratives into wider interpretations of Roman Britain is considered below, but of course it is neither feasible nor desirable that every display should discuss religion. It is, however, valuable to consider how religion is more broadly reflected within certain categories of activity. This is to say that, whereas a column fragment, relief carving or roof tile might not be expected to have a religious aspect to their individual interpretation, the broader concept of buildings and architecture across the whole gallery might be expected to consider religious structures. The manufacturing processes involved in creating those items might also have ritual connotations that could be explored. The display unit methodology enables such holistic thematic comparisons to be made across galleries and between museums.

Every display unit at the surveyed museums which included reference to Roman Britain was assigned to one of 17 primary categories (Fig 6.1; Table 6.1), based on assessment of the dominant interpretative message. The categories were defined after surveying had been completed to ensure that they reflected the varied displays rather than attempting to fit their

narratives into predetermined frameworks. The myriad ways in which museums approach and contextualise Romano-British archaeology mean that the display unit categories are diverse, some reflecting ancient activities (e.g. trade/commerce), others materials (e.g. stonework) and some scholarly approaches (e.g. antiquarian). There is inevitable subjectivity in both the creation of these categories and the determination of which narrative was dominant in a given display unit. The creation of broad categories rather than ones with greater specificity, such as "industry/production" rather than "potteries", "tilemaking", "metalworking" etc, has mitigated the impact of this subjectivity and avoided the number of categorisations becoming analytically unwieldy. The display units have therefore provided a method by which displays at museums of differing sizes, structures and interpretational approaches can be quantitively compared.

The number of display units at individual museums varied considerably, with the lowest being Durham University (5) and the Bloomberg Mithraeum (6), and the highest Verulamium Museum (95) and Corinium Museum (94). The average across all museums was 49.

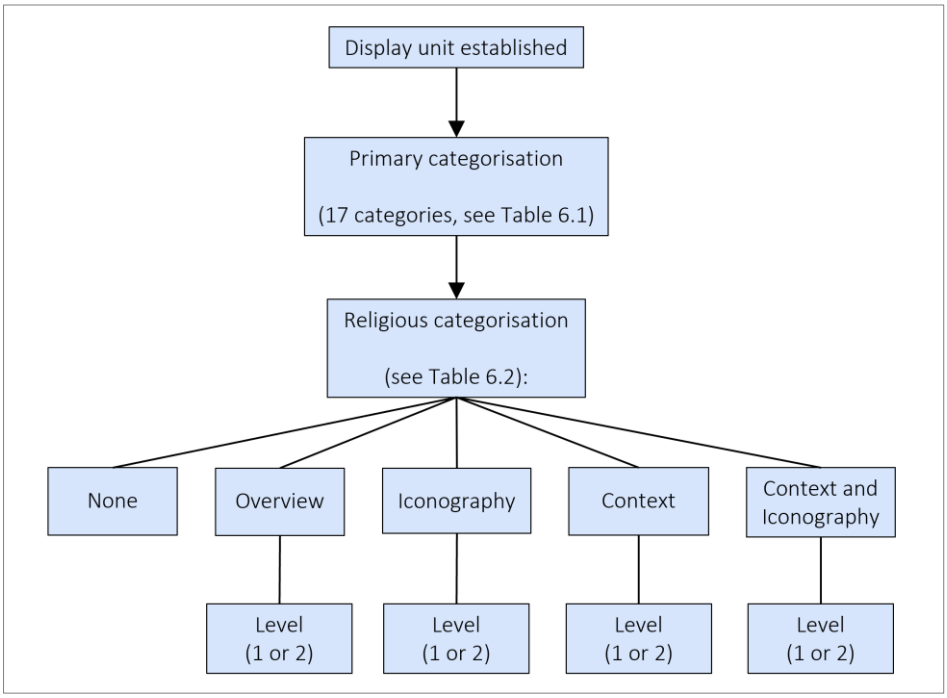



*Fig 6.1: Display unit categorisation flowchart*

After this initial categorisation, each display unit was further evaluated for any references to religious systems, iconography, beliefs, or practices. Any such references were assigned to one of four religious categories based on a subjective assessment of the nature of the content: 'overview', 'context', 'iconography' or 'context and iconography' (Table 6.2). It was also

recorded whether the religious interpretation constituted a minor reference (level 1) or a significant reference (level 2). A level 1 reference, for example, might include the name of a deity or the existence of a religious site or structure, whereas a level 2 reference would provide more detailed interpretation, perhaps describing the use of a ritual object, discussing a deity's sphere of influence, or contextualising the functions of structures and objects.

| **Category** | **Category description**<br>**Display units which primarily focus on:** |
|---|---|
| Antiquarian | The activities of antiquarians and antiquarian discoveries |
| Art / decoration | Artworks and structural decoration such as mosaics and wall plaster |
| Buildings / construction | Buildings and building works, architecture and infrastructure |
| Daily Life | Everyday life, domestic activity, food preparation and consumption, transportation |
| Death / burial | Funerary activity and monuments, burial practices and grave goods |
| Health / wellbeing | Health, wellbeing and medicine |
| Hoarding | The deliberate burial of material culture assemblages |
| Industry / production | Manufacturing processes such as ceramic kilns, metalworking, agriculture |
| Jewellery | Items of jewellery and other small, personal items |
| Leisure | Leisure activities, toys and games, bathing |
| Literacy | Writing and literacy |
| Military | Warfare, military activity, life in the Roman army |
| Overarching / introductory | Introductory and overarching narratives describing Roman Britain, a specific geographical area or museum collection |
| Pre-Roman | Activity prior to AD43 (only if the Roman period is referenced) |
| Religion | Religious and ritual activity and associated beliefs |
| Stonework | Stone objects grouped because of their material and without another category leading the interpretative narrative |
| Trade / commerce | Economic activity, trade, markets and coinage |

*Table 6.1: Display unit categories*

| Category | Category description |
|---|---|
| Overview | References about how religion in the Roman world 'worked', such as its ubiquity, or references to the general presence of religious structures in towns |
| Context | References which relate the findspot of an object (beyond simply giving modern geographical placenames) or its original context of use |
| Iconography | References which discuss the form or decoration of an object and any imagery or epigraphy present |
| Iconography and context | References which include references to both iconography and context, as defined above |

*Table 6.2: Religious categories*

### 6.2.1 The prominence of religion in displays of Roman Britain (*centrality*)

Detailed architectural analyses are beyond the scope and focus of this research, but displays, and visitor experiences of them, cannot be detached from wider museum environments. Visitors to the British Museum's airy Weston Gallery (Fig 1.4), part of a complex enfilade of galleries on the third floor of a world-famous museum, have differing experiences to those visiting the small museum at Housesteads (Fig 6.2A), set in a converted farmhouse on a dramatic windy northern ridge with the fort's remains just outside the door. Similarly, viewing displays while surrounded by the intimate architectural remains at Bath (Fig 6.2B) or the oppressively sturdy Medieval walls of Colchester Castle (Fig 6.2C) is atmospherically distinct from the contemporary concrete and glass of NMS (Fig 1.6). As discussed in Chapter 4.2, these environmental and atmospheric factors combine with museographical decisions regarding the presentation of finds and interpretation to influence how visitors encounter and understand Romano-British religion.

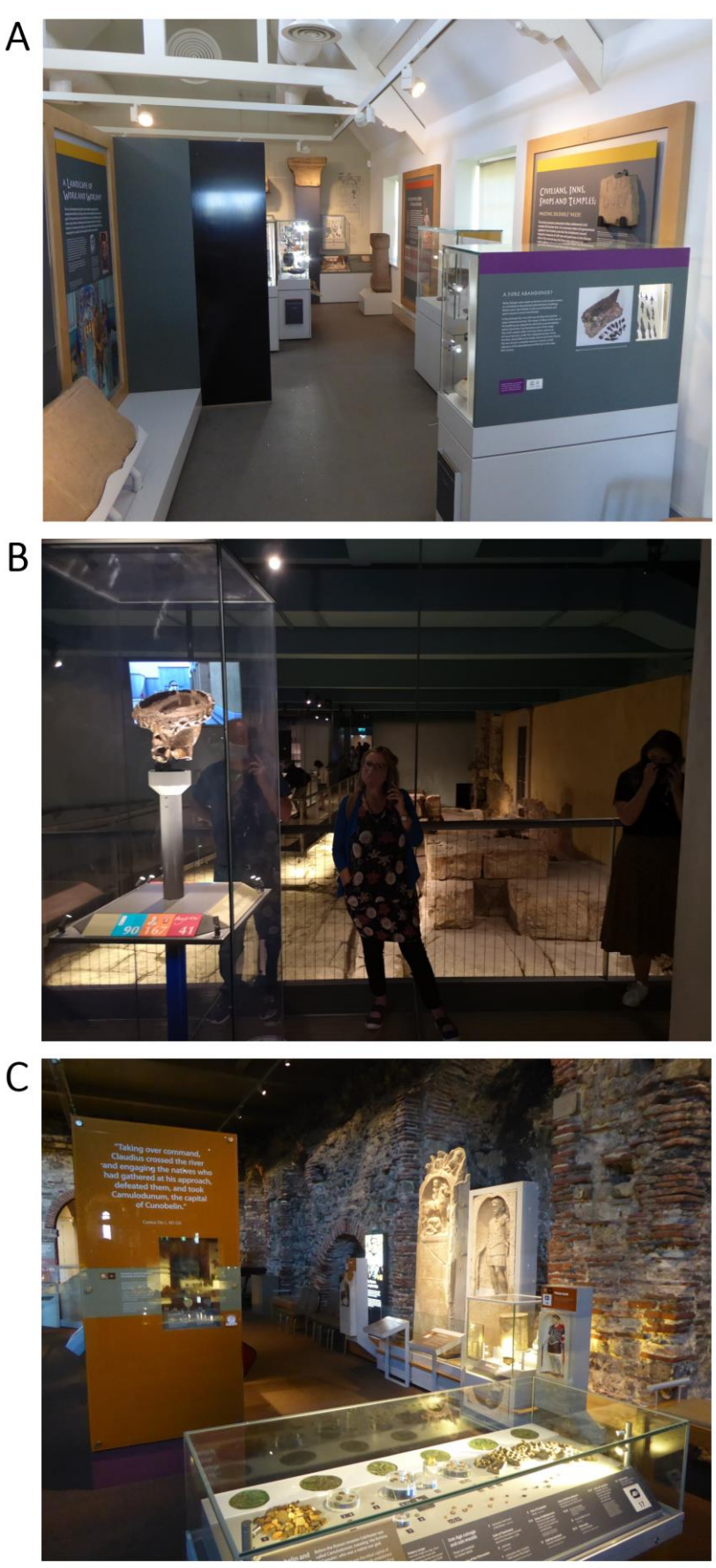



*Fig 6.2: Museum gallery atmospherics. A) Housesteads, B) Bath, C) Colchester Castle. Author's photographs*

As discussed in Chapter 2.2, the surveyed museums represent different categories (Table 2.2), each reflecting differing institutional relationships with Roman Britain. Category A museums are exclusively Romano-British in scope and their displays are accordingly focused. Similarly, category D museums, though sometimes containing finds from other periods at the archaeological sites they represent, contain primarily Romano-British displays. At the category B and C museums, Roman Britain displays form part of wider suites of galleries. Some adopt a broadly chronological approach to their galleries, using established archaeological time divisions (Colchester Castle, Corinium Museum, Tullie House, Museum of London, Durham University and Wiltshire Museum) while others utilise divisions based on thematic or curatorially-derived categories (e.g. 'Natural Cheshire' and the 'Ridgway Silver gallery' at the Grosvenor Museum and 'Exploration' and 'Collectors and Donors' at the Hunterian). The British Museum, NMS, Great North Museum and the Ashmolean have more complex galleries based upon thematic, chronological, geographical, curatorial and cultural divisions.

Schematic plans of the surveyed Romano-British displays are presented in Appendix B. Within their Roman Britain displays, the majority of museums adopt a thematic approach (Table 2.1), with only the Museum of London, Colchester Castle and Durham University overtly introducing a chronological structure to the period. NMS is the only surveyed museum to employ a multi-period thematic approach to its archaeology displays, though each floor of the Scottish History wing is chronological. However, Roman religious material is restricted to certain thematic sections of the Early Peoples gallery.

#### *6.2.1.1 Prominent religious objects*

Religious objects at a number of museums are positioned in prominent locations, either in areas of high visitor circulation or along key sightlines. I connect this with the Space Syntax concept of centrality and consider the extent to which the positioning of religious objects makes them foci for visitor attention; cognitively central to experiences if not always architecturally so in the manner centrality is usually employed within space syntax analyses.

Only at one museum were Romano-British religious objects positioned in key non-gallery circulation spaces. Visitors to Tullie House are presented with two altars upon entering the museum, positioned in the entrance foyer, beside the shop and directly outside of the toilets

(Fig 6.3). The altars are both large and visually stimulating objects, bearing prominent imagery of sacrificial and ritual paraphernalia, the altar on the right in Fig 6.3 (RIB927) set up following a vow to restore a building. Unfortunately, neither altar is interpreted, meaning that visitors may not even recognise them as Romano-British let alone contextualise their ritual functionality. The curatorial interviewee stated that they belonged to a previous open-storage initiative and that future projects would improve their interpretation.

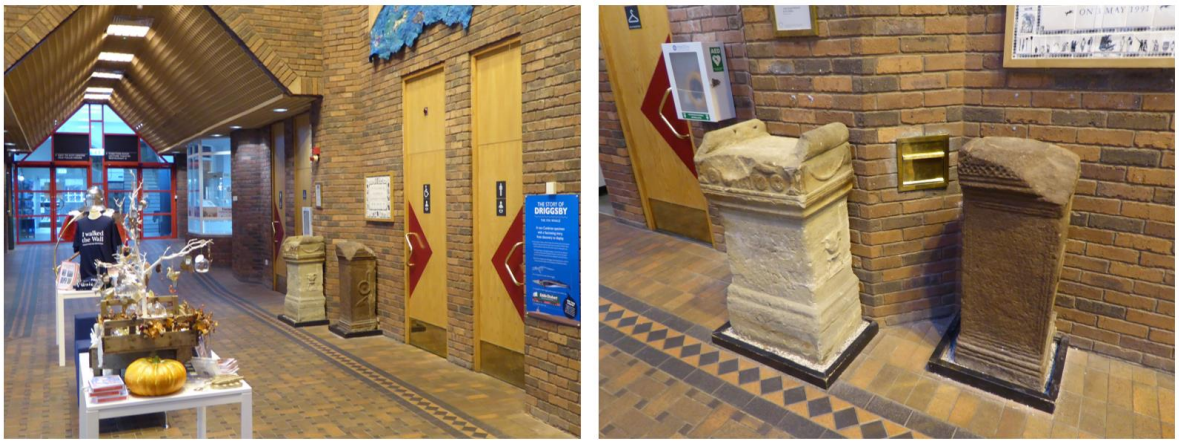


*Fig 6.3: Altars in the foyer at Tullie House Museum. Author's photographs*

At the Clayton Museum, a large and imposing relief of Mars from the Housesteads *principia* greets the visitor upon entry (Fig 6.4), while at Vindolanda the first object visitors encounter is an altar dedicated to the Divine House, the Deities of the Emperors and Vulcan (RIB1700). The altar's religious implications are of secondary significance, however, as its prominent display is due to its unique recording of the name of the settlement, being set up by the villagers of Vindolanda (*vicani Vindolandesses*). A similar situation will occur at the new Museum of London, where an inscription to Mars Camulos from the Tabard Square temple complex (see Chapter 7.4.6.3) will be the first object visitors encounter, but this will reflect the inscription being the first from London to mention the town's name rather than its religious significance (curatorial interview).

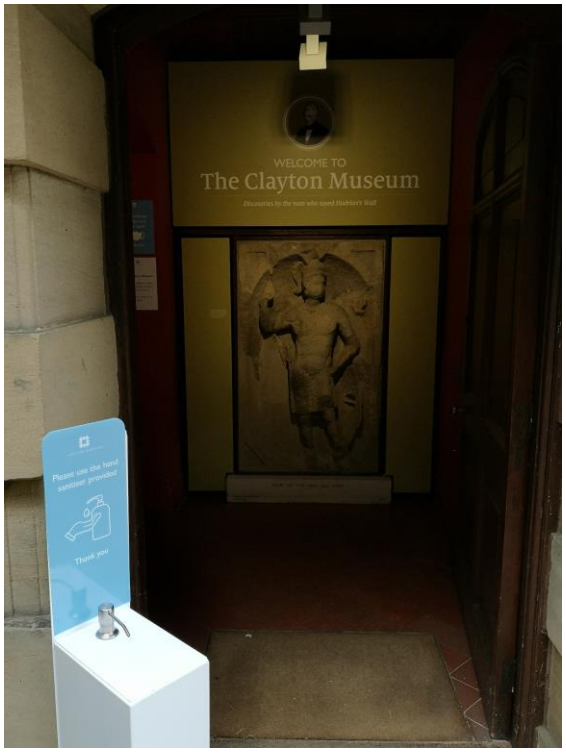



*Fig 6.4: Clayton Museum (Chesters) entrance. Author's photograph*

The layouts at the British Museum and Tullie House's Frontier Gallery are of particular interest to the concept of centrality. At Tullie House, the gallery has been designed to create a central bottleneck to ensure that the limited amount of Iron Age material is not bypassed by visitors (curatorial interview). This area features a number of significant religious objects such as silver votive plaques to Cocidius, relief carvings and small altars (Fig 6.5),[1] the interpretation of which are considered further in Chapter 7.2.1.2.

The British Museum's Weston Gallery is designed around a broad central corridor, along which are positioned some of the most high-profile (and visually appealing) objects and assemblages, many of which have religious connotations (Appendix B: B1). These include the hoards from Hoxne, Mildenhall, Water Newton, Ashwell and Felmingham, and the Hinton St Mary mosaic. The gallery design is partly enforced by fire regulations (curatorial interviewee) but also to facilitate easier visitor navigation between the museum's many galleries. Visitor engagement with individual permanent galleries at the British Museum is low (Buck 2010: 45–6), and although visitors do stop at the prominent 'treasure' cases on the main thoroughfare, many others pass straight through the gallery (Polm 2016: 238). While the prominence of the most

[1] 'Non-Roman Religion'

famous and visually impressive hoards is therefore understandable, the brief vision of Roman Britain they present to most visitors is unrepresentative of the province as a whole, artistically, geographically and diachronically. It presents a view of Roman Britain intended to be compared with the material culture of the Mediterranean world rather than reflecting a more nuanced provincial reality.

*Fig 6.5: Iron Age displays in the Frontier Gallery at Tullie House. Author's photographs*

Another aspect of centrality is the dominant positioning of religious objects along key sightlines. At Bath, the gilded bronze portrait of Sulis Minerva sits in front of her temple, visitors making their way across the courtyard under her constant gaze (Fig 6.2B, Appendix B: D7, vii), though, as discussed in Chapter 8.4.8.2, this dramatic view of the goddess is not comparable to the experiences of Roman worshippers using that same courtyard.

Visitors at Corinium Museum moving from the open and airy Hare gallery into the main displays are presented with an alcove displaying an altar with a reconstruction drawing behind (Appendix B: C4, ii); the visitor moving directly towards this ongoing religious act as the participants look directly at them (Fig 8.24), something I consider further in Chapter 9.2.3.2. Later in the visitor journey, a large replica Jupiter Column dominates the far end of the main gallery, the original capital visible from both ground level and the upper mezzanine gallery (Figs 6.6; 7.25).

*Fig 6.6: Replica Jupiter column with original capital, Corinium Museum. Author's photograph*

The positioning of large stone objects is particularly significant in displays of Roman Britain, as altars, tombstones, statue bases, inscriptions and reliefs are often the largest and most eye-catching items in galleries. Ferris (2021: 17) calculates that 63.5% of sculpture in Roman Britain is from the north of the province, and museums in the northern group accordingly display considerable amounts of stonework. However, stonework presents specific museological challenges. Seven out of the 11 curatorial interviewees identified a lack of space to display it, while at Durham University floor weight restrictions were further highlighted as preventing larger items being displayed. Large stone objects are often displayed in discrete but prominent groups, demonstrated for example at the British Museum, Chesters, the Great North Museum, Senhouse, the Hunterian, Corbridge, Tullie House's Border Gallery and the Grosvenor Museum's Stories in Stone Gallery (Fig 6.7).

Clayton Museum, Chesters

Hunterian

Grosvenor Museum (Stories in Stone)

Tullie House Museum (Border Gallery)

Senhouse Museum

Great North Museum

*Fig 6.7: Displays of stonework. Author's photographs*

However, such groupings risk homogenising unique and charismatic individual objects to expanses of creamy-grey stone blocks, detaching them from their original contexts and reifying 'stonework' as a discrete category of archaeological artefact. Altars, for example, are significant ritual offerings, individually created at considerable expense and erected at deliberately chosen locations where they interacted with other structures, spaces, offerings and people. In displays, altars are often positioned closely together and with gallery lighting carefully angled to highlight inscriptions. Ritually significant design elements such as imagery of sacrificial paraphernalia, animals and processes on the sides of altars are often not discussed on labels, and thereby thrown into both literal and interpretational shadow (Fig 6.8) as epigraphic evidence is given prominence. The use of mirrors at Senhouse to highlight the hidden detail of some altars, the only surveyed museum to do so, provides a notable exception (Fig 6.9). The tombstones at the Grosvenor Museum, though not interpreted through a religious lens, sit in front of a painted cemetery backdrop. Though this portrays a questionably white marble, classical necropolis, it does attempt to recontextualise the stones into a conceptual landscape context beyond the gallery (Fig 6.7). At the Great North Museum, the curatorial interviewee expressed a desire to change the altar displays to make them something which could be "contemplated more" and "more of an experience", particularly enabling visitors to look all around them, and changes made to the displays to achieve this since the surveying was completed are discussed in Chapter 10.6.

Another important interpretational consideration is how museums represent the relative positioning of stonework from specific archaeological sites. At the Museum of London, stonework from the London mithraeum is displayed in an apse referencing that of the original temple (Fig 6.10). A display update in 2018 moved the tauroctony scene from a very low position, thought to reflect its original location in front of the apse, to a higher one to enable visitors to more easily view it (Keily 2018). Such decisions reflect the tension between authenticity and accessibility, but in other situations, for example at the Great North Museum and Vindolanda, display decisions can undermine original religious contexts without improving visitor experiences.

*Fig 6.8: Positioning and lighting of altars. Author's photographs*

*Fig 6.9: Mirrors to show altar details at Senhouse Museum. Author's photographs*

*Fig 6.10: Museum of London Mithraeum display. Author's photograph*

The three altars from the Carrawburgh mithraeum (Great North Museum) are currently displayed with the impressive figurative altar of Sol, dedicated by Lucius Antonius Proculus, in the centre, flanked by the two altars bearing only inscriptions (Fig 6.11A). This arrangement is undoubtedly the result of design aesthetics which promote visual balance and symmetry. However, it does not represent the original sequence of the altars in the mithraeum, which had the Sol altar to the left of the trio (Fig 6.11B), and visitors to the mithraeum site see reconstructed altars accurately respecting this original arrangement (Fig 6.11C).[2] This is not merely an issue of aesthetic pedantry but fundamental to the interpretation of the altars as functional ritual objects. In the original orientation, only the central altar has a focus, the flanking altars having flat tops, perhaps acting as ritual tables (*mensae*) or as bases for relief imagery or portable braziers. The significant aspect here is that once all three altars had been

[2] The museum's audio-visual presentation on the cult was filmed inside a previous museum reconstruction, which respected the original arrangement

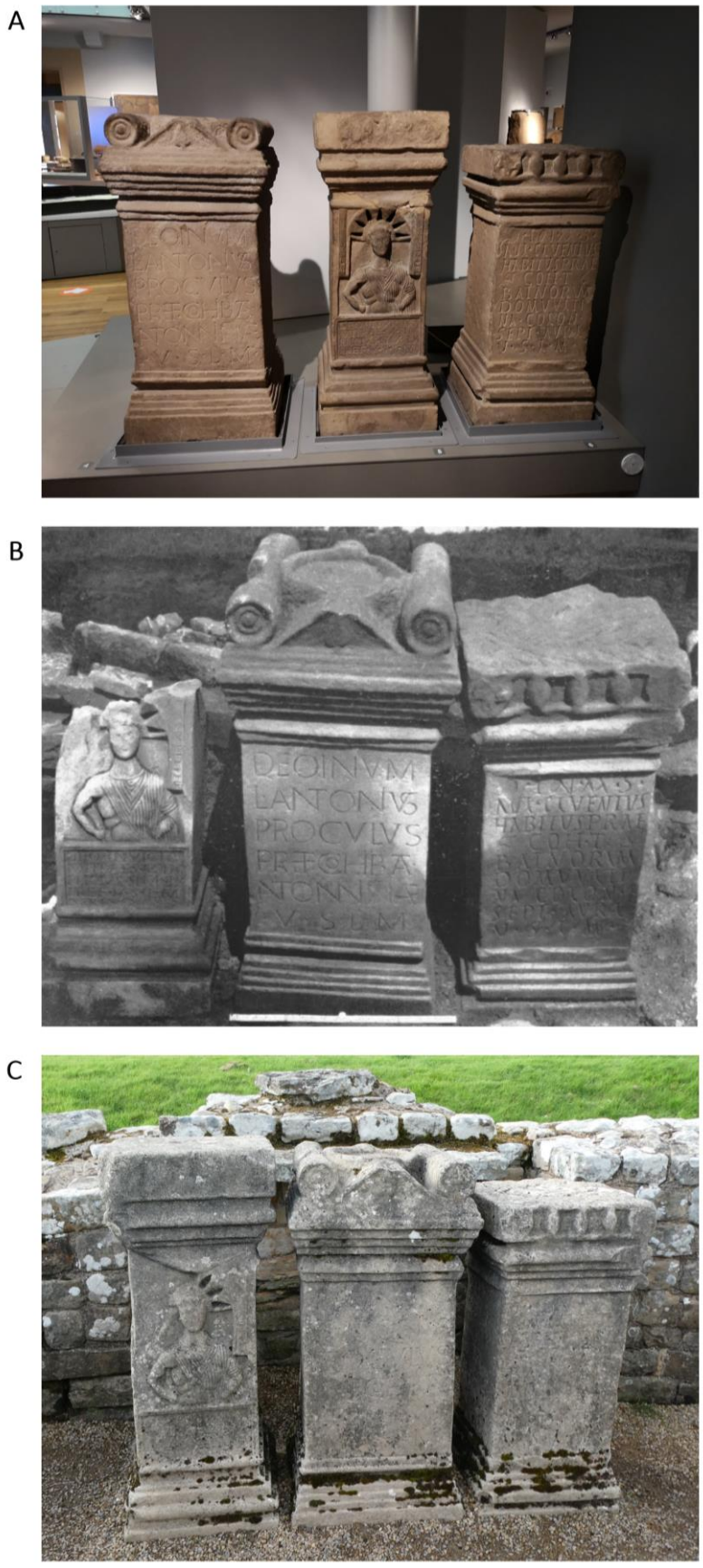



*Fig 6.11: Carrawburgh Mithraeum altars. A) Great North Museum display (author's photograph), B) in situ during excavation (Richmond and Gillam 1951 Plate XI b), C) in situ replicas at the mithraeum site (author's photograph)*

dedicated, at different times and by different cult members (all military Prefects and presumably also of high cultic rank), they were intrinsically connected within that ritual space. Their relative positioning was significant for the conducting of offerings and for representing the relative status (and later communal memory) of the individuals who erected them. The alteration of such relationships serves as an example of how traces of religious experiences preserved in the archaeological record can be undermined by aesthetically-driven museological decisions.

*Fig 6.12: Vindolanda Dolichenum. A) museum display, B) site interpretation. Author's photographs*

A similar situation can be discerned in the display of the temple of Jupiter Dolichenus at Vindolanda. Here, again, three altars were excavated, two large altars positioned prominently within the temple in front of an *aediculum* and clearly forming a focus of ritual activity, and a third, much smaller, altar positioned outside the door of the temple (Birley and Birley 2010). Fig 6.12 shows the relative positioning of these altars both within the museum display and of replicas positioned in-situ on the site. In the museum display (Fig 6.12A) the larger altars are positioned further apart than they originally stood, but are clearly intended to reflect that they were in front of an *aediculum* which perhaps once contained a relief of the deity, represented by an unattributed image of Jupiter Dolichenus on the rear wall. The smaller altar, perhaps an offering from a female worshipper (Chapter 8.3.4), is mounted on the wall behind the fragmentary altar. This position, hanging decontextualised in space, not only disconnects it from the main altars but also fails to relate it to either the architectural context of the temple structure and its environment, or the social contexts of its dedicator and anyone subsequently encountering it outside of the temple on the street. Though the altar's original positioning is briefly referenced on the interpretative panel, it does not, unlike the other two altars, appear on an annotated photograph of the temple remains, further serving to diminish its significance.

The surviving condition of stonework can also make engagement with its original context difficult. At Wiltshire Museum, for example, a stone with a relief depiction of the three Fates is displayed on the floor with the image pointing upwards, this orientation reflecting the stability of the surviving stone block (Fig 6.13). Despite a detailed interpretative label, the positioning makes it difficult for visitors to imagine how the relief might have originally been experienced. The museum, however, has ambitions for it to feature more centrally in their new galleries, and for it to be included in a reconstruction of the grand tomb it perhaps once formed part of (curatorial interview).

The Fates relief represents an instance where a single fragment is all that remains of an original structure, but in other instances religious sites and structures are represented by more extensive assemblages. In the next section I consider how the dispersal of such assemblages around gallery spaces and even between different museums might influence visitor perceptions of them.

*Fig 6.13: Fates relief, Wiltshire Museum. Author's photograph*

### *6.2.1.2 Sites dispersed between museums and within galleries*

The vagaries of museum collecting practices can lead to material from specific sites being deposited in multiple institutions. The Clayton Museum at Chesters, for example, contains finds from numerous sites along Hadrian's Wall excavated by Clayton, and, to visitors at least, their existence as part of his collection supersedes their identity as elements of their original site assemblages. The museums at the originating sites rarely cross-reference these absent finds, leading to the presentation of incomplete or dispersed narratives.

Displays about the Housesteads mithraeum at the Great North Museum, Housesteads and Chesters provide an interesting case study of this issue. The Great North Museum contains the most iconic sculptural and epigraphic objects from the mithraeum, the attractively symmetrical display including the tauroctony, a relief of the birth of Mithras, altars, and statues of Cautes (Fig 6.14). However, the statue of Cautes to the left of the birth of Mithras is actually from the Carrawburgh mithraeum, reflecting the dominance of display aesthetics over the context of the finds. The need to include a statue from a different mithraeum was likely due to other Housesteads statues of Cautes and Cautopates being at Chesters, alongside a possible relief of Mithras himself (Fig 6.15) and an altar to Jupiter and Cocidius. At Chesters, however, there is no interpretation on their origins or significance apart from the perfunctory Victorian labelling on the bases. The Housesteads site museum itself displays no stonework from the mithraeum. Its existence is only noted once, in a display panel on the vicus which includes a reconstruction drawing of the mithraeum's interior and a photograph of the Great North Museum's birth of Mithras relief (Figs 6.16; 7.18). It is interesting to note, however, that the reconstruction drawing does not feature in the interpretation at the other two displays. Visitors are therefore presented with differing approaches at each museum, but at none of them can a detailed or coherent understanding of the temple structure, the positioning of the reliefs, statues and altars, or the experience of its worshippers, be obtained.

Significant religious objects from Corbridge are also dispersed between museums. Though the Corbridge site museum contains a range of significant stonework, two of its most unusual religious finds, both altars inscribed in Greek, are not part of the displays. One, dedicated to Heracles of Tyre by a priestess called Diodora, is displayed at the British Museum, while the second, dedicated to the mother goddess Astarte by a man named Pulcher, is at Tullie House. The separation of these dedications diminishes Corbridge's ability to narrativize the frontier town's complex religious communities, within which the cultural backgrounds and religious beliefs and practices of these individuals must have been notable.

*Fig 6.14: Housesteads Mithraeum display at the Great North Museum. Author's photograph*

*Fig 6.15: Housesteads Mithraeum statuary at the Clayton Museum (Chesters). Author's photograph*

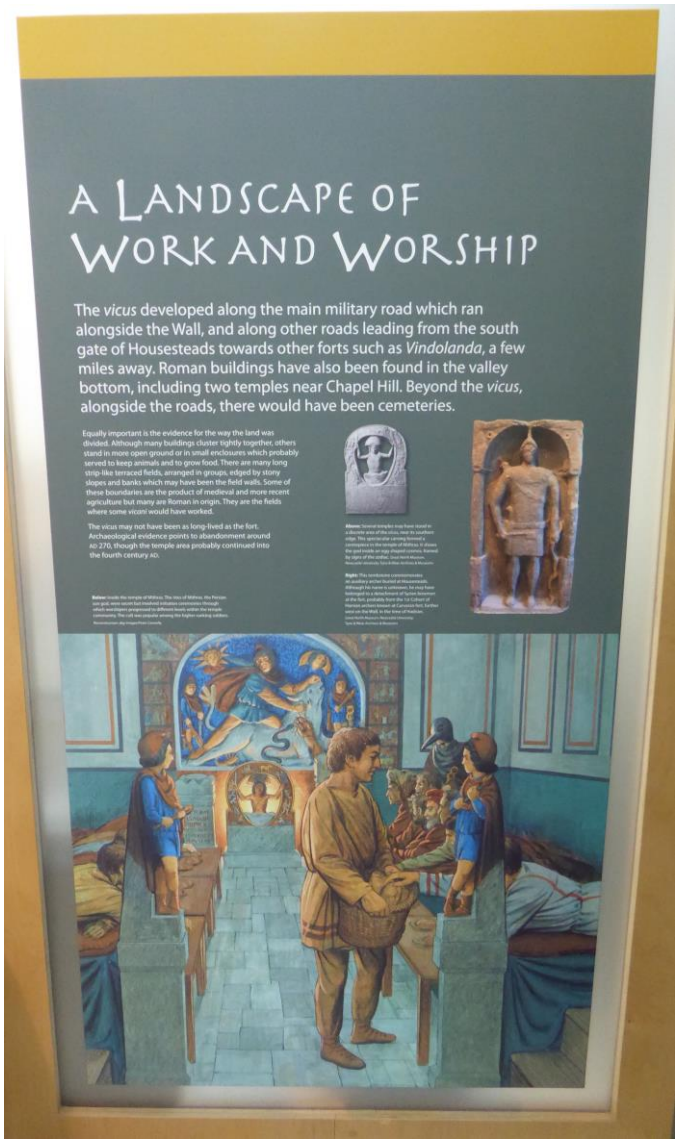



*Fig 6.16: Panel with Mithraeum reconstruction drawing, Housesteads museum. Author's photograph*

The dispersal of site assemblages within individual galleries can also influence visitor understandings of religious activity. The integration of religious material culture into varied displays is undoubtedly of benefit in promoting more nuanced understandings of religious experience and its relationship to myriad daily activities, as discussed below. However, there is a concordant risk that the dispersal of material from individual sites across displays dilutes understanding of specific religious places and activities. At the Clayton Museum at Chesters, the small finds from Coventina's Well are grouped in a display case in the small gallery along with the main interpretation of the site,[3] while the 23 stone reliefs, altars and inscriptions are spread across four different areas of the Victorian-style open displays in the main gallery.[4] An

[3] 'Treasure down the Well'
[4] Appendix B: A1, x, xiv and xv

individual visitor would therefore struggle to recreate the totality of the stone dedications from the shrine (see Chapter 7.4.6.5). The iconic and significant reliefs depicting either nymphs or perhaps Coventina herself have been highlighted as a ‘Curator’s Choice’, but visitors must still conceptually connect them to the cased displays in the adjacent gallery (Fig 6.17).

*Fig 6.17: Coventina’s Well stonework and ‘Curator’s Choice’ label, Clayton Museum (Chesters). Author’s photograph*

### 6.2.2 Integrating religion in displays of Roman Britain (*configuration*)

> *"I always feel like religious material culture gets separated and treated as mysterious, strange and sometimes silly. But it was a huge part of the daily lives of Roman people and should be treated as an aspect of this life."* (online survey respondent, Q11)

In this section I consider how religious material culture and interpretations of ritual practices are integrated within displays, using the concept of 'display units' and their categorisations introduced above. Fig 6.18 shows the overall percentage of religious references across all display units at surveyed museums, by both northern and southern groups (icon shape) and museum category (icon colour). No substantial differences can be observed between the northern and southern groups, and at the majority of museums, regardless of their categorization, between 20-50% of display units reference religion to some degree. As discussed further below this suggests that, as a broad concept, religion is generally well-represented in the museums. The percentages of religious references are notably higher than average at the Bloomberg Mithraeum (D6), Bath (D7), Senhouse (D1) and the British Museum (B1). This is unsurprising at Bath and the mithraeum as they focus on specific religious sites, but is more notable at the latter two, particularly the British Museum.

Overall, specialist Roman museums (category A) have a lower average percentage of religious references (27.5%) than national museums (category B - 47%), local, regional and university museums (category C – 35%) or site museums (category D – 53.5%). The Clayton Museum at Chesters (A1) is the only category A museum to subvert this trend with 50.6%, though its displays of material found at other Hadrian's Wall fort sites explains why its profile more closely matches the much higher religious representation at category D institutions. Fig 6.19 presents the same dataset as Fig 6.18 but highlighting the latest available gallery installation or update at each museum (Table 2.1), demonstrating that there is no notable correlation between the age of a gallery and the quantity of religious references

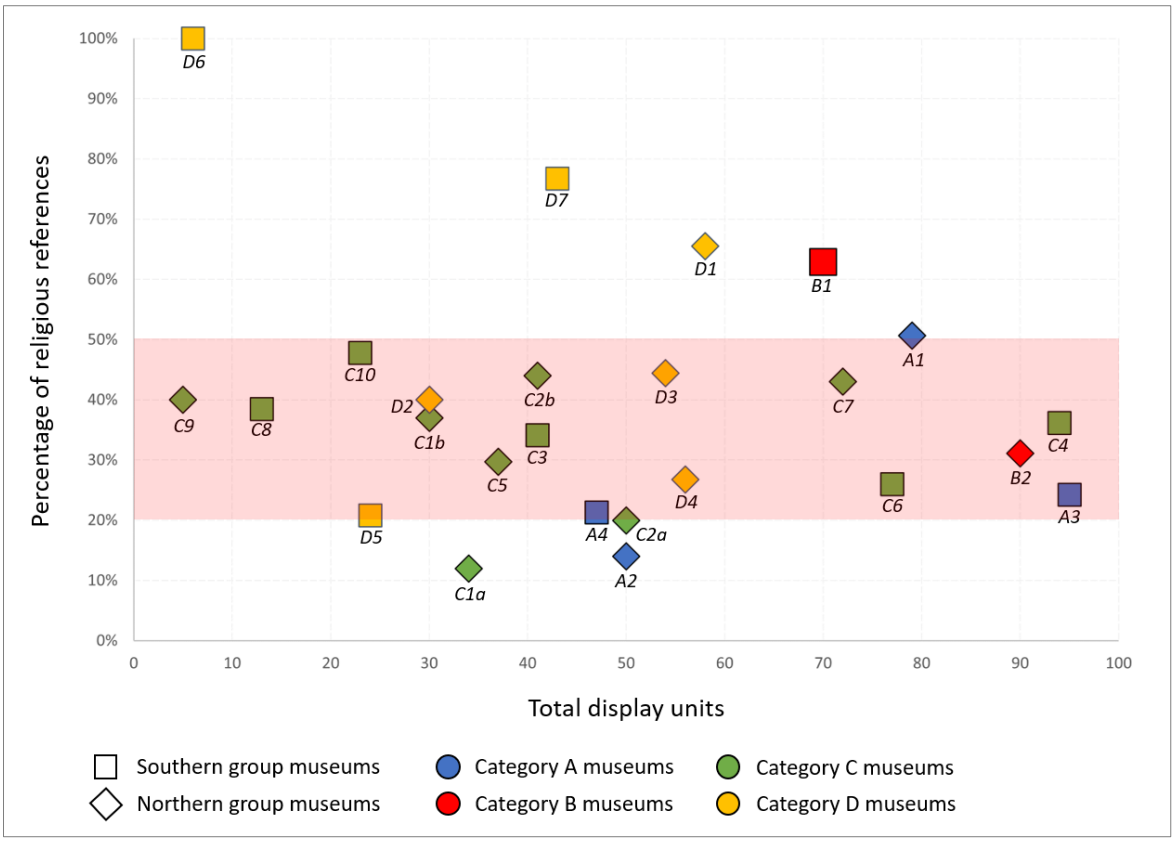



*Fig 6.18: Scattergraph of percentage of religious references by survey categories (see Table 2.2).*

*See Table 2.1 for museum codes*

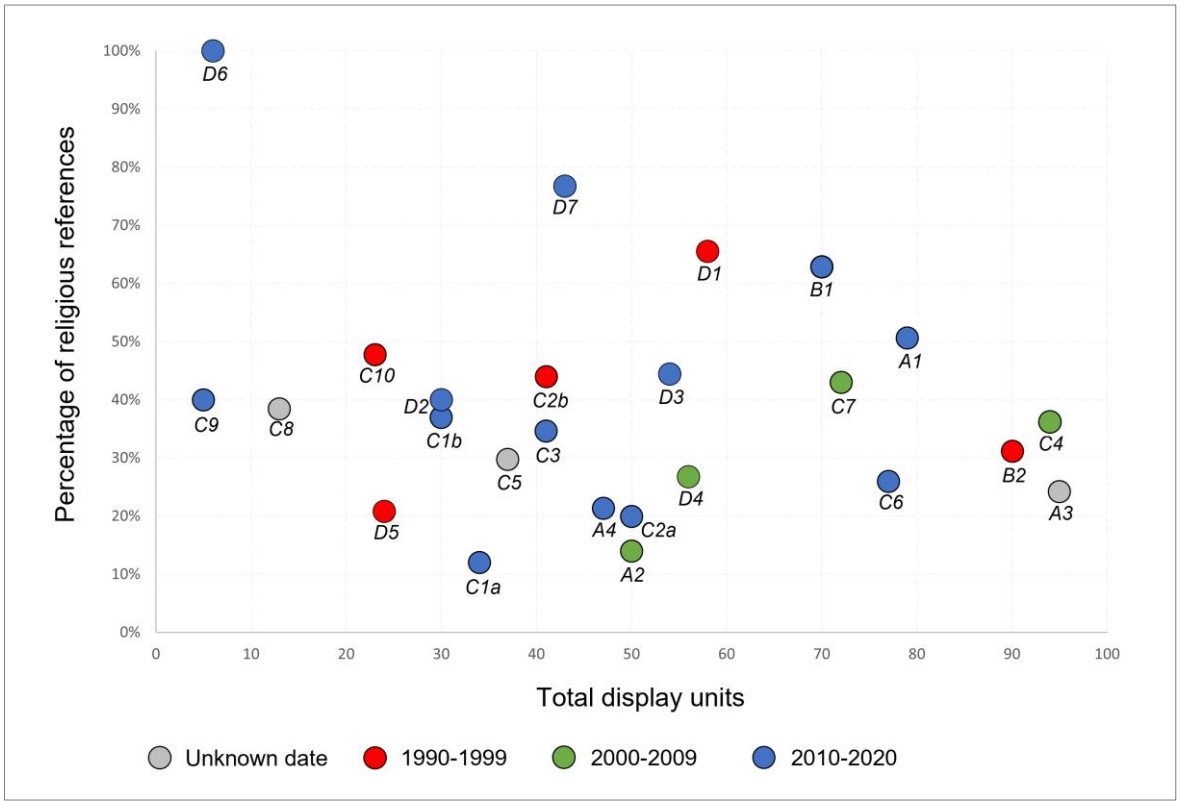



*Fig 6.19: Scattergraph of percentage of religious references by date of museum gallery*

To explore the integration of religious narratives in more detail it is necessary to investigate the prevalence of religious references across individual display unit categories. Fig 6.20 presents the 17 display unit categories (Table 6.1) in order of total frequency across all museums, highlighting the ratio of level 1 and level 2 religious references within them (though not the specific nature of those religious references, which is explored below). The dominance of architecture, religion, the military and the more nebulous concept of daily life within displays of Roman Britain is clearly demonstrated. The high volume of display units categorised as 'Religion' reflects that religion is predominantly being presented as a discrete aspect of life. It is notable, however, that every category of display unit contained at least some references to religion, indicating that its presence is acknowledged, albeit often minorly, across a wide range of contexts. Stonework displays contain a notable percentage of references to religion, as do those on health and wellbeing, and hoarding, while trade and manufacture displays rarely reference religious activity. Death and burial displays also reference religion comparatively infrequently considering the importance of beliefs in an afterlife, and ritual activities related to the disposal of bodies and during subsequent commemorations. However, death and burial displays at a number of museums include definitive statements about such beliefs, which I discuss further in Chapter 8.2.1.1.

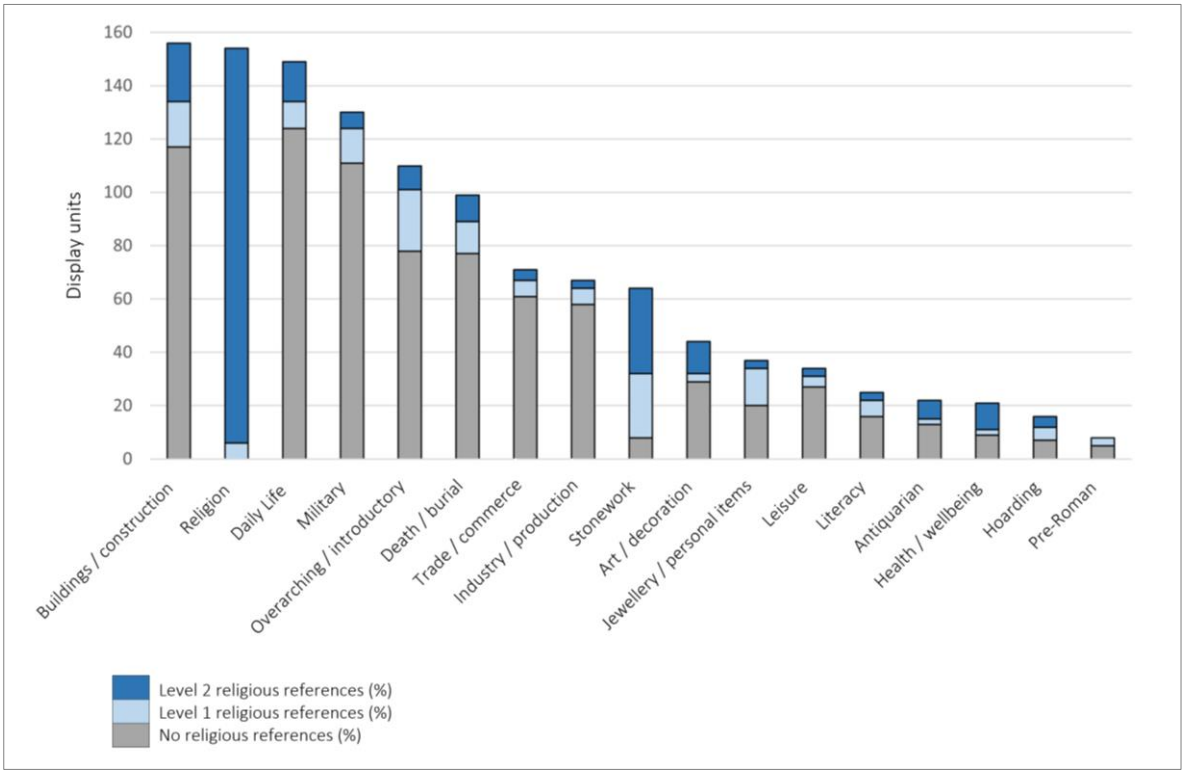



*Fig 6.20: Integration of religious references within display unit categories, all surveyed museums*

Figs 6.21 and 6.22 display the same data divided into northern and southern group museums, retaining the display unit category order from Fig 6.20. It can clearly be seen that displays dedicated to religion remain prominent within both groups. Greater relative ratios of military and stonework display units are demonstrated in the northern group, and art/decoration, jewellery and leisure in the southern group. Despite the varying quantities of certain display unit categories, religious representation within those categories remains broadly the same; that is to say that discussions of religion within the various aspects of life and work in Roman Britain are generally consistent between the northern and southern group museums. The nature of these references is therefore of particular significance for further investigation. What aspects of religious beliefs, acts and experiences are being highlighted, and how do they relate to the wider facets of life being presented and interpreted?

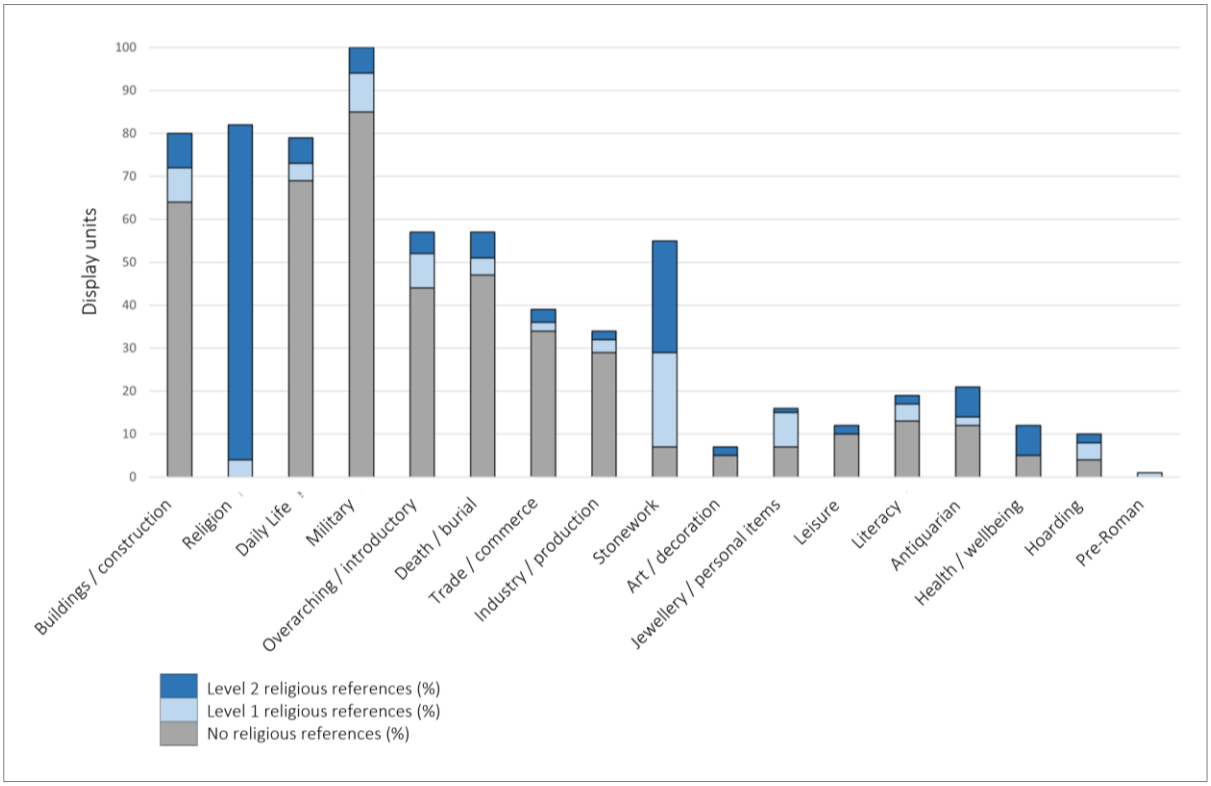



*Fig 6.21: Integration of religious references within display unit categories, northern group museums*

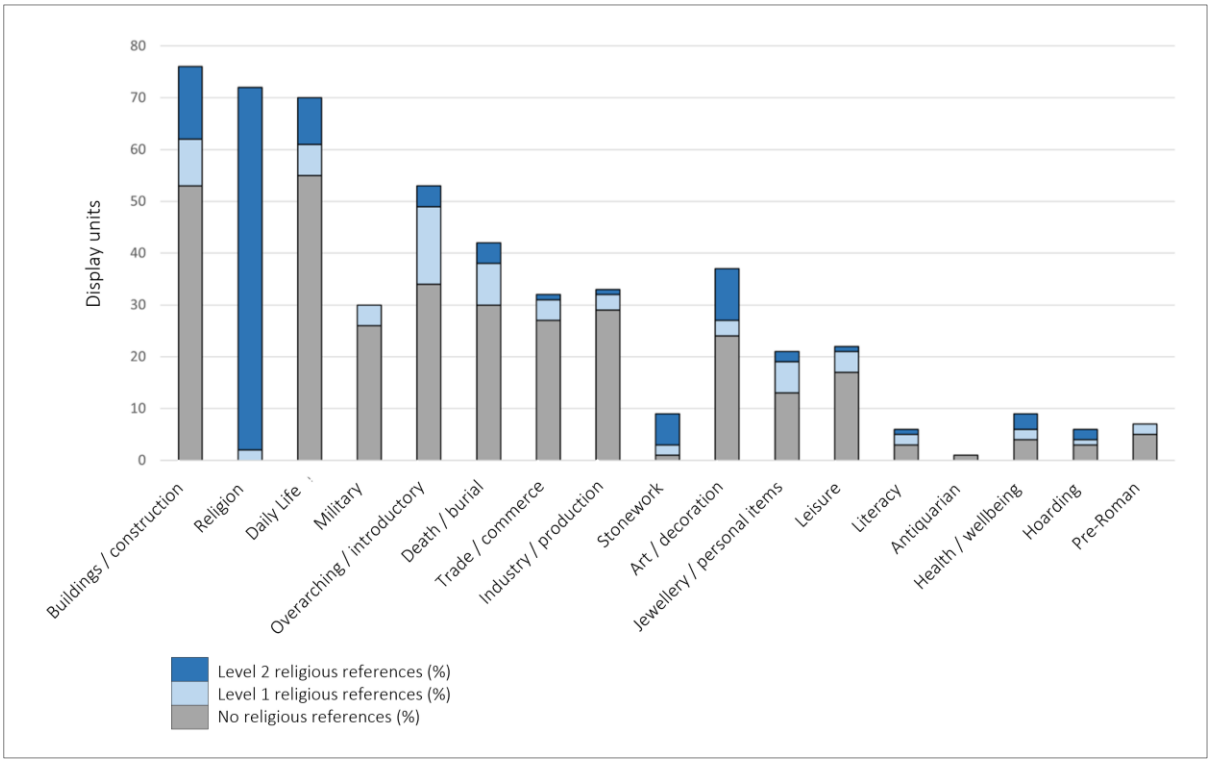



*Fig 6.22: Integration of religious references within display unit categories, southern group museums*

As discussed above (also Fig 6.1; Table 6.2), display units referencing religious beliefs or activity were categorised as either 'overview', 'iconography', 'context' or the composite 'context and iconography'. In the following sections, I consider how each of these four religious categorisations are reflected within the broader Romano-British display unit categories. Figs 6.23A-C present the data upon which these discussions are based, organised by the same display unit category order as Fig 6.20. Although, as discussed below, iconography accounts for a large percentage of overall religious references, Figs 6.23A-C reveal that each of the 17 categories produced a distinct signature, indicating that concepts of religious belief and activity are being engaged with differently within these different subjects.

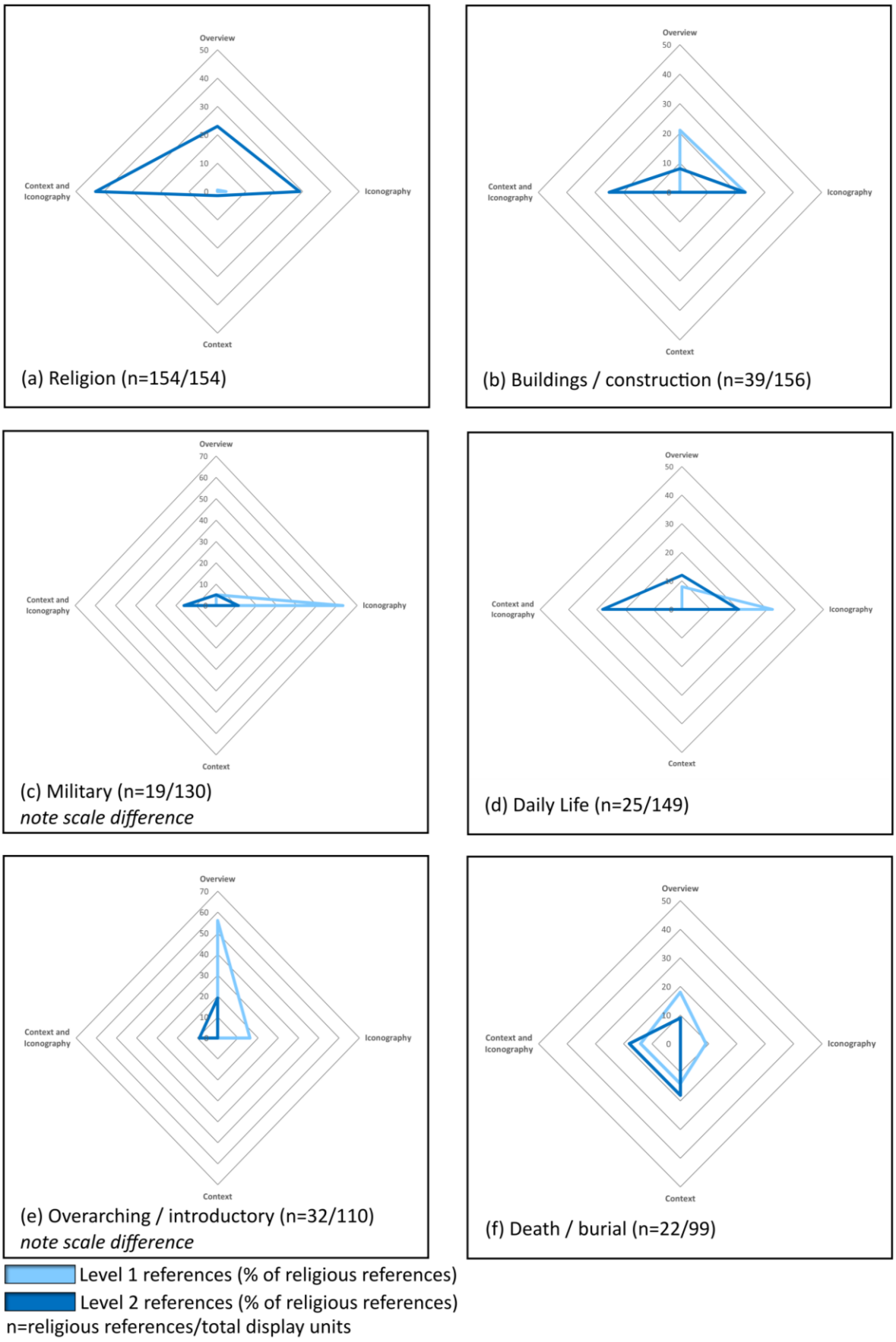



*Fig 6.23A: Categorisation of religious references within specific display unit categories*

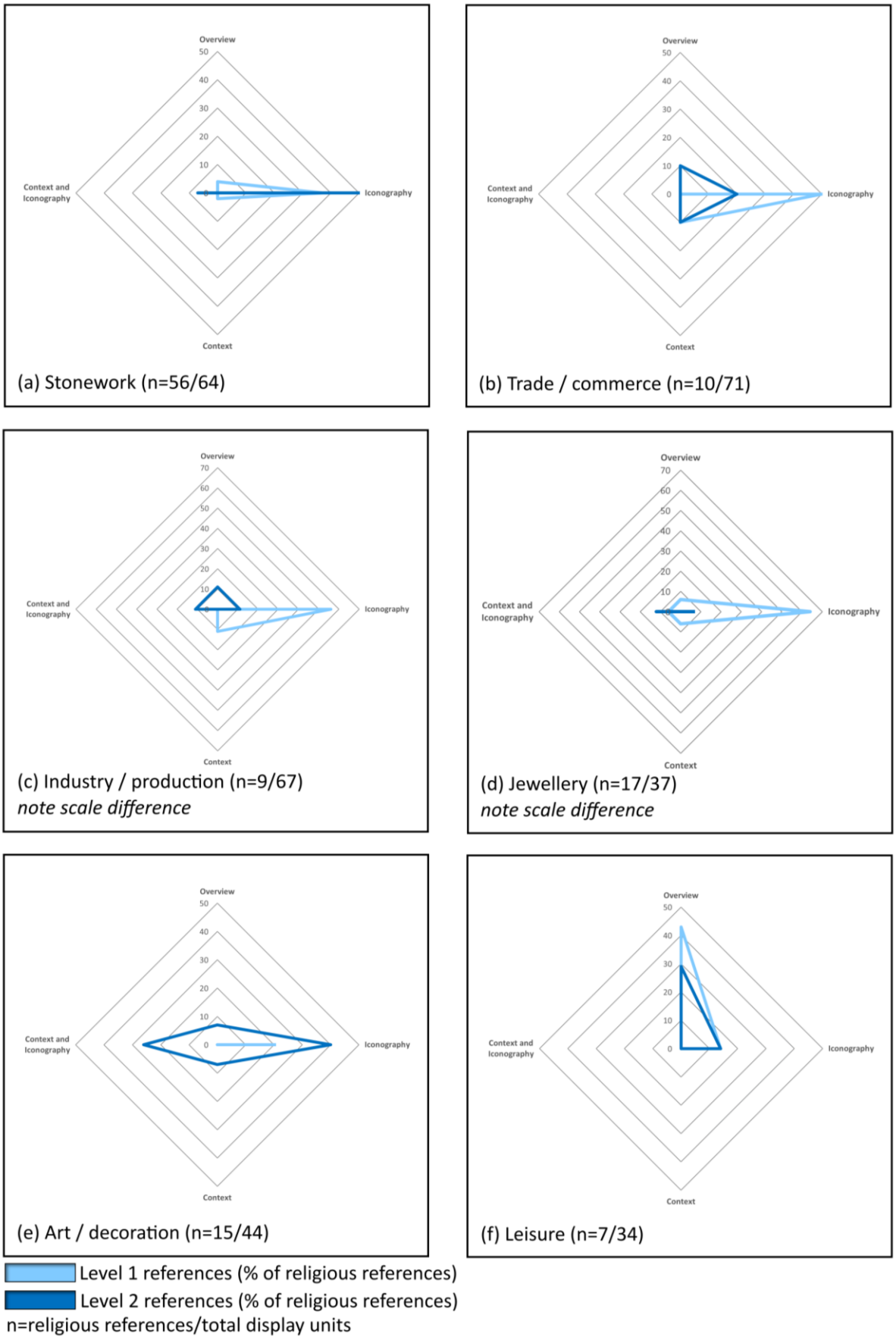



*Fig 6.23B: Categorisation of religious references within specific display unit categories*

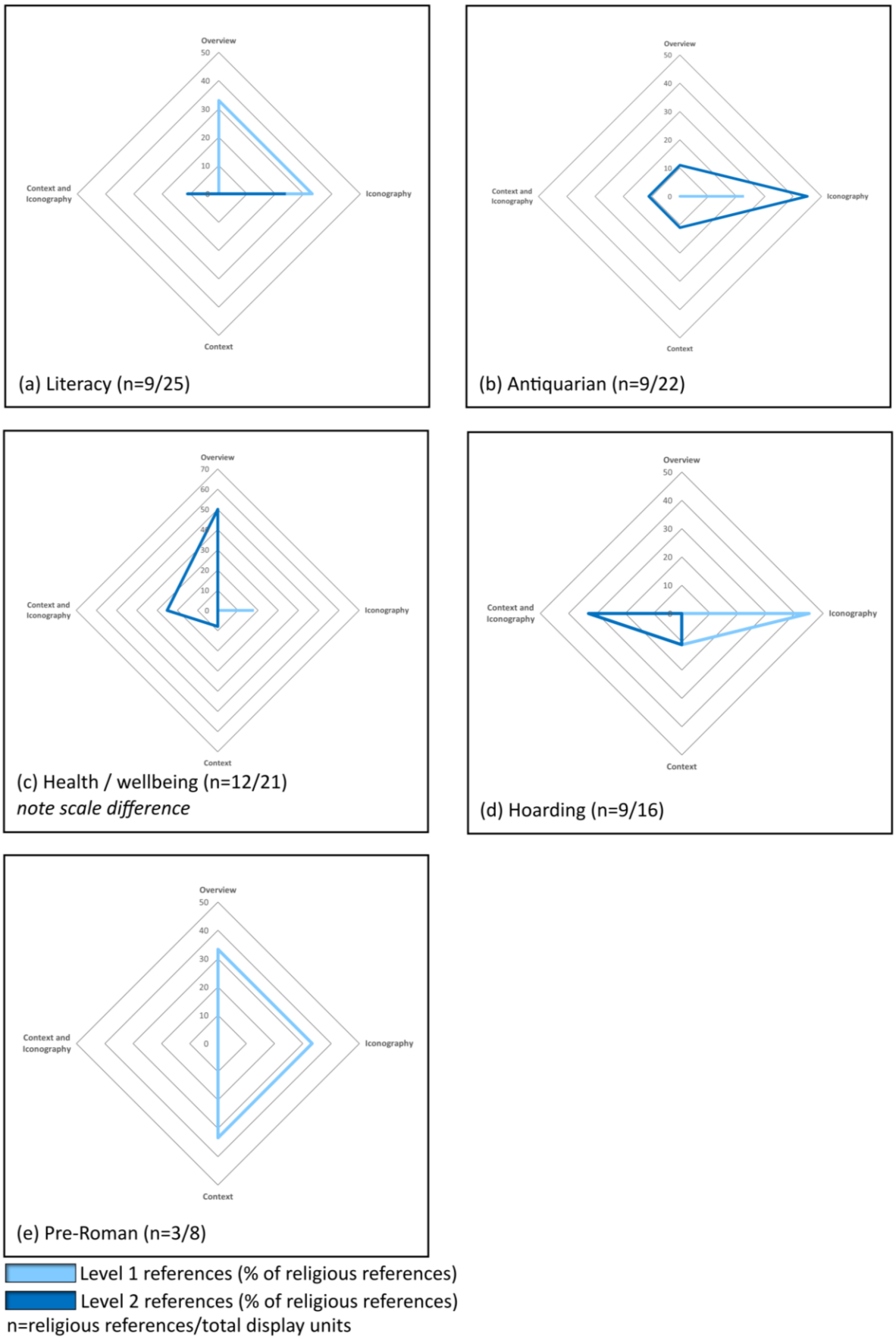



*Fig 6.23C: Categorisation of religious references within specific display unit categories*

#### *6.2.2.1 Overview*

The overview category reflects references which explain how religion in the Roman world 'worked' or make general or overarching statements about the existence of religious structures or beliefs in Roman Britain. Such references were, unsurprisingly, prevalent in interpretation providing overarching/introductory narratives of sites and geographical regions, but these were mostly of a minor (level 1) nature. References to the religious aspects of leisure activities, literacy, and health and wellbeing were also mostly of this same overarching nature.

Literacy displays often included religious inscriptions as examples of written language rather than demonstrative of ritual activity, and religious references were almost entirely minor (level 1). References within displays of leisure generally drew high-level connections between theatres and temples, or bath houses as sites of ritual activity but did not go into detail about the implications of such associations, which are explored further in Chapter 7.4. Similarly, health and wellbeing displays generally involved overarching references to how perceptions of healing might involve divine intervention without necessarily engaging with the specific contexts and uses of objects. However, although not frequent, references to religion as an aspect of health and wellbeing were mostly more significant (level 2) discussions, and these are considered further in Chapter 7.4.4.

#### *6.2.2.2 Iconography*

Iconographic religious references are defined here as those which focus on the physical appearance of objects. This might include describing imagery of deities and their attributes or the transcribing of inscriptions. Crucially, references categorised solely as iconographic do not incorporate discussion of the functional or depositional contexts of such finds, which are discussed below as 'iconography and context'. Iconographic references are therefore entirely aesthetic in their interpretation of religious material culture.

Iconography is the most common of the four religious categories, accounting for 46% of all religious references (205 out of 447 display units with religious references of both level 1 and 2). A number of prominent Romano-British categories were notably dominated by iconographic references: military, daily life, stonework, trade/commerce, industry/production,

jewellery, art/design, literacy, antiquarian and hoarding. Typical examples of such references include descriptions of images of deities on steelyard weights (Figs 6.24; 6.25), items of jewellery (Fig 6.26) and ceramics (Fig 6.27). In such instances religious iconography is often reduced to a purely decorative role rather than considered as possessing embodied functionality, or as influential in social relationships. For example, an image of Jupiter on a ring might have provided apotropaic protection (Chapter 5.4.2) or emotional support at times of stress or danger, whereas using a pot adorned with a smith god might have protected the user during a risky manufacturing process. The presence of deities on weights might increase a buyer's confidence in the veracity of the transaction, a point notably made by the Great North Museum: "merchants used the image of Minerva, goddess of trade, on their bronze weights to indicate their honesty."[5]

*Fig 6.24: Steelyard weights display, Corinium Museum. Author's photograph*

[5] 'Trade and Transport'

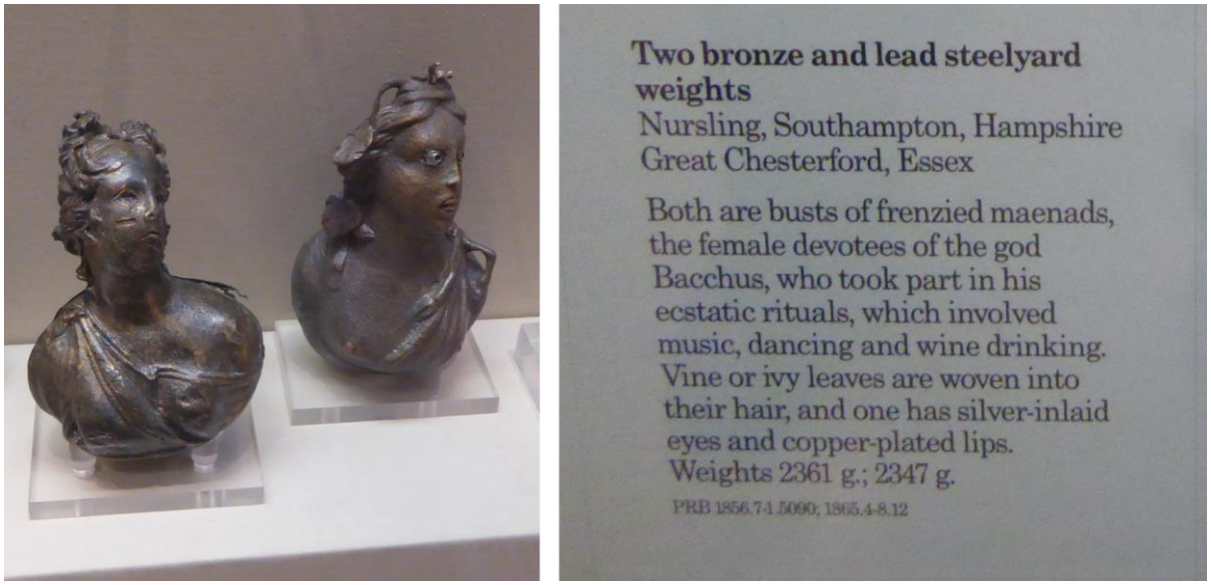



*Fig 6.25: Steelyard weights display, British Museum. Author's photograph*

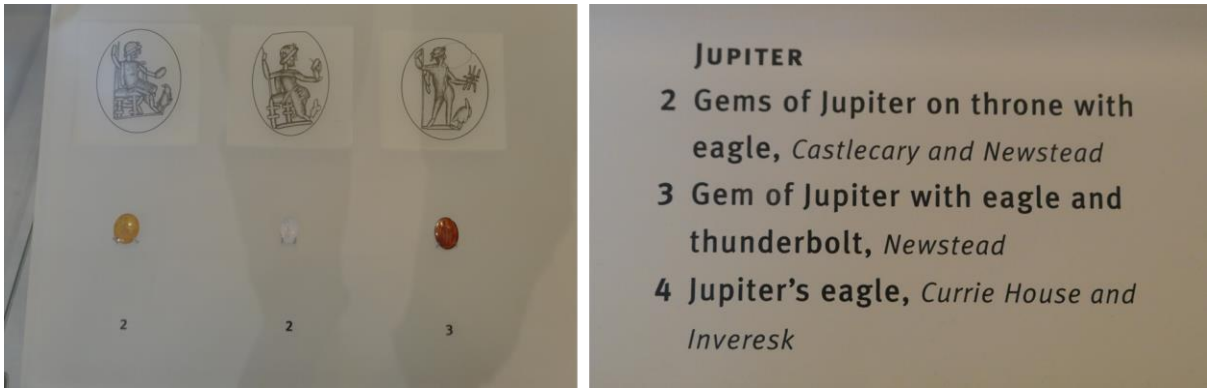



*Fig 6.26: Intaglios display, National Museum of Scotland. Author's photograph*

*Fig 6.27: Smith god display, Corbridge. Author's photograph*

The integration of religion into these facets of life can therefore be seen as generally rather superficial, focused on the description of objects rather than the more complex social roles of ritual activity, and reflective of the aesthetic gaze in museums critiqued in Chapter 4. It is likely that such objects were specifically selected for display because of their intrinsically-interesting religious iconography rather than their specific archaeological contexts, and it is to considerations of religious contexts that I now turn.

#### *6.2.2.3 Context*

The context category represents religious references where the use or deposition of objects is the primary interpretative narrative. Where iconography is also discussed, display units have been categorised as 'context and iconography' and are considered below. This category therefore represents objects identified as having a ritual aspect which is not intrinsic to their manufacture or appearance.

Context was the least common of the four religious categories, with few displays discussing it without also incorporating iconography. This is to say that religious objects whose context was discussed were generally those also possessing iconographic significance. Only 4.5% of religious references were categorised as 'context' (20 out of 447 display units with religious references of levels 1 or 2). The only category to noticeably discuss context was death and burial, and this is perhaps unsurprising as the category is itself highly contextualised. References within this category generally relate to the placing of grave goods as a means of benefitting the deceased either in an afterlife or on the journey to one.

The general lack of consideration of context detached from iconography highlights a wider lack of attention paid to the phenomenon of structured deposition, and I consider this further in Chapter 7.

#### *6.2.2.4 Context and Iconography*

As noted above, this category incorporates objects for which the interpretation includes reference to both the physical appearance of objects and the context of their use or deposition. It accounted for 43% of 'Religion' display units, all of which were comprehensive (level 2)

references. These references include the making of religious offerings, such as at Bath and various hoards at the British Museum, and relating finds to specific temple structures, such as the *Dolichena* at Vindolanda and Corbridge, the 'Theatre' and 'Triangular' temples at Verulamium, or the suggestion at Corinium that mother goddess reliefs may have originated from a temple.

Religious references within this category occur in larger ratios in the daily life, health and wellbeing, hoarding, and buildings/construction categories. Within buildings/construction, half of the references occurred at Bath, where contextualising architectural finds to elements of the complex is clearly desirable. This occurs most notably and dramatically with the temple pediment (Fig 9.16), where visitors are specifically encouraged to think of how the reliefs were viewed by Roman visitors, discussed further in Chapter 8.4.6.2.

Describing the iconography of finds and connecting them with specific structures or depositional events does not constitute considering them in their lived context. To what extent museums engage with more complex issues of how objects were positioned, touched, smelt, gazed upon, or emotionally experienced within these contexts are explored in subsequent chapters.

### 6.2.3 Encountering religious narratives in displays of religion in Roman Britain (*depth*)

In this section I explore how visitors encounter religious activity and beliefs as they progress through gallery spaces, using the Space Syntax concept of *depth*. Depth explores how well integrated an architectural space is within a museum layout and, building upon the discussions above which demonstrate that religion is generally well represented in galleries, I use this concept as a basis to consider the physical location of religious content within galleries. When do visitors first encounter any interpretation regarding religion during their visit, and when do they encounter substantial religious narratives?

Fig 6.28 visualises where within each museum a visitor might first encounter both a religious reference (within any display unit category) and a display focussed on religion (a 'Religion' category display unit) starting with the first display with Romano-British content they

encounter. This research project has not been able to undertake visitor observations but, as visitor gallery journeys will vary and some galleries have multiple entry points, the data presented here assumes that the visitor will take a route that brings them most quickly into contact with religious displays and therefore represents the 'best case scenario' for an early religious encounter.

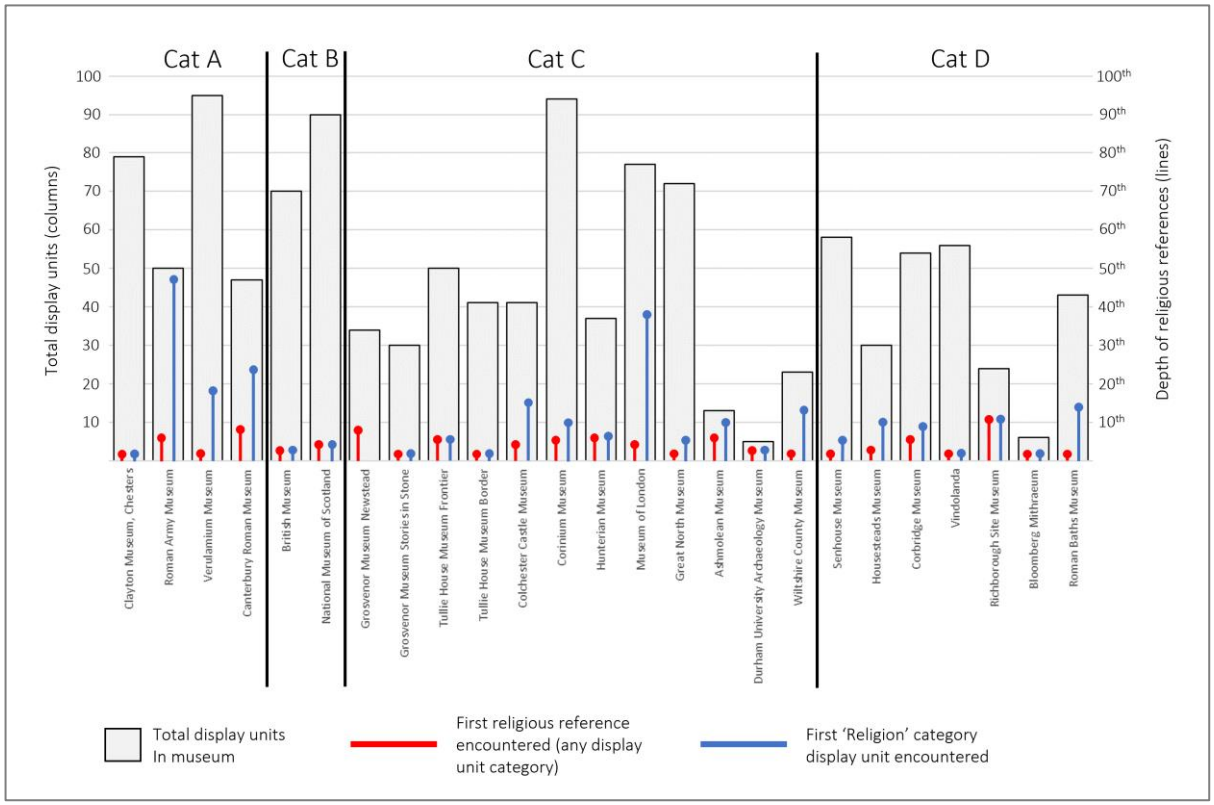



*Fig 6.28: Depth of religious content within visitor journeys*

The first religious reference is generally encountered early in the visit, often through an introductory panel. This generally occurs within the first 10 display units, and within the first three at 17 museums. At Chesters, the Great North Museum, Vindolanda, Grosvenor Museum (Stories in Stone), Tullie House (Border Gallery) and the Bloomberg Mithraeum, a 'Religion' display unit is the first display encountered. At Bath, although it is not until visitors reach the relief carving of Minerva and the display about the chief priest Gaius Calpurnius Receptus that religion becomes the main interpretative focus (Appendix B: D7, v), religion is referenced repeatedly in early displays of the site's architectural development.[6] At these sites, visitors are therefore very quickly introduced to aspect of religious activity which may frame their ongoing visit.

In contrast, at other museums, the first Religion display unit is only encountered at a much later point in the relative journey based on the total number of display units. For example, at the Roman Army Museum the dedicated religion display (Fig 7.6) is one of the final elements of the journey, and at Canterbury, the Museum of London and Wiltshire Museum, Religion displays are encountered around halfway into the Romano-British content. It is interesting to note the category A museums, specialising in Roman Britain, generally position religion later in the narrative than many other museums. As discussed above, these museums also had a lower overall representation of religious content.

## 6.3 Summary

The discussions in this chapter demonstrate that religion is generally well-represented in displays of Roman Britain, forming a significant aspect within many galleries and often one of the first narratives introduced to visitors. Religion has been shown to represent a major strand in holistic narratives of Roman Britain, alongside the military, architecture and daily life. However, despite some integration of religious narratives into other aspects of life, substantive discussion of religion remains restricted to dedicated 'Religion' displays. References to religious activity are primarily iconographic in nature, with less focus on contextualising religious activity not founded upon overt imagery and inscriptions, such as the implications of wearing jewellery, acts such as structured deposition, or the function of ritual activity in manufacturing or industry.

[6] Though the Covid-19 related closure of the 'Life and Death in Aquae Sulis' section affected this analysis

The impact of the dispersal of site assemblages between institutions on their interpretation has been demonstrated, as has the recontextualising of original relationships between religious objects to suit display aesthetics. As a consequence, despite a strong religious material culture presence in displays, concepts of lived religious experiences are potentially restricted. In the following chapters I expand on these observations to explore interpretations of lived religious experiences in greater detail, beginning with presentations of concepts of religious hybridity and identity in Roman Britain.

# Chapter 7:

# Analysing Romano-British Religious Hybridity

## 7.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how museums engage with post-colonial Roman archaeologies and concepts of religious hybridity and identity, focussing upon three Analysis Statements:

> §2: "Romano-British religious activity was the result of complex cultural interactions occurring in specific physical and social contexts, and was integral to wider cultural change rather than a result of it."

> §3: "Romano-British religious beliefs, practices and iconography were not static or homogeneous, but idiosyncratic, culturally diverse, and diachronically dynamic."

> §4: "Religious activity should be defined to include a variety of communicative strategies at traditionally non-religious locations, including the use of amuletic devices and the creation of structured deposits."

My online survey asked respondents (Q9, Appendix D) which deities they recognised from a list of 30 attested in Britain. The results (Fig 7.1) demonstrate a significantly greater recognition of classical and mystery cult deities than those of north-western provincial origins. Considering the survey respondents' generally high level of interest in Romano-British archaeology (Q6), 60% stating a 'serious interest' or possessing 'expert knowledge', this trend would likely be more pronounced in non-specialist audiences.

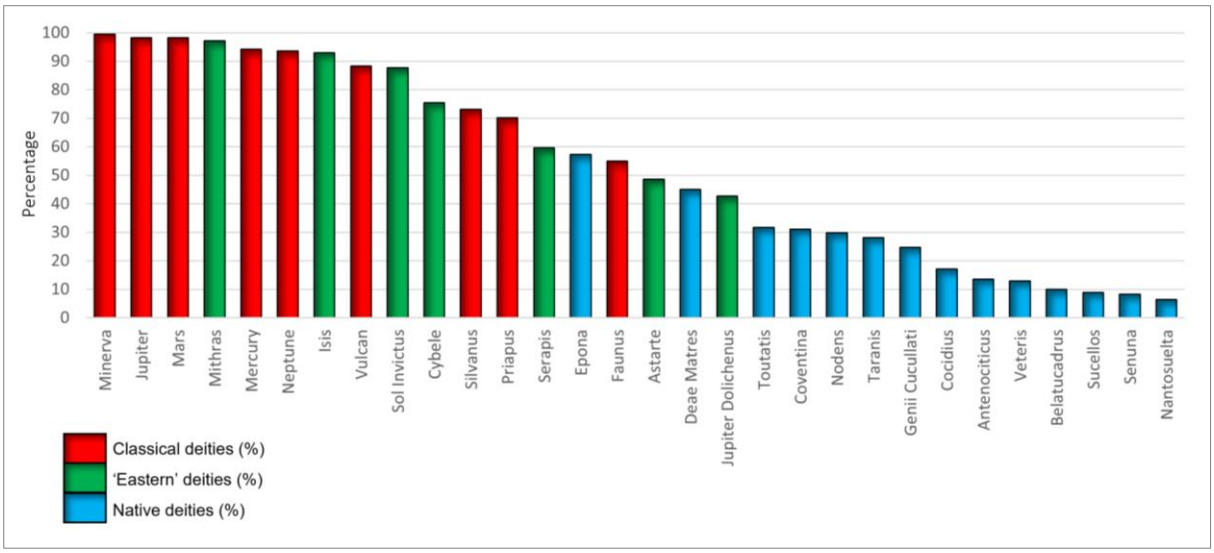



*Fig 7.1: Responses to online survey Q9, recognition of deities of differing origins*

The survey presented a simplification of the variety of deities attested in Roman Britain, omitting syncretised deities, those of more disparate cultural origins, and abstract concepts such as personifications of Virtue or Victory. Though recognition of classical deities can be related to the prominence of the classical world in western culture, deities 'native' to the north-western provinces are more likely to only be encountered in more specialised heritage settings such as museums. How museums approach the archaeological evidence for various deities in Roman Britain, and consider questions of who worshipped what, where, why and how, are therefore significant in promoting consideration of wider issues of religious change and identities.

Figs 7.2-7.5 present data on the categories of deities presented to visitors at the surveyed museums, including both object interpretation and text panels. As museum collections are restricted in the deities they contain, many museums discuss non-represented deities in their contextualisation of objects into provincial and broader Roman religious contexts. The interpretation data therefore goes beyond reflecting the objects available to individual museums based on archaeological distributions of religious material culture, to demonstrate holistic discussions of deities within the Roman world. The prevalence of classical deities is clearly demonstrated across all four survey categories (Fig 7.2), representing between 53% (category A) and 76% (category B) of all deities referenced. Mystery cults have a broadly similar representation across all categories of museum, whereas the specialist Roman museums (category A) have the greatest representation of native deities.

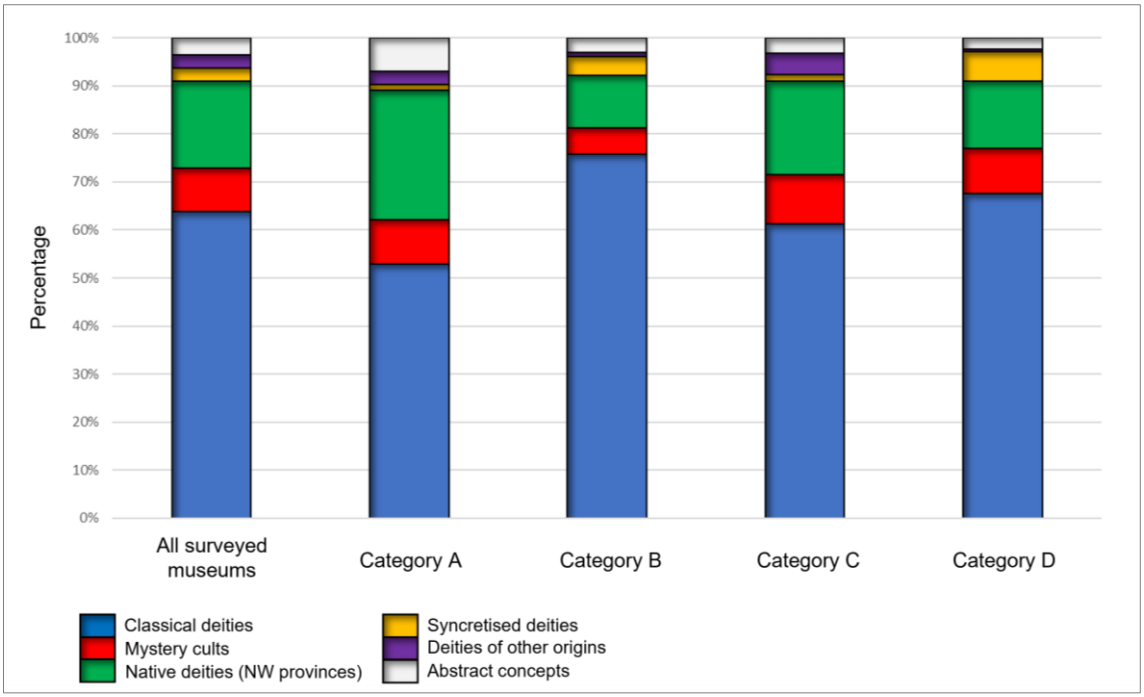



*Fig 7.2: Museum representations of deities of differing categories, by survey categories (see Table 2.2)*

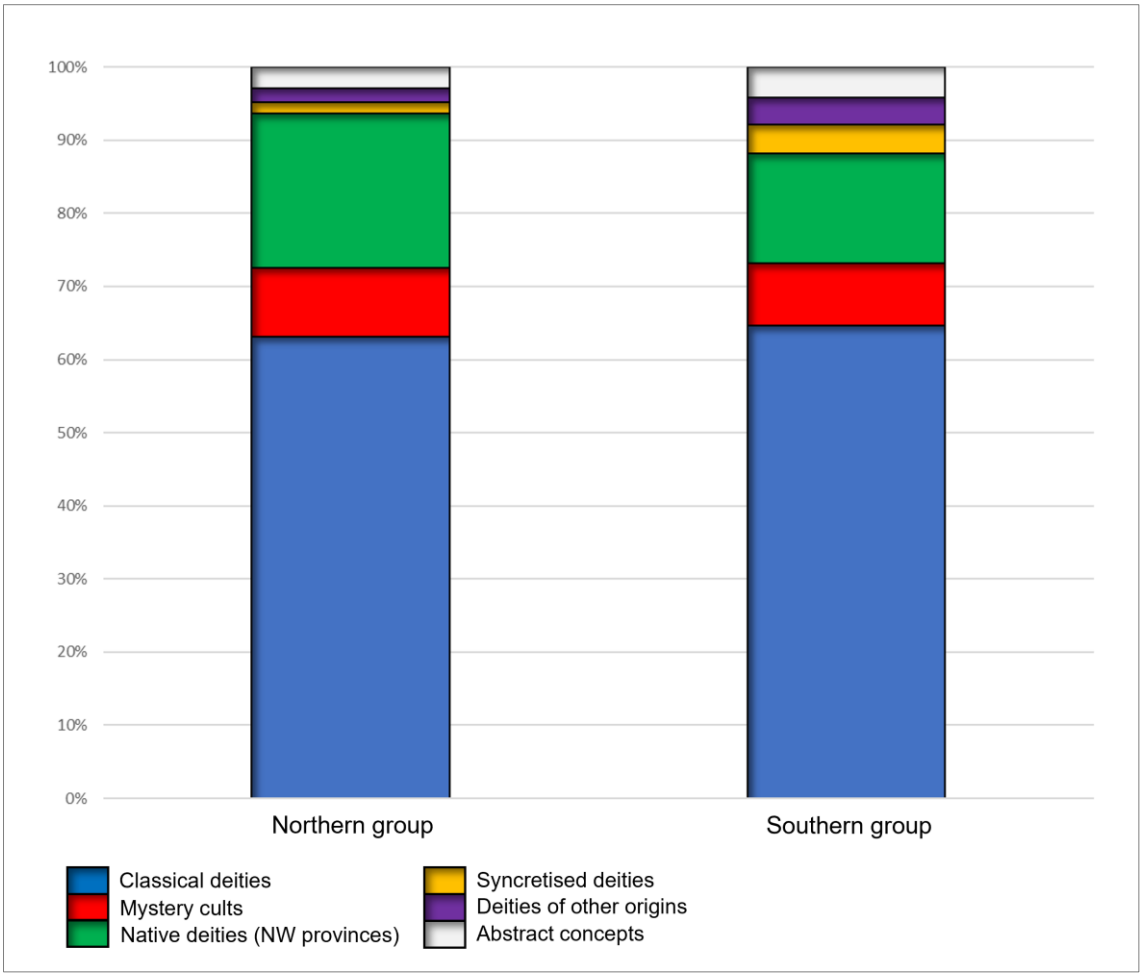



*Fig 7.3: Museum representations of deities of differing categories, by geographical groups*

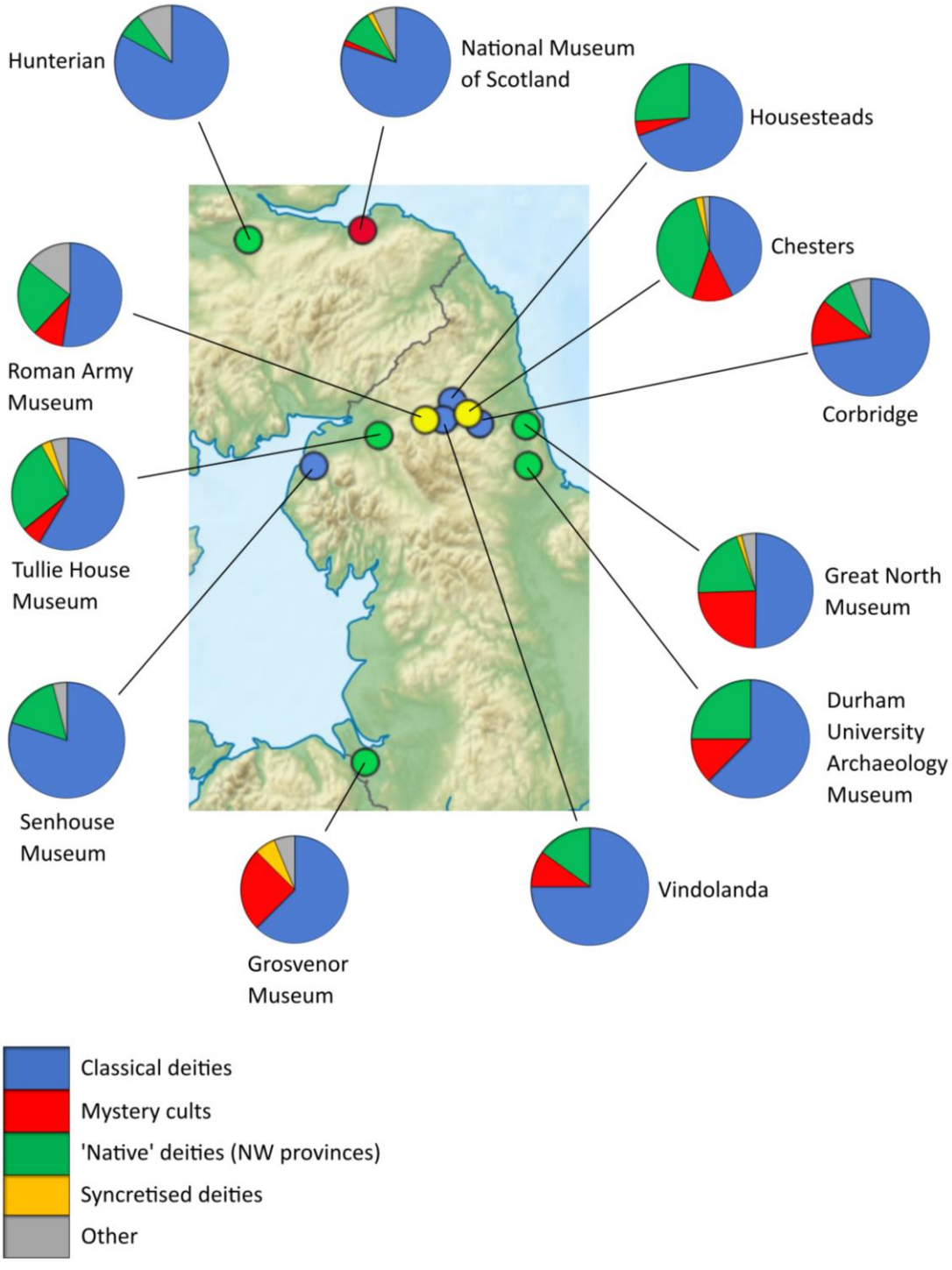



*Fig 7.4: Museum representations of deities of differing categories at individual museums, northern group*

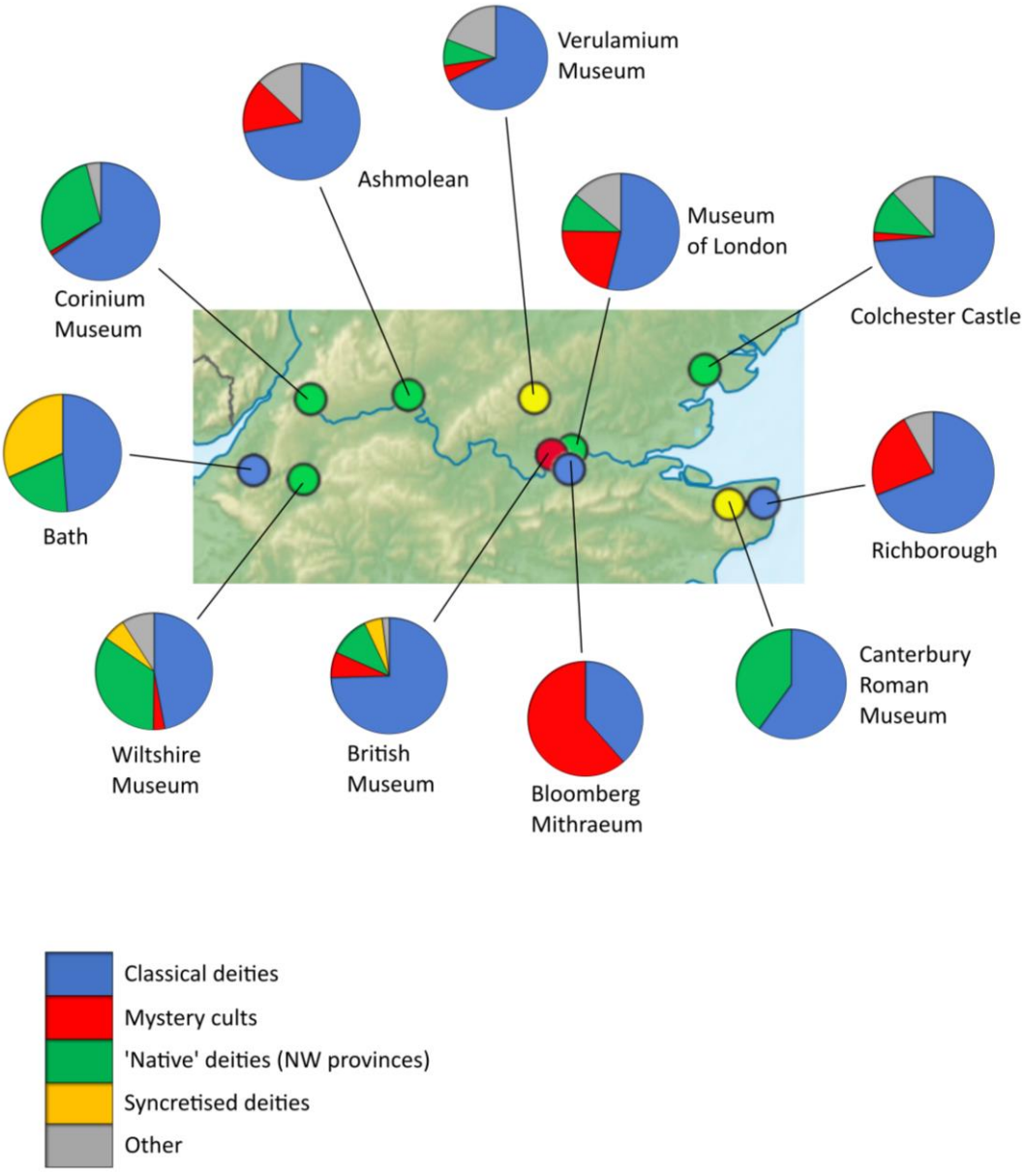



*Fig 7.5: Museum representations of deities of differing categories at individual museums, southern group*

Fig 7.3 shows this same dataset by northern and southern group museums, demonstrating a notable national consistency, but with northern group museums providing slightly more references to native deities. Examining individual museums (Figs 7.4; 7.5) reveals the idiosyncrasies of some museums, such as the high percentage of references to the syncretised Sulis Minerva at Bath, and to Mithras at the Bloomberg Mithraeum.

To return to the online survey data (Fig 7.1), museums in Britain were most frequently selected as the source where respondents obtained their knowledge of the Roman world, with visits to archaeological sites a close second (Q7). Additionally, of the respondents who recognised fewer than five native deities, 87% said that they were frequent (2-5 visits per year) or regular (6+ visits per year) museum visitors (Q14). This suggests that, despite the representation of native deities in museum displays, and indeed the prevalence of religion in general (Chapter 6), current display approaches may not be sufficiently influencing wider public recognition of them.

## 7.2 §2: "Romano-British religious activity was the result of complex cultural interactions occurring in specific physical and social contexts, and was integral to wider cultural change rather than a result of it."

To systematically explore this statement it is necessary to consider museum presentations of various aspects of religious life in Roman Britain. Building upon observations made above about the relative representation of deities of differing cultural and geographical origins, I first explore how concepts of Roman and native deities and practices are narrativized in terms of their relative significance and the cultural backgrounds of their worshippers. I then examine presentations of religious change and adaptation, including syncretism and Roman tolerance towards native deities.

### 7.2.1 Narrativizing Romans and natives

#### *7.2.1.1 Hierarchies of deities*

Challenging the hierarchies inherent in traditional interpretations of the Roman world is central

to post-coloniality. Though detailed analysis of museum presentations of Roman and native identities in Roman Britain would be valuable, discussing them through other than a religious lens is beyond the scope of this research. However, it is worth considering that the general framing of Roman Britain influences how visitors contextualise religion. Colchester Castle's seemingly innocuous statement that "people thought that the Roman gods each had their own special powers" betrays a key conceptual problem.[1] The common use of 'Roman' to both refer to a period in British history and as a specific cultural descriptor leads to the Roman period becoming irrevocably associated with classical, Mediterranean culture and its religious pantheon rather than reflecting provincial diversity. At Tullie House and Corbridge, visitors are immediately presented with tombstones of Roman cavalrymen riding down 'barbarians', the former even titled "Rome overcomes the barbarians".[2] The Roman Army Museum similarly opens with the less visual but similarly-themed quotation from Virgil's *Aeneid* (VI.1151–1154) that it was Roman destiny to rule the world. Such powerful sentiments serve to establish early hierarchies, reinforcing preconceptions of the relative status of Roman and barbarian (native) individuals and, by extension, their respective religious beliefs and practices.

Hierarchies of the relative significance of deities are subtly presupposed in the order they generally appear in interpretative text: classical deities, mystery cults or other exotic deities, and finally native deities. However, lists are necessarily sequential and, although subverting the hierarchy might subtly challenge this orthodoxy, descriptive language often compounds the message. At Corinium, Jupiter, Minerva and Diana are presented as "well-known" gods worshipped in the town, alongside the "unusual" gods Cernunnos, Rosmerta and Epona.[3] The Roman Army Museum states that while someone from Gaul might, for example, "have worshipped Dea Gallia, the Goddess of Gaul", this is implied as secondary to their worship of the "main Roman Gods" such as Jupiter or Mars.[4] Senhouse refers to the worship of Imperial Virtue and Juno as "mainstream".[5] Tullie House talks of the worship of "major (gods) such as Mars to less important ones like the *genii loci*".[6] Canterbury Roman Museum describes an urban temple being for "official gods", implying that others gods were 'unofficial'.[7] Can we be

[1] 'Choose your god'
[2] The curatorial interviewee noted how it dominated a previous prehistoric display, giving a sense of the inevitability of Rome
[3] 'Gods and Goddesses'
[4] 'Where were they from?'
[5] 'Hermione, Daughter of Quintus'
[6] 'Gods'. In contrast, Ferris (2021: 38) notes the prevalence of the *genius loci* in the north, connecting it with respect for local landscapes
[7] 'Early Roman Canterbury Reconstruction'

certain which deities any individual in Roman Britain would have considered ‘mainstream’, ‘unusual’, ‘major’ or ‘official’?

*Fig 7.6: Religion display at the Roman Army Museum. Author’s photograph*

The use of graphical imagery is another aspect of the display assemblage which can infer hierarchies. At the Roman Army Museum, striking images of Jupiter, Mars and Ceres dominate the display of religious stonework (Fig 7.6). Though the interpretation talks of soldiers worshipping a diversity of deities such as Dea Syria, Fortuna and the Veteres, the depicted classical deities sit physically and conceptually above all of these, despite not being attested in the displayed objects. Even when archaeologically absent, marbled classical gods frame the display for the visitor. At Vindolanda a similarly large and imposing image of Cloacina accompanies a display of wooden finds from the fort’s sewer system,[8] and a Pompeiian fresco of Venus, Mars and Cupid provides a backdrop for a group of altars.[9] The use of smaller-scale comparative imagery from the classical world such as relief carvings and frescoes supports religious interpretation at the Museum of London, Corinium, Verulamium and Richborough.

[8] ‘Vindolanda’s Wooden Underworld’
[9] ‘To the Gods Departed’

While providing an understandably rich visual resource, they reinforce the primacy of the classical world and narratives of empire-wide religious homogeneity, discussed further below.

Hierarchies can also be discerned in interpretations of the relative artistic qualities of 'local' sculpture in contrast to classical art. Despite challenges to preconceptions that native artworks represent failed imitations of classical perfection (Chapter 5.2.2), pejorative descriptions persist. The Hunterian's statement that in Roman Britain "the style of sculpture was essentially classical, but many Celtic influences can be detected" presupposes a classical default being varyingly influenced by local practices, yet the opposite might be convincingly argued.[10] At Corinium, the artistic styles of two mother goddess reliefs (Fig 7.7), perhaps from the same temple, are directly compared. One (Fig 7.7, right) is interpreted as "very classical in style", in "marked contrast to the rather stern, upright, Romano-Celtic style" of the other (Fig 7.7, left). Though not openly derogatory, the interpretation suggests that the latter has failed to meet the standards of the former, rather than the respective commissioners or artists possessing differing interpretations of the goddesses' character. At Durham University, a painted reconstruction of a small stone head also illustrates a classical bias, the original's large lentoid eyes replaced with small, anthropomorphically realistic, eyes in the reconstruction (Fig 7.8), altering the original sculptor's clearly intentional representation.

*Fig 7.7: Mother Goddess reliefs at Corinium Museum. Author's photographs*

[10] 'Religion and Belief'

*Fig 7.8: Repainted stone head at Durham University Archaeology Museum. Author's photograph*

The Border Gallery at Tullie House contains an impressive range of depictions of native deities, and the language used to describe them is informative. The tension in interpreting native imagery is neatly encapsulated by the label accompanying a ram-horned god from Netherby, described as "one of the finest pieces of primitive Celtic sculpture". Such phrasing may confuse visitors attempting to evaluate its quality. Primitivity is a relative concept, presumably determined by comparisons with the classical world, and the sculpture therefore seems to simultaneously excel and fail. While negativity is clearly not the museum's intent, other statements, such as the "crude lettering" on an altar indicating that it was "probably inscribed locally", and that unidentified figures are thought to be Celtic due to their "crude facial features" or being "poorly proportioned", reinforce perceptions that native sculptures, and by extension deities, were of lesser significance.

This nuance is also present at the British Museum. The head of Mercury from Uley (Fig 8.44) is described as "an outstanding work in wholly Roman style, showing little or no sign of native British taste", while a patera handle from the Capheaton Treasure is "purely Roman" despite simultaneously being interpreted as possibly depicting the syncretised Sulis Minerva. Their

'Romanness' is defined solely through artistic achievement. Similarly, a statuette of Apollo from London is described as being "of unusually high quality", suggesting an omitted 'for Roman Britain', and a repousse-decorated bronze strip from Surrey, attributed to the Celtic deities Sucellos and Nantosuelta by Black (2008: 14), is interpreted as being "of almost child-like naivety".

#### *7.2.1.2 Whose gods are these?*

How museums approach the religious options available to individuals in need of divine intervention is discussed in Chapter 8.2.1, but here I specifically consider connections between cultural background and religious identities. This typically means narratives rooted in the primacy of the classical pantheon, discussed above, which readily accept a native Briton worshipping Mars or Minerva, yet perceive someone of 'Roman' identity beseeching a native deity as an oddity requiring explanation. A cartoon at Senhouse (Fig 7.9) depicts a (rather stereotyped) native couple devoutly making offerings to the "Horned God", while two Roman legionaries look on in amusement, though whether at the worshippers' attire, ritual practices or choice of deity is unclear. The cartoon, however, conflicts with the museum's statement that depictions of the Horned God are plentiful specifically "because auxiliary soldiers patronized the local cults".[11] Complex relationships between the Roman military and the worship of native deities is also reflected through two silver plaques to Cocidius at Tullie House (Chapter 6.2.1.1; Fig 6.5). Their discovery at the very Roman headquarters building at Bewcastle is not discussed, and they are instead simply presented as representative of the "Non-Roman religion" of the "Nasty Little Brits".[12] Similarly, though altars to Belatucadrus and the Veteres are well attested by military personnel, the Roman Army Museum states that these native deities "may have been mainly worshipped [by] the civilian population".[13]

[11] 'Horned god'
[12] 'Non-Roman religion'
[13] 'Religious Faith in a Foreign Land'

*Fig 7.9: 'The Horned God' cartoon, Senhouse Museum. Author's photograph*

An interesting example is the Great North Museum's altar to Antenociticus set up at Benwell by Tineius Longus (Figs 7.10; 7.23) in thanks for a promotion. The first-person interpretative text (see Chapter 9.2.2.3) has Longus say of Antenociticus: "He's only a local deity, but my ambition must have impressed him. It just goes to show that these local gods are more powerful than you think". The narrative is grounded in a perception that the 'local' nature of Antenociticus' attestation reflects a similarly parochial sphere of influence; that the granting of an important promotion within the Roman military might be beyond Antenociticus' power. However, Longus does not seem to have considered this the case when he made his vow, a confidence likely confirmed when the deity fulfilled his part of the deal. It is the surprise of the interpretation's author rather than Longus' that is presented to visitors.

The cultural origins of some deities are more complex than simple dichotomies of Roman and native. The mother goddesses (*Deae Matres*) feature commonly in displays, referenced in some form at 14 of the 23 surveyed museums, and offer a good example of the movement of deities within the Roman world. Although well-attested across Britain, Gaul and Germany and recognised as being 'Celtic' in origin, they seem to have been introduced to Britain after the

*Fig 7.10: Tineius Longus 'People Portal' and altar, Great North Museum. Author's photograph*

Roman conquest through the Roman military (Aldhouse-Green 2018: 69). Although several museums reference these wider 'Celtic' origins, others interpret them as indigenous deities. At Corinium, where they are particularly prevalent in the displays, they are described as both a "local Celtic cult" and a "Romano-British hybrid cult", and the British Museum refers to them as both "native Celtic" and "indigenous". The Museum of London terms them "native" on multiple occasions, though the 'East and West' display groups 'British mother goddesses' under 'Foreign gods' and dates them as 'Roman' (Fig 7.11). This rather confusingly, though perhaps accurately, makes them simultaneously 'Roman', 'foreign', 'British' and 'native'. Only at Housesteads are their military connections forefronted, the interpretation stating that they were brought to the area by the army from Germany.[14] Similar confusion can be observed with a less-widely attested deity, Epona, who at Senhouse is variously described as being brought to Britain by Gaulish cavalry, as a "native horse goddess", and as a "Roman god".[15]

[14] 'Deae Matres sculpture'
[15] 'Epona carving', 'The Romano-British panel' and 'Offerings to Roman Gods'

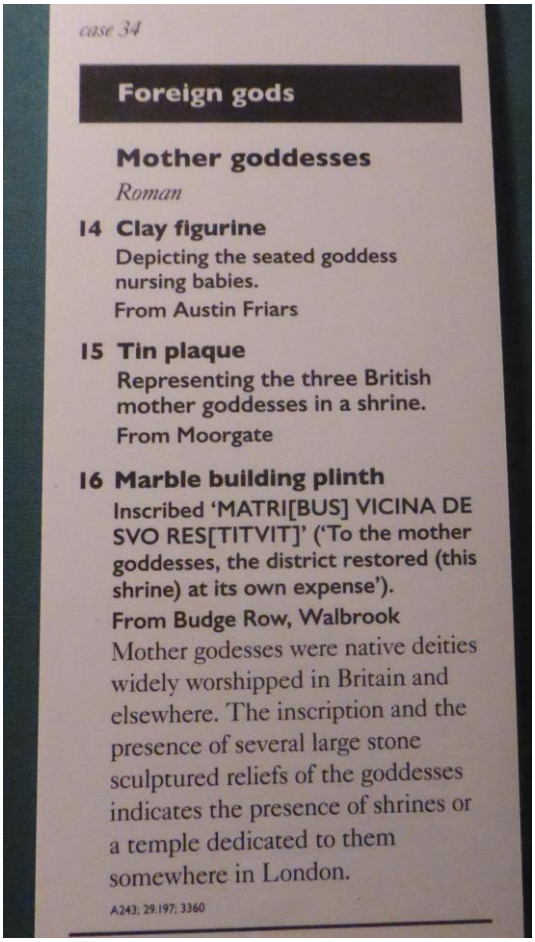



*Fig 7.11: 'Foreign Gods' interpretation, Museum of London. Author's photograph*

Of related interest here is the definitive identification of deities through their iconographic attributes. Two of the silver votive plaques from the Barkway hoard (Fig 7.12) at the British Museum,[16] for example, are interpreted as being dedicated to Vulcan due to one of them being inscribed 'Nu(mini) V(o)lc(an)o'. The long hammer the god carries, however, has been interpreted by Black (2008: 16) as the mallet of the Celtic smith-god Sucellos. There is therefore a risk that epigraphic references to classical deities become viewed as universally accepted interpretations of the deity. Depictions of both Senuna at Ashwell (British Museum, discussed further below) 17 and Brigantia (NMS), for example, are that of the classical Minerva (Fig 7.13). Jackson and Burleigh (2018: 3–4) admit that translation of the Ashwell inscriptions began with expectations of finding 'DEAE MINERVAE'. At Corbridge, it is suggested that conflations of imagery may reflect the confusion of ancient worshippers, a statue to the native deity Arecurius having similar imagery to Mercury because "perhaps even the dedicator, the Roman citizen Cassius Apollinaris, was unclear about the god's role and

[16] 'Uley'
[17] 'Pagan Religion'

attributes" (Fig 7.14). However, any perceived confusion may equally be attributed to anachronistic modern desires for neat categorisation.

Simplistic and potentially confusing narratives are therefore being presented to visitors at a number of museums regarding the relationships between the cultural origins of deities and their worshippers. This is grounded in the dichotomous categorisation of both divine and human actors as either native or Roman, and presumptions regarding their cultural homogeneity and related normative religious behaviour.

*Fig 7.12: Votive plaque from the Barkway Hoard, British Museum. Author's photograph*

*Fig 7.13: Votive plaque from the Ashwell hoard at the British Museum (left) and relief of Brigantia at the National Museum of Scotland (right). Author's photographs*

*Fig 7.14: Relief of Arecurius, Corbridge. Author's photograph*

### *7.2.1.3 Empire-wide homogeneity and resistance*

That Britain became culturally, economically and politically part of the wider Roman empire is expressed at a number of museums. Tullie House speaks cosily of the creation of a "way of life that was the same across the Empire", so "people from different provinces would feel at home anywhere in the Roman world".[18] Statues of Fortuna "from the Mediterranean" (a British Museum loan) and Birdoswald are used to demonstrate empire-wide consistency of beliefs. The British Museum similarly presents religious statuettes as a means of spreading "Roman political and spiritual concepts in the provinces of the Empire".[19]

The Ashmolean is the only surveyed museum to comprehensively integrate material culture from Roman Britain with that of the wider Mediterranean (Appendix B: C8). This presentation of empire-wide homogeneity is reinforced through a gallery structure which conceptually separates Iron Age and Roman Britain, presenting the latter as more closely connected with the classical world than its own prehistoric past. Resistance to Rome is only referenced in the Iron Age display, though this too is presented from a Roman perspective. Iron Age religious activity such as votive deposition is described as conducted "to bring success in warfare", and a misty woodland backdrop evokes an animistic aura entirely absent from the Roman Britain displays.

Narratives of resistance to Roman religious ideas are most prominent at NMS, the curatorial interviewee stating that "one of the things we were really keen to do was to make the point that this is a frontier religion, this is not what's happening in the heart of the Roman empire". This frontier approach manifests in a notably anti-colonial narrative. The 'Ruled by an Alien Empire' case, for example, talks of the "threatening and bewildering" native experience of encountering an enemy which responded to resistance by offering "slavery or death, crushed beneath the imperial boot". This narrative is complicated, though, through references to the native valuing of imported commodities and of some tribes seeing advantages in gaining the trust of a Roman military which included northern Britons. Religious practices are rarely discussed in this context, interpreted instead as independently native or Roman, an approach with implications for the interpretation of structured deposition, as discussed below. Interpretation that the sacrificial scene on the Bridgeness slab (Fig 8.17) represents "a religion very far from native

[18] 'Life in Roman Carlisle'
[19] 'Statuettes'

ways",[20] or that the religious traditions of the Roman army were "completely alien to the native peoples of Scotland" hint at religious interactions, even tension, but do not engage with them in detail or on an individual, experiential, level.[21] Frontier landscapes are ones of perpetual cultural exchange and contested identities (Ferris 2021: 4).

The context of NMS' Early Peoples gallery is significant when reflecting upon the ongoing relevance of Roman imperialism to contemporary identities and politics (Chapter 1.1). Its creation was contiguous with Scottish devolution in 1999, and its narratives of 'Scottish' resistance to an aggressor from the south might therefore be understood on multiple levels by visitors, particularly in the Scottish capital and in its national museum.

#### *7.2.1.4 'Barbarian' headhunting*

One specific narrative regarding the relative practices of Romans and natives relates to acts of decapitation. The significance of heads across Iron Age north-western Europe occupies too complex a literature to be rehearsed here (see e.g. Armit 2012), but the so-called' 'Cult of the Head' is referenced at some museums. At Senhouse visitors are told that "Celtic warriors" displayed the heads of their enemies in shrines or at their houses to show guests,[22] and Tullie House states that such trophies were connected with human sacrifice.[23] The Great North Museum notes more positively that "to the Celts, the head was the repository of someone's soul, intelligence and bravery". The act of taking or ritually burying human heads is sometimes portrayed as fundamentally 'un-Roman'; a means by which to distinguish Roman 'civilisation' from native 'barbarism' through the lens of modern sensibilities about the treatment of the dead. For example, the Grosvenor Museum's interpretation of a cavalryman's tombstone states:[24]

> *"The Romans usually recruited their cavalry from the less civilised parts of the empire. Aurelius' appearance, with large moustache and stiff spiky hair, may suggest that he came from a barbarian background. This impression is increased by the severed head which appears at the bottom of the sculpture."*

[20] 'Dedicated to the emperor'
[21] 'On the Frontier'
[22] 'The Serpent Stone'
[23] 'Celtic Religion'
[24] 'Tombstones'

The human skulls found in London's Walbrook stream have elicited much discussion, suggested to have been Boudiccan revolt victims, natives punished by the Roman garrison, defeated gladiators (Redfern and Bonney 2014), the result of cemetery erosion (Powers 2015), or individuals buried close to the running water to continue Iron Age traditions (Hingley 2018: 22). Their interpretation varies across different displays at the Museum of London. A skull in the Boudiccan revolt display is suggested to have belonged to a victim of the massacre, whereas in the 'Spirituality or Superstition?' display two skulls are suggested to have perhaps been deposited as "religious offerings to the British water gods". Both interpretations, however, imply that decapitation was a native act.

Despite this, decapitation burial is a widely-attested Roman burial practice (Tucker 2015; Crerar 2016), and numerous examples are known of the display of human body parts in Roman military and religious contexts (Redfern and Bonney 2014: 223). Decapitation burial is only referenced at Corinium, where it is described as a possible religious custom to prevent the individual returning from the afterlife.[25] A more dramatic example, the violently killed and de-fleshed skull of an adolescent found in a 2nd century pit at Verulamium's Folly Lane temple-mausoleum (Aldhouse-Green 2001: 107), does not form part of Verulamium Museum's interpretation of the site.

Colchester Castle acknowledges the potential for Romans to have conducted beheadings, interpreting skulls from the fortress ditch as "Britons executed by the Romans in c.AD55. Their decapitated skulls were exhibited on stakes as a warning to others".[26] This interpretation is qualified with the opinion that "the Romans would not have treated their own countrymen that way because they believed they would not find peace in the next world without a proper burial".[27] At the Roman Army Museum, a skull bearing brutal injuries deposited in a ditch at Vindolanda following display on a pole is discussed as a case study in 'Roman or Barbarian' identities. The display valuably highlights that narratives of 'Roman' and barbarian' on the frontier are complicated through the individual having grown up in northern Britain but being of Italian parentage. However, it still expresses shock that someone of Italian heritage could be treated in such a way, whereas the beheading of a 'barbarian' native is presented as normal.

[25] 'Death and Burial panel'
[26] 'Skulls of Executed Britons' supplementary card
[27] It is interesting to note the use of countrymen, implying that 'Roman' was a national identity

Practices involving the post-mortem treatment and display of human heads and associated beliefs were, therefore, clearly not confined to 'Celtic warriors'. Persistent narratives that they represent barbarian rather than Roman acts owe more to perceptions of Rome as a civilising force than the archaeological data.

### 7.2.2 Adoption and syncretisation

The introduction of new deities and religious practices are important aspects of the impact of the Roman conquest. Subsequent developments in religious experiences such as the spread of mystery cults and Christianity are discussed in Chapter 7.3; here I investigate presentations of the religious changes brought by Rome, the syncretisation of specific deities and narratives of Roman 'tolerance' towards other religious practices.

#### *7.2.2.1 Religious change under Rome*

Concepts of religious change in the ancient world are dominated by tension between the broad compatibility of ancient polytheistic belief systems and presumptions of significant cultural advancement under Rome. A general narrative within museums is that religious change occurred as a direct result of the Roman invasion, but its detailed implications often remain unexplored. Change is also presented as predominantly conflict-free, as evidenced through the widespread use of the passive term 'adoption' to describe native acceptance of Roman practices, for example at Wiltshire Museum,[28] Verulamium,[29] Corbridge,[30] Vindolanda,[31] the Great North Museum,[32] and Canterbury Roman Museum.[33] Tullie House similarly presents a mimetic narrative that "as the local people witnessed this Roman religion, they began to copy this style of worship".[34]

The term 'merged' is used at Bath, Durham University and Canterbury Roman Museum,[35] and although this implies a process with greater parity, it also suggests an agentless one. The

[28] 'Introductory panel'
[29] 'Rites and Rituals'
[30] 'Timeline'
[31] 'To the Gods Departed'
[32] 'A Choice of Gods', 'The Written Word'
[33] 'Everyday Life and Death in Roman Canterbury'
[34] 'Roman Identity' supplementary card
[35] Bath, 'Audio Guide 15'; Durham, 'Roman Occupation'; Canterbury, 'Religious cults'

Museum of London's statement that "the Romans accepted that their beliefs would become mixed with local British ideas" similarly promotes a conflict-free and Roman-centric process. More aggressive Roman agency is expressed at the British Museum ("Rome absorbed as well as dominated the culture of those she conquered"[36]), the Great North Museum ("native gods were absorbed into mainstream Roman religion"[37]) and Senhouse (the "native population was subjected to Roman culture"[38]).

Tullie House engages with the concept in the greatest detail, telling visitors that:

> *"Roman religion was very different from other contemporary religions in Europe. Essentially Roman people believed the gods could influence human affairs. Different gods had influence over various aspects of life and over other gods. People communicated with the gods, making offerings and dedications, asking the gods for help, making promises to them and thanking them for their assistance. Romans arrived with a formal religion and ritual which became the new way of worshipping. Previously, the native people of Britannia had worshipped lots of gods in the open air, or in 'sacred groves.'"* [39]

Though valuably detailed, there are problems with this narrative. It implies, likely unintentionally, that, in comparison with Roman deities, those of Britain were not part of a 'formal' religious system, did not have individual spheres of influence, were unable to influence human affairs, and were not beseeched by individuals for help.

The restriction of Iron Age religion to animistic 'sacred groves' is also expressed at Wiltshire Museum: "before the Roman Conquest, the gods had been worshipped at natural places of particular sanctity such as clearings in groves, at rivers, springs, lakes or on hill tops".[40] The same interpretation goes on to reference the increased formality of Roman religion, saying that many of these sites "developed into large and important places of worship, with stone buildings built in a classical style, stone altars and effigies of the gods in stone or bronze", implying that

[36] 'Statuettes'
[37] 'A Choice of Gods'
[38] 'Horned gods'
[39] 'The Roman Identity' supplementary card
[40] 'Worship'

they only gained importance through the erection of classical structures and statuary. It also suggests that natural sites lost their religious significance, echoed in Senhouse's statement that "Roman gods replaced the worship of the natural world".[41] Housesteads Museum similarly equates Roman influence with the introduction of structure and organisation, "the Empire brought rules and regulations, systems of belief and administration".[42] However, the suggestion that cults in the Roman world were structurally unified is as problematic as the idea that native beliefs lacked structure.

Changes in the conceptualisation and depiction of deities is only directly referenced at two museums. Tullie House states that "for the first time the gods appear as human figures",[43] and the Great North Museum that "giving gods a human form was a Roman practice and was rare in pre-Roman Britain".[44] Both of these statements represent a view challenged in recent scholarship, Kiernan (2020), for example, arguing that perceptions of aniconic Iron Age religion are "utterly untenable" and rooted in 19th century models of religious development (Chapter 1.3.1).

#### *7.2.2.2 Syncretisation and transmitting traditions*

Syncretised deities do not feature prominently in the surveyed museums (Figs 7.2–7.5), representing only 3% of the total references to named deities. Though they are better represented in southern group (4%) than northern group (1%) museums, Bath accounts for the majority of the southern references. Discussion of individual acts of syncretisation is beyond the scope of this research, but syncretic processes are significant to post-colonial studies and the formation of hybrid religious practices and identities (Chapter 5); how and why religious ideas and deities moved, interacted and were perceived in changing religious landscapes, and what the agents of such changes were.

The relative hierarchies of deities of differing cultural backgrounds, discussed above, are also highly relevant here. Though epigraphic evidence for syncretised deities usually sees the classical deity's name preceding the native element, presumptions that native deities played

[41] 'Horned Gods' and 'The Romano-British'
[42] 'Local/Provincial/Empire'
[43] 'Non-Roman religion'
[44] 'Antenociticus head'

diminutive roles are overly simplistic and cannot represent the perceptions of every worshipper (Chapter 5.2.2). Corinium's narrative that "native gods and goddesses often became linked to classical ones" reflects the view, discussed above, of religious change as inevitable and agent-less. [45] An altar to Mars Belatucadrus at the British Museum is described as "Mars, god of war, in his local guise as Belatucadrus", minimising the native deity's identity, whereas an altar to Mars Condates at the Great North Museum[46] is presented without explanatory discussion.

Bath's Sulis Minerva is probably the most widely recognised syncretised deity in Britain. The museum interpretation (Audio Guide 15) describes the syncretisation process:

> *"When the Romans first came to Bath they found the local tribes already worshipped a goddess of the spring. They called her Sulis. Sulis reminded the Romans of their own goddess of healing, Minerva, and so the identity of the two goddesses merged. Sulis Minerva."*

Challenges to interpretations of Bath as a healing centre are discussed elsewhere (Chapter 5.3.2 and below), but the syncretisation process is presented here as an uncontested divine 'merging' due entirely to (homogenised) 'Roman' agency. However, how the deity was ritually addressed was clearly contextually significant. As Cousins (2020: 132–3, note 143; cf. Watts 1998: 117) observes, she appears in syncretised form on pewter ritual vessels, yet as 'Sulis' alone on half of the curse tablets and all but two stone inscriptions (including the tombstone of the chief priest Gaius Calpurnius Receptus). She never appears solely as 'Minerva'.

How different worshippers might have perceived syncretised deities is addressed at Wiltshire Museum and Tullie House, the former suggesting that "native people probably continued to use the old name only, while the newcomers saw the god principally in classical terms".[47] Despite maintaining problematic connections between ethnic and religious identities, visitors are at least invited to consider that individual perceptions of deities differed. A panel at Tullie House talks of gods being "linked" but then asks visitors to consider whether "this can be seen as either giving equal emphasis to both, or a 'takeover' of the local god by the Roman one".[48]

[45] 'Religion'
[46] 'A Choice of Gods'
[47] 'Gods and Goddesses'
[48] 'Gods'

A supplementary card elaborates further by asking "is this an example of enlightened toleration by the occupying power, or does this represent colonial oppression?" Though parity is presented as the best the native deity might achieve, this interpretation refreshingly challenges visitors to consider power inequalities, and syncretisation as neither a neutral nor an apolitical process.

The Border Gallery at Tullie House grants even greater agency to the native population: "contact with the Romans led the Celts to associate some of their own gods with Roman gods".[49] However, other interpretation in that gallery demonstrates that undue interpretative focus on describing individual objects can lead to connectivity between those objects being overlooked. A carving of a figure holding a cornucopia and a wheel over an altar (Fig 7.15) is highlighted as notable because "this combination of Roman and Celtic elements in one sculpture is unique in Britain". While this interpretation may be correct,[50] the same gallery also contains a stone carving of a wheel (interpreted as potentially connected with either Jupiter or a 'Celtic wheel god') and an altar to Jupiter (RIB1983) bearing imagery of a lightning bolt on one side and a wheel (omitted from the interpretation) on the other. Such objects, when discussed holistically and comparatively rather than individually, offer greater potential to consider the role of iconography in the transmission of religious ideas and the function and characterisation of deities.

[49] 'Celtic Religions'

[50] Green (2011: 58) suggests that its semi-seated position may indicate a link to the mother goddesses, also attested at Netherby and appearing with wheels in other depictions

*Fig 7.15: 'Celtic wheel-god' relief at Tullie House Museum. Author's photograph*

### *7.2.2.3 Roman 'tolerance' of religious activity*

The concept of religious 'tolerance' is central to discourses of power, agency and authority within the Roman world, yet remains mired in models of a proactive Rome projecting its values onto static and passive 'others'. Despite this, the sentiment expressed in several museums (consolidated in Table 7.1), that the Romans tolerated the religions of the peoples they encountered, might be considered *prima facie* a rational and supportable one. Apart from references to the eradication of the druids, systemic suppression of (polytheistic) religious activity is not supported archaeologically or by classical literature. That Rome may not have violently suppressed the religious beliefs it encountered is often even presented as a virtue, as in the phrase "enlightened toleration" at Tullie House, discussed above. As Witcher (2015: 205) observes, one should be wary of casting the Roman world as a "model of inclusiveness", obfuscating more nuanced and localised Roman influences on cults and practices which might not be expected to leave tangible evidence.

| Museum | Display (see Appendix B) | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|
| A2: Roman Army Museum | 'Religious faith in a foreign land' | "Freedom of religion was permitted, but with certain safeguards imposed." |
| A3: Verulamium | 'The Last King of Verlamion' | "The Romans even allowed a Romano-Celtic temple to be built on the site." |
| B2: National Museum of Scotland | 'A Tolerant Religion' | "Roman religion was tolerant and flexible." |
| | 'Explore Roman Gods' | "The Romans did not want to upset the local gods of the countries that they conquered." |
| C2: Tullie House Museum | 'Roman Identity' supplementary card | "In some cases there is identification with 'local' deities; where a local deity is linked with a classical one. Is this an example of enlightened toleration by the occupying power, or does this represent colonial oppression?" |
| C3: Colchester Castle Museum | 'Roman Religion' | "The Romans worshipped many gods and goddesses. Some had only a local significance, others were worshipped across the empire. The Roman state tolerated this religious diversity, unless a cult was thought to pose a threat to the established order." |
| C4: Corinium Museum | 'Religion' | "The Roman state demanded that people worship the Emperor and the main classical gods – Jupiter, Minerva and Juno. As long as these were demands were met, people were generally allowed to continue to worship their own native gods." |
| | 'Christianity' | "Christianity was one of the few religions the Roman authorities would not tolerate." |
| C7: Great North Museum | 'A Choice of Gods' | "People were free to worship any god they wished as long as the rituals didn't include human sacrifice. They also had to acknowledge the official gods of Rome and the cult of the emperor." |
| | 'Christianity' | "Christianity was one of the few religions the Roman authorities would not tolerate." |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| C9: Durham University Archaeology Museum | 'Life in Roman Britain' | "Britons were allowed a high level of religious freedom. As long as they worshipped the Roman gods, Britons were generally free to worship most gods and religions." |
| | 'Roman Occupation' | "The Romans were also religiously flexible, and often adopted deities, such as Mithras, from the lands they conquered." |
| C10: Wiltshire County Museum | 'Gods and Goddesses' | "After the Roman Conquest the worship of the Celtic gods was not suppressed." |
| D1: Senhouse Museum | 'Horned Gods' | "When the Romans arrived in the north-west, a native population was subjected to Roman culture. In the south, the native priests, the Druids, had opposed to the Roman invasion [sic]. They were not allowed to survive as an organized force. Traditional religious practices such as human sacrifice and cannibalism were banned. The Romans did not, however, destroy the gods of the peoples they conquered. Instead, they interpreted the local gods in terms of their own traditions." |
| D5: Richborough | 'Roman Religion' | "Roman religion combined a tolerance for individual beliefs with the cult of the Emperor promoted by the State." |

*Table 7.1: References to religious 'tolerance'*

Nongbri (2013: 139–140) sees tolerance as prevalent in Roman scholarship since Gibbon, who aimed to positively contrast the ancient world with what he saw as the intolerance of contemporary Christianity. O'Neill (2011: 227) considers that the pervasive use of the term within modern multicultural debate reflects "often unconscious assumptions about both the normative nature of the dominant culture and the ease with which differences could be negotiated". In many museums, it is the Roman state which is presented as dominant and capable of easily integrating new traditions. Of the 15 statements collated in Table 7.1, nine reference a generic concept of 'the Romans' or 'the Roman State' possessing tolerance or

projecting it onto equally homogenised native populations.

The LAR approach argues that rather than attempting to apply such grand state-level narratives, restrictions on individual religious options are better explored at communal and personal levels. How, for example, did people become aware of the existence of new deities? What pressures did they face to either adopt new practices or conform to communal traditions? How might the actions of individual agents of any cultural background cause specific practices to be adopted, altered, or ceased, and how were they ontologically justified? It is therefore through lived experiences that concepts of religious choice and tolerance might be more engagingly explored, rather than through the lens of vague and remote imperial authority.

Tolerance implies the reluctant acceptance of ideas or practices, and it is apt to question what potentially intolerable acts were being performed. Only two museums elaborate on what these might have been; the Great North Museum and Senhouse both reference prohibitions on human sacrifice, with the latter further suggesting that cannibalism was practiced and required eradication. As discussed above, however, the treatment of human remains in Roman Britain defies simple cultural categorisation, and a number of potentially sacrificed bog bodies also date to the Roman period (Isserlin 1997). The British Museum curatorial interviewee noted that the 1st century CE sacrifice of Lindow Man might be better considered within early Roman display contexts than its current Iron Age gallery location.

Four museums propose that Roman tolerance was not freely offered but reliant on active acceptance and worship of "the Roman gods" (Durham);[51] "the emperor and the main classical gods of Jupiter, Minerva and Juno" (Corinium);[52] "the cult of the Emperor promoted by the State" (Richborough);[53] or "the official gods of Rome and the cult of the Emperor" (Great North Museum).[54] Though, as discussed above, there are problems with defining which deities are 'official' or 'main' and how such requirements would be monitored and transgression punished, reference to the imperial cult is valuable. Witcher (2015: 210) argues that Roman pluralism was driven less by ideological respect for cultural differences but through limited power to enforce the opposite (cf. Elsner 2007: 258) beyond specific displays of allegiance

[51] 'Life in Roman Britain'
[52] 'Religion panel'
[53] 'Roman Religion panel'
[54] 'Ritual'

such as through the imperial cult. Despite its prevalence in museum narratives, Roman tolerance might therefore be seen as not a deliberate imperial religious policy, but rather a result of the absence of one.

## 7.3 §3: "Romano-British religious beliefs, practices and iconography were not static or homogeneous, but idiosyncratic, culturally diverse, and diachronically dynamic."

The dynamic nature of religion, 'always in the making', is central to LAR (Chapter 3.3). Here I build upon this to explore museum interpretations of longer-term processes of religious change, how individuals and communities responded to the introduction of not only new deities but new religious practices and relationships with divine forces. I explore more general interpretative approaches to religious change before turning to mystery cults, Christianity and adverse reactions to change such as iconoclasm.

Presentations of Roman Britain in museums are generally chronologically structured, beginning with military activity and ending with decline. However, despite religious narratives often being introduced early in the visit (Chapter 6.2.3), visitors are often not given a strong sense of the passage of time, or of social and religious change. Two museums more firmly structured around defined chronologies are Colchester Castle and the Museum of London. At the former, displays are divided into three categories: 'Roman Invasion', 'Roman Heyday' and 'Roman Decline' (Fig 7.16). These terms, and the accompanying imagery of a helmet, classical temple façade and ruined column, present classical urbanism as the benchmark of prosperity. At the Museum of London, large panels provide a strong chronological context for the town's development but, as discussed in Chapter 1.5, also present a narrative focused on economic prosperity (Figs 1.5; 7.17 and Appendix B: C6, i). Despite imagery such as the head of Mithras at the Museum of London or the temple façade at Colchester Castle, religious change is not a factor in either of these overarching chronological narratives.

*Fig 7.16: Colchester Castle Timeline. Author's photograph*

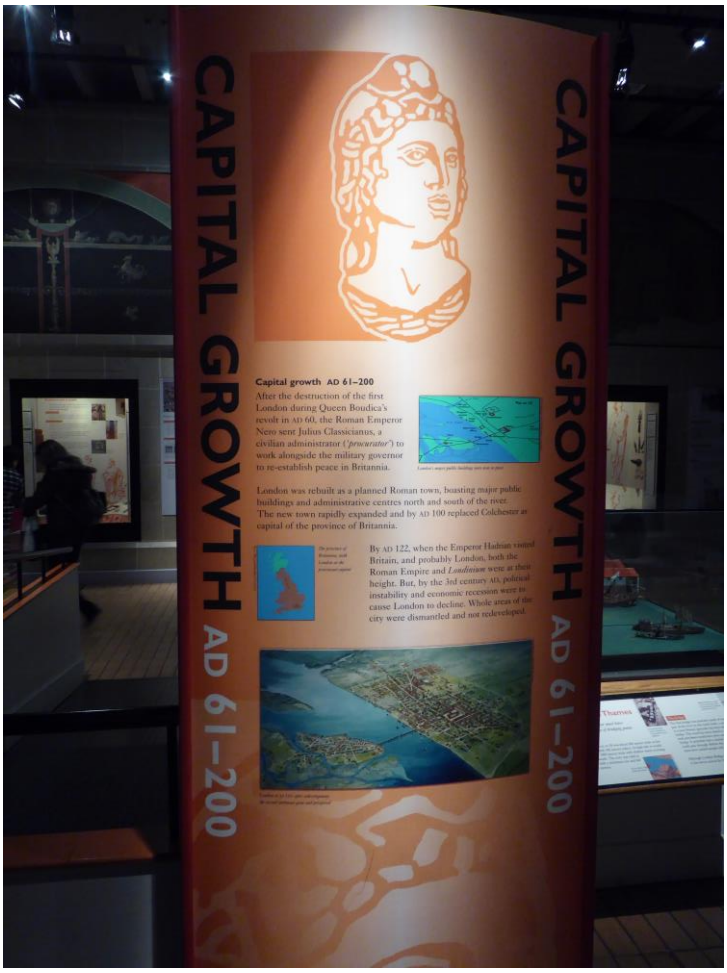



*Fig 7.17: Museum of London 'Capital Growth AD61-200' panel. Author's photograph*

At other museums, change is presented more subtly within specific displays. Corinium, for example, references an increasingly militarised society during the 3rd century,[55] though the stone 'Bisley Warrior', depicting either Mars or a local deity, is used to illustrate military equipment rather than to reflect religion at the time. At Corbridge, however, the 3rd century is described as a time of religious transition, but a period when the quantity of sculpture and inscriptions decreased.[56] The growing popularity of Sol Invictus is specifically noted, as it is at Verulamium[57] and Tullie House,[58] and connections between this deity and imperial authority are considered further in Chapter 8.3.1.

### 7.3.1 Mystery cults

The so-called mystery cults occupy a unique position in provincial religious studies, neither native nor fully Roman and imbued with an exaggerated exoticism stemming from their perceived eastern origins (Chapter 5.2.2). The specific language used by museums to describe these cults is discussed in Chapter 9.2.1. Here I explore how museums situate them into the religious landscape of Britain and how what they offered worshippers differed from other available religious options.

My online survey (Fig 7.1) demonstrated a generally high level of recognition of major mystery cult deities, particularly Mithras and Isis, and when asked what religious sites they could name, 73% of respondents referenced one or more mithraea (Q10). All but three museums (Hunterian, Senhouse and Bath) reference mystery cults, and they are evenly represented across all categories of museums and in the northern and southern groups (Fig 7.2). A number of museums possess significant displays (Figs 7.4; 7.5), as discussed below. In other museums, references tend to be brief, for example noting that there was a "gradual increase in cults such as those dedicated to Isis Cybele, and Mithras" (Richborough[59]) or that new religions such as Mithraism spread as they became fashionable (Wiltshire Museum[60]).

At the Museum of London the cults of deities such as Mithras, Cybele and Isis are distinguished

[55] 'A Time of Change'
[56] 'Timeline'
[57] 'Sandridge hoard'
[58] 'Eastern Religions'
[59] 'Roman Religion'
[60] 'Gods and Goddesses'

in interpretation from the "formal traditions" of Roman and native deities through categorisation as "the mystic east", and described as "secret societies".[61] This serves to disconnect them from their wider religious landscapes and present them as an exotic and mysterious 'other'. Mystery cults are described as being brought to "cosmopolitan London" (see Chapter 1.5.2) by soldiers and merchants, proving more popular than "conventional Roman religion" as they "offered much greater emotional satisfaction … by promising life after death". Tullie House presents a similar narrative, stating that "the official Roman religions did not offer any deep emotional meaning to people. To fill this need, new religions spreading from the east became popular".[62] However, neither elaborates on how this increased emotion manifested, such as through differing relationships with deities, new ritual practices (e.g. initiations) or the gaining of restricted knowledge, nor how membership of such cults might impact on social standing or the worship of other deities.

Several mystery cult deities are represented in the surveyed displays, including Isis (British Museum, Museum of London, Ashmolean, Richborough), Jupiter Dolichenus (Chesters, NMS, Tullie House, Great North Museum, Corbridge, Vindolanda, Ashmolean) and Cybele and Attis (British Museum, Grosvenor, Museum of London, Ashmolean, Corbridge, Richborough).[63] As interpretation of these deities is often comparatively brief, and some aspects of these displays are discussed in subsequent chapters, I focus here on the cult of Mithras.

#### *7.3.1.1 The cult of Mithras*

The cult of Mithras is the most widely discussed non-Christian religious community in the surveyed museums, with 14 museums referencing it and significant displays at the Bloomberg Mithraeum, Museum of London, and Great North Museum. The sensory visitor experience at the Bloomberg Mithraeum is specifically discussed in Chapter 8.4.1. Comparative interpretation for these museums is compiled for ease of reference in Table 7.2, with displays at other northern and southern group museums summarised in Tables 7.3 and 7.4 respectively. The high level of awareness of Mithras in the online survey (Fig 7.1) reflects the significant position the cult occupies both in the popular imagination and the history of religion. The cult

[61] 'East and west'
[62] 'Eastern Religions'
[63] It is debated whether the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus included 'mysteries' (Adrych and Dalglish 2020a: 98–109)

of Mithras is often referred to as Mithraism, the only mystery cult to be elevated into an 'ism', reflecting the 19th century reification of various belief systems (e.g. Buddhism and Daoism) into distinct comparative 'religious' packages (Chapter 1.3). Five of the 14 museums make at least one reference in this way (significantly including all three major displays), reinforcing a view that rather than being one cult among many in the Roman world, the worship of Mithras was a discrete religion. The Grosvenor Museum directly describes it as a 'religion', comparing its claims of an exclusive afterlife to those of Christianity and stating that Christians destroyed mithraea due to the threat the cult posed (considered further in Chapter 7.3.3).[64]

Museums which make only minor references to the cult (Tables 7.3 and 7.4) vary in the specific details they present to visitors, but often highlight Mithras' Persian origins, the spread of the cult through the Roman world or (particularly at northern group museums) its popularity with soldiers. Though cult iconography such as the tauroctony is sometimes described, comprehensive narratives of the cult's beliefs, ritual activity, the experiences of its members or, crucially, how it differed from other religious options, are not presented. The NMS curatorial interviewee noted that material from the recently discovered Inveresk mithraeum (Hunter *et al*. 2016) was a high priority for future display.

At the major displays (Table 7.2), more consistent narratives are universally expressed: the secrecy of the cult; male-only membership consisting of 7 grades and which benefitted members in their general lives; a complex and recognisable iconography; rituals which included initiations, feasting, washing and sensory experiences such as sounds and smells; beliefs involving astronomical symbols and the cosmos; and mithraea mimicking caves. Though initiations are referenced, the intensely transformative, sensorial and even torturous experiences they represent are not discussed apart from a single reference at the Bloomberg Mithraeum. Surviving fresco depictions suggest that they involved nudity, binding, sensory deprivation, exposure to fire, and simulated death (Gordon 2001; Gordon 2009; Rubio 2021). Also omitted is the nature of feasting and the deliberate selection and exclusion of some animals (Chapter 3.5.2.6). No display discusses the sources and comparanda upon which interpretations of the cult's beliefs and activities are primarily based (e.g. the well-preserved mithraea at Ostia) or the potential for communities of worshippers to have differed in their practices, perhaps driven by the movement of influential individuals between communities.

[64] 'Roman beliefs about death' and 'Possible Mithraic figure'

| | Great North Museum | Bloomberg Mithraeum | Museum of London |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Nature and origins** | | | |
| **Naming of the cult** | The Cult of Mithras; Mithraism | The Cult of Mithras; Mithraism | The Cult of Mithras; Mithraism |
| **Character / nature of Mithras** | 'Lord of Life'; 'god of light and truth'; 'god of Contract and Truth', Mithras a sun god | | Demanded honesty, purity and courage from followers; depicted as a youth |
| **Spread of the cult** | | Spread across the Roman Empire | Spread from Asia to the western part of the Empire |
| **Dates of the cult** | Introduced in the 1st Century AD | 1st to 4th Centuries AD; structure rebuilt in 4th C and rededicated to Bacchus | Appeared in Rome in the 1st Century AD. London mithraeum rededicated by c.350 and rededicated |
| **Origins of the cult** | Persian | | |
| **Secrecy of the cult** | Visitors not allowed; not allowed to divulge secret knowledge; secrets guarded jealously; Mithraic ranks not on altars in case stonemason not an initiate | A secretive religion | Organised as a secret society; a mysterious cult |
| **Organisation and membership** | | | |
| **Specific mithraea referenced** | Carrawburgh; Housesteads; Rudchester | London; Orange; map of other mithraea in the Empire | London; Orange |
| **Cult membership** | Male only; popular with army officers; soldiers; traders; merchants; Italian initiate; Greek speaking initiate ('Mytras' dedication) | Male only; women deliberately excluded; leaders from upper classes; traders; merchants; sailors; travellers; shopkeepers and other businesspeople; civil servants | Male only; popular with military and merchants; Serapis head donated by someone wealthy; Neptune and Genius sculptures possibly donated by someone in maritime trade |
| **Cult structure** | 7 grades with coloured tunics and masks; Lion grade responsible for lighting fire; altar on behalf of family not just initiate | 7 grades (Pater, Heliodromus, Perses, Leo, Miles, Nymphus, Corax) | 7 ascending grades from Raven to Father |
| **Ritual activity and beliefs** | | | |
| **Cult iconography** | Tauroctony; animals hindering Mithras; snake, dog and scorpion catching the bull's blood; bull slaying observed by Cautes and Cautopates; altar with | Head of Mithras (carrara marble, originally from tauroctony scene, Phrygian cap related to freed slaves and Persia, eyes gazing upwards perhaps to Sol, rest of | Cautes and Cautopates hold torches symbolising light / life and darkness / death; Head of Mithras (handsome youth, eyes looking away and may have been enamelled and |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | bull, Phrygian cap and bull slaying; altar with Mithras carrying whip and cloak | statue possibly organic); Tauroctony; animals attacking bull; sculptures buried at close of temple; Mithras imagery used motifs recognisable in eastern cultures | painted, part of full statue, broken when found); tauroctony; bull attacked by animals; signs of the zodiac; altars; sculptures from imported marble (Turkey or Italy) and probably carved in the Mediterranean; separate stone arm and marble hand of Mithras probably from Tauroctonies; painted inscription to Mithras, Sol and the August Emperors; Marble roundel of Danubian rider gods and mother goddess |
| **Ritual activity** | Ritual feasting; initiation ceremonies; washing important (bowl always by north bench); dedication of altars; use of bells | Tauroctony the focus of rituals;; initiation rituals; light, sound (chanting, music) and incense (from pinecones) played a role; use of special clothing including masks; telling of stories; frightening or painful (threatened with swords, blindfolded); communal activity; elaborate feasting; no bull sacrifices inside the temple; rituals were elaborate; chicken and wine consumed during rituals along; honey used in cleansing rituals; audio of reconstructed ritual greetings; reconstructed sound (speech and music) and light in original temple space | Tauroctony the focus of activity; reconstruction shows naked man being pursued by another in a mask; practised in small, closed groups; feasting and elaborate ceremonies; little is known of rituals; pinecones, chicken bones and strainer hint at ceremonies; jet handle from dagger may have been used in rituals; iron dagger may have been used in initiations; strainer possibly used for infusing herbs or drugs in Mithraic or Bacchic rituals; importance of ritual washing |
| **Beliefs of the cult** | Bull slaying as act of creation, Mithras born from either a cosmic egg (eastern tradition) or living rock; connection with the zodiac | What they believed remains unknown to us; Mithras arranged the cosmos; Believers have an important place in the cosmos; astrological symbols were important; killing of the bull created order and fertility in the world | Eternal happiness in the afterlife, importance of astrology |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Significance of the cult to members / communities** | Important in members' lives; significant role in frontier life | Could help members in their everyday lives; shared identity and place in the world | Offered greater emotional satisfaction |
| **Mithraea structures and their settings** | | | |
| **Mithraea interiors** | Dark and cave-like (artificial light needed); contain benches, tauroctony the focus; AV set in reconstructed mithraeum | Central nave and side aisles; rows of 7 columns (related to membership orders); internal well for ritual water; raised platform with apse for sculpture; represents the cosmos; small and windowless; crowded; smoky and incense filled; essentially a dining room; recreation of a cave; entered through a narrow door and down three steps; torches used for dramatic lighting; rituals took place in nave and on dais; members reclined on benches | Tauroctony the focus of the temple and may have been in front of an altar; Serapis head part of a statue designed to fit into a niche in the temple; rounded apse with an altar; 7 pairs of stone pillars separating aisles may be linked to grades (later removed when temple rededicated); entrance to the east; cave-like; sunken floor; no windows; candles and lamps provided drama and mystery; entered through narthex and descended down steps; wooden benches; small stone altars; washing bowls; timber water tank; many sculptures; modified over time (9 successive floors); marble hand from tauroctony may have been wall-mounted |
| **Mithraea setting** | | Reconstruction drawing of exterior of mithraeum building; reconstruction drawing of ritual being enacted | London mithraeum believed to have been located behind a large house; reconstruction drawing of exterior of mithraeum building |
| **Connections** | | | |
| **Other associated deities / figures** | Cautes; Cautopates; mother goddesses; Apollo | Cautes; Cautopates; Sol; Luna; the seasons; Bacchus (temple later rededicated) | Minerva; Cautes; Cautopates; Serapis; Mercury; Neptune; Genius; sun, moon and wind gods; Bacchus; the 'August Emperors'; Danubian rider gods and goddess |
| **Relationships with other religious groups** | | Mithraeum rebuilt and rededicated to Bacchus | Mithraeum rebuilt and rededicated to Bacchus |

*Table 7.2: Displays of the Cult of Mithras – major displays*

The term mystery cults refers to the knowledge bestowed on initiates (Chapter 5.2.2), and interpretations of the secrecy of this knowledge are significant. The use of "secret societies" at the Museum of London or "secretive religion" at the Bloomberg Mithraeum risk transposing the nature of the 'mystery' from revelatory knowledge to the very existence of the community. When combined with the use of the term cult (Chapter 9.2.1.1) and the cave-like setting of the mithraeum, some visitors may even equate it with *illuminati*-like conspiracy theories. This is exacerbated through a general failure to contextualise such cults within the Graeco-Roman world (e.g. through comparanda such as Demeter at Eleusis), or considering how they changed through time and place to suit specific social and religious needs. The Great North Museum curatorial interviewee noted that during gallery tours "we might go on to Mithras and look at gods that are brought in from outside of the Roman empire but then are probably Romanised when they're brought into the Roman empire, and how Mithraic worship in the Roman empire is very different from an Iranian context". In displays, however, restrictions on access to specific revelatory knowledge remain unexplored, as does the idea that such restrictions might affect initiates of different grades as much as non-initiates (Ferris 2021: 86).

Though the cult's rites remained secret its existence was not. Kiernan (2020: 177) suggests that not all cult activity could have taken place in the small, dark temples and some may have been open to wider observation and even participation. Despite this, general perceptions of the cult's activities focus on those within mithraea to the extent that they might seem to occur in an alternate dimension. Both the Museum of London and the Bloomberg Mithraeum helpfully display a reconstruction drawing of the exterior of the London mithraeum in its urban setting. The former suggests that it may have been connected to a private house, yet does not go on to explore possible tensions between public and private identities and activities, their impact on the lives of members (doubtless observable entering and leaving the mithraeum), and how transitions between secular and sacred space occurred.

| | Roman Army Museum | Clayton Museum | Tullie House | Durham Univ. | Grosvenor Museum | Housesteads |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Nature and origins** | | | | | | |
| **Naming of the cult** | Cult of Mithras | | | | | Cult of Mithras |
| **Character / nature of Mithras** | | | God of light | | The son of a God who came to earth to protect and save mankind from the Lord of Darkness | Sun god |
| **Spread of the cult** | | | The most popular of the new religions spreading from the east | Gods like Mithras adopted from conquered lands | | |
| **Dates of the cult** | | | | | | |
| **Origins of the cult** | | | Persian | | | Persian |
| **Secrecy of the cult** | A secret society | | | | | Rites were secret |
| **Organisation and membership** | | | | | | |
| **Specific mithraea referenced** | Carrawburgh | Housesteads; Carrawburgh | | | | Housesteads |
| **Cult membership** | Popular with Roman officers | | Popular with soldiers | | | Popular among high-ranking soldiers |
| **Cult structure** | | | | | | Different grades |
| **Ritual activity and beliefs** | | | | | | |
| **Cult iconography** | | | Carving of figure with Phrygian cap may be associated with Mithras | | | Tauroctony (in reconstruction drawing) |
| **Ritual activity** | | | | | | Initiation ceremonies; feasting; |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | reconstruction drawing of interior during a meal |
| **Beliefs of the cult** | | | | | An exclusive life after death | Mithras born from a cosmic egg |
| **Significance of the cult to members / communities** | | | Eastern cults filled an emotional need | | | |
| **Mithraea structures and their settings** | | | | | | |
| **Mithraea interiors** | Reconstruction drawing of interior of mithraeum | | | | | Birth of Mithras carving was a centrepiece |
| **Mithraea setting** | | | | | | |
| **Connections** | | | | | | |
| **Other associated deities / figures** | | Cautes; Cautopates; Jupiter; Cocidius; Genius Loci | | | Possibly a cross-legged figure (damaged) | |
| **Relationship with other religious groups** | | | | | Mithraea targeted by Christians | |

*Table 7.3: Displays of the Cult of Mithras – northern group museums*

| | Richborough | Colchester Castle | British Museum | Verulamium Museum | Wiltshire Museum |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Nature and origins** | | | | | |
| **Naming of the cult** | Cult of Mithras | | Cult of Mithras | Mithraic | Mithraism |
| **Character / nature of Mithras** | | | | God of light and truth, giver of bliss and saviour from death | |
| **Spread of the cult** | Gradual increase in Eastern Cults such as that of Mithras | | Spread widely through the Empire | | New religions such as Mithraism became popular and spread through the Roman world |
| **Dates of the cult** | | | | | |
| **Origins of the cult** | | Persian | | Indo-Iranian | |
| **Secrecy of the cult** | | | | | |
| **Organisation and membership** | | | | | |
| **Specific mithraea referenced** | | | | London | |
| **Cult membership** | | Popular with the army | | | |
| **Cult structure** | | | | | |
| **Ritual activity and beliefs** | | | | | |
| **Cult iconography** | | Tauroctony | Tauroctony | Ceramic beaker with Mithras, Hercules and Mercury; token of birth of Mithras; image of London head of Mithras | |
| **Ritual activity** | | | | | |
| **Beliefs of the cult** | | | | Mithras was born from a rock | |
| **Significance of the cult to members / communities** | | | | | |

| Mithraea structures and their settings | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Mithraea interiors** | | | | | |
| **Mithraea setting** | | | | Believers passed through Verulamium on their way to the London mithraeum | |
| **Connections** | | | | | |
| **Other associated deities / figures** | | | | Ormzad (‘the creator god’) and Re (‘the Egyptian sun god’) | |
| **Relationship with other religious groups** | | | | | |

*Table 7.4: Displays of the Cult of Mithras – southern group museums*

The cave-like interior of the mithraeum is central to interpretations at all three major displays, as is the dramatic use of torches and lamps to highlight cult iconography in the otherwise windowless space. Reconstruction drawings of the interiors of the London and Housesteads mithraea, however, contradict this narrative by depicting well-lit, spacious interiors (Fig 7.18). The Great North Museum features a video set inside the replica mithraeum which used to exist in the museum gallery,[65] in which Lucius Antonius Proculus moves around the physically constricted space as he speaks of restricted access to the mithraeum and his duties tending the lamps (Fig 7.19). That he dedicated the prominent central altar (discussed in Chapter 6.2.1.1), however, is not referenced, and his lone presence make his devotions feel individual rather than communal.

Finally, the range of finds and imagery from mithraea reflect the cult's complicated relationships and connections with other deities and religious communities. The Museum of London, for example, displays high-quality sculpture of five other deities (Serapis, Minerva, Mercury, Neptune and a Genius) which were perhaps displayed within the mithraeum.[66] The presence of these other deities is interpreted as demonstrating "the blending of religions common in the Roman period", yet this contradicts the separation of mystery cults from the 'formal' religions these deities mostly represent, noted above.[67] The Bloomberg Mithraeum does not reference these other sculptures at all, while the possible 4th century rededication of the temple to Bacchus is similarly only given one brief mention.[68] Visitors are therefore presented with a simplified narrative in which Mithras alone is the focus, detaching the cult from its integrated, diachronically shifting and rather messy religious reality. Even the concept that the cult members might have worshipped other deities besides Mithras is not addressed, again making the cult appear exclusive in a manner echoing monotheistic religions.

[65] This was removed to facilitate temporary displays (curatorial interviewee)
[66] Chesters similarly displays an altar to Jupiter, Cocidius and the Genius Loci from the Housesteads mithraeum (RIB1583)
[67] 'The sculptures from the temple of Mithras'
[68] Joint worship of Mithras and Bacchus has also been argued (Haynes 2008: 128)

*Fig 7.18: Reconstruction drawings of the interiors of the Housesteads Mithraeum at Housesteads Museum (left), and the London Mithraeum at the Museum of London (right). Author's photographs*

*Fig 7.19: Still from the Carrawburgh Mithraeum AV film at the Great North Museum. Author's photograph*

### 7.3.2 Christianity

Late Roman Christianity is well-represented at the surveyed museums, with 17 referencing it and 11 displaying finds with confirmed or suspected Christian connections. This material culture evidence takes the form of inscriptions, symbols (such as chi-rho, fish, crosses or peacocks) on jewellery, metal and ceramic vessels, and utensils. Some museums also discuss evidence for early church buildings or Christian re-use of temple sites.

The British Museum contains the greatest quantity of Christian objects in the survey, and perhaps any museum in the country, but also some of the most visually impressive in the form of the hoards from Mildenhall, Hoxne and Water Newton, the frescoes from Lullingstone villa, and the Hinton St Mary mosaic. Many of these occupy prominent gallery positions (Chapter 6.2.1), enhancing the significance of Christianity in the religious narrative of Roman Britain presented to the museum's large and culturally varied audiences. However, discrete display groupings disrupt narratives of continuity and connectivity. A casket fragment with Christian imagery from Uley, for example, is displayed with other Christian objects rather than the primary display about the temple.[69]

In contrast, late Roman Christianity does not feature at NMS, instead deliberately presented as a post-Roman phenomenon. Though Christian iconography appears in the Traprain Law hoard, it was of economic rather than religious significance to its Scottish receivers, as the curatorial interviewee explained:

> *"We don't have Roman Christianity in Scotland therefore we don't tell that story. The story of Christianity in Scotland picks up in the 4th, 5th century in the next part of our gallery ... Even though we obviously have items with Christian iconography in the Traprain treasure they're telling you about a different world so they're displayed in a different way. They're not relevant to Christianity in Roman Scotland, they're relevant to Christianity elsewhere in Roman Britain or elsewhere in the Roman world."*

Discussion of the growth of Christianity often centres around Constantine's 312CE Edict of Milan. Connections between imperial authority and religion are explored further in Chapter 8.3.1, but it is significant that early Christianity is presented through the lens of the Roman state, first through persecution and then adoption, rather than the agency of individual worshippers and communities. Constantine's edict is variably portrayed as the empire officially adopting or sanctioning Christianity (Corinium, Roman Army Museum, British Museum, Canterbury), granting Christians freedom to worship (Colchester Castle), de-criminalising Christianity (Corbridge), or ending the persecution of Christians (Vindolanda). Given the lack

[69] 'Water Newton treasure'

of academic consensus regarding the events of the 4th century, it is understandable that museum interpretations differ. However, a narrative of widespread change is discernible across the museums. Conversion to Christianity is implied to have been sudden and all-encompassing, as if the sincere beliefs of millions of individuals were replaced instantly and without resistance via imperial decree. Statements such as at Verulamium that the cult of Cybele "continued until the spread of Christianity" reinforce perceptions of the inevitability of Christianity's triumph and its rapid and universal adoption.[70]

The persecution of Christians is considered at Verulamium ("Roman authorities saw it as a threat to the state"[71] and "the practice of this new religion was forbidden"[72]) and Corinium ("one of the few religions the Roman authorities would not tolerate" and "regarded as a dangerous cult"[73]). However, such observations remain on a political rather than a personal scale. A British Museum label compares jewellery with Christian symbolism to the modern wearing of a crucifix, suggesting that it may have been worn discreetly "in a society where many people were still pagans". The implication that openly displaying Christian symbols may have put people at risk of harm, whether through physical violence or social ostracization, is both fascinating and relevant, but is left unresolved and could serve to reinforce negative preconceptions of 'pagans' among some visitors.

Some displays suggest associations between Christianity and more general late Roman decline, for example Colchester Castle states:

> *"By AD370 Colchester was a largely Christian community and had become a very different place to the earlier Roman town. The strength, influence and power of the Roman Empire were fading. The town was much smaller than in earlier years, visibly decayed, and under fear of attack."*[74]

The audio-visual presentation at Verulamium would seem to imply that Christianity contributed to wider imperial instability and decline. The 3rd century walling of the town is

[70] 'Triangular Temple'
[71] 'The Triangular Temple'
[72] 'Roman Verulamium AV'
[73] 'Christianity'
[74] 'Decline and Fall'

attributed to the empire facing "uncertain times", before an image of the chi-rho appears with the statement that "the rise of Christianity was one of the forces troubling the Roman empire at this time".[75] Verulamium has a particular connection with early Christianity as the location of the 209CE martyrdom of St Alban, though the museum only makes passing reference to this. The audio-visual presentation uses a Medieval manuscript illustration of his beheading, which, though understandable in terms of needing visual material, risks conflating the late Roman religion with its later Medieval manifestations. Similarly, the British Museum's interpretation of the Lullingstone wall plaster observes that "Christian priests still use the standing pose with raised hands when praying before a congregation" (Fig 7.20). While perhaps true for some priests, reinforcing the similarities between modern and ancient ritual practices and continuity of Christian worship obfuscates more complex realities. Modern Christians of any denomination would be unlikely to find the rites performed at the Lullingstone house church entirely in alignment with their own doctrines.

*Fig 7.20: 'Orantes' pose wall plaster from Lullingstone Villa at the British Museum. Author's photograph*

[75] 'Roman Verulamium AV'

The complex cultural context for early Christianity can be considered through how its practices interacted with those of other contemporary cults and deities, and its position as the empire's 'official' religion. The British Museum's impressive precious metal hoards from Mildenhall and Hoxne contain iconographic and epigraphic references to Christianity alongside mainly Bacchic imagery. The Hoxne hoard interpretation notes that such religious conflations are "common in late Roman treasures", while the Mildenhall treasure's panel elaborates that they occurred at a time "when the new faith had not yet supplanted traditional religion". Another famous hoard, from Water Newton, though iconographically entirely Christian, contains gilded silver votive plaques, possibly originally displayed in a church. Visitors are informed that the objects were "indisputably intended for religious use, and the religion in question was Christianity", yet also that they "come from the same tradition as ... pagan examples" and that one references the fulfilment of a vow. Such hoards therefore present greater opportunities to explore the syncretic nature of early Christianity and its relationship with existing pagan ritual processes and communicative strategies.

The central roundel from the Hinton St Mary mosaic is prominently displayed at the British Museum (Fig 7.21), offering a window into connections between early Christian imagery and imperial authority. Though often interpreted as an early depiction of Christ, the image may equally represent an imperial portrait of Constantine or one of his successors (Pearce 2008). The chi-rho existed as a utilitarian symbol prior to Constantine but its prominent use in his personal propaganda inextricably linked it with both Christianity and imperial authority. Though the museum interpretation qualifies that the depiction is "probably" Christ, no alternatives are suggested either in the panel or in the Eyeopener gallery tours for which the mosaic is the final stop.[76] The complete mosaic includes imagery of Bellerophon slaying the Chimaera, hunting scenes, and four male busts. The interpretation includes small images of the entire mosaic (Fig 7.21) and suggests that this pagan iconography might have been re-interpreted through a Christian lens, such as a metaphor for good triumphing over evil. However, the controversial separation of the central roundel serves to isolate the 'Christ' image from both its immediate iconographic setting and its wider late Roman religious, mythological and cultural context.[77] The pomegranates on either side of the figure's head, for example, are interpreted as "signalling immortality", yet the same motif appears elsewhere in the gallery on

[76] I am grateful to the curatorial interviewee for the tour 'script'
[77] The mosaic was fragmented in 1997 and only the roundel re-displayed, leading to some criticism (curatorial interviewee)

a 2nd century silver pin,[78] where in a pagan context it is interpreted as being "associated with fertility and good fortune".

*Fig 7.21: Hinton St Mary mosaic roundel at the British Museum. Author's photograph*

Colchester Castle also features a significant display of early Christianity,[79] the final Roman case encountered by the visitor chronologically and separated from other Romano-British religious displays by the castle's imposing architecture (Appendix B: C3, v). The accompanying 'Decline and Fall' panel, noted above, conflates Colchester's Christian community with a narrative of the decay of both the town and wider imperial power. The display focusses primarily on the cemetery and possible early church at Butt Road, presenting a Christian attribution (Watts 1993) with certainty despite some scholarly doubt. A funerary banqueting hall (Millett 1995b) and a mithraeum (Walsh 2018b), for example, have been suggested as alternative interpretations of the 'church'. No Christian iconography has yet been discovered at the cemetery, but other finds with Christian symbolism appear in the display

[78] 'Jewellery'
[79] 'Christianity in Roman Colchester'

amongst the Butt Road material, a juxtaposition which reinforces the Christian interpretation to visitors.

One element of the display is particularly eye-catching, the "remains of (a) possible Christian martyr" consisting of a skull, femur and ceramic bowl, mounted to resemble a crucifix (Fig 7.22). The remains were excavated in 1935 at the bottom of a pit inside the apse of the possible church, but were not its only contents. Aside from the displayed bowl, there were fragments of at least six other ceramic vessels and an iron bowl, bird bones, a silver armlet, a silver ring, a fragmentary iron stylus, a knife, an item identified as a 'frying pan', wall plaster, a large number of coins, and a medallion of Constantine II (Hull 1958: 245–247). The human remains belonged to a female who had suffered a non-fatal skull fracture and, due to the lack of a mandible, it has been suggested her remains had been previously interred elsewhere (Crummy and Crossan 1993: 175–176; Walsh 2018b: 348). Walsh (2018b) argues that there is insufficient positive evidence to suggest that the remains are those of a Christian martyr. The primary aim of the display seems to be the presentation of an important early Christian community in Colchester, with alternative interpretations of the evidence omitted.

*Fig 7.22: Human remains from 'Hull's Pit' at Colchester Castle. Author's photograph*

The display's broader interpretation of burial practices can be similarly questioned. While Roman infant burial practices in particular can seem strange to modern eyes (see e.g. Millett and Gowland 2015), the display appears to offer moral judgement on them. The interpretation of an infant buried lying on a roof tile, for example, states that (Christian) "children were now given proper burials". This is accompanied by a supplementary information card which states that a belief that children had souls led to their burial in the cemetery, "unlike earlier pagan graveyards where children were not usually buried with any care, or were left out of an adult cemetery altogether". The interpretation does not define the ages of children or discuss the implied 'improper' earlier burial practices or the beliefs underlying them. That such earlier burials were careless or disrespectful has been refuted (Millett and Gowland 2015), and the argument is further undermined by the presence of earlier child burials in the Butt Road cemetery (Millett 1995b: 454).

The reverse of the supplementary card states that "by preserving such remains the museum is respecting the dignity of the deceased and its family. That is a major consideration with Christians, who believe in the physical resurrection of the body". However, standards for the dignified preservation of human remains (DCMS 2005) apply to all those cared for by museums. Highlighting a particular religion, especially when this attribution is not universally accepted, appears unduly influenced by the feelings, and perhaps religious beliefs, of the interpretation's author. It is also worth reflecting that such ethical sentiments have not prevented the display of fragmented human remains, nor the giving of the invented name 'Camilla' to a female from the cemetery whose face has been reconstructed. My point in making such observations is that the interpretation of early Christianity is inextricably entwined with individual perceptions of the modern religion and its moral values. An observation by the Canterbury Roman Museum interviewee is relevant here, that although the current museum staff were generally non-believers, the addition of someone with strong beliefs might influence the emphasis that religion was given in the displays.

### 7.3.3 Reaction to religious change

Every religious object from Roman Britain has, at some point, undergone a transformation from an object of veneration to something prosaic, whether due to its respectful retirement, through a loss of belief in its divine agency, or through wilful attempts to remove its power. As

Kiernan (2020: 270) notes, it is less important to identify the individual cause of an object's fragmentation or disposal than to recognise that there are various factors that could have brought it about and that it was likely a significant event. To overlook this phase of an object's life in favour of its 'heyday' of use is to deny an important aspect of its biography, and here I consider how museums interpret evidence of the damaging and burial of religious objects and its implications for social and religious tensions in Roman Britain.

Several museums display objects interpreted as having sustained deliberate damage, yet the potential causes of this damage are often not addressed. The reasons why the heads and shoulders of mother goddesses might be "smashed off" (Tullie House), a relief of Mercury and Rosmerta "defaced in antiquity" (Corinium), or a face-pot of Mercury "deliberately defaced in Roman times" (Vindolanda) are left to visitors' imaginations.

In other cases, potentially deliberate damage is not addressed at all. At Corinium, interpretation of the tombstone of Bodicacia does not reference the defaced figure of Oceanus or that the tombstone was found being re-used as a later Roman grave cover (Tomlin 2015: 384–385).[80] A broken and partially burned hunter deity statue from Southwark is pictured at the Museum of London but its damage not discussed (see also Chapter 7.4.6.3). Two altars to Antenociticus from Benwell, including that erected by Tineius Longus (Chapter 7.2.1.2), bear damage likely sustained when they were toppled at the destruction of the temple (Simpson and Richmond 1941: 38–39) (Fig 7.23). Neither the object captions nor the audio-visual presentation about the temple reference this damage, or indeed say anything about the end of the temple's life.

The destruction of religious structures is referenced at Corbridge, where it is noted that the Dolichenum was "broken up some time in the third century", and at Verulamium where a possible Jupiter column "was destroyed in Roman times, and the fragment was found beneath house foundations dating to between AD100 and AD200". At Colchester, Boudica's burning of the Temple of Claudius is the building's defining interpretative narrative, its religious function secondary to its destruction as a symbolic representation of Roman authority. Finally, the inscription at Bath by Gaius Severius Emeritus recording his restoration of 'the virtue and deity of the emperor' following a 'holy spot' being 'wrecked by insolent hands and cleansed fresh' (Cousins 2020: 95) is interpreted only through a translation of the inscription.

[80] Aldhouse-Green (2018: 51) alternatively suggests parallels with Cernunnos

*Fig 7.23: Damaged altars to Antenociticus from the Benwell Temple at the Great North Museum. Author's photographs*

That Christians might be responsible for damage to pagan statuary and structures is raised at some museums. Though the observation at Corbridge that "some religious sculpture was demolished when religions changed" only hints at possible Christian perpetrators, other museums are more definitive. The Grosvenor Museum states that "Christians made a particular point of destroying the temples of Mithras" as "they felt his worship was a blasphemous copy of their own", and that a headless figure (perhaps Mithras or Attis) might therefore be connected with such acts.[81] The destruction of the Vindolanda Dolichenum and the temple of Sulis Minerva at Bath are also tentatively connected with Christians,[82] whereas the abandonment of the theatre and theatre temple at Verulamium are attributed to anti-pagan legislation.[83] It is notable that neither the Bloomberg Mithraeum nor the Museum of London suggest that Christians were responsible for the destruction of the London mithraeum, despite it being argued by some scholars (see Croxford 2003: 91).

[81] 'Possible Mithraic Figure'
[82] Smith (2008: 175) noted that the Bath museum website claimed that Christians decapitated Sulis Minerva, but it no longer says this (accessed 06/04/2022)
[83] 'The Theatre'

## 7.4 §4: "Religious activity should be defined to include a variety of communicative strategies at traditionally non-religious locations, including the use of amuletic devices and the creation of structured deposits."

Temples are a well-known and expected element of the religious landscape, yet narratives overly emphasising their conceptual centrality risk presenting a restricted view of religious activity. Here I consider how museums engage with broader conceptualisations and manifestations of religious activity, such as ritual acts outside of temple contexts, the wearing of protective magical amulets, and structured deposition; how religious experiences formed part of wider social geography and daily activities. This is not to deny the importance of temples as foci for ritual acts and the projection and maintenance of both religious and secular authority, but to argue that they should not be artificially separated from other manifestations of ritual activity.

Some museums acknowledge a general religious presence within everyday life, as discussed below, or insinuate the presence of religious activity at otherwise prosaic locations such as bridge crossings (the altars from the Pons Aelius at the Great North Museum or an altar and inscription from the bridge abutment at Chesters), gateways (reliefs of Mercury at Corinium and Venus at Senhouse), or places where lightning struck the ground (Great North Museum and Senhouse). The audio guide at Bath (15) explains that:

> *"religious belief was something that was fundamental to life in the ancient world. People's lives were surrounded, both in the home and in public spaces, by religious imagery. They worshipped deities in the home, they also worshipped in temples. The public holidays were dictated by religious festivals. Religion affected people at all levels and people from all levels of society would have come to a temple like this."*

While this offers a succinct and valuable context for visitors, it still conceives of religion as the worship of anthropomorphic deities, and Chapters 7.4.5 and 7.4.6 explore how phenomena such as apotropaic magic and structured deposition represent more holistic religious narratives. First, however, I focus on interpretations of religious activity at non-temple locations such as

houses, baths and entertainment venues, and how ritual is perceived as playing a role in healthcare.

### 7.4.1 Religion at home

Archaeological evidence for religion in domestic settings in Roman Britain is fragmentary. Despite Mediterranean concepts of household shrines (*lararia*), deities and practices often being transposed into British contexts, it is unclear how widespread such practices were. A general distinction can be discerned in the museums between objects interpreted as being of active religious agency, such as statuettes venerated at household shrines, and more passive religious imagery appearing in functional contexts such as decorative furniture mounts, and structurally on wall plaster or tessellated pavements. These can be seen to relate to concepts challenged in recent scholarship, that of the ritual/functional dichotomy (Chapter 1.3.2) and that domestic religion was a discrete sphere of religious activity (Chapter 3.3). The interpretation of a face-pot at Durham University, for example, notes that "some have been found at ritual sites, but others have been found in domestic contexts", implying that domestic contexts preclude ritual interpretations.

Smaller-scale reliefs and statuettes are commonly interpreted as being used in household shrines. For example, at Housesteads is it suggested that each home would have had its own altar and that a carving of three *genii cucullati* may have been from a "personal or family shrine". A relief of an unidentified female deity and a bronze figurine of a priestess (Great North Museum), an unidentified togate god or *genius* (Senhouse), a series of small figurines (Corbridge) and a group of statues including a pipeclay Venus figurine and a copper alloy Minerva (Tullie House) are also suggested to have come from domestic shrines. At Tullie House, the interpretation draws a direct connection between their small size and possible domestic contexts.

Verulamium Museum contains the greatest focus on domestic shrines, with both a dedicated display and a reconstructed shrine (Fig 7.24). The display positions household worship as a central tenet of religious life, stating that:

> *"Religion occupied a central role in the daily lives of the people of Verulamium. Every household would honour its own gods and goddesses and would make offerings to them to safeguard the family's health and prosperity. Most houses would have had small shrines where stone, ceramic or wooden statuettes of the gods were kept. A small altar stood in front of the shrine on which daily offerings were made. These probably consisted of food and wine; a small quantity of wine would be poured onto the altar as a libation."*

The display contains various pipeclay figurines, suggesting that "even poor households often had a small statuette of one of these goddesses",[84] and miniature copper alloy altars, but confusingly also statuettes of other deities such as Mercury, Mars and Ceres which, from the interpretation, are not intended to be viewed as domestic. The town's iconic statuette of Venus (possibly actually Persephone) is prominently displayed in a dedicated case in the museum's central roundel (Appendix B: A3, v). The interpretation suggests that "the figurine probably once held central place in a household shrine", and a replica statuette forms the centrepiece of the reconstructed shrine alongside an oil lamp and another object, now missing (Fig 7.24; also Fig 2.2). The shrine reconstruction offers the potential to explore domestic rituals and the varying roles and experiences of family members. Graham's (2020: 86–88) consideration of the differing sensory experiences of family participants at the *terminalia* ritual might provide a model for such interpretation. Unfortunately, the reconstruction, being poorly lit and painted dark purple, fails to provide visitors with experiences commensurate with the significance the interpretation suggests such shrines held. The Museum of London curatorial interviewee spoke of plans to include a garden shrine in the new museum currently being designed, which may engage more enthusiastically with its contextualised ritual use.

[84] Fittock's (2015) study of figurines from London identified domestic rubbish deposits as a significant findspot, but did not attribute them to household shrines

*Fig 7.24: Reconstructed household shrine at Verulamium Museum. Author's photographs*

The second category of domestic religious depictions are those which are not assumed to have been actively venerated, such as furniture fittings and decorative scheme elements, and which only appear at a small number of museums. At Corinium, a small statuette of a *Lar* and mounts in the form of a Satyr mask and a nude female ("possibly a native goddess") appear in the 'Furniture' display. Chesters has a finely crafted bust of a Maenad, the interpretation describing their ecstatic dancing during Bacchic rituals. Neither explore the social context of encountering such images in domestic settings. Finally, the British Museum's 'Eating and Drinking' display includes a patera with a bust of Pan on the handle and a dramatic Medusa mask on the inside of the base. Though in a domestic display, it is a ritual vessel (as the curatorial interviewee also acknowledged) and the interpretation neither explains its function nor the Medusa's apotropaic power.

The Lullingstone wallplaster at the British Museum has been discussed above, and Corinium also contains significant examples of mosaics and wall plaster bearing religious iconography. The impressive Dyer Street 'seasons mosaic' is prominently positioned in the gallery (Appendix B: C4, iv) and features imagery associated with Bacchus and the four seasons, though the god is described simply as "a suitable subject for a dining room".[85] The wall plaster and mosaic from a room in the domestic or administrative complex at Kingscote, are of

[85] 'Dining in Style'

particular interest. Displayed in a corner of the main gallery (Fig 7.25A; Appendix B: C4, iv), the mosaic features a central roundel of Venus holding a mirror (Fig 7.25B) and the surviving plaster fragments (Fig 7.25C) are interpreted as depicting Venus and cupids with the armour of Mars (Timby 1998). Contextualising discussion of the wider Kingscote site, including small finds, is on the mezzanine level above (top left of Fig 7.25A, Appendix B: C4, v), which includes a photograph of the Venus mosaic in situ. However, though the Venus theme must have been apparent to anyone entering the room, and likely related to its function in some way, the interpretation does not consider the impact of such a space dominated by religious imagery or the context of that space within the wider complex.

A

B

C

*Fig 7.25: Kingscote Venus mosaic and wall plaster at Corinium Museum. Author's photographs*

### 7.4.2 Religion and entertainment

Harvey (2014: 109) notes that late-Roman Christian authorities saw music and theatre as integral to pagan worship, and connections between religious activity and entertainment venues are valuably highlighted at a number of museums. The Grosvenor Museum's interpretation of the altar to Nemesis from the Chester amphitheatre (Fig 8.12) asks visitors to consider why the goddess of fate might be worshipped in that place but also to ponder what personal narratives might have prompted the erection of this altar, set up by a Centurion "after a vision" (Chapter 8.4.8.1).[86]

Direct geographical and functional relationships between theatres and temples are referenced at Wiltshire Museum: "a possible small theatre at Winterslow … may have been attached to a temple or shrine where religious dramas were enacted in honour of a god".[87] At Colchester Castle, however, though displays of religion occupy the same large case as theatrical and sporting entertainment (Appendix B: C3, v), they are not integrated interpretationally. The proximity of theatres and temples in the town is noted, but ritual and entertainment venues are presented as distinct. At Bath, a fragment of cornice from a possible theatre building north of the temple complex is displayed. Though this structure appears on a reconstruction drawing of the town,[88] potential performative connections between the religious precinct and such structures are not discussed. Similarly, at Canterbury, the large theatre is shown as adjacent to the hypothetical temple complex (Fig 9.22) but the two are discussed as separate entities.[89]

It is at Verulamium where the connection is most directly discussed, through the town's well-preserved theatre and adjacent 'theatre temple'. The connection between them is highlighted not only through references to the theatre being a focus for religious festivals, but also to architectural alterations to the temple at the time the theatre was constructed.[90] The temple is described as changing from a complex with a high wall around it which "created a sense of mystery as to what was inside" to a structure with its entrance realigned towards the theatre, suggesting a direct operational relationship.[91] The simultaneous decline of both sites is linked

[86] 'Altars'
[87] 'Games and Pastimes'
[88] 'Aquae Sulis panel'. Davenport (2021: 136–139) suggests that the 'tholos' was actually a theatre
[89] 'Early Roman Canterbury reconstruction'
[90] 'The Theatre'
[91] 'The Theatre Temple'

to edicts prohibiting pagan theatres and temples. The interpretation therefore valuably promotes the symbiotic connections between such major urban structures in the minds of visitors. However, finds from the theatre are displayed in a case with other leisure activities, while the temple theatre is displayed with the triangular temple (Appendix B: A3, iv). These normative thematic groupings of 'religion' and 'leisure' serve to undermine the otherwise well-presented and significant connections raised between the theatre and temple.

### 7.4.3 Fortune in the baths

Bathing is an iconic symbol of the Roman world's cultural influence, though popular perceptions of it do not usually feature religion. Bathing is generally considered in museum displays through room sequences, personal hygiene routines, and as a setting for business and leisure activities. Ingate (2019: 89–92) argues for parallels between bathing and religious experiences: the regular presence of religious imagery, the broader ritual significance of water in the Roman world, and the transformative act of immersion. Connections between bathing and religion are present in some museums, particularly in the northern group, through statues and dedications. Some interpretation, however, implies that religious imagery was primarily aesthetic by describing it as "adorning" (Corinium) or "decorating" (Hunterian) bath houses.

Fortuna is particularly well-represented in bath houses, including relief carvings from Castlecary (Hunterian), Cirencester (Corinium), and two from Bewcastle (Tullie House). The Great North Museum displays an altar from Carvoran (though its baths context is not interpreted), and three altars from Risingham, two to Fortuna and one to "the gods who dwell in this place". The Clayton Museum has an altar to Fortuna Conservatrix and a dedication to the mother goddesses from the riverside bath house, along with a statue of a river god from the commanding officer's bath house, thought to perhaps originally have adorned the bridge.

Two explanations as to why Fortuna in particular might be beseeched while bathing are presented. Tullie House and the Great North Museum suggest that gamblers required good luck, or alternatively (also suggested at the Hunterian) that the nudity of bathers may have led them to feel at risk from misfortune. Cousins (2020: 104; see also Ingate 2019: 90) alternatively observes that the 'fortune' granted by Fortuna might have related more to *salus* (wellbeing) than pure 'luck'. The role of religion in health and wellbeing is discussed below, but the concept

that offering to Fortuna was part of a holistic health regime of cleanliness and exercise rather than to mitigate the risks associated with prosaic bath house activities is an engaging one.

Despite the museum not displaying any original reliefs or inscriptions from baths, the reconstruction drawing at Senhouse shows an offering being made at an altar while other activity continues nearby (Fig 7.26). While the statuette associated with the altar appears to depict Victory, this contextualising of a ritual act into such a location would be valuable at other museums to support their more substantial material evidence.

*Fig 7.26: Bath house reconstruction at Senhouse Museum. Author's photograph*

### 7.4.4 Health and wellbeing

My analyses in Chapter 6.2.2.1 (Fig 6.23C) suggested that references to the role religion played in health and wellbeing generally involved overarching statements that healing had a divine aspect rather than considering contextualised individual experiences, and here I explore these further. Interpretations of health fall into two broad categories, those which interpret such

issues through an entirely secular lens, and those which engage with the concept that healing and wellbeing in the ancient world involved the influence of divine forces.

*Fig 7.27: The temple courtyard section of the model of Roman Bath in the 4th century (left) and close-up of the 'incubation' building (right). Author's photographs*

The museum which might be expected to discuss the concept of divine healing most fully is Bath. The audio guide highlights the healing powers of Sulis Minerva and the first panel visitors encounter in the museum informs them that people came from across the Roman world "to bathe in sacred waters, seek healing and pray".[92] This healing narrative recedes throughout the museum, but recurs in relation to the suggestion that "those seeking divine help for an illness or affliction might rest overnight in special temple buildings".[93] This 'incubation' is connected with the god Aesculapius, and the interpretation suggests that it may have occurred in the building with a 'four seasons' façade located opposite the sacred spring in the temple courtyard. The doorway of the reconstructed façade includes a video projection of a priest talking to a seated figure, but this is uninterpreted. The building appears, also without interpretation, on the model of the 4th century complex near the museum's entrance, with a cutaway roof showing people lying on beds (Fig 7.27). The museum display opposite the reconstructed façade (Appendix B: D7, v) features an inscription recording a vision, an altar interpreted as depicting the birth of Aesculapius, and a pipeclay figurine of a dog. Cousins (2020: 42–45), however, argues against Aesculapian interpretations of these finds. Confusingly, the altar and inscription were not discovered at the temple but associated with entirely separate structures at the nearby Cross Bath site, which Davenport (2021: 143) argues may have been the focus of healing activity in the town. This significantly different context is not forefronted

[92] 'Meet the Romans panel'
[93] 'Inscription recording a vision'

in the interpretation, meaning that visitors will likely, but erroneously, connect the discoveries with the famous temple complex they are visiting.

This confusion aside, if the museum's interpretation is accepted by visitors, as expected, the intense experiential facets of such a healing process are worth further consideration. How might an individual qualify for treatment through their ailment or social status? What preparations might be required in terms of ritual cleansing, clothing, prayers, offerings, or the ingestion or abstinence of certain food or drink? Hughes (2018: 198–199) discusses relief images of the god physically touching sleeping patients, the divine and mortal realms in direct contact. What might it have felt like to lie in an unfamiliar room within the sacred courtyard after other worshippers had left, wondering if direct communication from the deity was imminent? Experiencing the footsteps and perhaps whispers of attendants, the troubled murmurs of other patients, and the lingering smells of earlier ritual acts in the courtyard outside. Desiring to fall asleep and receive a vision yet a combination of anxiety, excitement, fear, hope and, perhaps, the ailment's symptoms preventing it. This intoxicating emotional and sensory assemblage represents a transformative experience which might affect the individual for the rest of their life and therefore offers a powerful opportunity to engage visitors with intense religious experiences. The interpretation, however, simply states that the person rested overnight and had their dreams interpreted by a priest.

At Colchester Castle, the so-called Doctor's Grave contains various surgical implements but also divining rods and a strainer bowl, an assemblage which blurs distinctions between magic and medicine (Garland 2018). The interpretation observes that "divination was a standard part of medicinal practice at this period", used to see if "omens were favourable before starting surgery",[94] but does not elaborate on such processes, the beliefs underlying them, or the authority controlling or interpreting them.

Other museums which connect divine and secular healing, including the British Museum, Great North Museum, Tullie House, Richborough, Corbridge and Housesteads, must rely on less extreme experiences. At Corbridge, everyday religious activity is valuably framed as an aspect of wellbeing,[95] considering that while the knowledge of doctors was generally good, holistic

[94] 'Doctor's Grave'
[95] 'Caring for the Body and Soul'

health was ultimately in the hands of the gods. In contrast, Tullie House's statement that alongside practical medical knowledge "there was also much use of superstition and folk remedies" rather trivialises the significance of divine healing in the Roman world and the social role of the possessors of such religious knowledge, particularly in rural communities.[96]

The British Museum observes that "there were no barriers between science and religion", highlighting both preventative and curative medicine but connecting religious activity primarily with the former.[97] The Great North Museum's 'Kill or Cure' display also presents Roman medicine as a mixture of science and religion, noting that even secular cures might rely on divine assistance. An inscription set up following a pronouncement from the Turkish oracle known as the Clarian Apollo is interpreted as possibly related to the avoidance of a widespread threat to health, thought to be the 2nd century Antonine Plague. The Museum of London's 'In sickness and in health' display does not directly discuss divine healing but includes a gold prayer plaque, written in Greek and intended to ward off plague. The display dates it to the 3rd or 4th century, though Tomlin (2014) also relates it to the Antonine Plague. The Great North Museum's interpretation suggests that the success of the Clarian Apollo inscription is evidenced by Britain being largely unaffected by the plague. This may or may not have been the case (e.g. Simmonds *et al*. 2008; Ellis and King 2014), but the divine protection sought by fearful individuals should not be underestimated. The London plaque's text is not fully transcribed in the display, but the author's anguish can be felt in his description of the plague's "infiltrating pain, heavy-spiriting, fleshwasting, melting, from the hollows of the veins" (Tomlin 2014).

Materiality is specifically discussed in Chapter 9.4, but the magical healing properties of materials are referenced at the Great North Museum through a lithomarge egg which, it is suggested, might have been held during childbirth, and a jet ring which cured various ailments and may have protected against snakes. The *valetudinarium* display at Housesteads references the apotropaic properties of amber, lithomarge and jet, and suggests that a pipeclay Venus figurine perhaps had a protecting role in childbirth. Amber is also referenced at the Bloomberg Mithraeum as having the ability to heal sick children.

[96] 'Roman Medicine'
[97] 'Preventative Medicine'

The examples above demonstrate an interpretative focus on positive connections between religion and healing, yet the opposite is not often considered. Curse tablets (discussed in Chapter 5.4.3 and considered further in Chapter 8.4.7.2) often seek dramatic ill-health for their victims, but only the British Museum references divine agency being beseeched to such effect.[98] At no museum displaying curses are their potential emotional or social consequences discussed, or that the deities invoked were respectable and 'mainstream' and the requests not considered immoral.

### 7.4.5 Magical amulets

As discussed in Chapter 5.4.2, amulets seem to have been a common option for individuals in need of divine assistance. However, though the term 'amulet' is used at several museums, nowhere is it defined, and visitors must apply their own understandings and experiences of wearing objects for personal protection. Whereas some might agree with the Great North Museum's statement that amulets were used by "superstitious people", others may not consider them mere 'superstition' and engage with them in their own lives, perhaps even wearing them during their visit.

Objects described as amulets include pierced boar tusks, engraved gems and a statuette of Harpocrates on a chain (British Museum), a chalcedony head of Cupid (Ashmolean), a pierced dog's tooth (Great North Museum), and a bone fish and a copper alloy phallus (Verulamium). The Museum of London interprets a red deer antler with carved faces as the Roman Janus transformed into a "native magical emblem", though this 'native' attribution seems based solely on the carving of the faces being "in the native style" (see Chapter 7.2.1.1). Other potentially amuletic objects are not interpreted as such, for example pierced dog teeth at Durham University, a pierced boar tooth at the Ashmolean, and copper alloy vulvate mounts at Chesters.

The 'Magic and Superstition' display at NMS presents a more detailed exploration of the subject, explaining that "it was important to have magic on your side in a world where luck, both good and bad, was a force affecting your life. People wore charms and amulets to bring good luck and ward off evil." It describes how natural objects, exotic curiosities, parts of

[98] 'Preventative Medicine'

animals or items of recognised antiquity could all possess magical agency, as could the materials that objects were made from. This engaging and valuable text, however, is written to describe prehistoric beliefs, with imported Roman material culture counted among the "exotic curios". Though such a description also demonstrably applies to Roman Britain, such practices are presented as fundamentally prehistoric in nature and detached from the Roman world, a disconnect discussed further below.

### 7.4.6 Votive offerings and structured deposition

Despite the importance of context to archaeological interpretation, the deposition of objects is much less frequently discussed in museums than their use-life. This leads to important aspects of their biographies and the ritual practices and beliefs associated with deliberate deposition becoming secondary to their iconographic interest and aesthetic appeal (Chapter 6). Here I examine interpretative narratives surrounding the deposition of objects believed to have been intended to offer to, appease, or otherwise influence divine forces. This includes the deposition of objects and assemblages with overt religious iconography, and those where ritual intent is inferred from the structure of the deposit, the treatment or juxtaposition of its contents, or its landscape context (Chapter 5.3). The sections below explore idiosyncratic approaches to interpreting depositional practices at specific museums, focussing on some of Roman Britain's most iconic sites and finds. The language used to describe depositional acts is discussed in Chapter 9.

The related phenomenon of miniaturisation (Chapter 5.3.1) is also represented in some displays. At Corinium, miniature items including spears, axes, wheels and an altar are described as possibly being toys, "but when they are found in shrines or temples it is likely that they were votive gifts to the gods," connecting ritual intent entirely with overtly religious deposition locations. At Chesters, miniatures are presented as representative of both the occupations of donors (tongs from blacksmiths, bows from archers, and spearheads from soldiers) and their needs: "an eye for a cure for blindness, models of the tools of your trade for prosperity at work and so on."

### *7.4.6.1 British Museum*

The British Museum is home to some of Roman Britain's most significant hoards, some positioned prominently within the gallery (Chapter 6.2.1.1) and others dispersed throughout the displays. Overarching interpretation of votive depositional practices appears on the 'Gold and Silver hoards' and 'Lead and Pewter' panels (Appendix B: B1), though visitors may not associate this contextualisation with other displays across the gallery. The interpretation also fails to consider Romano-British depositional acts within longer chronologies of practices from prehistory and into the Medieval period.

Several important assemblages from the 1st to 3rd centuries have religious interpretations, namely those from Backworth, Hockwold, Barkway, Felmingham, Capheaton, Stony Stratford and Ashwell. Apart from Ashwell and Backworth, they are categorised using variations of the term "temple treasures", a phrase which may invoke Christian concepts of 'church plate'. It also obfuscates whether they represent permanent ritual paraphernalia or offerings donated by worshippers, which may have affected their perceived value and subsequent deposition (Chapter 5). The Ashwell and Backworth assemblages are more specifically interpreted as gifts offered at shrines by worshippers, and the presence of priestly regalia in the Stony Stratford and Felmingham assemblages may conversely lead to visitor assumptions that these represent 'official' temple property. The roles such regalia might have played in temple life, as projections of religious authority and in repeated ritual acts remain unaddressed, as do considerations of why they were subsequently buried and by whom.

The Ashwell hoard (Fig 7.28) is worthy of specific discussion here due to its comparatively recent discovery (2002) and the context provided by its detailed excavation. The discovery of the previously unattested deity Senuna (Chapter 7.2.1.2) forms the headline of the display: "A new goddess for Roman Britain". The interpretation describes the objects and their burial:

> *"The objects were gifts from individual worshippers to a previously unknown British goddess called Senuna. They were probably taken out of a temple and buried, perhaps for safekeeping, in the late 3rd or 4th century AD. For reasons we shall never know, they were not retrieved."*

Interpretations that deposits were primarily for (financially motivated) safekeeping rather than ritual acts is a recurring one, discussed further below, but this narrative also simplifies the broader depositional context. The excavations revealed that the deposition occurred on the perimeter of a large shallow circular hollow used from the late Iron Age for ritual feasting, votive deposition and perhaps commemoration of the dead, with ovens constructed in the centre (Jackson and Burleigh 2018). Other structured depositions included Iron Age coins and Bronze Age weapons, perhaps recognised for their antiquity (Chapter 5.3.3) and carefully curated (Hingley 2009). Multiple buildings stood nearby, some timber but others larger and perhaps of stone and with marble decoration. A nearby spring, perhaps sacred to Senuna, made the hollow boggy, and gravel surfaces enabled its use in wet weather. An extensively maintained road ran alongside the hollow, perhaps at times the route of boisterous processions. While on the edge of this activity and not definitively part of it, the depositional context of the Ashwell hoard is clearly significant to its interpretation and represents a more complex and compelling narrative than the restrictive one presented in the display: the burial of valuables for safekeeping in an anonymous location. The objects in the hoard appear to have been deposited at least a century after they were originally offered (Jackson and Burleigh 2018: 140), and after the donors had passed from personal memory. The decision to display the precious metal objects but omit other finds from the wider ritual landscape reinforces definitions of religion that are focussed on the identification of named anthropomorphic deities and aesthetic-appealing iconography at the expense of complex multi-generational and richly sensorial ritual practices. I return to such concerns in Chapter 8.

A similar focus can be seen with the Felmingham hoard, where a group of bronze objects were discovered inside an intact ceramic cauldron, undoubtedly deliberately selected for the purpose (Gilbert 1978: 159–162). The cauldron is in the British Museum collections yet does not form part of the display, again highlighting iconographic metallic finds over their depositional contexts and holistic assemblages. The silver wine cups in the Hockwold treasure (Fig 7.29) were "deliberately dismantled and crushed before burial", yet this act is not presented as potentially significant ritual fragmentation (Chapter 5.3.1). Instead, it is defined in economic terms, reducing them to bullion, and being inconvenient to art historical analysis; they had to be straightened "before they could be properly studied and understood".

The motives underlying the deposition of major late Roman hoards are generally secondary to descriptions of the vessels and their iconography. Ritual interpretations for the burial of

*Fig 7.28: The Ashwell hoard display at the British Museum. Author's photograph*

*Fig 7.29: The Hockwold treasure display at the British Museum. Author's photograph*

valuable objects are, of course, not the only plausible ones, though economic (functional) and ritual motives need not be mutually exclusive (Chapter 1.3.2). The hoards from Hoxne and Mildenhall, for example, do not support a narrative of votive deposition. The burial of the Thetford and Water Newton treasures are interpreted as reflecting potential fear of persecution from Christians and pagans respectively, yet their depositions are still discussed in fundamentally economic terms.

The museum's interpretation of lead and pewter objects notes that some were made "for religious reasons". Though it is suggested that deposits in watery places "were possible offerings to pagan gods", those bearing Christian imagery are not considered offerings but described as "church plate". This presupposition that watery deposition was an exclusively pagan act may explain why the Corbridge Lanx is interpreted as part of a Christian hoard yet its likely riverine context, discovered in the banks of the Tyne, is not highlighted. A replica of the Lanx is displayed at Corbridge, and the curatorial interviewee referenced a desire to highlight other potential votive deposits in the river in future displays.

#### *7.4.6.2 National Museum of Scotland*

The concepts of structured and votive deposition are more comprehensively discussed at NMS than any other surveyed museum, through its 'Burying treasure, sacrificing wealth' (Appendix B: B2, ix) and 'Glimpses of the sacred' thematic sections (Appendix B: B2, iii). The interpretation engages with the entanglement of ritual, magic and beliefs within daily activities and promotes a generally post-processual perspective. However, the gallery's strong Roman/native dichotomy (Chapter 7.2.1.3) manifests in votive deposits being presented as a primarily native practice which sometimes included the deposition of exotic Roman material culture. This is paralleled at the Hunterian, where a copper alloy jug from Lesmahagow, South Lanarkshire, is interpreted as being given as a gift to a "high-ranking local", who "in common Celtic practice, took it to a river to sacrifice it to the gods." Though it is widely accepted that metal objects, especially silver (Blackwell *et al*. 2017), were given as bribes to native communities, the interpretation implies both that the 'local' could not appreciate its functionality, and that watery depositions were a restricted native practice.[99]

[99] 'A gift to the gods'

The ‘Burying treasure, sacrificing wealth’ section at NMS contains some of the ‘exotic’ Roman objects from native contexts referenced above; a small late Roman coin hoard from Balgreggan, and a bowl, adze-hammer and cooking pot stands from the Carlingwark hoard.[100] The interpretation of the latter describes them as being obtained through contact with the Roman army, and that the value of hoarded items is defined through their material, artisanship or such exotic connections. It also references the hoard’s deposition in a liminal watery context and highlights the ritual killing of some objects to remove their secular functionality. Similarly, the display of the Lamberton Moor hoard, which includes fragmentary *paterae* and jewellery, describes the Roman contents as “viewed as powerful, fit to be offered to the gods in sacrifices”.[101] The hoard is rather romantically described as “offered to an unknown god on a lonely moor”. However, the depositor need not have been of ‘native’ identity, and Lamberton Moor is not in the misty highlands but near modern Berwick-upon-Tweed, an area where Romano-British material culture might have been readily obtainable.

The ‘Glimpses of the sacred’ and ‘Gods of the frontier, God of the Book’ sections offer a particularly valuable insight into distinctions made between native and Roman ritual deposition. ‘Glimpses of the sacred’ engages with acts of votive deposition, magical and superstitious practices, communal feasting and commemoration from prehistory to Pictish standing stones. Several Roman military depositional acts are included, though the interpretative voice is predominantly prehistoric. The ‘Everyday beliefs’ display includes a Roman coin hoard from the foundations of the Elginhaugh fort headquarters, interpreted as being deposited to bring good fortune to the structure and containing carefully selected coins. The pits at Newstead (Chapter 5.3.4) form the focus of the ‘Offerings in water’ display, where they are interpreted as well closure deposits comprising human and animal heads and everyday objects, some of which were deliberately damaged, and after which the wells were left to fill up naturally. A damaged sword from Newstead also features as the sole Roman object in the ‘Special places, special objects, special treatment’ display.

Museographically, the organically circular and slightly claustrophobic space of ‘Glimpses of the sacred’ presents a markedly different atmosphere to the angular, airy and naturally-lit ‘Gods of the frontier, God of the Book’ where the primary displays of Roman religion are located

[100] ‘Security hoards’ and ‘Votive hoards’
[101] ‘Objects of Power’

(Fig 7.30). This undoubtedly influences how visitors perceive these relative practices, mysterious acts of ritual deposition contrasted with a religion of decorative stonework, intricate iconography, written language and named, anthropomorphic classical deities which flows seamlessly into displays of Christianity. The curatorial interviewee highlighted that displaying polytheistic beliefs alongside Christianity aimed to make visitors recalibrate how they perceive and define religion, yet it also disconnects Roman religious activity from its prehistoric roots, as if depositional acts were not part of the same conceptual religious landscape as the inscriptions and statues. Altars to Jupiter (Trimontium[102]) and Imperial Discipline (Birrens[103]) displayed in 'Gods of the frontier' were both found deposited in wells in their respective headquarters buildings, yet such distinction-blurring depositional contexts are omitted from their interpretation.

*Fig 7.30: 'Glimpses of the sacred' (top) and 'Gods of the frontier, God of the Book' at the National Museum of Scotland. Author's photographs*

[102] 'Written Evidence'
[103] 'Shaping Stone'

### *7.4.6.3 Museum of London*

The Museum of London contains several interesting examples of structured and votive deposition. Individual references are made to foundation burials under buildings to bring 'good luck' (see Chapter 9.2.1.2) and the deposition of amulets in water,[104] but here I focus on interpretations of three specific depositions.

The burial of the sculptures from the London mithraeum (Chapter 7.3.1.1) reflect an important time in the cult's history. The panel accompanying the sculptures explains their deposition in pits beneath the temple's floor, connecting it with its early 4th century collapse and rebuilding. It states that it is unknown whether they were buried for protection by worshippers of the cult when the temple was rededicated to Bacchus, or by others "who wanted to remove all signs of the earlier cult". As noted above (Chapter 7.3.3), potential Christian iconoclasm is not specifically referenced in this regard.

The display of the Tabard Square temple precinct,[105] consisting of two Romano-Celtic temples within a shared enclosure, focuses primarily on objects deposited into a possible boundary ditch. These are generically interpreted as ritual deposits, though what this meant in terms of the beliefs or intentions of the depositors or how it related to the activity of the temples is not discussed. They include ceramic flagons and a jar (linked with funereal libations) and a bronze sandalled foot. The latter is suggested to be from a statue, the foot retained as a placatory offering when the remainder was recycled. The remarkable discovery of face cream surviving in a metal container was also found in the ditch, but the interpretation does not directly suggest it was a votive offering. Other finds from the ditch assemblage, such as coins, ceramics and animal bone (Killock 2015), are neither displayed nor referenced, making the more enigmatic finds the sole focus. The centrepiece of the display is the inscription to Mars Camulos, which though described as being found "carefully buried" in the courtyard, is not interpreted as a potentially ritually deposited object.

The panel on the suburb of Southwark discusses the prosperity of the area, proposing that a well deposit, located beneath what is now Southwark Cathedral, "suggests the presence of a

[104] Both in 'Spirituality or Superstition'
[105] 'Lifting the Lid on Roman Temples'

temple or shrine".[106] The contents of the well are simply described as a "collection of sculptures", whereas the whole deposit comprised the skeletons of an old dog and a young cat with a layer of charcoal over them, building debris containing sculptures of a hunter deity, a *genius*, a funerary casket lid (unique in Britain), a figure of possibly Oceanus or Neptune, and fragments of a small altar and a tombstone. The caption of the image of the hunter deity on the panel does not connect it with the well deposit. The excavators suggested that the group originated from a mausoleum rather than a temple, noting that the hunter deity had been broken by a deliberate blow to the chest, the lower half showing signs of burning (Hammerson 1978). This damage, an important part of its narrative, has been minimised through conservation work (as with the Hockwold cups, Chapter 7.4.6.1) and the figure reassembled. As referenced in Chapter 7.3.3, the damage remains visible yet uninterpreted.

### *7.4.6.4 Bath*

Offerings deposited into the spring at Bath are referenced at numerous points in the museum. However, these references do not consider the highly contextualised, multisensory and likely emotionally-charged experience of placing votive objects, including curses, into the goddess' steamy waters (Chapter 5.4.3.2). As a fundamentally significant element of the site's religious functionality and the place in Britain where such acts might be best understood and experienced, this seems an unfortunate omission. Instead, powerful and emotive acts of deposition are restricted to the rather reductive observation that they were "thrown into the spring" (Fig 7.31), and I return to the use of such language in Chapter 9.

The 'Offerings to the Goddess' case (Fig 7.31) contains various artefacts including "temple plate, personal belongings, and jewellery" but the significance of individual depositional acts is downplayed. The audio guide (80) suggests that a priest's headdress possibly fell into the waters accidentally and describes the mutilated pewter items as showing "some wear and tear", suggesting "they were offered to the goddess when they'd reached the end of their useful life". The ivory breasts model is the only object described as "votive", yet no explanation of why it may have differed in nature or intent from other objects placed in the spring is offered. Though the display is located in the corridor overlooking the sacred spring, the interpretation does not connect the relationship between the displayed objects and their original depositional location.

[106] 'South Londinium'

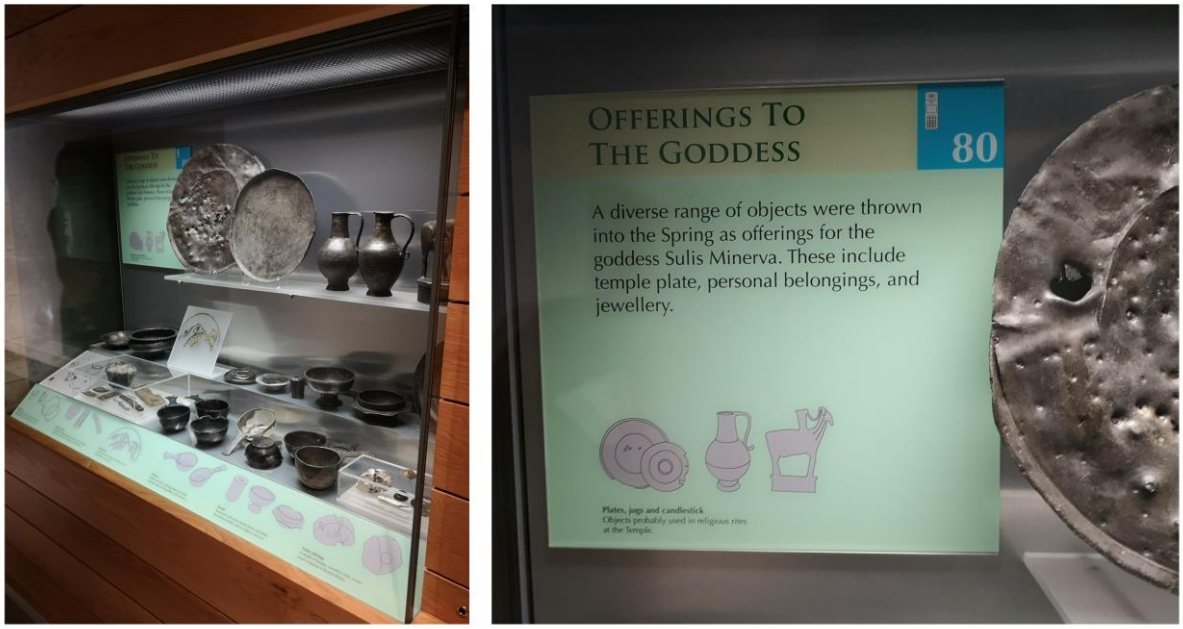



*Fig 7.31: 'Offerings to the Goddess' display at Bath. Author's photographs*

*Fig 7.32: Reconstruction drawing of the sacred spring at Bath. Author's photograph*

A reconstruction drawing of the sacred spring is presented nearby (Fig 7.32), but is uninterpreted, positioned in a narrow transitional corridor space, and does not depict a ritual act in progress. It is therefore doubtful whether visitors connect the objects with the nearby sacred waters they were purposefully and reverently offered into, and no interpretation explains how the experience of that deposition changed over time as the spring became enclosed and depositional acts more private (Chapter 5.4.3.2). The most intense depositional experiences likely involved curse tablets, and I consider interpretation of their creation and deposition in Chapter 8.4.7.2.

### *7.4.6.5 Chesters*

The assemblage from Coventina's Well represents the most significant votive deposit displayed at the Clayton Museum. As noted in Chapter 6.2.1.2, finds from the site are dispersed around the museum. The 'Treasure down the well' display provides a quantification of the finds: "within the well were found 24 altars and over 16,000 coins, as well as brooches, figurines and beads". Excavations in 1876 revealed that the objects were deposited in a stone reservoir within a low-walled *temenos*, forming what is generally perceived as a shrine of Romano-Celtic form but with the reservoir in place of a *cella* (Allason-Jones and McKay 1985: 2–3). Though the reservoir appears to have been fed by springs, it was clearly not primarily a source of water and as Allason-Jones (1996b: 107) observes, 'well' is therefore a misnomer, though the displays use the name uncritically throughout. Though brief references are made to the shrine it is never described or illustrated, and the framing of the deposition as being in the titular 'well' detaches the objects and their deposition from their architectural context, just as the use of 'treasure' in the display title promotes their economic rather than ritual significance.

The nature of the deposition of the objects into the reservoir is uncertain, but multiple acts may be represented. Objects were likely deposited as offerings during the shrine's active life, with the larger stonework positioned around the *temenos* and carefully deposited in the reservoir when the shrine was decommissioned (Allason-Jones 1996b: 113–115). Discussion of the deposition centres on Clayton's unwillingness to interpret the finds as votive, instead seeing the discarding of so many coins as wasteful, and that the jewellery "must have been thrown into the well by 'love-sick damsels'".[107] An early Bronze Age axe hammer is an unusual

[107] 'Treasure down the well'

offering, the interpretation observing that "a worshipper might have attributed special powers to such an ancient item, and have placed it deliberately in the well". Ceramic vessels are tentatively connected to feasting as part of a "religious ceremony", though the experiential nature of such acts and the identities and motivations of the individuals undertaking them remain unexplored. Finally, the origins of Coventina herself are not discussed, such as whether attestations to her in north-western Spain and southern France reflect her export from or import to Hadrian's Wall.

## 7.5 Summary

This chapter has discussed presentations of religious hybridity in Roman Britain, centred upon post-colonial critiques of rigid cultural constructs of 'Roman' and 'native' identities. I have argued that a lack of recognition of indigenous deities, evidenced through my online survey, is compounded by a predominance of classical deities in displays, and that museum descriptions of deities and their artistic depictions reinforce classically-biased hierarchies of divine power and significance. This is also reflected in interpretation which conflates the ethnic identities of worshippers with their choice of deities. I have discussed how religious change and syncretisation are presented as processes primarily driven by Roman agency, particularly through problematic notions of the 'tolerance' of the Roman state. The cult of Mithras has been shown to be particularly prominent in displays, though 'mysteries' are often interpreted as referencing social secrecy rather than revelatory knowledge and altered relationships with divine forces, and intense initiatory experiences are generally overlooked. Tension caused through religious change is not widely considered beyond broad statements usually connected with the growth of Christianity, and potentially deliberate damage to some objects remains either uninterpreted or insufficiently contextualised.

I then discussed manifestations of religious activity outside of formal temple settings. Religion in domestic contexts is not widely considered and remains locked into Mediterranean-style worship at formal household shrines predicated on small-scale iconographic depictions of deities. Valuable connections are raised at some museums between temples and entertainment venues, particularly theatres and bath houses, though lived experiences of religious activities in and between those spaces are not generally considered. Some museums discuss connections between religious activity and health and wellbeing, including the wearing of protective

amulets, but do not generally explore the social contexts in which such beliefs operated or the transmission of such specialist religious knowledge. The suggestion of Aesculapian incubation at Bath was explored as a specific example where intense individual experiences might be valuably presented to visitors.

Finally, I explored the deposition of objects, which is generally interpreted as the disposal of ancient equivalents of ‘church plate’ when featuring overtly religious objects and for economic reasons when not. A focus in displays is on the iconographic description of enigmatic objects, with little interpretation of other, less aesthetically appealing, objects from assemblages, their depositional contexts, or the intentions, motivations or experiences of the depositors. Structured deposition is almost entirely absent in displays. Though notably prominent at NMS, it is portrayed as a primarily prehistoric and mysterious act, a message reinforced through the relative museography of displays.

# Chapter 8:

# Analysing Lived and Multisensory Religion

## 8.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how the concepts of lived and material religion, introduced in Chapters 3 and 4, are engaged with in museum displays. This involves the presentation of interpretative narratives surrounding the religious options and agency of individuals, expressions of identity and status through ritual acts, how religious groups and officials created and maintained authority and relevance, how religious acts were embedded within social and economic networks, and how multisensory experiences formed an important aspect of religious activity. These all reflect recent challenges to traditional perspectives of Roman religion as homogenised, rigid and rather emotionless, and to museum display methodologies which prioritise the aesthetic properties of objects (Chapter 4.1).

This chapter accordingly engages with a wide range of concepts and displays, first considering narratives of individual religious beliefs and options and how they were expressed through ritual practices. I then discuss interpretations of religious authority, and the relationships between religious and other identities and activities, whether social, economic, cultural or gender-related. Finally, I consider the sensory experiences of ritual practices through light and colour, sound, smell, taste, movement, embodiment and the emotions. These discussions focus on three Analysis Statements:

> §5: "Religion is a dynamic social construct, 'always in the making', individual decisions make every religious act a contextually specific, creative performance with the agency to influence future performances."

§6: “Social, political, economic and religious power are intrinsically entwined and require constant negotiation as part of both tangible and imagined communities.”

§7: “Embodied, sensory and emotional stimuli were central to individual lived religious experiences and the creation and maintenance of religious identities, communities and relationships.”

## 8.2 §5: “Religion is a dynamic social construct, ‘always in the making’, individual decisions make every religious act a contextually specific, creative performance with the agency to influence future performances.”

The LAR approach stresses that rituals require repetition to be kept alive (Chapter 3.3.4). Through being performed and witnessed, specific ritual acts might continue to be influential in communicating with the supernatural, surviving across generations or spreading geographically. However, each performance is an individual act with the potential to introduce change. Particularly efficacious, or indeed disastrous, results or differing desired outcomes might influence future performances. Here I explore how museums contextualise and interpret such individual religious agency, first through narratives of the religious options available to individuals, and then through descriptions of ritual processes, including relationships with the divine through the concept of the vow and sacrificial rites.

### 8.2.1 Religious options

The polytheistic nature of the Roman world is overtly stated in some museums and implied in others through the presentation of multiple deities. Visitors are generally expected to be aware that people living in the ancient world believed in the existence of multiple gods and goddesses, each with differing but specific spheres of influence. But how did individuals know about the existence and abilities of those deities? After all, “gods, like dogs, will only answer to their names” (Ando 2008: 130). How did they obtain knowledge of the correct ritual process required to communicate with them? To explore how museums engage visitors with the religious options available in Roman Britain, I first examine statements about wider beliefs in

the supernatural, before turning to consider interpretations of the range of deities available to individuals and how religious knowledge about them was transmitted.

#### *8.2.1.1 What 'the Romans' believed*

As discussed in Chapter 1, beliefs are one of the most difficult aspects of religion to address archaeologically; the use of material culture to infer the complex, relativistic and dynamic worldviews and emotions that underpin and motivate individual and communal ritual activity. Despite this, a number of museums make statements regarding specific beliefs held by people in both Britain and the wider Roman world. Although various oblique references are made to beliefs, this discussion focuses on more definitive statements, which are consolidated in Table 8.1. Phrases such as 'the Romans believed...' (*vel sim*) reflect the problematic presentation of a homogenised yet undefined 'Roman' identity incorporating everyone living in the Roman world (Chapter 7.2.1.3). Though it is probable that some of these beliefs were held by individuals in Britain, they are generally presented without reference to supporting (classical) literary or archaeological evidence. This lack of cultural and temporal contextualisation is particularly problematic as it diminishes beliefs rooted in non-classical mythologies and ontologies, and how new ideas influenced the existing beliefs of individuals or communities in Britain.

Specific 'belief' statements fall into two distinct categories. The first is that people believed in multiple gods with connections to specific places or influence over different aspects of life, and these concepts are explored further in Chapter 8.2.1.2. The second, larger, group is eschatological. Despite a general dearth of religious considerations in displays of death and burial (Chapter 6.2.2; Figs 6.20-6.22), it is interesting that it forms a focus for such definitive statements.

| Museum | Display (see Appendix B) | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|
| A1 - Canterbury Roman Museum | 'Religious cults' | "Romans believed in many gods." |
| | 'Evidence from the Grave' | "These [grave goods accompanying cremations] reflect the Roman idea of the afterworld, in which the dead still need practical things – food and drink for the journey, a coin for the ferryman over the river of death, lamps, shoes, and treasured heirlooms or belongings." |
| A3 – Verulamium | 'Lifting the Lid' | "For us Romans, the scallop shell pattern was a symbol of life after death. It represented the oceans across which we had to sail to reach the blessed isles after we died." |
| | 'Rites and Rituals' | "The people in Verulamium worshipped a cosmopolitan mix of gods and believed the gods influenced every aspect of their lives." |
| | 'Household shrine' | "People in Verulamium believed every aspect of their daily lives was watched over by a god or spirit." |
| | 'A child's coffin' | "Souls were believed to be ferried across the River Styx to the Underworld. This child had been provided with a coin to pay Charon the ferryman." |
| | 'He died with his boots on' | "It was believed that good shoes were needed for the journey to the Underworld." |
| B1 - British Museum | 'Death in Roman London' | "Coins were often buried in graves in the belief that the dead must pay Charon, the Ferryman of the River Styx, for passage to the Underworld." |
| C1 - Grosvenor Museum | 'Roman Beliefs about Death' | "The Romans had a wide range of beliefs about death. They believed that there was some form of life after death and that everyone had a soul which lived on after the person had died." |
| | | "The dead were believed to "live" close to where they were buried, either underground or in the tomb." |
| | | "The Romans believed the Ocean surrounded the earth and led to the Isles of the Blessed, a mythical paradise which no mortal could reach." |
| | | "Followers of gods such as Cybele and Mithras, and Christians were promised life after death. They believed that their faith offered them an after-life from which non-believers would be excluded." |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| C2 - Tullie House Museum | 'The Street Funeral' | "The Romans believed in a life after death." |
| C3 - Colchester Castle | 'Wealth and oppression' | "The Romans would not have treated their own countrymen that way (decapitation) because they believed they would not find peace in the next world without a proper burial." |
| C6 – Museum of London | 'Inside the temple' | "The Romans believed that jet had magical properties and it is often found in burials." |
| | 'The Spitalfields Roman' | "The Romans believed that jet had magical properties which kept away evil and ensured a safe journey to the Underworld." |
| D1 - Senhouse Museum | 'Marcus Maenius Agrippa' | "The Romans believed that prayer and sacrifice regulated relations between man and gods." |
| | 'Dedications by Paulus Postumius Acilianus' | "Both Romans and Britons believed that every place had its own spirit." |
| | 'Nymphs' | "People in Roman Britain believed that water nymphs were gods who lived near streams and wells." |
| | 'The Death Bed' | "Most people in the Roman world died at home, with relatives and close friends gathered round. The nearest relative gave the last kiss, to catch the soul which, so it was believed, left the body with the final breath and then closed the departed's eyes. The body was set on the ground, washed, anointed and dressed (in a toga if a male Roman citizen). A wreath (of blossoms for a woman) was placed on its head and a coin placed in its mouth to pay the fare on the ferry to the Underworld." |

*Table 8.1: Statements about Roman 'beliefs'*

The Museum of London, Canterbury, Tullie House, and Colchester Castle inform visitors of a belief in an unspecified afterlife, while Verulamium and the Grosvenor Museum specifically relate this to the classical Greek mythology of the 'Blessed Isles'. The Grosvenor Museum also states that there were exclusive afterlives for mystery cult initiates and Christians. The placing of coins in graves to pay Charon the ferryman is referenced at Verulamium, Canterbury, Senhouse, Museum of London and the British Museum. Verulamium suggests that the journey to the afterlife required the crossing of the ocean but also that shoes in burials are indicative of a belief that good footwear was required. Corinium's display of a cockerel from a child's grave notes Mercury's role as a psychopomp,[1] however the display dedicated to that deity (Fig 8.1) does not reference this chthonic aspect, focussing instead on his roles within the realm of the living as a god of "travellers, merchants and trade but also of thievery and cunning".[2] Beliefs connected with death and burial are therefore conceptually detached from the roles such deities play in daily life, which is unreflective of their complex identities.

8. Silver cockerel with gilt wings found in Watermoor, Cirencester
9. Copper-alloy *Caduceus* or herald's staff from a figurine of Mercury found in the Amphitheatre, Cirencester
10. Head of Mercury found in Cricklade Street, Cirencester
11. Votive relief of Mercury found in Watermoor, Cirencester. The god is shown with all his associated symbols such as the cockerel and the purse. Below the niche there are faint traces of an inscription 'DEO MERCVRIO' ('to the god Mercury').

*Fig 8.1: Mercury display at Corinium Museum. Author's photographs*

[1] 'Cemeteries of Corinium'
[2] 'Mercury: God of Travellers'

At Senhouse, a series of panels describe sequential processes of death and burial (Fig 8.2). They relate beliefs in a soul existing and departing the body at death, and then address the anointing and garlanding of the body, mourning rituals, funeral processions, cremation, funereal feasting, and annual rituals to prevent the deceased returning as a ghost. From one perspective, the panels present an engaging insight into death and burial, considering various valuable multisensory and emotional factors; light, music, song and speech, and embodied movement all feature. They consider the ongoing personal and social impact on mourners through repeated graveside and calendrical ritual activities such as the festivals of *Parentalia* and *Lemuria*. However, the words, actions and beliefs presented in the panels reinforce homogenised and universal 'Roman' experiences. Visitors are not presented with a hypothetical individual funereal process, but one which represents a standard process across the Roman world. Definitive statements such as "only when a pig had been sacrificed was a grave legally a grave", that funeral processions of the rich and poor occurred in daylight and at night respectively, or that "on returning from the funeral relatives were purified by fire and water" cannot be universally attested, and certainly not through the British archaeological record. The culturally and temporally specific sources upon which the narrative is based, such as Ovid's *Fasti*, are not referenced. Therefore, while detailed and evocative discussions of funereal activity are to be welcomed, their applicability to the northern frontiers of Roman Britain requires more overt contextualisation.

*Fig 8.2: Death and burial display at Senhouse Museum. Author's photograph*

#### *8.2.1.2 The 'catalogue of gods'*

Depictions of deities and their attributes form a core element of religious displays at many museums, presented as demonstrative of polytheistic systems where deities with differing spheres of divine influence would be chosen to receive offerings depending on the specific needs of the worshipper. Interpretation often focusses on a deity's name, which visitors are expected to recognise, variably accompanied by a physical description (including attributes and animal companions) and perhaps their spheres of influence. Notable examples of this approach are found at the British Museum, Corinium (Fig 8.1), Wiltshire Museum (Fig 8.3), Verulamium, Corinium, Colchester Castle, NMS (Fig 8.4), the Great North Museum, and the Ashmolean.

Such displays generally aim to present the range of deities in the museum collections, and narratives are therefore focused (sometimes tentatively) on identifiable and anthropomorphically depicted deities in materials which have survived. The Museum of London curatorial interviewee, for example, stated a "desire to be as representative as possible, if we do have a statue of a particular god we should put it on display, to show the range of gods that were worshipped." This focus on deities is reinforced through display titling (e.g. 'Gods and Goddesses' at the Ashmolean and Wiltshire Museum) or text such as the British Museum's 'Pagan Religions' panel which begins with discussion of the artistic identification of classical deities (Fig 8.5). British Museum gallery tours have also been renamed in recent years, from 'Religion in Roman Britain' to 'Gods and Goddesses in Roman Britain' (curatorial interview). The result is the presentation of a 'catalogue of gods' which was universally understood and equally accessible across the Roman world and dominated by the classical pantheon (Chapter 7.2.1.1). Worshippers are presumed to have selected from this 'catalogue', but without due consideration of their restricted religious knowledge and agency. This oversight is not restricted to museums, however. Zoll (1995b: 129–132) accuses archaeologists of a similar fixation with the names, relationships and origins of deities at the expense of "how they were paid homage, where and by whom".

Graham (2020: 172) suggests that, though identifying deities is important, to better understand the functioning of religious systems: "we need to shift our perspectives away from those dominated by sight, by anthropomorphism, and by the identification or at the very least categorisation of gods by type". An alternative approach is therefore to view religious choice

*Fig 8.3: Copper alloy statuettes at Wiltshire Museum. Author's photograph*

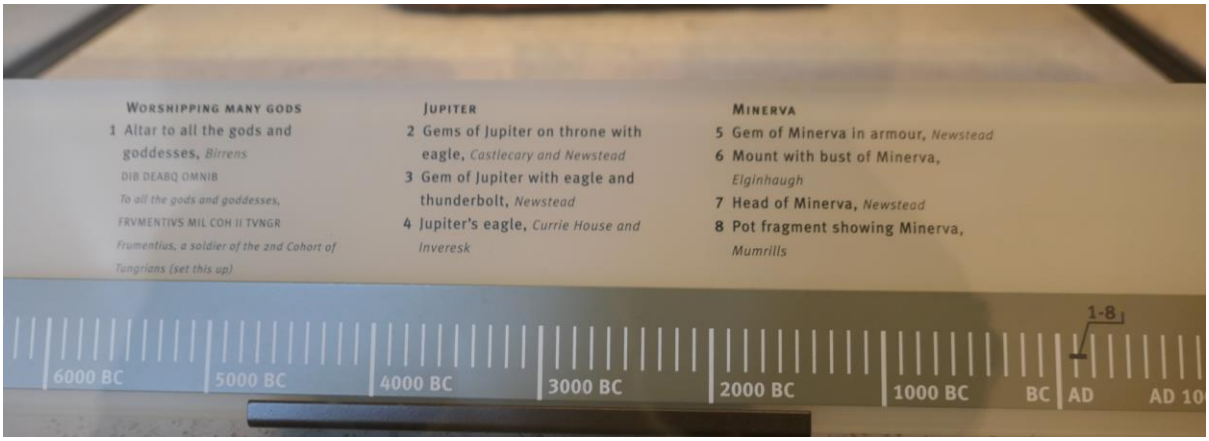



*Fig 8.4: Object labels at National Museum of Scotland. Author's photograph*

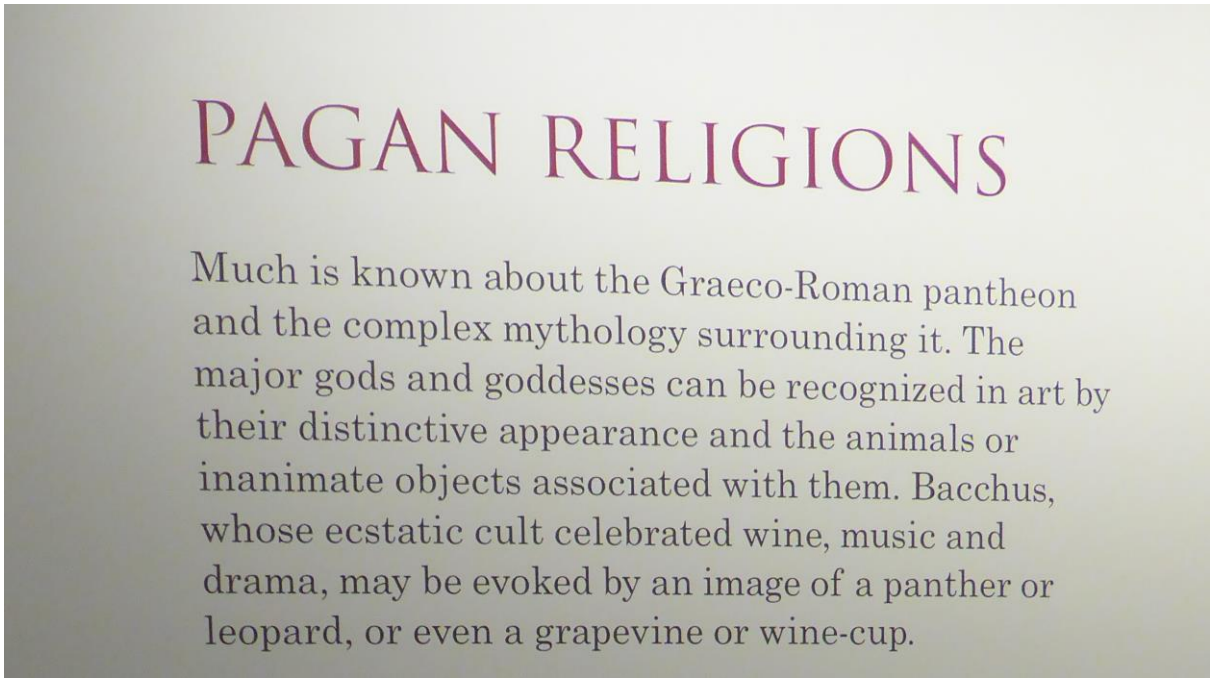



*Fig 8.5: 'Pagan Religions' panel text at the British Museum. Author's photograph*

through the lens of contextualised individuals and their needs, rather than deities. This might include considering how knowledge of the existence and efficacy of deities was obtained and transmitted; what offerings or ritual processes were required and how might they be acquired, prepared or performed; and the logistics of making offerings in specific, perhaps distant, places or at specific times. What might a person do if the deities readily available to them did not specialise in their needs? Hingley (2021b: 186) wonders how free the less-privileged inhabitants of Roman Britain were to make decisions about their lives, and selectivity of religious options might represent a rare and significant source of agency.

This alternative approach requires recalibration of how depictions of deities in museums are interpreted within specific ritual contexts. Depictions of Mercury at Corinium (Fig 8.1), for example, were created to fulfil differing physical and conceptual ritual roles and may be better understood through those contexts rather than their shared iconographic connection to Mercury; prioritising the depth of specific individual experiences over the breadth of iconographic evidence for certain deities. Although it is commonly implied that deities were selected for worship because of their spheres of influence, the specific needs of individuals and communities are not sufficiently explored.

Concepts of personal religious options, however, are not entirely absent in museums. At Vindolanda it is noted that religious choices reflected both personal and communal beliefs,[3] while at Tullie House the choice of deities to depict on finger rings is attributed to "the gods the owner felt would help them the most".[4] At the Great North Museum a major subsection of the 'Worshipping on the Wall' displays is 'A Choice of Gods' (Appendix B: C7, i), though 'choice' seems to reflect the quantity of displayed deities rather than decision making processes. Colchester Castle's 'Choose your god' interactive (Fig 8.6) invites visitors to select a (classical) deity to 'pray' to (see Chapter 9.2.1.1). This, however, inverts needs-based religious decision making. The selection is made from unlabelled cartoon images, and only afterwards is the chosen deity's sphere of influence revealed, for example Abundantia "for enough food, success making money and good luck", or Mercury "for safe journeys and business success." In contrast, Senhouse has a display focussing on a specific circumstance (going into battle), posing questions which lead to different deities (Fig 8.7). Though the choices are restricted, the combination of personality and circumstance influencing decision-making is valuable, offering a more engaging approach to the concept of religious choice than at many museums.

*Fig 8.6: 'Choose your god' interactive at Colchester Museum. Author's photograph*

[3] 'Worship and tribute'
[4] 'Gods'

*Fig 8.7: 'Offerings to Roman gods' at Senhouse Museum. Author's photograph*

At the Clayton Museum, the 'My Roman Pantheon' interactive represents a technologically sophisticated approach to religious choice through which visitors engage directly with displayed stonework (Fig 8.8). At a replica *aediculum* inside the museum's entrance (Appendix B: A1, ii) the goddess Juno invites visitors to choose three gods that suit their needs. The visitor takes a wooden lamp with three lights around the gallery, presenting it to cards beside certain objects to select that deity, an act which extinguishes a light. Upon returning to Juno, a printed 'oracle' tells them about their chosen deities, one of 289 potential result combinations (Petrelli et al. 2018).[5]

[5] Research into the selections made by visitors is ongoing: pers. comm. Andrew Roberts, English Heritage

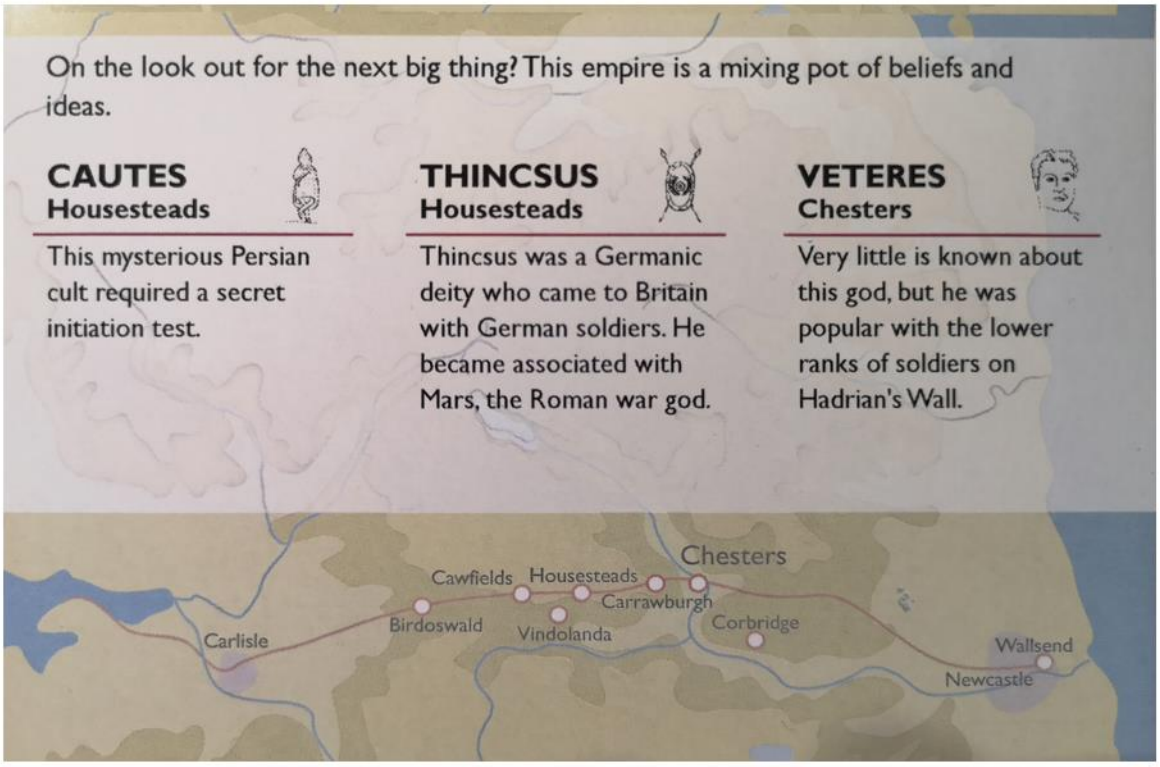



*Fig 8.8: 'My Roman Pantheon' interactive at the Clayton Museum (Chesters). Author's photographs*

This engaging interactive encourages consideration of original objects, the tactility of the lamp and the finality of the extinguished light providing greater impact than the pressing of a button on a screen. The 13 available deities deliberately reflect a range of cultural origins and spheres of influence (Petrelli et al. 2018), though the museum's minimalist interpretation may not enable the choice of deity to be particularly well-informed without prior knowledge. However, the effect of restricted choice was reflected in the curatorial interviewee's comment that "you do see people going to one and then, like, going oh, no, no, no and going to another, so they're very aware they've only got those three lights". The interactive therefore offers fascinating potential for engaging visitors with differing religious options and a valuable impetus for more detailed consideration of the significance of religious stonework.

Finally, at the Roman Army Museum, religious choice is not raised in the displays but more surprisingly through the donations box (Fig 8.9), at which visitors are asked to make an offering to either Minerva, Felicitas or the Penates to support areas of the Vindolanda Trust's work related to their spheres of influence.

*Fig 8.9: 'Offerings to the Gods' donations box at the Roman Army Museum. Author's photograph*

### 8.2.2 Ritual processes

In this section I consider how museums present and contextualise ritual performances. As significant moments of direct communication with divine entities, rituals were a means of self-definition by religious communities and should be considered uniquely creative and potentially influential acts. Revell (2008: 147–148) criticises scholarship which combines idiosyncratic evidence from specific sites to produce homogenised provincial narratives. The extent to which museum displays reflect the individuality and creativity of ritual acts is explored below, firstly through relationships between mortals and the divine (why people conducted certain ritual acts), and then through descriptions of sacrificial processes (what those ritual acts comprised).

#### *8.2.2.1 Contractual religion*

The centrality of reciprocally beneficial contracts with deities (vows) to religious communication in the Graeco-Roman world is presented at a number of museums. However, the prominence given to this foundational concept and the language used to describe it vary. The 'Roman religious contracts' display at NMS states that "the idea of a contract between human beings and the gods was central to Roman religious practice", while the Grosvenor Museum similarly explains that "the Romans thought of their relationship with the gods as being like striking a bargain".[6] At Corbridge, the relationship is presented as people erecting altars and statues and "in return they hoped for good fortune and to have their problems solved",[7] a narrative based on a wish for divine assistance rather than a contractual expectation of it. The Museum of London states that "the Romans had a business-like attitude towards their gods", offerings made "in return for favours requested or granted, or to placate them if the worshipper had caused offence".[8] This highlighting of both proactive and reactive ritual is valuable, though the section title, 'superstition', risks implying to visitors that human/divine relationships were irrational or insincere. The use of 'favour' to define the relationship also appears at Tullie House,[9] Chesters,[10] and Colchester Castle,[11] and similarly risks undermining the seriousness of the vow. The abbreviation VSLM (Chapter 5.3), indicating the fulfilment of

[6] 'Altars'
[7] 'Public Religion'
[8] 'Spirituality or Superstition?'
[9] 'Inscriptions' and 'The Roman Identity' supplementary card
[10] 'Gods from far and wide'
[11] 'Roman religion'

a vow, appears frequently on displayed altars but at no museum is the phrase, though sometimes translated, ever explained.

The reasons why an individual might make a vow or feel the need to make an offering in thanks are suggested at some museums. These include "travelling, combat, business, childbirth" (NMS[12]), "success in battle" (Tullie House[13]), the "preservation of the emperor and the empire" (Senhouse[14]), "making a sea crossing or a cure from an illness" (Grosvenor Museum[15]), for military promotion and business success (Great North Museum[16]), to ensure good fortune and to thank the gods "when things went well" (Verulamium[17]), or to "defeat enemies and protect their own" (British Museum[18]). These demonstrate a general trend towards conceptualising religious interactions as conducted at times of heightened personal risk or to achieve economic or social prosperity. At Tullie House, an inscription records that a merchant, Antonianus, will return to repaint the letters in gold if he is successful,[19] the interpretation wryly observing that "we don't know whether his business was a success, but there is no trace of gold in the lettering today". At the Great North Museum, a 'People Portal' (see Chapter 9.2.2.3) has Lucius Caecilius Optatus discuss the altars he established to ensure his business' ongoing success while he is in the army. Contractual vows could also be entered into on behalf of others, for example family members (Great North Museum, Senhouse, Chesters, NMS), or by freedmen for the welfare of their former masters (Bath, Great North Museum), though in none of these instances are the social implications considered, such as whether the third parties might be aware of the supernatural contracts they were being included in and what obligations it placed on them.

At Bath, contractual relationships with Sulis Minerva (or any of the site's other attested deities), do not feature prominently in the interpretative narrative, despite a number of altars at the site referencing the fulfilment of vows. Objects deposited into the sacred spring (Chapter 7.4.6.4) are described as gifts brought by pilgrims, "probably intended as thank you presents, perhaps for the birth of a child or a recovery from sickness, or a successful harvest" (audio guide 80).

[12] 'Roman religious contracts'
[13] Open display altars
[14] 'Marcus Maenius Agrippa'
[15] 'Altars'
[16] 'Worshipping on the Wall'
[17] 'Rites and Rituals'
[18] 'Pagan Religions'
[19] 'The merchant stone'

The making of vows and their subsequent resolution are therefore reduced to reactive gift-giving. Cursing, considered further below, is presented as an equally unidirectional and rather benign request, "you write a message to the goddess Sulis Minerva asking her to punish the thief" (audio guide 92), rather than the goddess being gifted ownership of the stolen goods or even the thief's health (Chapter 5.4.3).

#### *8.2.2.2 Ritual acts*

This section examines how museums describe formal ritual acts such as sacrifices. Though references to elements of sacrifices are made at numerous museums, complete sacrificial processes are only presented at Tullie House and Senhouse.[20] These lay out a broad sequence of the pouring of liquid offerings, the stunning and killing of the victim, the examining of entrails (haruspicy), the burning of some meat on the altar, and the consumption of remaining meat by participants. The presented processes are procedural rather than experiential, though Senhouse hints at sensory experiences through reference to the speaking of prayers, the playing of music, and the victim having to meet its fate willingly to expiate any guilt associated with its killing. However, as with the burial process discussed above, the sequence is presented as universally applicable and without consideration of why, where or when any specific ritual occurred, what each element achieved in terms of divine communication, who was sanctioned to partake, or how the ritual's efficacy might have been determined.

At Bath, haruspicy is considered through the statue base dedicated by Lucius Marcius Memor. The audio guide (30) explains what haruspicy was and suggests that Memor would also have conducted augury. However, haruspicy is presented as an isolated act, not contextualised within broader ritual processes aside from a generic reference to him examining sacrificed animals. This unique reference to a haruspex in Britain is used to highlight Bath's significance, but also serves as a reminder that the sacrificial processes described at Senhouse and Tullie House, both referencing haruspicy, may not reflect common practices in Britain.

Bath also features a video of a military officer making an offering over an altar to Mars Loucetius (Fig 8.10), the original of which is displayed nearby.[21] The act, set against a neutral

[20] 'Religious finds' and 'Sacrifice'
[21] 'Offering AV'

background, has a (slave?) attendant adjust the orientation of the altar before bringing the dedicant a *patera*. The dedicant pours its contents onto the altar before sprinkling a powdery substance (perhaps *mola salsa*) onto the altar and raising his hands in prayer. Unfortunately, Covid restrictions during the survey visit prevented access to the accompanying interpretation, and it is therefore not possible to comment on how the act is described, such as whether it discusses that the deity being addressed is not Sulis Minerva.

*Fig 8.10: Still from religious offering AV at Bath. Image from The Roman Baths 'Information for visitors with Autism' guide (from https://www.romanbaths.co.uk/)*

Other museums contain illustrations of ritual acts being performed. At Verulamium, rituals to Cybele at the Triangular Temple are described as including music, palm branch bearers (*dendrophori*) and the sacrifice of an ox, though the specificity of such ritual elements to the deity are not considered. The gallery contains a reconstruction (Fig 8.11) of a sacrifice at the temple, though its physical separation from the temple finds and lack of cross-referencing mean that visitors may not associate them (Appendix B: A3, iv). The Grosvenor Museum has a reconstruction drawing of the pouring of a libation to Nemesis (Fig 8.12), the dedicator depicted *capite velato,* with head tilted back and eyes closed; However, the ritual act being

performed is not described and no fire is shown in the altar's focus. At Senhouse, a painting depicts a soldier making an offering on an altar to Jupiter, overseen by two officers and with colleagues observing who have presumably either already undertaken or are about to undertake the same act (Fig 8.13). The act takes place within a wooden structure which seems to contradict the claim made elsewhere in the gallery that "oaths sworn out in the open air, in full view of Jupiter, carried more weight than oaths sworn under a roof".[22] A second altar is being moved into place on logs but it is unclear what purpose this will serve in the ongoing ritual. An interesting parallel to these static depictions is the approach taken at the Musée de la Romanité in Nîmes, France, where an animation is projected onto the face of an altar (Fig 8.14).[23] While this evocatively connects the altar with a ritual performance, the dedicant raising his hands represents the full extent of the depicted ritual.

*Fig 8.11: Sacrificial scene reconstruction at Verulamium Museum. Author's photograph*

[22] 'Marcus Maenius Agrippa'
[23] See Chapter 10.6 for a similar project at the Great North Museum, installed after the surveying for this research was completed

*Fig 8.12: Reconstruction of an offering to Nemesis at the Grosvenor Museum. Author's photograph*

*Fig 8.13: Military ritual scene at Senhouse Museum. Author's photograph*

*Fig 8.14: Projection onto an altar at the Musée de la Romanité, Nîmes. Author's photograph*

Some museums display contemporary depictions of offerings being made, often through deities shown holding *paterae* over altars (Figs 8.15; 7.14), though interpretations do not go beyond simple observations that offerings are being made. The British Museum displays a relief from Vindolanda depicting a giant Mercury holding his money bag over a diminutive figure making an offering (Fig 8.16). The interpretation focuses on describing Mercury's attributes and spheres of influence, suggesting that the dedicant is a temple attendant and the large figure may represent a cult statue. The image might also be seen to show the presence of the deity at the ritual, the power imbalance in the relationship and the dedicator's desires for wealth.

A particularly complex contemporary sacrificial scene appears on the Bridgeness slab (Fig 8.17), which features at five museums: the original at NMS, casts at the Hunterian and Tullie House, and as a photograph at Senhouse and Corinium. Interpretation at these museums is presented in Table 8.2. The reasons for the performance of the ritual are variously described as to bring luck to the army, as thanks for victory, or to ritually cleanse the legion. At NMS and Tullie House the slab's two scenes are connected to suggest a narrative of successful conquest.

*Fig 8.15: Reliefs of deities making offerings over altars. A) Tullie House Museum, B) Tullie House Museum, C) Corinium. Author's photographs*

*Fig 8.16: Relief from Vindolanda of an offering to Mercury at the British Museum. Author's photograph*

However, at every museum the details of the actual ritual act are minimised. The pouring of the libation is only noted at Senhouse, and the sacrificial victims of a pig, sheep and bull (the *suovetaurilia*, indicating that the offering was to Mars) referenced only at the Hunterian. None of the museums discuss the scene's valuable experiential evidence, such as the crowded attendees behind the dedicant, the musician, or the architectural framing.

*Fig 8.17: The Bridgeness slab and detail of the sacrificial scene at the National Museum of Scotland. Author's photographs*

| Museum | Display element | Interpretation |
|---|---|---|
| B2: National Museum of Scotland | 'Dedicated to the Emperor' | "This carved slab commemorates building the most eastern part of the Antonine Wall, which cut Scotland in two. Its grand inscription records the army's dedication of the building work to their Emperor. The theme of the stone is conquest and domination. The left-hand panel depicts the noble Roman soldiers defeating the native tribes, who are shown as naked and cowering barbarians. The right-hand shows a religious ceremony, in which sacrifices are being offered to bring luck to the army. This was a religion very far from native ways." |
| C2: Tullie House Museum | 'Bridgeness slab cast' | "This inscription from Bridgeness is more than just a recording of the section of the Antonine Wall built by the Second Augustan Legion. The panels at each end are Roman propaganda commemorating their triumph over the Caledonians. The left-hand end is the conventional image of the mounted Roman riding over the barbarians. The other end shows a sacrifice by the Legion to the Roman gods for their victory." |
| | | "Details highlighted in red. Close examination of the original Bridgeness stone in the late 1970s showed that the Romans had picked out some details in red paint. These included the letters of the inscriptions. In the left-hand panel blood from both the severed head and the neck of the beheaded Briton and the soldier's cloak in the right-hand panel were also painted red. Further examination revealed traces of other colours presented on the figures." |
| C4: Corinium Museum | 'Religion panel' | "Distance slab from Bridgeness, West Lothian on the Antonine Wall showing a priest performing a ceremony." |
| C5: Hunterian | 'Bridgeness slab' | "This is a cast, made around 100 years ago, of the largest known slab from the Antonine Wall, and the only one recorded from the eastern end. To the left a gruesome scene shows a Roman cavalryman riding down native warriors. One has been beheaded and one has a javelin shaft protruding from his back. On the right we see a sacrificial scene showing the ritual cleansing of the legion with soldiers and a pig, sheep and bull before an altar." |
| D1: Senhouse Museum | 'Sacrifice' | "The Commander pours a libation before the sacrifice." |

*Table 8.2: Interpretation of the Bridgeness slab*

Other brief references are made across various museums to aspects of ritual processes or offerings, such as the use of *paterae* to pour libations (Museum of London, Great North Museum, Bath, Chesters, Tullie House, Senhouse) or that pinecones were sometimes used as altar fuel (Great North Museum, Corinium).[24] Specific offerings are cited as being cakes and sacred liquids (Ashmolean[25]), white oxen (Senhouse[26]) wine, oil or blood (Senhouse[27]), pigs (Tullie House[28]), cockerels (Verulamium[29]), food and wine (Verulamium[30]), milk, wine or oil (Hunterian[31]), wine (NMS[32]), and animals and wine (Tullie House[33]). Senhouse states that "sacrificing to Vulcan involved throwing live fish onto a fire",[34] however such offerings are only recorded in relation to the Vulcanalia festival, and this therefore represents a further universalising of highly contextualised activity as discussed above. The specificity of offerings to certain deities is suggested at Corinium, where sacrifices of "goat, sheep and cockerels" to Mercury at Uley are noted,[35] but in general relationships between specific offerings and deities are not engaged with in museums.

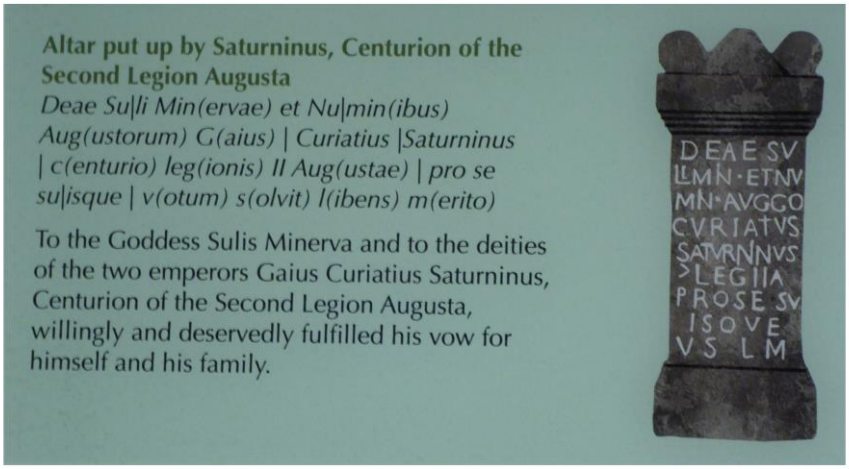
Altars often provide opportunity for discussions of ritual processes, though interpretation frequently prioritises their inscriptions over discussion of their ritual functionality, positioning them as examples of literacy and providing only transcriptions/translations (Fig 8.18). When the ritual functions of altars are addressed, the pouring of offerings into the focus is most commonly highlighted, though usually perfunctorily as part of a physical description of the object rather than contextualised as a ritual act.

At Tullie House (Fig 8.19) and Senhouse, images of altars are used to label their component elements, again focussing on description and terminology rather than functionality and related experiences. Tullie House's statement that "(the Romans) all erected the same type of altar as this was the standard way in which the Gods and Goddesses were worshipped throughout the empire" overlooks that altars are not ubiquitous across the Roman world, nor the only means

[24] Tullie House suggests pinecones being burned as offerings in their own right
[25] 'Worship'
[26] 'Sacrifice'
[27] 'Marcus Maenius Agrippa'
[28] 'A gift to the gods?'
[29] 'Animal Evidence'
[30] 'Household shrine'
[31] 'Firmus altars'
[32] 'Roman religious contracts'
[33] 'Religious finds'
[34] 'Helstrius Novellus panel'
[35] 'Mercury: god of travellers'

of communicating with the divine. Altars were primarily commissioned by high status males, and Fig 8.20 demonstrates that museum displays of altars reflect the northern bias evidenced in the archaeological record.[36] A focus on the consistency of altar forms also disregards the variety inherent between individual altars, such as disparities in size, anepigraphic and solely iconographic examples, and varying accompanying imagery. The presented narrative is therefore a familiar one of widespread 'Roman' homogeneity, rather than one in which each altar and the rituals performed on it are the result of individual and dynamic agency, enacted with broadly established formulae.

A




B

*Fig 8.18: Interpretation of altars. A) Bath, B) Tullie House. Author's photographs*

[36] The single altar at Verulamium (Fig 8.20) is from Cumbria, but the museum does not discuss the lack of altars from Verulamium

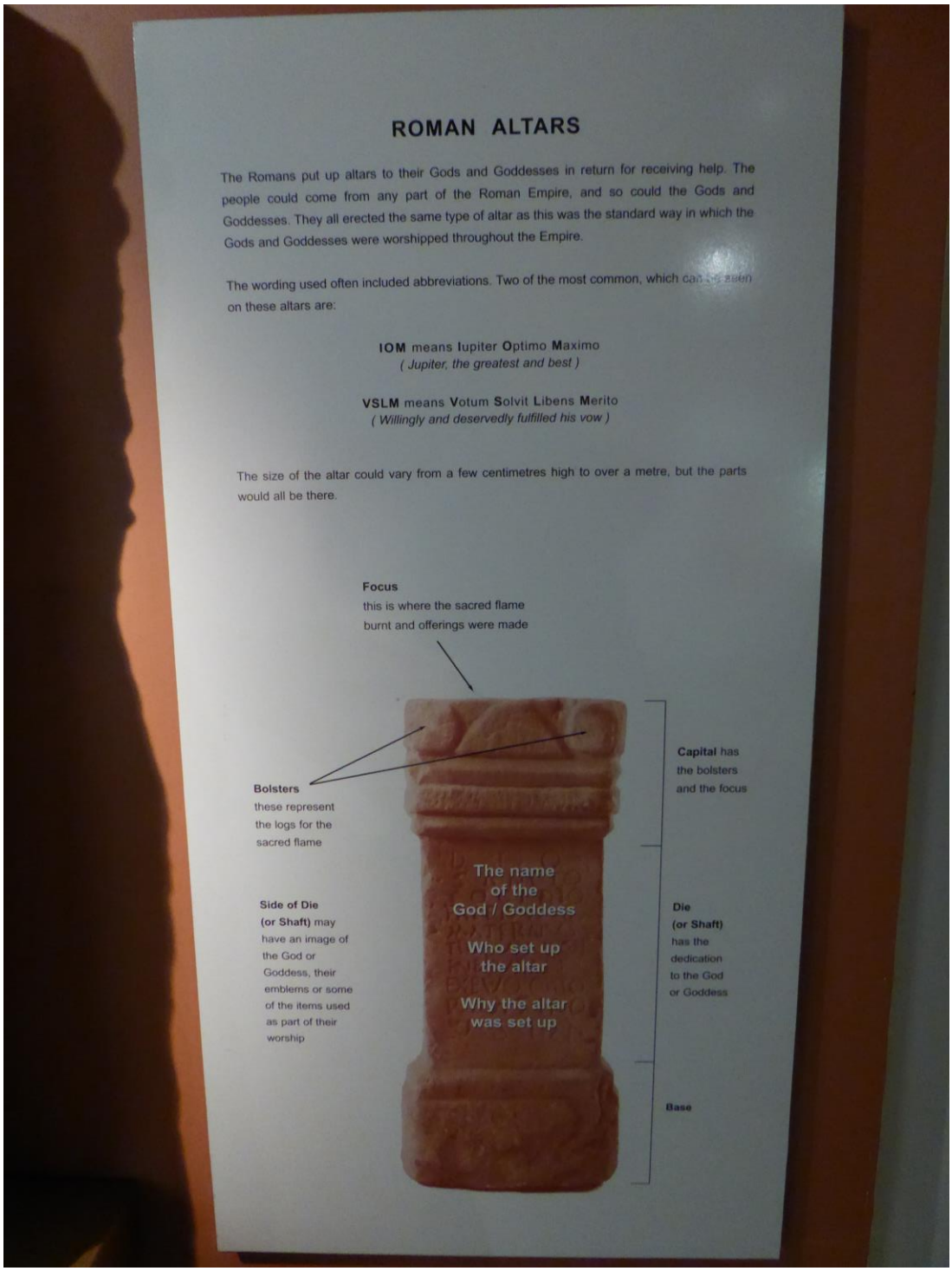



*Fig 8.19: 'Roman altars' panel at Tullie House Museum. Author's photograph*

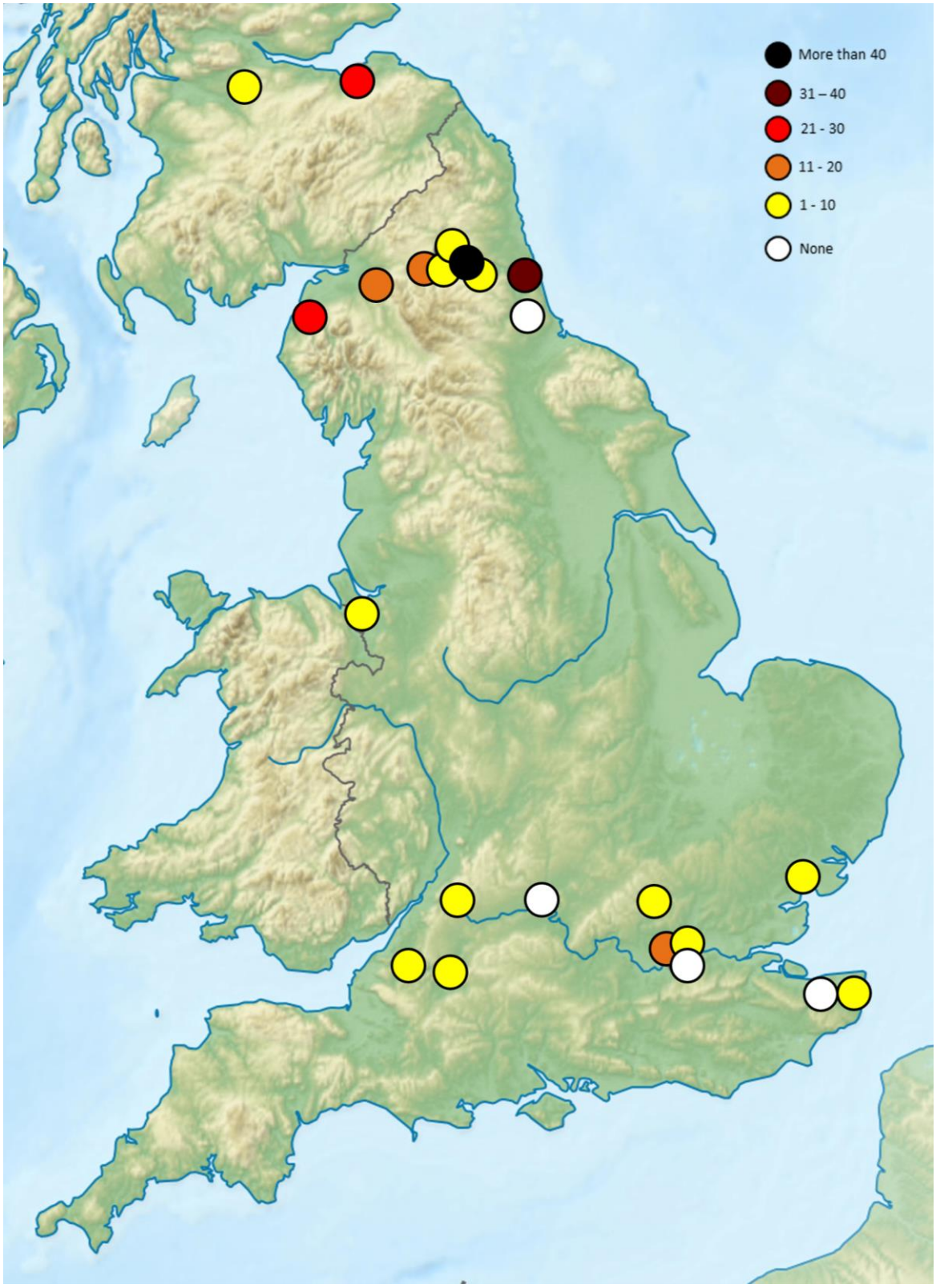



*Fig 8.20: Map showing the number of altars displayed at the surveyed museums*

Secondary imagery on altars represents an important aspect of their social and ritual functionality, yet is overshadowed in displays, often literally as discussed in Chapter 6.2.1.1. Depictions of ritual vessels, priestly regalia, sacrificial animals and other offerings, even deities themselves, are not merely decoration but part of what La Follette (2011) termed “sacred still life”; representations of the ritual processes conducted on the altar and a reminder of them to future users or viewers. Some altars feature particularly complex and detailed imagery which must have been significant to both the dedicant and observers, such as altars from Whitley Castle (Great North Museum), Maryport (British Museum) and Vindolanda (Chesters) (Fig 8.21), though at none of these museums is the unusual imagery discussed.

A B C

*Fig 8.21: Altars with detailed imagery. A) British Museum, B) Great North Museum, C) Clayton Museum. Author’s photographs*

## 8.3 §6: "Social, political, economic and religious power are intrinsically entwined and require constant negotiation as part of both tangible and imagined communities."

The physical integration of religion into displays of various aspects of life in Roman Britain and its manifestation in locations such as homes and baths have been discussed in Chapters 6.2.2 and 7.4. Here I explore the contextualisation of religious activity within social, economic and political networks; the embeddedness of religion within communities. Some museums observe that "Roman religion was all pervading" (Corbridge[37]), or "an important part of everyday life" (Corinium[38]). I explore how the complex reality of that integration is approached through examining relationships between religion and imperial politics; the roles of religious officials; the ongoing social impact and visibility of religious offerings; representations of gender identities through religious acts; and how engagement with economic networks was necessary to procure the objects and materials required for ritual activities.

### 8.3.1 Religion and imperial power

Relationships between religious authority and political power have long been acknowledged across various cultures, and certainly within the Roman world. The ability to communicate with the divine, or control those that do, can greatly influence an individual's social and political authority. Manifestations of that authority, however, can be complex and diverse, and their archaeological identification difficult. For example, Colchester Castle promotes a centralised Roman provincial religious system, stating that though the town ceased to be the provincial capital, it "remained the main religious centre" in Britain,[39] a difficult claim to support archaeologically. Instead of thinking in terms of provincial (i.e. national) religious structures, it is more valuable to consider how power and authority interacted and were expressed at various levels, from the imperial to the local.

The most commonly presented connection between religious and political authority is through the imperial cult, attested on inscriptions at many museums. Central to its interpretation are

[37] 'Caring for the Body and Soul'
[38] 'Religion'
[39] 'Roman Colchester reborn'

concepts of its official status and the divine nature of living or deified emperors. Tullie House[40] and NMS both describe it as a "state religion", with the latter presenting it in more authoritarian terms as demanding that "everyone had to worship the Emperor's power and the major state gods".[41] Wiltshire Museum more passively suggests that emperor worship was "encouraged to promote loyalty to him and the state".[42] At Verulamium,[43] it is valuably suggested that the nature of the cult changed over time, becoming increasingly political and a tool of imperial authority. Uncertainty can be perceived, however, between the comparative divinity of living and deceased emperors. Senhouse distinguishes between deified emperors and the living emperor who "for all his power, was still, during his lifetime, a human being".[44] NMS, in contrast, implies that living emperors possessed divine agency, as they were "believed to have great powers".[45] The Ashmolean states (questionably) that deification was universal, "Roman emperors became gods, usually after their deaths",[46] while the British Museum suggests that though the living emperor was not worshipped, his *numen* (divine spirit) might be.[47] Religious dedications to *Discipulina* are displayed at Tullie House and Corbridge, interpreted at the latter as evidence that "the orders the soldiers were following had divine status".

The strong connections between imperial authority and Christianity, particularly through Constantine, were considered in Chapter 7.3.2, but other emperors also cultivated connections with specific deities, worship of the god intertwined with declarations of political affiliation. Ferris (2021: 33, 72, 101), for example, notes connections between the Severan dynasty and Jupiter Dolichenus, Mars and Fortuna. The Great North Museum also makes this link, suggesting that the worship of Jupiter Dolichenus was promoted as part of "fostering loyalty among the troops".[48] At Corbridge, Sol is specifically identified as reflecting changing religious practices, being "promoted as a supreme Roman deity, raising his profile and importance" (Fig 8.22, top).[49] Elsewhere in the gallery, an inscription to that supreme sun god, Sol Invictus,[50] has the god's name erased. This act is linked to the *damnatio memoriae* of

[40] 'The Roman Identity'
[41] 'Many Gods and Goddesses'
[42] 'Gods and Goddesses'
[43] 'Rites and Rituals'
[44] 'Marcus Maenius Agrippa'
[45] 'Many Gods and Goddesses'
[46] 'Gods and Goddesses'
[47] 'Imperial imagery'
[48] 'Worshipping on the Wall'
[49] 'Timeline'
[50] 'Sol Invictus inscription'

Elagabalus, because "the chiselling out of the god's name might have been damning by association" (Fig 8.22, bottom). The social and religious implications of literally erasing a deity because of its connections with political power, however, are not further explored.

*Fig 8.22: Relief of Sol (top) and inscription with damnatio memoriae (bottom) at Corbridge. Author's photographs*

### 8.3.2 Religious donors

Ritual acts often required some form of financial outlay such as the commissioning of altars or the acquisition of sacrificial animals, objects, incense, wine or altar fuel. Even the offering of already-owned objects such as jewellery or coins required their acquisition and the willingness to relinquish them. Every religious act and offering was the result of individual circumstances and specific need(s), and the British Museum's statement that coins were "an obvious choice for votive offering" is not, therefore, self-explanatory. Who paid for ritual necessities, and what social and spiritual benefits they gained through recognition of their beneficence, are of significance when considering religious activity as embedded within social and economic networks. Here I consider the ongoing social implications of religious acts and will return to the connections between religion and wider economic processes in Chapter 8.3.5.

Euergetism was central to urban development in the Graeco-Roman world, and the extent to which it was present in Roman Britain is relevant to models of elite adoption of Roman culture (Chapter 5). This is represented in museums via interpretation of epigraphic references recording the creation or restoration of religious sites, such as the mithraeum and a temple to the mother goddesses at Rudchester (Great North Museum). An uninterpreted altar at Tullie House evidences a vow to rebuild a derelict structure (see Chapter 6.2.1). At NMS, an inscription records that Julius Crescens established a statue for the guild of worshippers of Mercury at Birrens "from his own pocket".[51] Despite such epigraphic attestation, that the construction or repair of a religious structure could be as much a religious offering as the donation of an object is not explored at any museum.

The financial value of offerings is referenced at a number of museums. At Tullie House, the headline statement "rich worshippers gave expensive gifts to temples" directly associates votive offerings with individuals of wealth and social status. Vindolanda also notes that "commissioning or buying a statue or altar could be expensive" but suggests that such outlay was worthwhile as "on the frontier, it was important to keep the gods on your side".[52] At the Museum of London, religious donors are primarily discussed in connection with the high-quality sculpture from the mithraeum, again associating religious offerings with wealthy

[51] 'Honouring the gods'
[52] 'Worship and tribute'

individuals. If some offerings were expensive, others seem excessively so. The largest altars, for example, are of greater size than practicality demanded while, conversely, some very small altars might have been too small to be easily used and may only be symbolic. Both extremes might be viewed as prioritising the ongoing social visibility of the donor as much as the religious message. At Chesters, however, the thuribles from Coventina's Well are noted for their crudeness, and that as such "they must have cost a fraction of the price of ornately carved altars and suggest a less wealthy devotee". The inscription on one records that the donor, Saturninus Gabinius, made the thurible with his own hands. Though we can only speculate as to how the goddess might have valued such a personal offering, Saturninus thought it important that she knew.

It was a 'district' rather than an individual which provided the funds for the restoration of a London shrine to the Mother Goddesses.[53] However, the Museum of London's interpretation of the inscription does not discuss the community's role in its repair or their public promotion of their achievements. At NMS an altar to Jupiter at Carriden was dedicated "from the villagers" but "organised by Aelius Mansuetus", an individual clearly more significant than the rest. The altar to Vulcan established by the villagers at Vindolanda similarly once also contained the name of a specific leading citizen, now, perhaps ironically, lost. By making their generosity known not only to the deity but to subsequent viewers of the dedication, social as well as religious benefits were potentially wrought. Tullie House emphasises that the creation of inscriptions was an act of public and lasting visibility, stating both that "religious dedications, altars and tombstones allowed people to record their names in a public and permanent fashion", and "dedicating altars was a public statement. The choice of god and the way people who dedicated the stones indicated how they saw themselves".[54] The Hunterian,[55] Housesteads[56] and NMS[57] similarly note that altars represent the creation of a public record, respectively "of duties and vows made", "to record their achievements and document their allegiance", and "as a public sign of a worshipper's belief".

The British Museum contains valuable references to the public display of temple offerings. Visitors are invited to imagine the plaques from Water Newton "pinned up somewhere in the

[53] 'Spirituality or superstition'
[54] 'Language' and 'The Roman Identity'
[55] Monumental sculpture panel, part of 'Altars'
[56] 'Altar'
[57] 'Roman religious contracts'

church, or placed on the altar, giving thanks to God",[58] or the silver plaques from the Ashwell hoard "shimmering in the half-light of a temple building".[59] However, the inscriptions on the Ashwell plaques give greater prominence to the name of the dedicator than the deity, and when displayed the deity's name might even be hidden while the dedicator's remained visible. The excavators suggest that such personal aggrandisement was "an integral part of the inscribed vow process" at the site (Jackson and Burleigh 2018: 23, 133), yet the museum interpretation inverts this, centring the deity, as discussed in Chapter 8.2.1.2, and rendering the dedicators almost invisible.

Displays of votive plaques and leaves at temples are also referenced at the Great North Museum, Corinium and Colchester Castle. At the latter, however, a curse tablet is included among the votive plaques, presented as if created with the same ritual intent, "to show that the person had fulfilled their obligations to a god in return for their favour".[60] The plaques are transcribed but the donors are not discussed, despite including the unusual example of a Caledonian dedicating to a Romano-Celtic deity (Mars Medocius of the Campeses) on behalf of the victory of the emperor Alexander (Bagnall-Smith 2008: 154);[61] a fascinating public statement of identity and political affiliation conducted through the medium of religious dedication.

At Bath, a number of altars and statue bases are noted as having originally been set up in the temple courtyard and yet reconstructions of the courtyard (Fig 8.23) portray a clean architectural space containing only the main altar and statue-topped 'haruspex stone'. A vision of the space cluttered with dedications from previous visitors, including to deities other than Sulis Minerva, is therefore rejected in favour of an interpretation in which only a few 'official' interventions are present. This interpretation seems to reflect presuppositions of a Roman imposition of order and structure onto religious practices, as discussed in Chapter 7.2.2.1.

[58] 'Pagan Religion'
[59] 'Water Newton Treasure'
[60] 'Roman religion'
[61] A replica of an original in the British Museum

*Fig 8.23: Reconstructions of the temple courtyard at Bath. Author's photographs*

### 8.3.3 Religious knowledge and authority

The importance of religious knowledge to the creation and maintenance of practices is a significant aspect of the holistic religious landscape. Here I discuss how museums interpret individuals possessing such knowledge, their social positioning, religious roles and responsibilities, and regalia. As discussed in Chapter 3.3.3, religious knowledge and authority was wielded by a range of individuals, and in the discussions below I use 'priests' and 'religious officials' as non-gendered terms for holders of formal positions of religious authority, and 'religious practitioners' as a holistic term to define anyone possessing religious knowledge.

Almost no consideration is given in museums to defining priesthoods in Roman Britain, or how they might differ from the roles and status of modern religious officials. Canterbury Museum, for example, contextualises priests within a modern class framework: "there would also have been shopkeepers, labourers, servants, and professionals such as doctors, teachers, clerks, magistrates and priests".[62] This implies that priesthoods were a socially respected and specially educated career path, akin to that of the modern Christian clergy. The Great North Museum, in its interpretation of an altar to Nemesis, suggests that "not all cults had a professional priesthood but most had someone to carry out the rituals", again noting priesthoods as specialist professions, but suggesting that religious knowledge might also be held by others, a perspective

[62] 'Everyday Life and Death in Roman Canterbury'

perhaps connected to the museum's interpretation of the cult of Mithras which notes that Lion grade initiates were responsible for tending altar flames.[63]

The relative roles and responsibilities of worshippers and religious officials are central to understanding individual ritual experiences, and the reconstruction drawing at Corinium (Fig 8.24), discussed in Chapter 6.2.1.1 for its prominent positioning, is of interest in this regard. The figure about to perform a ritual with bowl and jug is clearly the centre of attention, though whether he represents a priest or a dedicant is unclear, especially as the older figure behind him is also *capite velato.* That the central figure might not be a priest may surprise visitors with Judeao-Christian expectations of religious authority, yet the lack of interpretation means such assumptions remain unchallenged. A cartoon at Senhouse depicting a shocked priest (Fig 8.25) indicates through his attire and demeanour that he holds special status and possesses authority over, or at least cares about, the correct performance of rituals.

*Fig 8.24: Reconstruction drawing of a ritual scene at Corinium Museum. Author's photograph*

[63] Though this is presented as a practical task rather than connected to the ritual connotations between that grade and fire (Rubio 2021: 185)

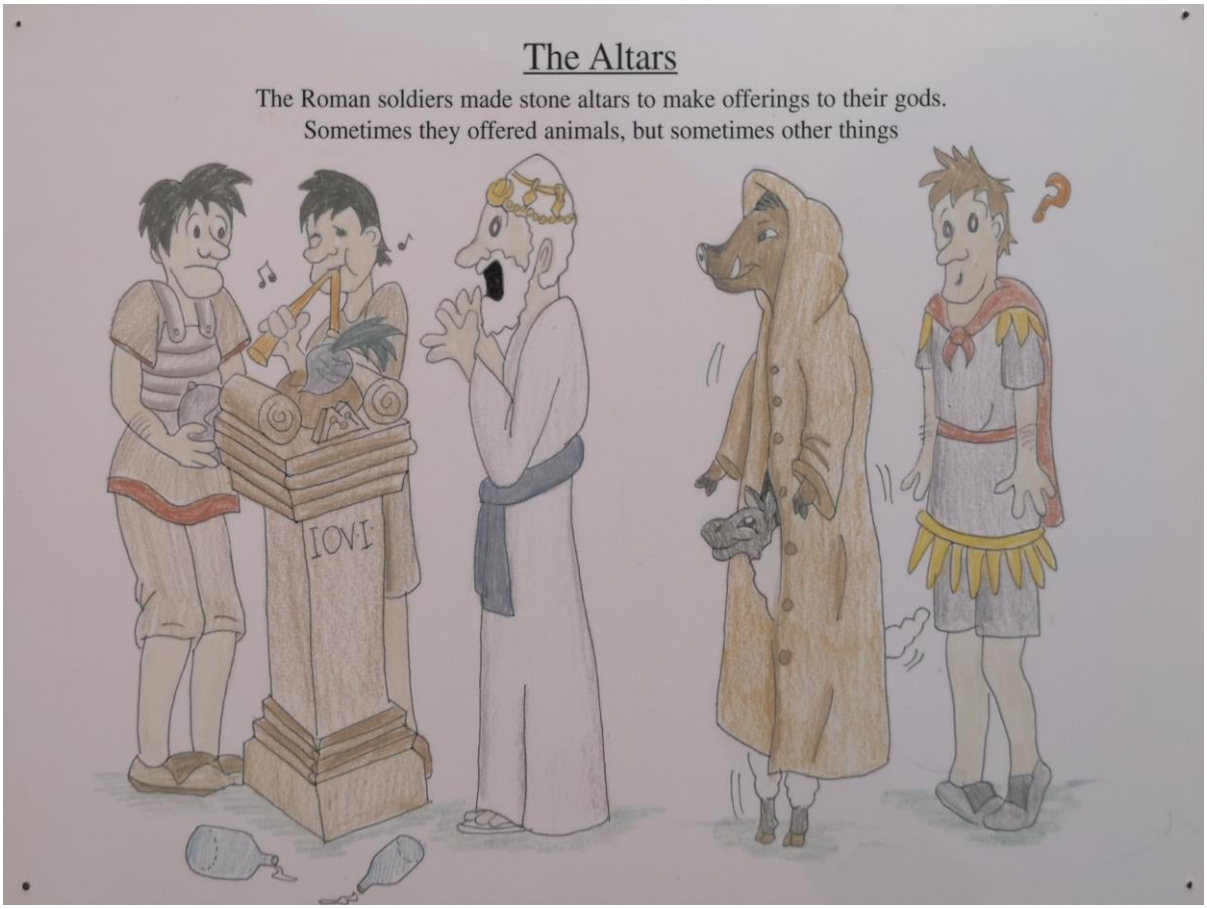



*Fig 8.25: 'The Altars' cartoon at Senhouse Museum. Author's photograph*

Activities conducted by religious officials are briefly referenced at some museums, such as conducting sacrifices (Tullie House, Canterbury) or receiving offerings at temples (Canterbury). That religious officials would assist worshippers in the preparation of inscriptions is hinted at Wiltshire Museum,[64] whereas at Bath the temple complex is presented as requiring multiple staff members, with religious officials particularly significant in the creation of curse tablets: "its safer to actually employ a scribe who will use the right language on the curse because obviously you don't want to say the wrong thing and upset the goddess" (audio guide 92) (Fig 8.26). However, as discussed in Chapter 5.4.3.2, it is likely that religious officials were involved in guiding the formulation of curses rather than actually writing them.

[64] 'Reading and Writing'

*Fig 8.26: Writing of a curse tablet AV at Bath. Author's photograph, taken during a previous visit in 2015*

It is at Bath where an archaeologically-attested religious official is most prominently encountered, in the form of the chief priest Gaius Calpurnius Receptus. Visitors first encounter him in a video projection leading a procession,[65] seemingly the same one featured in the nearby temple model (Fig 8.27A, B), and he is the first character they meet when they subsequently enter the religion-focussed displays, through another video projection beside his tombstone (Appendix B: D7, v). Here a more pastoral priestly role is implied (though see Chapter 3.3.3) as Receptus speaks to, perhaps even consoles, a washerwoman (Fig 8.27C) before ushering her away as the haruspex Lucius Memor approaches and the two hold a lengthy but inaudible conversation (Fig 8.27D).

Receptus' uniquely altar-shaped tombstone (Fig 8.27D) is interpreted as reflecting his widow's pride in his role,[66] which is described as "(leading) religious ceremonies in the temple and its courtyard". It also notes that he may "have been the leading official in the walled area of Aquae Sulis", a notion that the audio guide (15) develops: "Gaius Calpurnius Receptus was a highly respected figure in the town. As well as being a priest, he was probably a senior magistrate and a leading figure on the Ordo, the town council". The social power gained through religious

[65] 'Ritual Procession AV'
[66] Esposito (2019: 118) argues that the tombstone reflects her status claims as much as honouring her husband

authority is also reflected in the interpretation of the haruspex, whose influential proclamations made them “powerful people, these priests. Battles were won and lost on their advice” (audio guide 30).

*Fig 8.27: Gaius Calpurnius Receptus at Bath. Author’s photographs*

Priestly regalia is, unsurprisingly due to its rarity, only displayed at a restricted number of museums. The headdress from the spring at Bath has been discussed previously (Chapter 7.4.6.4) for the suggestion that it may have accidentally fallen from the priest's head, but is otherwise uninterpreted. The tin mask also found in the spring "may have been carried in procession by a priest".[67] The British Museum displays the two headdresses from Hockwold, identifying them as "part of priestly regalia" and describing the imagery on them, but not otherwise engaging with the priests who might have worn them, or their deposition. Similarly, the two chain headdresses from Stony Stratford, one prominently mounted (Fig 8.28), are simply described as "probably worn by priests".

*Fig 8.28: Headdress from Stony Stratford at the British Museum. Author's photograph*

[67] 'Religious mask'

A specific priesthood which attracts much attention, indeed dominating perceptions of the cult (Esposito 2019: 58), are the *Galli* of Cybele, infamous for their ritual self-castration. A pair of bronze 'clamps' found in the Thames are traditionally interpreted as being connected with such a ritual, and interpretations of both the original in the British Museum and a replica in the Museum of London present this narrative. Alternatively, Heeren (2009) has convincingly argued that such objects, though undoubtedly possessing some ritual significance through their iconography, are better interpreted as twitches for calming horses.

Druids are a priestly class which is prominent in the popular imagination and supported by ancient literature. However, they do not feature prominently in displays, perhaps reflecting narratives of a Roman Britain more connected to the continent than its prehistoric past (Chapter 7) and a lack of tangible supporting material culture. Wiltshire Museum's Iron Age displays describe druids as ritual leaders possessing social status, healing knowledge and having connections with human sacrifice, but they are entirely absent from the Roman gallery. At Senhouse they are seen in military terms, the "native priests" who opposed the Roman invasion and "were not allowed to survive as an organised force".[68] This eradication narrative has been challenged by Webster (1999), who argued instead for changing social and religious druidic roles in Britain and Gaul under Rome. The occupant of Colchester's 'Doctor's grave' (Chapter 7.4.4) is interpreted as a possible druid due to the "mixture of magic and medicine", but what a druid actually was is left to visitors' preconceptions of that term. As an example of changing manifestations of religious authority in the wake of the Roman invasion, druids might be expected to feature more prominently in religious narratives. Overall, religious knowledge is almost exclusively considered through the lens of priests and supporting officials connected with temple sites. No consideration is given to other, 'unofficial' practitioners, such as Gordon's charismatic mystagogues, or those in communities that might offer valuable advice on specific practices or have knowledge of the production of magical amulets (Chapter 3.3.3).

### 8.3.4 Religion and gender identity

In this section I explore gender in interpretations of religious activity, specifically how men and women might have differed or been restricted in their religious needs, choices and lived experiences, and the representation of women as worshippers and their offerings. Research into

[68] 'Horned gods'

transgender individuals in Roman Britain is a developing field (Sherratt and Moore 2016), but increasingly suggests some fluidity of gender presentation, such as the Catterick *gallus* (Pinto and Pinto 2013) or burials such as the Harper Road person (Redfern *et al.* 2017).

The Museum of London notes that the cult of Cybele was popular with women,[69] though suppositions that female deities might only be of religious interest to women is challenged at the British Museum,[70] where it is highlighted that the mother goddesses, Isis and Cybele were also worshipped by men. The cult of Mithras is the most commonly encountered example of gender restricted religious practices, its male-only membership presented as a defining characteristic (Chapter 7.3.1.1, Tables 7.2-7.4). While the existence of female initiates has been argued (e.g. David 2000), consensus remains that the cult was predominantly male-only. Ferris (2021: 85–86) suggests that actively anti-feminine narratives within the cult's mythology may even have contributed to its obsolescence. Masculine narratives dominate expectations of cult activity, for example at the Great North Museum a statue of a mother goddess from the Carrawburgh mithraeum is described as "unexpected" as "Mithraism was a male cult",[71] and an altar from the Housesteads mithraeum dedicated "on behalf of an extended family", is "unusual, as Mithraism was confined to male worshippers".[72] Rather than expressing surprise at such evidence, however, it may be more valuable to challenge perceptions of what membership of a 'male-only' cult meant to its community.

The dedication of two altars, to Imperial Virtue and the goddess Juno, by a woman named Hermione forms the focus of a panel at Senhouse.[73] The interpretation suggests that her choice of deities demonstrates her adherence to "mainstream religion" (Chapter 7.2.1.1), and that she must have possessed independent wealth to have commissioned the altars on her own behalf. The religious freedom of women is considered through the statement that "usually, women relied on the head of their family for public demonstrations of faith". Though Juno is often connected with women and childbirth (e.g. at the Museum of London), the Senhouse panel valuably highlights that Hermione's altar is the only dedication to the goddess by a woman from Britain. The possibility that women may have beseeched Juno in less visible ways than through the male-dominated practice of altar dedication (Hope 2016) is not explored.

[69] 'Spirituality or Superstition'
[70] 'Mother Goddesses'
[71] 'The Cult of Mithras'
[72] 'Housesteads Mithraeum'
[73] 'Hermione, Daughter of Quintus'

The independent religious agency of women is further demonstrated at the Great North Museum through the (unnamed) wife of Fabius setting up an altar to the nymphs after being forewarned through a dream (discussed further below). Also, at Tullie House, an altar to the nymphs is displayed, established by a mother and daughter, Vettia Mansueta and Claudia Turianilla, following a successfully completed vow. However, the altar forms part of the uninterpreted 'stonemason's yard' display, leaving visitors unaware of these women and their joint religious needs. Another dedication at Tullie House is a statue base to the mother goddesses and fates, established "for the welfare of Sanctia Gemina",[74] though whether erected by Sanctia herself or on her behalf, and why she required divine intervention, remain unknown. At Bath, a well-dressed woman and a younger, more plainly dressed woman (an attendant or slave?) are shown admiring the temple pediment (Fig 8.29) and seem to be visiting independently. Curse tablets at Bath, the Museum of London and the British Museum demonstrate that women could be both the creators and the targets of curses.

*Fig 8.29: Still from temple courtyard AV showing female visitors. Author's photograph*

[74] 'Religious finds'

Direct relationships between ritual offerings and the gender of donors are presented at some museums. The Ashwell hoard at the British Museum (Chapter 7.4.6.1) contains objects inscribed with both male and female names, the prominent silver statuette of Senuna being dedicated by Flavia Cunoris. The gold jewellery from the hoard, though not bearing inscriptions, is interpreted as the donation of a "wealthy female worshipper". Similarly, at Bath, items of jewellery such as rings, brooches and beads "were probably thrown into the spring by women", and jewellery offered to Coventina was originally attributed to "love-sick damsels" (Chapter 7.4.6.5). While such jewellery may represent female fashions, it need not be presupposed that they were offered by women any more than other objects might be assumed to have been given by men. Care must be taken not to apply overly simplistic gender categories to religious offerings. After all, the deities being offered to in these instances were themselves female.

The small altar placed outside the door of Vindolanda's temple of Jupiter Dolichenus has been mentioned previously (Chapter 6.2.1.1, Fig 6.12) with regard to its positioning. The fragmentary inscription suggests that it was dedicated by a woman named Alexandra (Birley and Birley 2010: 38–39). That the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus was an available religious option for women is supported by other inscriptions across the empire including an altar from Birrens by a woman named Magunna (NMS[75]). A jet finger ring from the Vindolanda temple may also suggest a female presence (Birley and Birley 2010: 34). However, the interpretation does not question why any altar, let alone one dedicated by a female worshipper, would be so diminutive in both size and positioning, or how it might have been ritually activated in that location. The positioning of the temple within the fort is unusual and also raises questions of access by non-military personnel, whether Alexandra's worship of Jupiter Dolichenus related to military connections, and whether she could have partaken in activities such as ritual feasting.

At Tullie House, interactive terminals invite visitors to help 'Octavia' get ready to visit a temple (Fig 8.30), However, the focus is solely on clothing and the temple visit does not form part of the activity. Though expectations of respectability at the temple might be inferred through her wealthy attire, there is no consideration of the suitability of certain clothing for ritual activity. The same terminals have 'jigsaw' activities, and here Octavia says that she has broken one of

[75] 'Exotic and familiar gods'

the temple statues, though the three objects presented (Fig 8.30) do not overtly relate to religious contexts.

*Fig 8.30: Interactive terminal at Tullie House Museum. Author's photographs*

### 8.3.5 Religious activity and economic networks

This section explores how museums engage with the economic networks required to facilitate religious activity. The acquisition of materials and animals for sacrifice, the commissioning of altars and reliefs, and the manufacture of votive objects all required interaction with production and procurement processes, and all had financial implications. A general dearth of religious integration into narratives of production, manufacture and trade was observed in Chapter 6.2.2, in terms of both the rituals involved in the performance of those activities and the creation and sale of items for religious use.

The processes through which, potentially exotic, sacrificial animals, incense or other offerings were acquired is rarely considered in museums. Senhouse references the post-sacrificial distribution of meat through butchers' shops, connecting the religious and secular trades (Chapter 8.2.2), and Verulamium considers sacrifice as a potential 'use' of cockerels (Fig 8.31). The Museum of London's flagon inscribed 'LONDINI AD FANUM ISIDI' ('London, at the temple of Isis') is interpreted as evidence of the existence of the temple and perhaps an offering, but not as representing the possible acquisition of liquids for the temple's use.

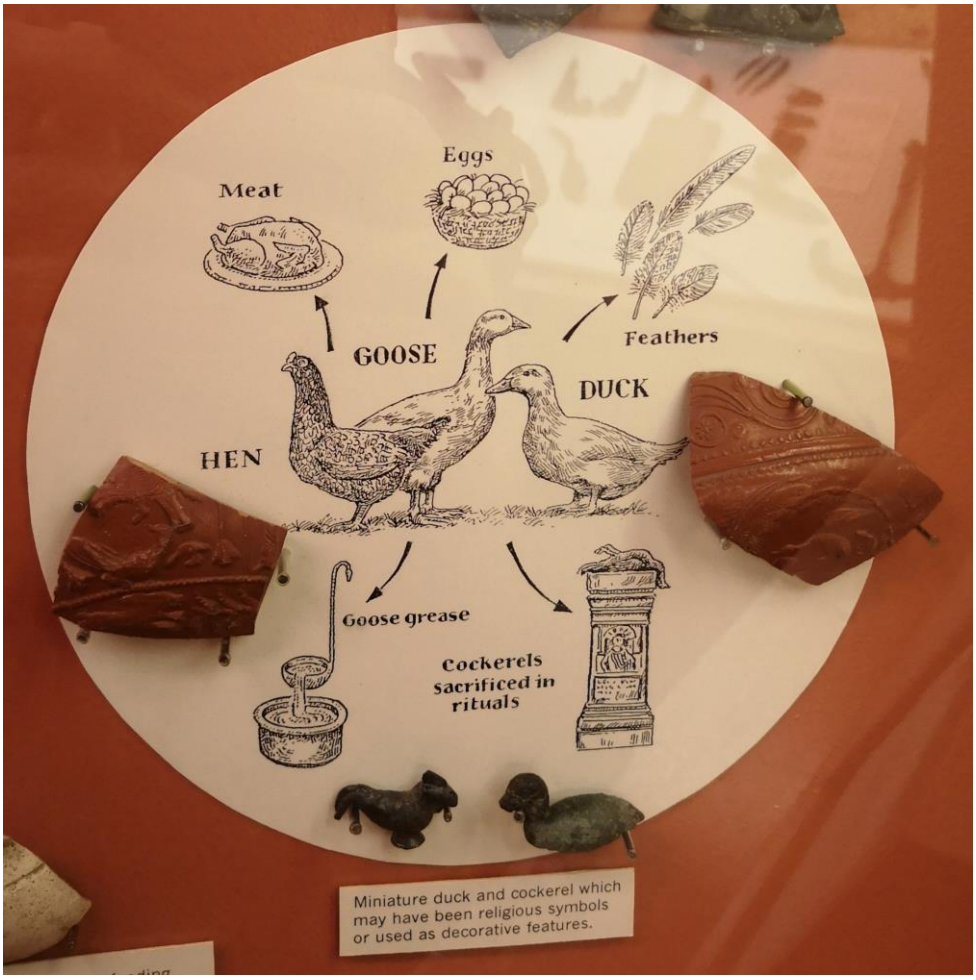



*Fig 8.31: Uses of birds at Verulamium Museum. Author's photograph*

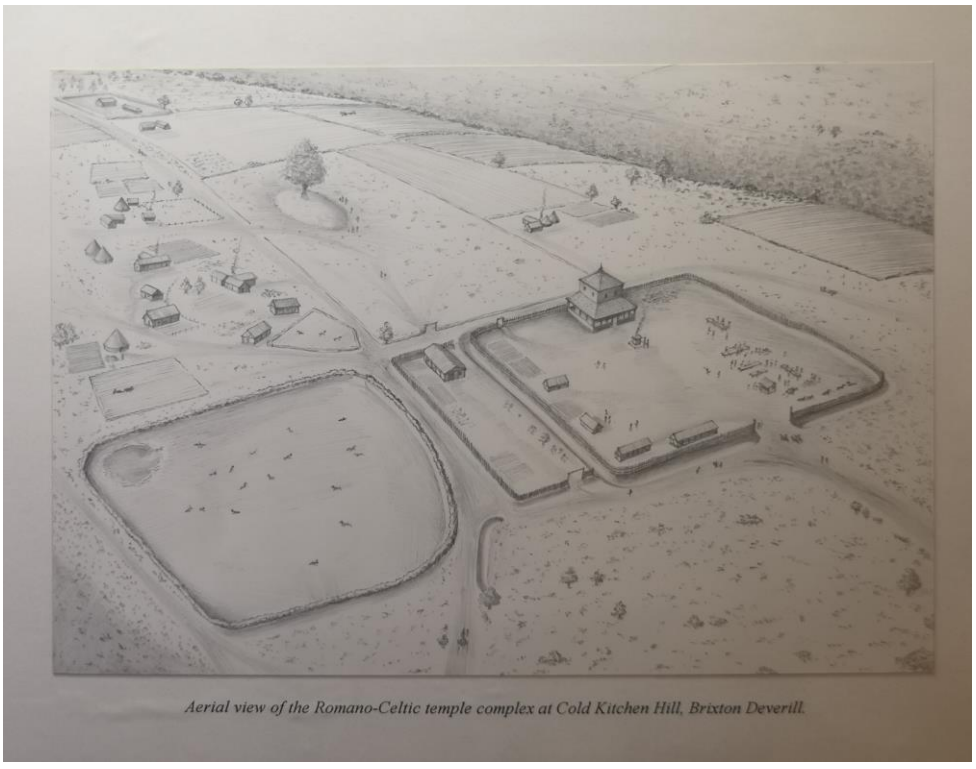



*Fig 8.32: Reconstruction drawing of the Cold Kitchen Hill temple at Wiltshire Museum. Author's photograph*

Commercial activity at temples is valuably referenced at Wiltshire Museum, such as that the Nettleton Shrub complex "included an iron foundry, bronze and pewter works and a water-powered mill". A reconstruction drawing of the Cold Kitchen Hill temple includes a bustling market area within the *temenos* (Fig 8.32), and it is suggested that the quantity of bead necklaces found mean that they were a particularly popular offering, manufactured at the site for sale to worshippers. In contrast, discussions of the Uley temple complex at the British Museum and Corinium Museum reference the presence of shops alongside guest accommodation, but do not directly connect these to the sale of religious offerings.

The manufacturing of religious objects is subtly suggested to the observant visitor at Verulamium, where an image of the museum's Venus statuette is used to demonstrate lost wax casting,[76] though without explanation of the object or its use (Fig 8.33). The same display contains crucibles from gold and silversmithing close to the theatre and theatre temple (see Chapter 7.4.2). These are twice referenced as being located close to the theatre, though the workshop's products might easily have served the temple. At Bath, the high tin content of the curse tablets (Chapter 5.4.3) suggests connections between their manufacture and local industry (Gordon 2015: 152; Cousins 2020: 134–136), but this is not considered in the museum.

*Fig 8.33: Bronze casting process at Verulamium Museum. Author's photograph*

[76] 'Metalworking'

The British Museum suggests, due to mistakes on votive plaques in the Water Newton treasure, that the commissioning of religious objects might have caused problems for craftspeople: "in many cases individual letters are reversed or misunderstood, and we may infer that the craftsperson was not familiar with the Greek alphabet". Such mistakes raise fascinating questions. Perhaps the commissioner of the plaque was equally illiterate in Greek? Was absolute accuracy perceived as crucial for the Christian God to understand the message? Did the craftsperson refuse to correct the errors? These all reflect the practical and economic relationships between the production of objects and the affordances required for their subsequent religious functionality. That restricted religious knowledge might be deliberately denied to craftspeople is suggested at the Great North Museum, where it is noted that while military ranks are recorded on altars to Mithras, cultic ranks are not, as "the stone mason may not have been an initiate".[77]

The creation of religious stonework is considered in some detail at Senhouse, where a panel explains that altars were made by soldiers excused certain duties due to their skill.[78] It references the quarrying of the stone, that otherwise 'normal' stoneworking tools were used, and that designs were pre-planned. An unfinished altar is displayed at Tullie House, bearing completed carvings of a mother goddess and a *genius* on the sides, but an unworked face (Fig 8.34). Though the interpretation references its unfinished nature, the processes by which altars might be uniquely commissioned or purchased pre-formed and then personalised, are not explored. This altar might have been contextualised in the 'stonemason's yard' display, containing various uninterpreted items of, often religious, stonework, including the mother and daughter dedication discussed above. The concept of the display offers interesting potential to explore the commissioning and creation of religious sculpture.

[77] 'Altars to Mithras (Carrawburgh)'
[78] 'Making an altar'

*Fig 8.34: Unfinished altar at Tullie House Museum. Author's photograph*

An archaeologically-attested craftsman of particular significance is Sulinus, recorded at both Corinium[79] and Bath.[80] The former displays an altar set up by him to the mother goddesses, discovered close to reliefs of those deities at Ashcroft (Fig 7.7), a site once suggested to have been his workshop but more likely a temple (see Darvill and Gerrard 1994: 72). While that altar's inscription does not note his trade, on a statue base at Bath, also dedicated to the mothers and set up in the temple courtyard, he describes himself as a 'sculptor'. The Bath statue base is topped with a drawing of one of the Ashwell mother goddesses (Fig 7.7, left),[81] and the interpretation suggests that Solinus may have had workshops at both Bath and Cirencester. However, there is no consideration that other religious dedications at Bath might have been his products, or that he may have been an important figure in the temple community's networks.

[79] 'Artists and Artisans panel' and 'Local Cults'
[80] 'Sulinus panel'
[81] 'Stonemason AV'

## 8.4 §7: "Embodied, sensory and emotional stimuli were central to individual lived religious experiences and the creation and maintenance of religious identities, communities and relationships."

The range of sensory stimuli inherent in ritual acts is complex, and their contextualisation fundamental to understanding the lived experiences of participants. This section explores museum engagement with such religious sensory experiences, broadly defined to include senses such as proprioception, the emotions, and the embodied use of objects.

Due to its unique multisensory presentation of a Romano-British ritual space, the visitor experience at the Bloomberg Mithraeum, which opened in November 2017, is worthy of special initial discussion.

### 8.4.1 The Bloomberg Mithraeum

> *"We wanted it to be atmospheric but not creepy, we wanted it to be dark and mysterious but not scary or intimidating for visitors."* (Chiles 2019)

The visitor experience is spread across three levels (Appendix B: D6). Visitors first encounter an object wall featuring finds from the wider Bloomberg site excavations. Sensory religion is referenced through a pair of bells, the iPad-based interpretation stating that alongside other functionality they were "used in religious contexts", their sound "thought to frighten off evil spirits". However, the interpretation does not connect them with the mithraeum.

The mezzanine level provides contextualisation for the cult and temple (Chapter 7.3.1.1) using low lighting and ghostly projections (Fig 8.35A). The immersive audio which dominates the space and is presented by leading academics, makes several references to sensory experiences. Eberhard Sauer observes that, with regard to initiation rituals, "light effects, probably sound effects, as well as the use of incense played a role, so it would have been a very thought-provoking atmosphere in these very small windowless temples". Innes Klenner invites visitors to imagine a dark room, lit by lamps and torches and filled with smoke and incense, where a cramped crowd would have witnessed masked performers telling the cult's narrative myths: a powerful and emotive scene. Hugh Bowden's later comment that rituals might have been

frightening events, involving being blindfolded and threatened with a sword, add to the atmospheric tension evoked.

In the temple (Fig 8.35B), visitors are presented with multisensory interpretation through smoky haze, dramatic light, and sound, without any immersion-destroying interpretative panels. Chiles (2019) reported that the inclusion of smells was considered, but ultimately rejected, and Hunter Crawley (2020: 443) states that she specifically suggested burnt pinecone, roasting meat and damp to the designers.

The audio presentation, lasting c.3½ minutes and conducted entirely in Latin, has the following sequence:

1. Horn, *cistrum* and tympanum crescendo [82]
2. Call and response greetings between the Pater and different cult initiate grades with tympanum between. Selected dramatic lighting and smoke haze
3. Tympanum crescendo and horn solo. Lights fade and modern tauroctony lights up
4. Sounds of general chatter (feasting)
5. Pater toasts Mithras followed by cheers and clinking of cups
6. Pater quotes excerpt from Kipling poem 'A Song to Mithras', which fades out during reading. Tympanum and horn sound
7. Lights rise

The lighting effects include the illumination of the tauroctony and the casting of 'sheets' of light to represent the walls (Fig 8.35B), an effect enhanced by smoke. Though atmospheric, these effects do not attempt to simulate the specific lighting evidenced in mithraea, such as pierced altars and reliefs (discussed further in Chapter 8.4.2.1), or specifically placed torches and lamps.

The feasting activity represented, though not overtly highlighted, within the temple experience is discussed in the mezzanine interpretation. Richard Gordon centres the sense of taste when he describes the temple as "essentially a dining room", and the temple model interpretation

[82] Instruments are listed in transcripts

A

B

*Fig 8.35: Interior of the Bloomberg Mithraeum. A) Mezzanine level, B) Temple. Author's photographs*

notes the consumption of "chicken and wine along with honey", accompanied by a drawing of ritual feasting (Fig 7.18).

The use of Latin (the mezzanine level includes a transcript) effectively serves to simultaneously immerse and separate the visitor from the ritual scene. The ritual should, after all, remain unfamiliar, and for the visitor to feel like an interloper is a useful cognitive challenge for perceptions of the universality of religion and ritual activity. The reading of the anachronistic Kipling poem, beyond that author's difficult colonial connotations (see e.g. Walsh 2020), enables more evocative Latin to echo across the space rather than accurately reflecting the cult's rituals.

The immersive and evocative temple experience has been well received by general and scholarly audiences (Chiles 2019). The mithraeum was the 4th most frequently mentioned site on my online survey question (Q18, Appendix D) asking respondents to name successful displays. An explanatory response to another question (Q22) elaborated:

> *"The London Mithraeum stands out as a venue that successfully attempts to capture the ancient sensory experience of visiting a shrine, whilst not ignoring the distance of time or the importance of the archaeology itself."*

The mithraeum experience is unique in its portrayal of Roman religion, particularly for visitors able to apply the contextualising mezzanine floor interpretation to their temple experience. For others, the experience is likely to be memorable but perhaps less challenging to preconceptions of universal ritual activity grounded in an authoritative priest (Pater) leading a congregation in a call and response form of worship. In addition, the ritual presented is not a defined act, conducted at a specific time with specific purpose and attended by specific people, but representative of any (and therefore every) ritual act conducted at the temple.

## 8.4.2 Light and colour

### *8.4.2.1 Ritual light*

The presence of light in religious spaces and as a part of the ritual sensorium is acknowledged at several museums, though often in the form of unspecific observations such as that "during religious ceremonies lamps would be lit" (Roman Army Museum[83]) or "use of light was an important part of rituals" (Chesters[84]). At the Great North Museum,[85] though the tending of flames in mithraea is highlighted, lights and candlesticks are presented as primarily practical, while the British Museum's interpretation of an iron candlestick from Uley states that while such objects "may have been functional, it is possible they had a votive purpose". Ambient lighting is therefore generally presented as practical rather than a deliberately manipulated element of ritual sensorial assemblages. At Vindolanda,[86] small lamps are usefully contextualised as being lit during prayers around an altar or statuette, and at the Museum of London, lighting in the London mithraeum added "to the sense of drama and mystery".[87]

The altar dedicated by Marcus Simplicius Simplex at the Carrawburgh mithraeum (Great North Museum) depicts Sol, his radiate crown pierced to enable light from a lamp placed behind to shine through (Fig 6.11).[88] Such dramatic and technically complex stonemasonry would have been specially commissioned to create specific theatrical ritual effects, perhaps when the altar was used for offerings or during storytelling. Though its figurative nature has influenced its display relationship with other altars from the mithraeum (Chapter 6.2.1.1), the performative facet of the design is not referenced in the interpretation. Ferris (2021: 83) also suggests that the Housesteads birth of Mithras relief, displayed nearby (Fig 6.14), was designed to produce a similar effect. As noted previously, however, reconstruction drawings of mithraea interior are often well-lit, undermining the role of dramatic lighting (Chapter 7.3.1.1; Fig 7.18).

At Bath, it is proposed that a sacred flame existed within the temple which "must have been a magnificent sight. A life-sized figure of the goddess rising up behind the flames glowing in

[83] 'Religion'
[84] 'Small objects'
[85] 'The Cult of Mithras'
[86] 'Vindolanda'
[87] 'Inside the temple'
[88] An effect also evidenced on an altar from Inveresk (Hunter *et al.* 2016)

their mysterious light" (audio guide 90). The periodic maintenance that this flame and its smoky output required to the gilded statue of Sulis Minerva (Fig 8.36) is considered further in Chapter 9.4.2.

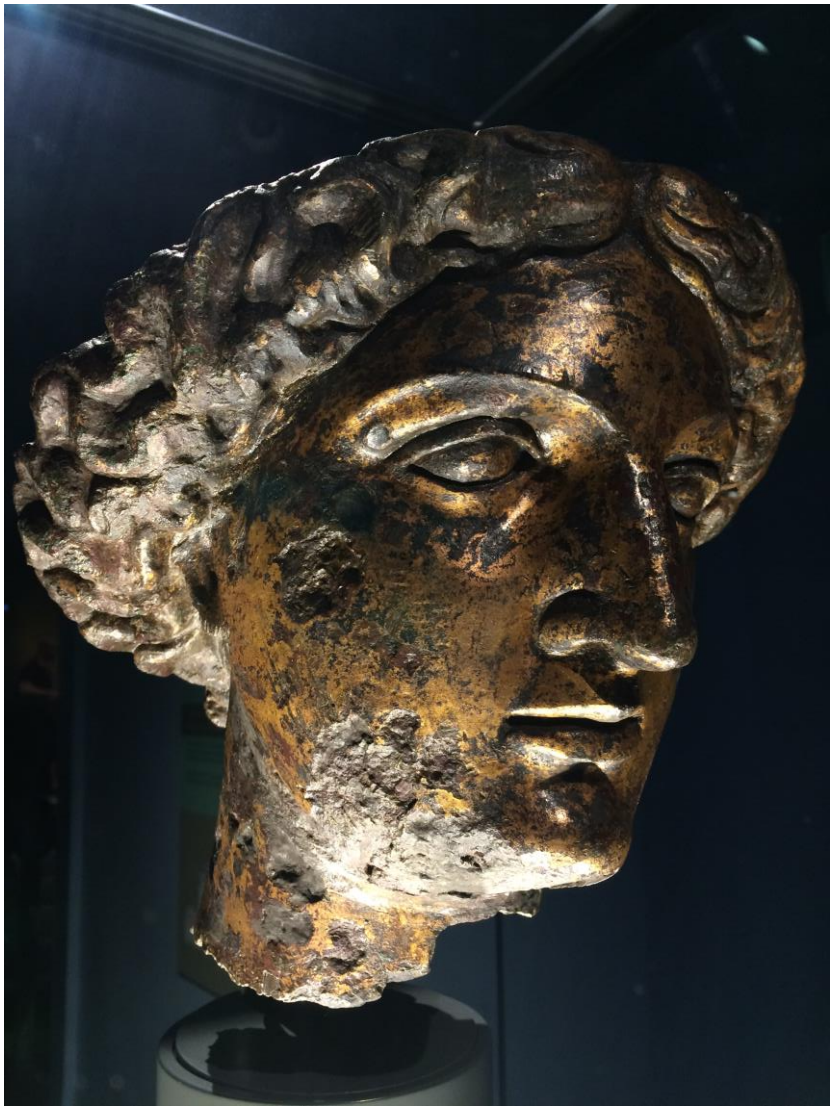


*Fig 8.36: Gilded head of Sulis Minerva at Bath. Author's photograph*

### *8.4.2.2 Polychromy*

Analytical techniques are increasingly recovering evidence of the paintwork that once brought much ancient stonework to life. Scholarship has focussed not only on reconstructing colour schemes, but also on how perceptions of a white ancient world influence modern cultural and political interactions (Beard 2019; Bradley 2021). Although some fully-repainted replica objects appear in museums (e.g. Colchester Castle, Corbridge, Grosvenor), none are religious.

Evidence of paint survives on some significant religious objects, and these are important when considering their original visual impact.

Marcus Simplicius Simplex's altar at Carrawburgh, discussed above, retained traces of red and green paint when excavated. The traces are mentioned but not contextualised in the interpretation, though a repainted replica can be seen in the audio-visual presentation of the mithraeum (Chapter 7.3.1.1; Fig 7.19). Light projections representing polychromy on altars have been introduced at the Great North Museum since the surveying was completed and are discussed in Chapter 10.6. Multiple paint traces survive on objects from the London mithraeum (Museum of London).[89] An inscription retains "traces of red paint in some of the letters", a marble roundel "has traces of pigment indicating it was originally painted" and a Bacchic group "has traces of red, green and blue paint". However, these are presented as disconnected and incidental survivals, rather than used to consider the colour originally present inside the temple. At Vindolanda, it is observed that altars often had red painted letters, "as it made the text easier to read, and added colour to the stones".[90]

Analyses of the Bridgeness slab (Fig 8.17) have revealed the existence of various paint traces (Campbell 2020), mainly on the inscription and cavalryman panel, but also the red cloak of one of the ritual attendees, and Tullie House references this recent research (Table 8.2). Also at Tullie House are a seated figure of Fortuna with pink and white paint traces and the 'merchant stone' (Chapter 8.2.2.1), the potential gold lettering of which was not solely of aesthetic value but demonstrative of a successful vow.

At Bath, consideration is given to the original appearance of the architectural remains. The audio guide encourages visitors to imagine the now-lost colours, and the temple pediment is dramatically and successfully reconstructed using coloured light projections (Chapter 9.2.3.1; Fig 9.16).

The interior decoration of religious spaces is not considered at any museum, though the reconstructed nymphaeum at Vindolanda is worthy of brief comparative reference here, despite not forming part of the museum. The interior wall paintings (Fig 8.37) are based on examples

[89] 'Inside the temple'
[90] 'Worship and tribute'

from Pompeii and Herculaneum which, while demonstrating the vibrancy of original interiors, do not accurately reflect Romano-British temples.

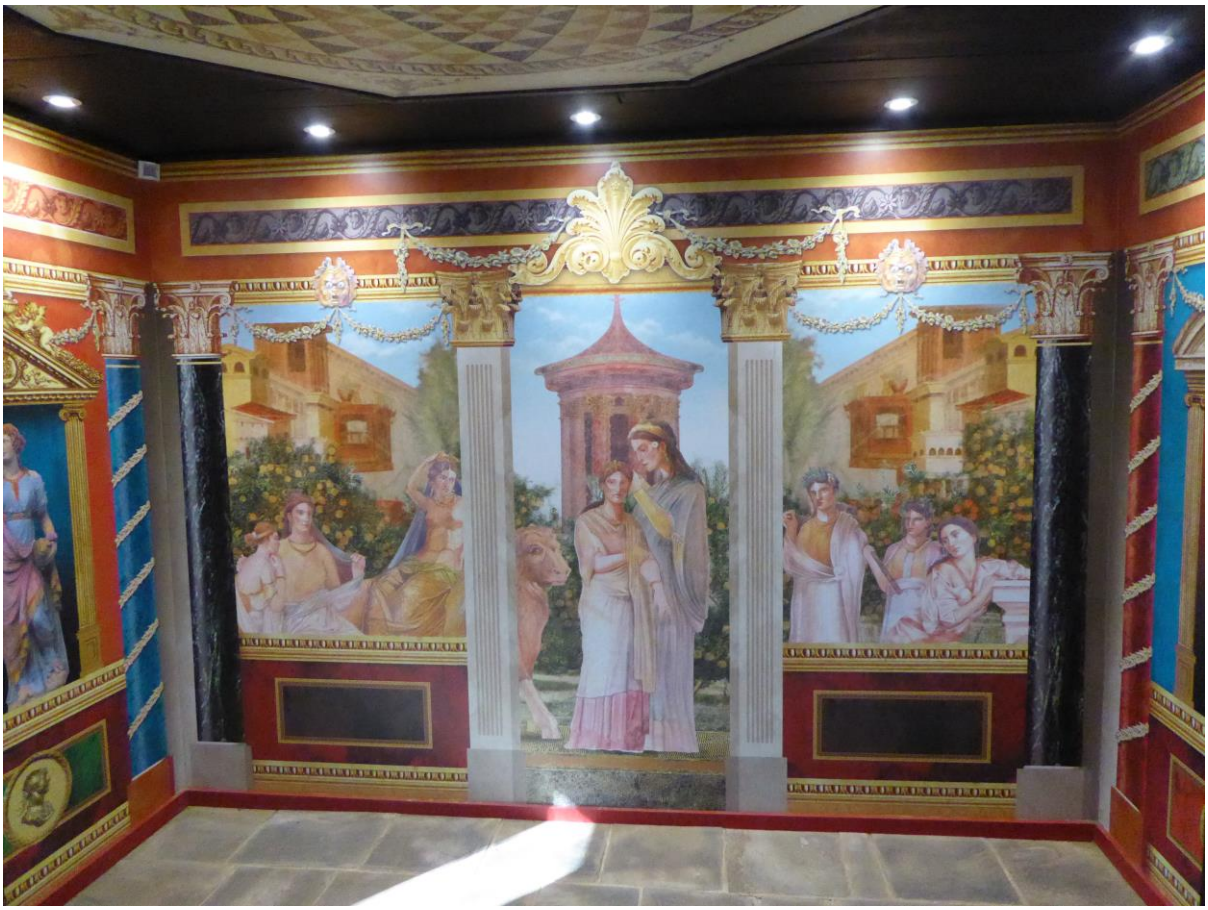


*Fig 8.37: Interior of the reconstructed Nymphaeum at Vindolanda. Author's photograph*

### 8.4.3 Sound

A number of museums consider sound and music in ritual sensory assemblages, though, as with light, often without contextual specificity. At Corinium and Verulamium,[91] for example, music is simply described as playing an important role in religious ceremonies and the latter highlights the importance of music at the triangular temple. An audio piece accompanying the reconstruction drawing in Fig 8.11 presumably reconstructs the sounds of rituals at the temple but was not active at the time of the survey, probably a victim of Covid restrictions.

[91] 'Leisure time' and 'Out and about'

Considerations of sound in ritual generally revolve around the presence of specific musical instruments. While notable, this restricts sound as a sensory stimulus to deliberately produced noises at the expense of the ambient ritual soundscape. Only at Bath are such sounds suggested, the audio guide (30) for the haruspex stone including knives being sharpened and the plaintive bleating of a sheep cut short. Bells, pipes and cymbals are the most frequently referenced instruments, sometimes in combination. Bells are particularly commonly noted as forming part of ritual activity, referenced at the Roman Army Museum, Vindolanda, Great North Museum, Bloomberg Mithraeum, Corinium, NMS, Senhouse and Chesters. The instruments used in the Bloomberg Mithraeum temple experience are referenced above (Chapter 8.4.1).

Bells were ubiquitous in the Roman world, serving multiple functions (see Eckardt and Williams 2018). Interpretations of the ritual functionality of bells include alerting the deity (Vindolanda), scaring away evil spirits or averting bad luck (Corinium, Great North Museum and NMS), or drowning unlucky sounds (Senhouse). At Chesters, they simply "added to the atmosphere". The sounds produced by bells of different forms and materials are not consistent, and more sensory-focused interpretations of the role of bells in ritual might consider how these different sounds could become associated with specific social and ritual contexts. Their contextualised use is also relevant for considering the experiences of those using or hearing them, whether handheld, hung in specific (e.g. liminal) locations, or part of larger composite objects (e.g. attached to a staff).

Pipes are also referenced with regard to ritual, though none of the museums displaying the Bridgeness slab's sacrificial scene (Fig 8.17) directly reference the compositionally-dominant double-pipe (*aulos*) player.[92] Only at Senhouse is music discussed in connection with it, and a similar *aulos* features in a nearby cartoon (Fig 8.25), its poor (drunken?) playing seemingly the cause of the priest's shock. A piper also plays in the video procession at Bath headed by Gaius Receptus Calpurnius, replaced with a curved horn (*cornu*) in the procession in the temple model (Fig 8.27).

The British Museum displays a rattle from the Felmingham hoard and a probable rattle handle from Barkway. These, it is suggested, were "used by priests to mark stages in religious

[92] Graham (2020: 104) discusses the artistic abbreviation of depictions of ritual events, such as the relative positioning of attendees

ceremonies, to attract the attention of the gods and to drive off demons" and might also have been used in divination. At the Museum of London, iron rattles are grouped as "religious ornaments" alongside a gold magical amulet and a copper alloy votive feather but are only described as making noise when shaken.[93] The adjacent East and West case has an image of an Isaic procession in which a sistrum, iconic to that cult and its unique soundscapes, is prominent but not interpretated. That different religious groups likely had unique auditory signatures (Chapter 3.5.2.4), perhaps even created using similar instruments, is not considered at any museum.

Apart from the Bloomberg Mithraeum, the Museum of London is the only surveyed museum to include ambient audio related to religion, with curse tablet inscriptions being read out. Although, as the curatorial interviewee noted, it is "meant to make you feel like you're part of a religious ritual", it is uncertain whether visitors will be able to associate the audio with specific objects or ritual experiences. The curatorial interviewee at Durham University observed that museum presentations of archaeology were generally too silent, and the Grosvenor Museum interviewee expressed a desire to include more emotive audio in future displays, citing the Bloomberg Mithraeum as an inspiration:

> *"It's definitely something I want to include more of in the museum, going into a darkened room and the sounds you might hear. At the beginning of the (London) mithraeum when you hear the shuffling footsteps as all the men are going into the underground room together. But whether it's the pouring of oil or wine or the chinking of coins, just to make it more, you know, to make people feel more."*

### 8.4.4 Smell

The smells of some ritual acts were intense and distinctive (Chapter 3.5.2.5), powerfully evocative reminders to attendees or observers of previous acts and the religious community's identity. However, smells are not widely engaged with in museums. Only one (Colchester Castle) contains a Roman smell activity, but this relates solely to food. The Bloomberg Mithraeum, as noted above, omitted smells from its temple experience. The uniquely

[93] 'Spirituality or superstition'

sulphurous smell of Bath's hot springs was likely a significant factor in the site's ritual sensorial assemblage yet is not discussed in any interpretation.

The economic processes through which specialist ritual substances such as incense were acquired is not considered at any museums (Chapter 8.3.5), but some museums display objects (apart from altars) related to its use. At Tullie House, the interpretation of a copper alloy incense container in the form of a bust of Bacchus describes the deity's spheres of influence, but its functionality, aside from a reference to its suspension loops, are not explored and it therefore serves only as an example of Bacchus' appearance.[94] Ceramic *tazzae* are displayed at the British Museum and Corbridge, described at both as having a religious function, but with incense referenced only at the latter. The two ceramic thuribles from Coventina's Well at Chesters are titled 'incense burners' but neither the label not the accompanying handheld guide discusses their functionality. Finally, at Wiltshire Museum,[95] a copper alloy candlestick in the form of a cockerel from the Nettleton Shrub temple site is erroneously interpreted as an incense burner (Wedlake 1982: 143), but only iconographic connections between the bird and Apollo, the temple's primary deity, are highlighted.

Though incense is thought to have been commonly burned on altars, fuels used to light the fire also had olfactory significance, particularly pinecones which are evidenced at a number of museums. At Corinium, the Mediterranean origins of the stone pine tree are noted, but not the networks required to transport the exotic cones to Britain, why such a specific fuel might have been desirable, or what its sensory effects might have been.[96] At the Museum of London, burnt stone pinecones excavated at the London mithraeum are displayed beside a contemporary example.[97] They are described as being associated with the afterlife, and that they would have given a pungent pine aroma. Though a valuable sensory reference, this powerful and pervasive smell it is not discussed in any other descriptions of the mithraeum and its rituals.

[94] 'Classical and Celtic deities'
[95] 'Worship'
[96] 'Gods and Goddesses'
[97] 'Inside the Temple'

### 8.4.5 Taste

As discussed in Chapter 3.5.2.6, taste is intrinsically linked to smell and difficult to engage with through material culture. Food is discussed, without reference to religious tastes, at a number of museums, such as 'Tastes of the Empire' at the Great North Museum, 'What's for dinner?' at Verulamium, or 'Roman diet' at Richborough. The latter uses an image of Dionysiac initiation from Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries as representative of a normal meal. The Ashmolean observes that "sharing food was an important part of any religious celebration", while the Grosvenor Museum and the British Museum reference funereal feasting through *totenmahl* tombstones.

Feasting at the Bloomberg mithraeum has been discussed above, and also features at the Great North Museum where a samian bowl and boar tusk are connected with feasting activity at the Carrawburgh mithraeum. The Dolichenum at Vindolanda was extended in the early 4$^{th}$ century through the addition of a room with a hypocaust, described in the site interpretation as a "feasting hall" and within the museum as a "comfortable dining room for worshippers". Both note that "Jupiter Dolichenus was associated with feasting", but do not further consider the related experiences or significance of this for communities of worshippers. At Chesters, ceramic vessels from Coventina's Well are simply interpreted as evidence that feasting probably took place at the site as part of a ceremony.

With the exception of general references and some more specific connections with regard to the cult of Mithras, food and feasting are not prominent in narratives of religious experience. Kamash's concept of 'religious menus' (Chapter 3.5.2.6) perhaps offers a more engaging approach to the specific and changing taste sensations associated with ritual feasting, and particularly how they might have differed from the experiences of everyday meals.

### 8.4.6 Proprioception, kinaesthesia and movement

In this section I consider implicit and explicit movements and positioning of the body within religious spaces and during ritual activity, which are fundamental to embodied religious experiences (Chapter 3.5.2). Also of significance are formal and informal movements within and between religious sites (including processions), the crossing of liminal boundaries, and

prohibitions on movements for some individuals or at certain times which reinforced religious and social authority.

### *8.4.6.1 Ritual postures and gestures*

The adoption of specific postures or the making of gestures as part of ritual or magical practices is not commonly considered in interpretation, though a number of objects provide valuable evidence for them. The British Museum's interpretation of the Lullingstone wall plaster (Chapter 7.3.2; Fig 7.20), for example, references the relevance of the 'orantes' pose within contemporary Christian worship, but not its ancient context. The postures adopted in statues and reliefs (e.g. Fig 8.15) present opportunities to consider how they reflect human movements and experiences. A statuette of Isis Dolente, seated with bowed head, at the Museum of London is "in a pose of mourning", but the significance of the pose in communicating the deity's mythology and the emotion it perhaps engendered in adherents remain unexplored. The relief of Silenus from Bar Hill (Hunterian) has crossed arms and middle fingers extended (Fig 8.38), a gesture made "to ward off the evil eye". However, the modern (western) implications of the raised middle finger might present an opportunity for discussing the cultural specificity of such embodied gestures.

*Fig 8.38: Bust of Silenus from Bar Hill at the Hunterian. Author's photograph*

The making of gestures and movements to invoke magical protection or as part of ritual sequences represent a fundamental aspect of embodied experience but are not readily attested archaeologically. The use of reconstructions is therefore significant in raising awareness of them, and specific bodily positions and gestures appear in many reconstruction drawings (see Chapter 9.2.3). For example, at Bath, the projection of an offering (Fig 8.10) includes various acts of bowing, the lowering of the head and the raising of hands. At Senhouse, the native Britons offering to the Horned god do so while kneeling and with eyes closed (Fig 7.9), while the Centurion at Tullie House raises his head (Fig 8.12). Though presented without discussion, these contribute powerfully, but likely subconsciously, to visitor perceptions of religion and religious activity in Roman Britain.

### *8.4.6.2 Ritual movement and positioning*

This section considers interpretations of movement around ritual sites, including restrictions placed on access, and how objects intended to be viewed from multiple or specific perspectives may be limited to single, static, perspectives due to museum display designs.

The broadest consideration of religious movement is an individual's attendance at a ritual event. Attendance at, or absence from, calendrical or communal ritual events might carry social and religious expectations and implications, or might require lengthy journeys involving financial or personal risk. None of the surveyed museums consider such aspects of religious presence.

Movement within and around specific religious locations is most significant at Bath and the Bloomberg Mithraeum, as sites where visitors might readily imagine themselves moving through the same spaces as Romano-British worshippers. As Revell (2008: 129) notes, references on curse tablets at Bath to the temple itself indicate that the sense of place, the "connection between the goddess and her sanctuary", was particularly significant to worshippers. At key places of ritual transition, such as entering the temple courtyard or the sacred spring, ancient worshippers would have been keenly aware of the thresholds they were crossing and the requirements for doing so. Despite interpretation informing visitors where they are within the complex (Fig 8.39), the implications of movement between the different zones of the precinct are not considered beyond general reference that some areas would have been off-limits to worshippers. The monumental enclosure of the sacred spring and the

increasingly intimate rituals it afforded (Chapter 5.4.3.2) are not discussed in this regard. Narratives of restricted access instead centre upon the cult statue of Sulis Minerva. Visitors are informed that their proximity to it (Fig 8.45) enables an experience denied to Roman pilgrims and only available to "priests and temple staff" (audio guide 90). Such an interpretation contrasts with scholarship arguing that coming face to face with the deity was the emotional climax of the ritual experience, discussed further in Chapter 8.4.8.2.

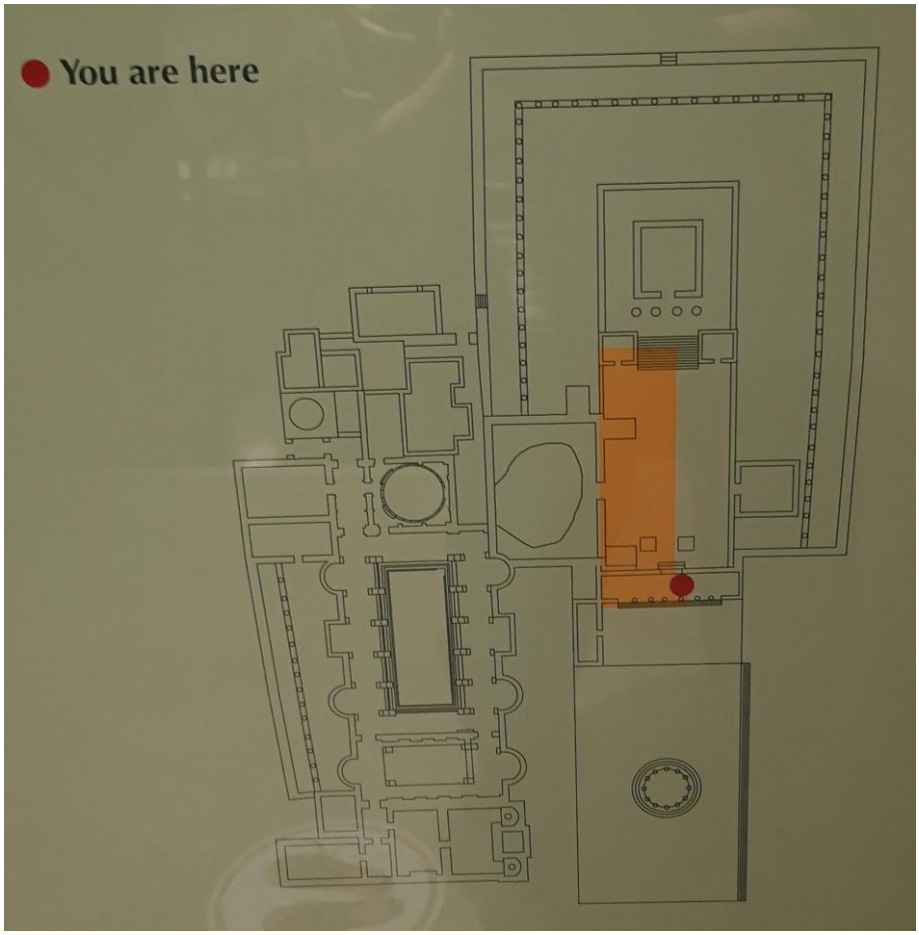



*Fig 8.39: Visitor orientation map at Bath. Author's photograph*

Movement and relative positioning are also considered in interpretations of mithraea. At the Great North Museum, restrictions on access are forefronted, visitors informed that, as non-initiates, they are privileged to be able to view the temple's interior. Both the Museum of London and the Bloomberg Mithraeum reference the descent into the 'cave' of the London mithraeum, though this is not prominently highlighted or connected with the visitor's own descent to the temple remains. A more complex conceptual positioning of the individual,

however, features in the audio presentation, which suggests that worshippers in the temple might have considered their place within the cosmos.

The ability to view objects from specific or multiple perspectives is a potential aspect of ritual engagement which museum display practices often restrict by enforcing fixed singular views of objects. Interactions with altars were fundamental to sacrificial acts, worshippers not just simply observing them, but touching, moving around, and making gestures in response to them (Weddle 2010; Graham 2020; Kiernan 2020). Some objects offer varying iconography, and therefore messages, from different perspectives, such as the altar to Apollo at the Great North Museum (Fig 8.21B) and the serpent stone at Senhouse,[98] yet visitors are restricted to a single perspective of each.

The original context of some religious imagery also affected how it was viewed. At Corbridge, stonework has been positioned to attempt to reflect this, for example making viewers look up slightly at a pediment from the shrine of *Roma Aeterna*. At Corinium, the reconstructed Jupiter column (Fig 6.6) rises between two floors, permitting differing perspectives of the capital's carvings, the lower reflecting that of an original viewer. The interpretation recognises that the reconstructed column provides "an impression of what it would have looked like to the people of Roman Cirencester", though the gallery space detaches the viewing experience from the column's original prominent context within the forum and its impact on the urban skyline (Woolf 2001). At Bath, the prominent temple pediment is similarly considered, the image (Fig 9.16) "looking down on visitors in the Temple Courtyard from a height of 15 metres. Its powerful imagery dominated the scene".[99]

### *8.4.6.3 Pilgrimage and processions*

Religious movement did not only occur within sites but between them, people travelling to worship particular deities at specific sites and times to meet their needs, and religious communities using processions to promote their presence. Few museums, however, engage with such journeys or pilgrimages. At Verulamium, a token showing the birth of Mithras is suggested as evidence that believers passed through the town on their way to the London

[98] Though antiquarian drawings of both sides are presented
[99] 'The temple pediment'

mithraeum. At Bath, visitors are told that "people visited the Roman Baths, Sacred Spring and Temple of Sulis Minerva from around the Roman world" and that "pilgrims came from far and wide to worship Sulis Minerva" (audio guide 65).[100] These references are, understandably, used to promote the importance of the site, but do not consider the expectations and experiences of those pilgrims and their journeys, or how knowledge of Sulis Minerva was transmitted.

Bath is also the site where formal processions are most prominently considered, both through the reconstructed processions (Fig 8.27) and the interpretation of the tin mask from the spring which "may have been carried in procession by a priest". These activities are envisaged as conducted entirely within the temple complex. That processions may also have included the wider town and beyond is not considered, isolating the sacred complex from its landscape. In contrast, at Verulamium, the *dendrophori* of Cybele are described as carrying palm leaves to the triangular temple as part of a festival held on March 22nd. This reference to calendrical religious activity is valuable, as religious activity is generally presented as reactive rather than proactively forming part of communal identity and providing annual foci. That processions might be eagerly anticipated sources of excitement and unique sensory experiences is not considered, though Vindolanda usefully highlights that the many sacred days in the year "gave ample opportunity for feasting and celebrating".[101]

## 8.4.7 Embodiment and objects

The concept of embodiment is fundamental to lived religious experiences; every religious act is inherently embodied, and every museum object had an embodied relationship with makers, users and depositors. To retain a manageable focus of discussion, here I consider the wearing of amuletic devices and jewellery, the creation and deposition of curses, and emotional experiences during ritual performances.

### *8.4.7.1 Amulets and jewellery*

Many objects with religious significance intended to be worn about the body, such as brooches, rings and pendants, are displayed in museums. Though some are identified as amuletic devices

[100] 'Meet the Romans'
[101] 'To the gods departed'

(Chapter 7.4.5), the interpretative focus for such objects is generally as markers of wealth and status, with their materials reflecting economic value rather than other potential affordances (Chapter 3.5). As discussed in Chapter 6 (Fig 6.23B), religious references in jewellery display units are overwhelmingly based on descriptions of religious iconography, which is primarily portrayed as outward projections of the owner's religious identity or affiliations. Wiltshire Museum says that the wearing of "rings with religious motifs expressed his piety", and at Corbridge items such as brooches "conveyed information about how you saw yourself, who you associated with or what you believed".

Though the Corbridge interpretation also recognises that such items might offer protection from illness or bring hunting success, these are attributed solely to iconographic motifs. The role of materiality in their functionality is absent, as is consideration of their embodied use. How did they not only demonstrate beliefs to other observers but serve to form, perform, communicate and maintain those beliefs? Were perceptions of efficacy based on previous success for the wearer or previous owners? Was such efficacy passive, or did it require activation through words or actions? Could it expire, or require renewal? Would such objects have been worn constantly or only at moments of particular need? None of these issues are considered at any of the surveyed museums; jewellery and amulets are generally presented as passive, rather than being actively worn, emotively experienced, and perhaps requiring ongoing maintenance.

#### *8.4.7.2 Creating and depositing curses*

The curses from Uley at the British Museum are considered almost exclusively through their written content; "shed(ding) light on the personal possessions of the ordinary people of Roman Britain, as well as reminding us of the timeless problems of petty theft and crime". Acts of creation and deposition are not discussed, with rolling and flattening prior to deposition presented as a modern interpretational inconvenience rather than a meaningful and deliberate ritual act, echoing the interpretation of the Hockwold cups (Chapter 7.4.6.1).

Curse creation processes are considered at Bath through the presence of scribes (Chapter 8.3.3). However, as at the British Museum, their literary interest is promoted over the experiences inherent in their creation such as the carving of the message into the heavy lead or subsequent

acts of rolling, folding or piercing (Fig 8.40). As discussed in Chapter 7.4.6.4, deposition into the spring is also not contextualised as particularly locationally-specific or emotive. Cursing also has embodied significance for the victim through the, sometimes extreme, ill-health or suffering wished upon them (Chapter 5.4.3.1). One curse, for example, wishes that the thief "become as liquid as water", a scene reconstructed in a touchscreen interactive discussed further in Chapter 9.3.2 (Fig 8.41).

Cursing is therefore presented as a fundamentally disembodied and predominantly literary act. The significantly abnormal tactile and emotional experiences inherent in carving, rolling and depositing lead tablets into watery contexts are diminished through vague generalisations of the processes involved, and not presented as particularly dramatic, emotive or transformative acts.

*Fig 8.40: 'Messages to the Gods' display at Bath. Author's photograph*

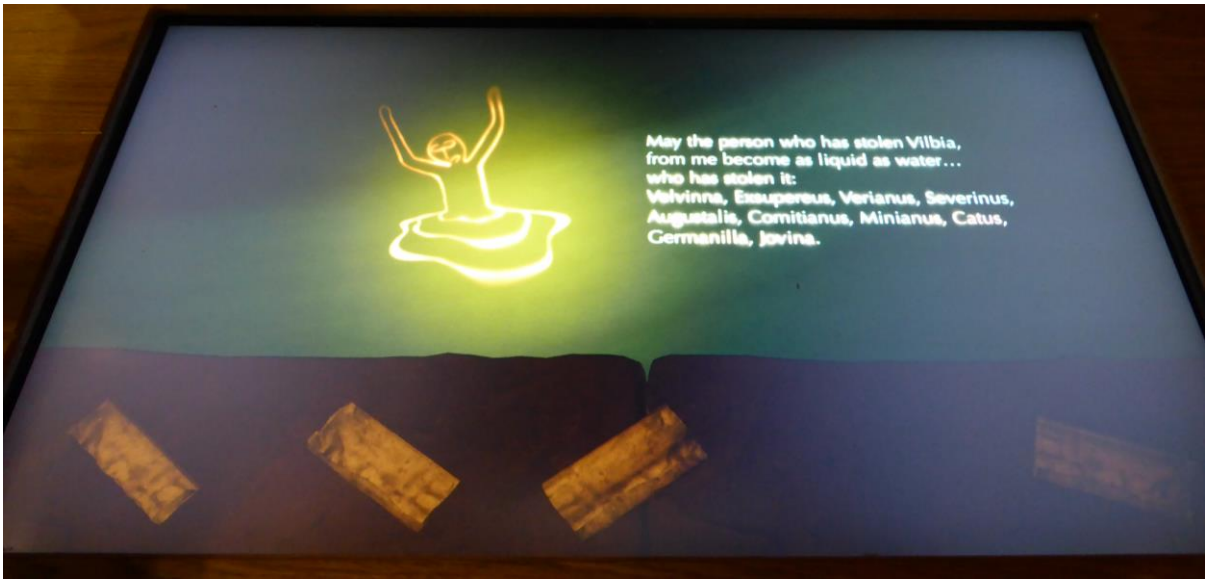



*Fig 8.41; Curses interactive at Bath. Author's photograph, taken during a previous visit in 2015*

### *8.4.7.3 Embodied ritual actions*

The Museum of London's interpretation of the London mithraeum notes that "washing was an important part of the Mithraic rituals" and that a stone laver was buried in the same pit as the major sculptures (Chapter 7.3.1.1). However, despite the laver being of sufficient significance to warrant careful deposition with the iconographic sculpture, it is not displayed with its more aesthetically appealing contextual contemporaries. Kiernan (2020: 203–205) argues that ritual washing likely also involved the cleaning and garlanding of statues, touching the stone or copper alloy akin to touching divine skin. The re-gilding of the statue of Sulis Minerva at Bath (see Chapter 9.4.2) might be considered in similar fashion but is instead treated primarily as a technical process.

Many embodied actions and experiences leave no material trace, though an altar at the Great North Museum has a worn bolster (Fig 8.42), suggested to have been caused (RIB3316) by the sharpening of blades. This evidence of this essential yet often-overlooked aspect of ritual practice is, however, not discussed in the interpretation.

A particularly interesting object for the consideration of embodied activity is the copper alloy jug, on loan at Tullie House from the British Museum. As discussed in Chapter 1.1 (Fig 1.1), the handle depicts scenes from a sacrifice, with those on the shoulder worn through use. This wear is not merely evidence of a long use-life, but a physical memory of its performance in

previous ritual acts. Considering the jug through such an embodied lens might therefore promote more complex and emotive narratives than simply one of wear through use.

*Fig 8.42: Worn bolster, possibly caused by knife sharpening, on an altar at the Great North Museum*

### 8.4.8 Emotions and religious experiences

The emotional aspects of religious experiences are the most difficult to access, and indeed assess, through material culture. I have previously referenced (Chapter 7.3.1) how mystery cults have been interpreted as introducing an emotional dimension lacking in 'traditional' polytheism, but that there is increasing recognition of the emotional experiences inherent in all ritual activity; fulfilling a heartfelt vow, reverently burying a deconsecrated statue, or touching a protective amulet. The observation at Vindolanda that offering to the gods was a "very personal process" which involved "emotional investment" as well as financial cost is notable for its rarity.[102] However, at no museum are religious uncertainty, anxiety or fear considered. Though these might be more regularly discussed for monotheistic religions, nobody in Roman Britain seemingly either questioned the existence or efficacy of deities or feared the effects of incorrectly engaging with them.

[102] 'Religion'

Below, I consider how museums engage with evidence of direct divine communication through visions and dreams, the intense experience of 'meeting' deities, and the possibility that religious experiences involved altered states of consciousness.

#### *8.4.8.1 Visions and dreams*

The potential embodied and emotional experiences related to the healing powers of Aesculapius during incubation at Bath were discussed in Chapter 7.4.4. The inscription associated with Aesculapian healing was set up *ex visu*: as a result of a vision. Although not common, such direct divine communication is also evidenced in inscriptions at other museums, particularly the Great North Museum. An altar to Fortuna by the prefect of the first cohort of Hamians, a replica of which is also displayed at the Roman Army Museum, was set up following a vision but neither museum discusses this aspect. The Great North Museum's interpretation of the altar set up by the wife of Fabius following a soldier's dream (see also Chapter 8.3.4) does, however, note that "receiving an instruction in a dream is often given as the reason for setting up a dedication". How seriously such third-party claims were taken, and what consequences Fabius' wife may have feared if the warning went unheeded, remain unexplored. At the Grosvenor Museum, the altar to Nemesis at the amphitheatre (Fig 8.12) was similarly the result of a vision, the interpretation stating that "we can only wonder what dream or vision he had". Whilst true, that such experiences were interpreted as direct communications from deities is worthy of further consideration for its impact on social relationships and the specialist knowledge potentially required to interpret their meanings.

#### *8.4.8.2 Coming face to face with deities*

As discussed in Chapter 3, the active and reciprocal relationships between worshippers and cult statues have become increasingly prominent in recent scholarship (e.g. Elsner 2007; Graham 2020; Kiernan 2020), and it is important to recognise that museum visitors do not generally view deities in the same manner as ancient worshippers. By this I do not simply refer to the artificiality of museum galleries or that the visitor is unlikely to consider that the deity exists, but that art-historical narratives present images solely as artistic *representations* of deities, even in ancient contexts. It must be considered that in some circumstances religious statuary was perceived as *being* the embodied deity (e.g. Gordon 1979; Ando 2008; Henig 2012; Kiernan

2020). The depiction of Mercury on the relief from Vindolanda, discussed above (Fig 8.16), even if depicting a gigantic statue as the interpretation suggests, might therefore also capture something of the dedicant's feeling of powerlessness in the very real and overwhelming presence of the deity.

Such an ontologically challenging concept has the potential to fundamentally alter visitor encounters with such imagery, and this is particularly pertinent for the heads of statues believed to have been the focus of cult worship at temples, for example, Sulis Minerva at Bath, Mercury at Uley (British Museum) or Antenociticus at Benwell (Great North Museum). Revell (2008: 120) notes Vitruvius' guidance that altars should be placed lower than statues in shrines, forcing worshippers to look upwards to the deity and recognising their lesser place, yet this relationship between viewer and deity is often reversed in museum displays. At the Great North Museum (Fig 8.43) and, despite the tall mount, at the British Museum (Fig 8.44), most adult visitors look down at the statues. Only at Bath (Fig 8.45) does the visitor look slightly upwards towards the face of Sulis Minerva, increasing the power of the image. At none of the museums are visitors encouraged to imagine the intense emotional impact of coming face to face not with simply an artistic representation of the deity, but the deity itself, reciprocating their gaze. At the Great North Museum, the sincere offering by the grateful Tineius Longus (Chapter 7.2.1.2) may have been made while looking into the very face of the god displayed nearby, yet in the gallery such emotional connections are not evoked (Chapter 4.2.1).

*Fig 8.43: Head of Antenociticus from Benwell at the Great North Museum. Author's photographs*

*Fig 8.44: Head of Mercury from Uley at the British Museum. Author's photographs*

*Fig 8.45: Head of Sulis Minerva at Bath. Author's photograph*

Differences in experiences between religious settings are also worthy of consideration. Mithraic initiates engaging in feasting in close proximity with the deity, for example, experienced a markedly different relationship with cult imagery than the pilgrim at a Romano-Celtic temple viewing the deity from a distance, perhaps through partially opened doors. Such significant contextual and experiential differences are lost in museum display designs. At Canterbury, copper alloy statuettes are positioned within replica temple façades (Fig 8.46) to simulate the positioning of large cult statues. Though creating an attractive and innovative display, it erroneously implies that copper alloy statuettes functioned as miniature versions of temple cult statues.

*Fig 8.46: Replica temple façades at the Canterbury Roman Museum. Author's photographs*

### *8.4.8.3 Altered states of consciousness?*

Evidence that ritual activities perhaps involved the taking of mind-altering substances is slight, and ecstatic religious reactions can be achieved without the use of drugs. That being said, some museums display objects which enable discussion of the possibility. At the Museum of London, a silver canister with an internal strainer from the mithraeum (Fig 8.47) is suggested to have been "possibly used for infusing herbs or drugs". The strainer vessel in the 'Doctor's grave' at Colchester is interpreted as being for medicinal use due to traces of honey and wormwood in the spout, but the possibility that it was also used for other substances, perhaps even beer, cannot be discounted (Garland 2018: 95); drunken intoxication also representing an altered state of mind. In general, such experiences are not considered within discussions of religious activity, despite their challenge to presuppositions of emotionless and procedural Roman civic rituals.

*Fig 8.47: Perforated silver canister at the Museum of London. Author's photograph*

## 8.5 Summary

This chapter has considered a wide range of displays and objects in its discussions of individuals and their religious options, the integration of religion into social, political and economic networks, and the importance of embodied and sensory stimuli in religious experiences. Though displays generally present a range of deities attested in Roman Britain, religious choice is restricted to what I term the 'catalogue of gods'. This uncritically places emphasis on deities and overlooks how knowledge about their existence and efficacy might be transmitted and applied by individual worshippers to meet specific needs. Ritual acts are presented as procedures rather than experiences, and beliefs and practises as universal across the Roman world, often based on highly-contextualised literary sources. Religious donors are considered through the financial rather than religious or social value of their gifts. Though female donors are generally portrayed as being present at religious activities, they are often uncritically connected with supposedly gender-specific votive offerings such as jewellery.

Rituals are not presented as reflecting idiosyncratic religious communities or worshippers, nor possessing dynamic potential to influence future acts ('religion in the making'). Religious authority is not widely discussed and is generally restricted to formal priesthoods and supporting officials rather than broader considerations of the social impact of religious knowledge and authority. The rather static and centralised view presented of religious activity is perhaps why connections between imperial authority and religion are more fully engaged with, particularly the imperial cult.

Despite many objects which enable discussion of the sensory experiences of religious acts, references to light, colour and smell tend to be discussed generically, or interpretationally isolated to specific objects and therefore incidental. Sound is the most frequently and usefully discussed sensory experience, particularly the noise of bells and pipes in attracting deities or warding off ill-fortune. Though some references are made to ritual feasting, the wider religious implications of taste are almost entirely overlooked.

Ritual movements and gestures appear regularly in displays through depictions on objects and in reconstructions but are not overtly discussed. Similarly, the ritual implications of movement around sites such as Bath are overlooked in favour of consideration of architectural forms and

layouts. Religious processions or travel to more distant religious sites to meet specific needs are not considered outside of a small number of minor references.

The embodiment of ritual acts is equally poorly embraced. The religious significance of jewellery is generally restricted to the bearing of distinct iconography, and then usually as a reflection of social status or simple outward statements of beliefs. Though there is some recognition of the imagery's functionality, such as providing protection, this does not extend to consideration of the properties of materials, or how such objects 'worked' religiously or socially when worn. Curses are not discussed at many museums, but when they are they are considered as primarily of literary interest. The significant sensory and emotional experiences of creating and depositing them are not fully exploited.

Finally, I discussed emotional experiences. Visions are referred to at some museums, but such direct communication with the divine is presented as an accepted reality rather than explored for its social and religious implications. The emotional impact of coming face to face with deities through their statuary is equally not considered, despite significant and specific examples of cult statuary being displayed. The evidence for altered states of mind forming an aspect of ritual experiences is also almost entirely overlooked.

# Chapter 9:

# Analysing Language, Interactivity and Materiality in Museum Displays

## 9.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on how presentations of religious experiences in Roman Britain are influenced by museological processes. I analyse the language and definitions used in interpretations of ancient beliefs and practices, and the use of creative 'storytelling' approaches to challenge established narratives. I then consider how reconstructions influence perceptions of religious experiences and how gallery interactivities which feature religious concepts enable visitors to engage with multisensory experiences. Finally, I discuss how displays engage with the materiality and multisensory properties of objects and their significance for discussing religious experiences.

These discussions focus upon three Analysis Statements:

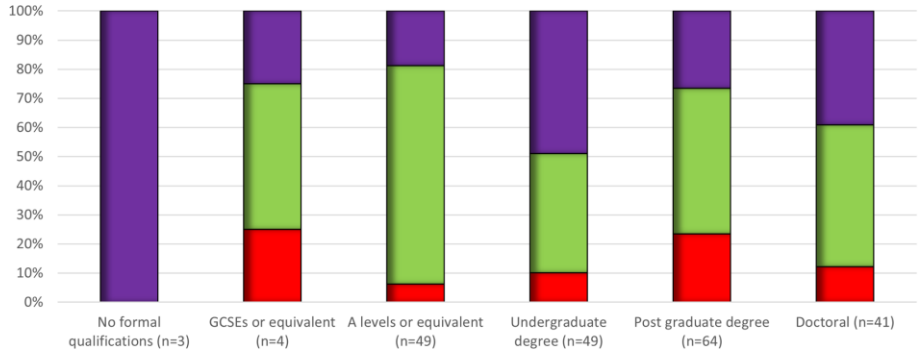
> §8: "The language used to describe religious activity is critical in the creation of meanings. Storytelling approaches can be valuable in promoting emotive, multisensory and ontologically challenging interpretation."
>
> §9: "Multisensory interactivities offer the potential for challenging and emotive 'proximal' engagement with religious experiences for visitors of all age groups."
>
> §10: "The materiality of objects is as significant to understanding their ritual significance and functionality as their form and iconography."

The online survey provided valuable data on museum visiting habits and engagement with interpretation. Respondents frequently rated museums as a major source of their knowledge of the Roman world, closely followed by archaeological site visits, which of course may also include museum displays (Q7, Appendix D). The survey also demonstrated that respondents significantly engage with museum interpretation (Fig 9.1), 84% stating that they read most or all of it. Though variations can be noted in levels of engagement across respondents of differing education levels (Fig 9.1A, Q4), these do not represent significant trends. Museum visit frequency (Fig 9.1B, Q14) was not a factor, though those considering themselves 'experts' in Roman Britain were more likely to both read more and less text (Fig 9.1C, Q6).

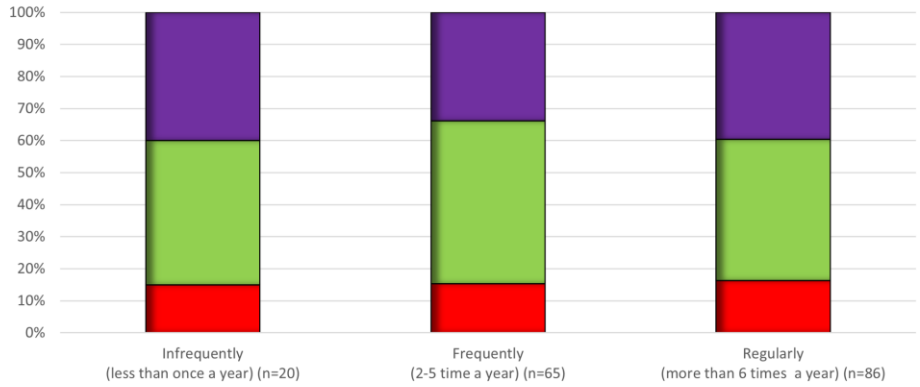
A majority of respondents believe that museum interpretation is generally accurate, though possibly slightly out of date (Q20), with only 4 respondents (2%) saying they had no confidence in presented interpretation. The information presented in museums can therefore be seen to be well received, trusted, and significant in influencing understandings of Roman Britain and its religious practices.

## 9.2 §8: "The language used to describe religious activity is critical in the creation of meanings. Storytelling approaches can be valuable in promoting emotive, multisensory and ontologically challenging interpretation."

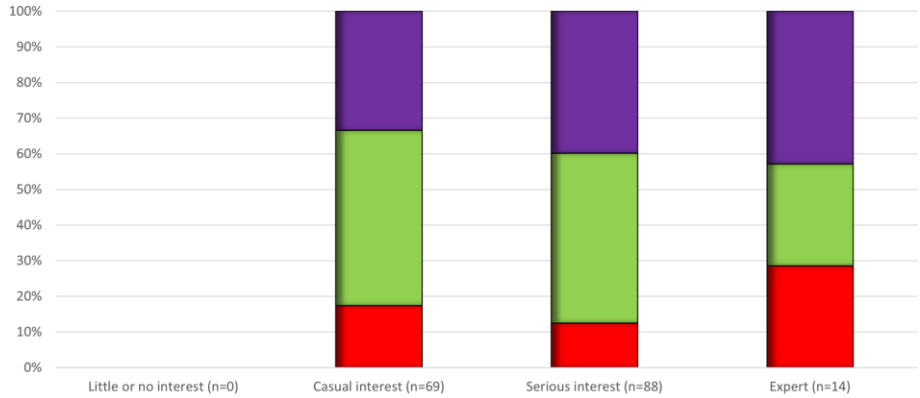
Museum interpretation does not merely transmit meaning to visitors but represents one active element in the meanings created by individual visitors (Chapter 4.2.1). Discourse analysis recognises that language cannot exist independently of social contexts, and the use of language and terminology within museum contextualising information (Fig 4.3) is relevant to discussions of religious beliefs and practices. Without contextualisation and definition, visitors are likely to uncritically transpose pre-existing understandings of terms onto their perceptions of Roman Britain, reinforcing rather than challenging existing understandings.




A) Online survey interpretation engagement by qualification level




B) Online survey interpretation engagement by museum visiting frequency




C) Online survey interpretation engagement by interest in Roman Britain

'I will read all or the vast majority of the gallery interpretation' (n=64)
'I will read most of the wall panels and a lot of object labels' (n=80)
'I may read a few wall panels and the labels of a few specific objects' (n=27)
'I do not read any interpretation' (n=0)

*Fig 9.1: Online survey responses on engagement with museum interpretation by qualification level, museum visiting frequency and interest in Roman Britain*

It is beyond the scope and purpose of this research to evaluate the effectiveness of holistic museum communication strategies. The following sections focus on the use of specific language and terminology related to religious beliefs and activities and then explore applications of creative 'storytelling' interpretation at specific museums. Finally, I discuss the visual language employed in reconstructions of religious acts.

### 9.2.1 Describing and defining 'religion'

In previous chapters I have cited numerous examples of the interpretative language used in museums. Here I consider the specific terminology employed to describe and define beliefs and their related activities. Building on discussions in Chapter 1 regarding the history and cultural relativity of 'religion', I discuss the interpretative applications of religion, ritual and other related terms, followed by the frequently referenced but amorphous concepts of 'good luck' and 'evil', and then the implications of the language used to describe the votive deposition of objects.

#### *9.2.1.1 The language of 'religion'*

Louise Ravelli (2006: 97) suggests that, though museums are encouraged to use language familiar to visitors, technical language is often essential and should be explained rather than avoided. I argue that terms such as religion and ritual are generally perceived as familiar, but should instead be treated as technical and requiring definition and contextualisation. Visitors bring their own culturally- and religiously-complex meanings to their encounters with such terms, and as the surveyed museums have widely differing visitor demographics, not all will possess the same perspectives and understandings of either the Roman world or religious practices.

Responses to my online survey, though representing a restricted sample size and relatively focused demographic (Chapter 2.4), demonstrate the inherent discrepancies in individual perceptions of key terminology. Respondents were asked to categorise a series of activities as 'religion', 'ritual', 'superstition', 'magic' or 'secular' (Q12), resulting in a range of opinions, with most activities receiving at least one response in each category (Fig 9.2). However, there were strong association signatures for some terms. Spoken prayers were overwhelmingly

connected with ‘religion’, whereas ‘ritual’ was associated with making offerings, and placing things in graves or deposits. The use of amulets, both wearing and touching them, was generally considered superstitious, though almost a quarter of respondents defined wearing them as magical. Magic itself was only strongly connected with cursing. The eating of meat from a sacrifice elicited a range of responses, with a slight majority considering it a secular act. Indeed, every act with the exception of sacrificing an animal was considered secular by at least some respondents. All of the responses provided to Q12 are, of course, equally valid. However, the varying perceptions of key terms reflected in the responses demonstrates the need for clear interpretational definitions.

The terminology used to describe overarching concepts of belief in the supernatural across all the surveyed museums are presented in Fig 9.3.[1] This data includes every instance of terminology used to describe holistic ‘religious’ systems, rather than references to individual acts or deities. References to “the God Mercury”, “the worshippers of Mithras” or a specific “burial ritual” are therefore not included, but “the Romans had many gods and goddesses”, “worship in the Roman world” or “Roman ritual practices” are.

The predominance of ‘religion’ is unsurprising given its widespread application in both popular and scholarly literature, but the variety of other terms used across museums of all surveying categories is notable. Southern group museums were slightly more likely to use ‘religion’, ‘cult’ and ‘magic’, and those in the northern group ‘gods/goddesses/deities’ and ‘belief’ (Fig 9.3A). Diversity of language is particularly notable in category C museums (Fig 9.3B), whereas in category D museums the term ‘belief’ is more frequently used but ‘gods and goddesses’ less so. Describing engagement with the divine in terms of ‘Gods and goddesses’ was the second most common overall, echoing approaches which promote the polytheistic ‘catalogue of gods’ (Chapter 8.2.1.2).

[1] Excluding references to Christianity, which is overwhelmingly referred to as ‘Christianity’ but occasionally also as ‘Christian religion’, ‘Christian belief’, ‘Christian faith’, ‘Christian cult’ and ‘Christian ritual’

| | Religion | Ritual | Superstition | Magic | Secular | Other |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| The sacrificing of an animal on an altar to a specific named deity at a public temple | 40.4 | 53.8 | 3.5 | 0.6 | 0 | 0 |
| The silent recitation of a prayer to a named deity at home | 82.5 | 8.2 | 5.3 | 1.2 | 1.2 | 0 |
| The placing of bottles of scented oils on the pyre during a cremation | 11.2 | 74.7 | 2.9 | 0 | 6.5 | 1.2 |
| The stroking of a pendant for good luck before the commencement of a speech | 4.7 | 12.3 | 72.5 | 8.8 | 0.6 | 0 |
| Writing a curse on a lead sheet asking a deity to punish a thief | 17 | 9.9 | 21.6 | 46.8 | 2.3 | 0 |
| Placing a closing deposit of complete ceramics and animal bone in a pit | 11.7 | 61.4 | 11.1 | 4.7 | 4.7 | 0 |
| Placing a pot of food beside a body in a burial | 29.4 | 60 | 6.5 | 0 | 2.4 | 0.6 |
| The wearing of an amulet in the belief it will prevent illness | 5.3 | 6.5 | 57.6 | 24.7 | 2.9 | 0.6 |
| The eating of meat from a sacrificed animal by a person not at the ceremony | 14.8 | 22.5 | 17.2 | 3 | 23.7 | 2.4 |
| Observing a passing religious procession in the street | 25.9 | 14.1 | 1.8 | 0 | 40 | 5.3 |
| Not conducting business on a day which has been deemed inauspicious / unlucky | 12.9 | 6.4 | 72.5 | 1.8 | 3.5 | 0 |
| Asking the unnamed spirits of a forest for safe passage before passing through | 29.8 | 14.6 | 42.7 | 9.4 | 0.6 | 0 |
| The decision to cremate a deceased loved one rather than bury them | 28.7 | 36.3 | 2.3 | 1.2 | 17 | 6.4 |

*(Numbers are percentages of responses to each statement, 'I don't know' responses omitted)*

0% 1-20% 21-40% 41-60% 61-80% 81-100%

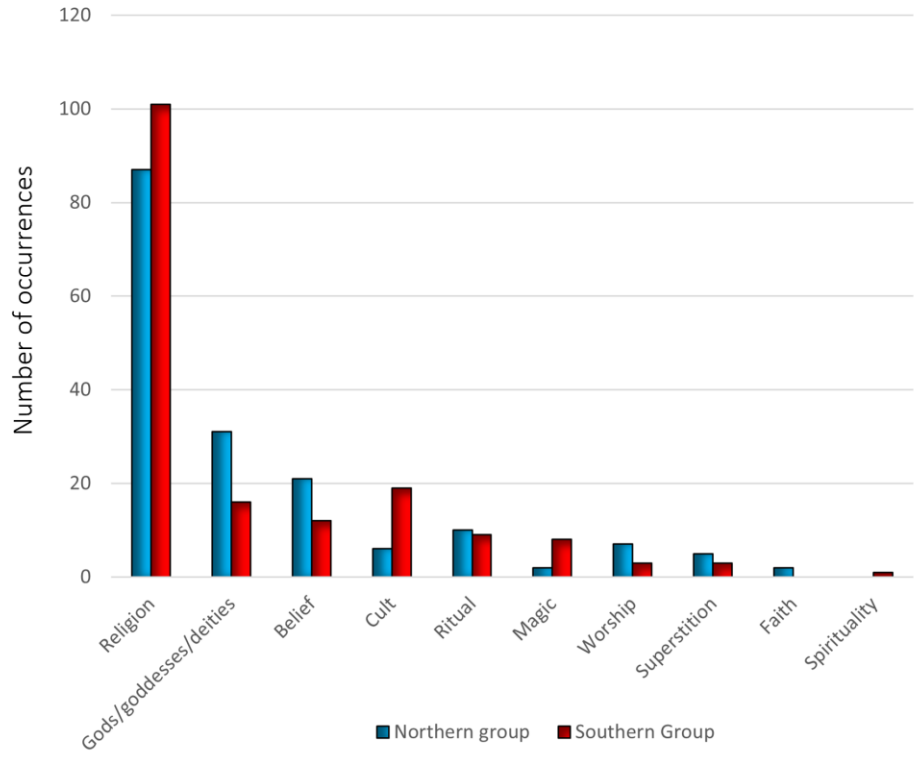
*Fig 9.2: Heat map of responses to online survey Q12, categorisation of acts as 'religion', 'ritual', 'superstition', 'magic', 'secular' or 'other'*

The data presented in Fig 9.3 includes references to both 'religion' and 'religions', though each carries a different implication. The former suggests a single polytheistic religious system, and the latter (used at the Museum of London, British Museum and Tullie House) that the various religious groups across the empire represented discrete 'religions'. While arguments can be made for the validity of both usages, the more significant issue is the lack of definition to explain why a particular form has been applied in any given circumstance, an issue recurrent through much of the discussion below.

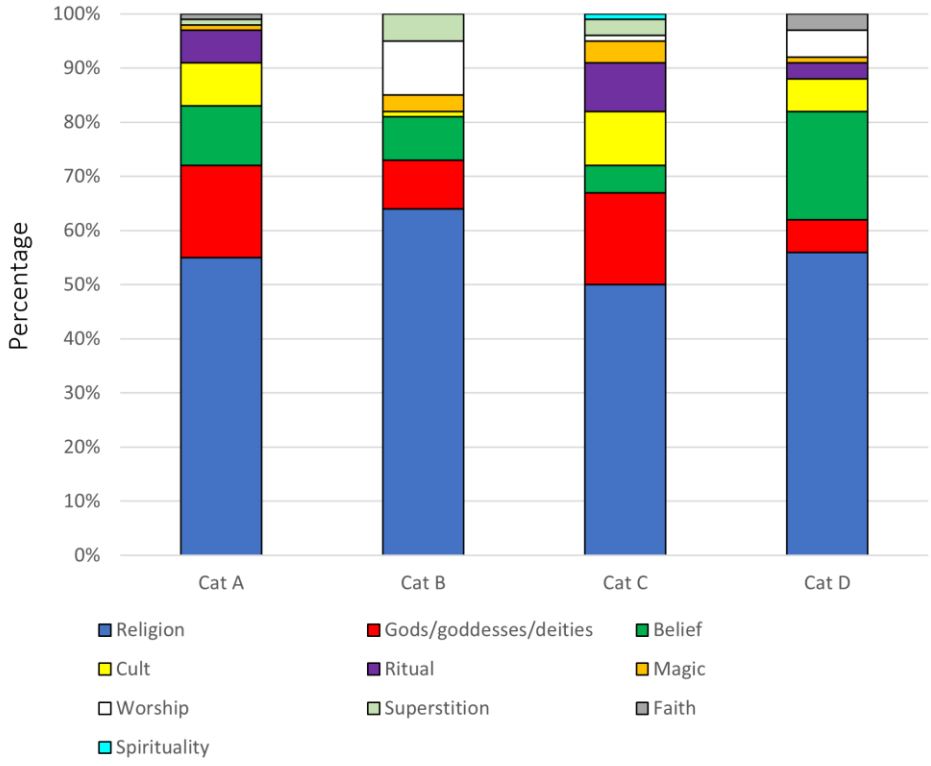
'Cult' is a term of particular interest for the specificity of its application. In a Roman context *cultus* is better translated as 'to worship' (Ando 2008: 5), yet is generally now used as a noun to mean a 'religious group'. However, a lack of definition in displays leaves its more sinister modern connotations unaddressed. Do some visitors infer interpretations of insidious groups psychologically manipulating their members? Though most may be able to contextualise the term, the situation is confused through its use as a pejorative at some museums. At Tullie House, for example, Iron Age beliefs are referred to as "mysterious cults" (a phrase confusingly similar to mystery cults), and at Corinium visitors are told that "for much of the Roman period Christianity was regarded as a dangerous cult", yet it is referred to as a 'religion' following its imperial adoption.

Analysis of all uses of 'cult' (Fig 9.4) demonstrates that it is overwhelmingly used to refer to the Cult of Mithras, with the Bloomberg Mithraeum's regular use of the term representing 24 out of 41 occurrences.[2] Displays also often refer alternatively to Mithraism (Chapter 7.3.1.1) and the two terms are used interchangeably within museums, the Bloomberg Mithraeum also referring to it once as a 'religion'. This inconsistency, combined with a large number of single references to the cults of various deities at individual museums (Fig 9.4), demonstrates the variability in the usage of the term and the lack of consistency in its application to different and distinct religious communities.

[2] Unlike Fig 9.3, this data includes all uses of 'cult'. 'General references' in Fig 9.4 are those which use it as a synonym for 'religion' and appear in Fig 9.3




A) Terminology used in interpretation, by geographical group




B) Terminology used in interpretation, by survey category

*Fig 9.3: Terminology used in interpretation by geographical group and museum survey categories (see Table 2.2)*

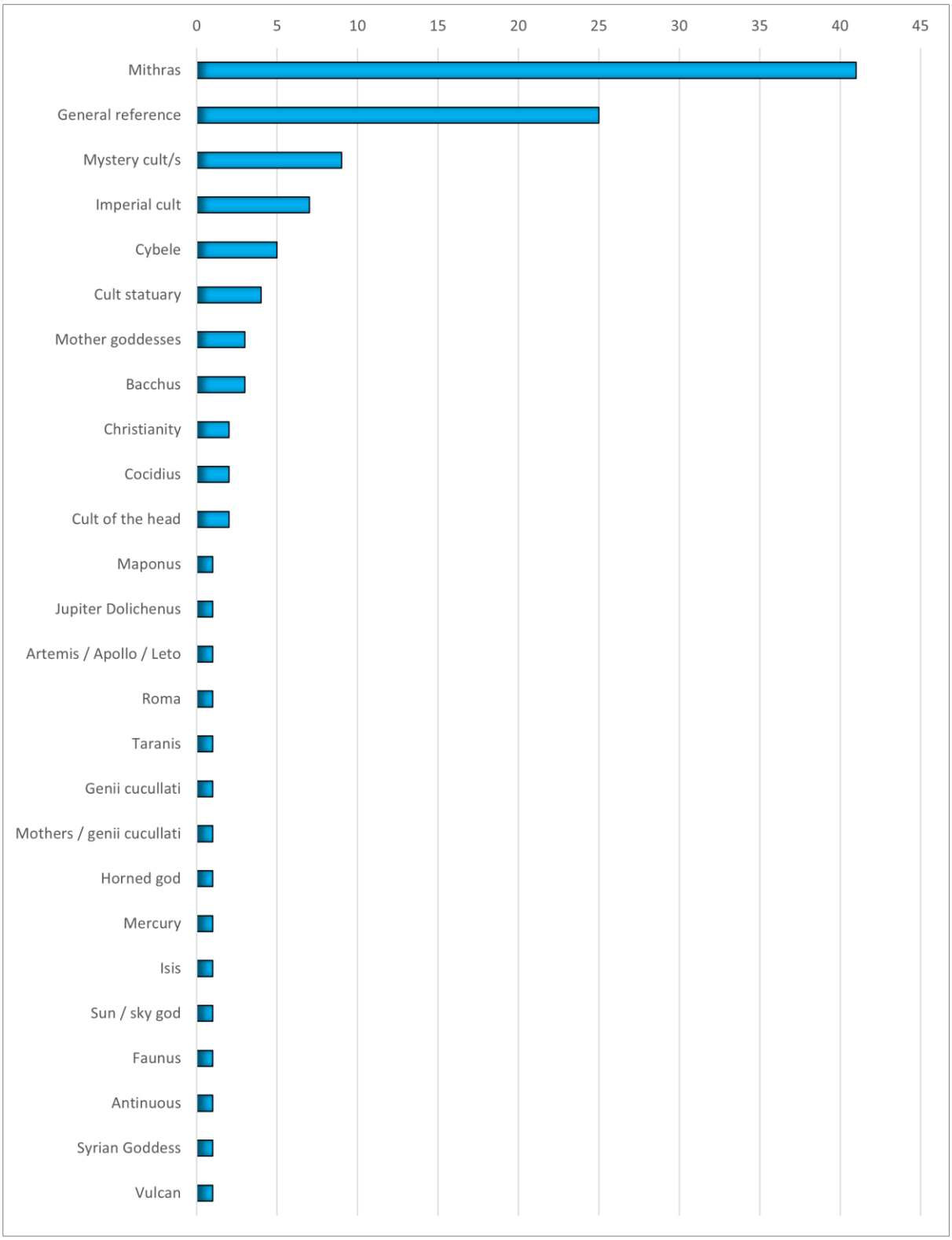



*Fig 9.4: References to the term 'cult' in interpretation across all surveyed museums*

The terminology used to describe the so-called mystery cults more generally is presented in Table 9.1. Despite scholarly challenges to the exoticizing orientalism resulting from a focus on their eastern origins (Chapter 5.2.2), museum interpretations almost universally draw on such language to describe them. Geographical perceptions of 'the east' are highly contextual, and modern visitors are unlikely to instinctively understand the concept in Graeco-Roman geographical terms. Tullie House directly refers to the cults as "oriental" and Corbridge to them coming from the "far east" of the empire, statements which may easily lead to confusion with modern East Asia. Corbridge's additional use of "mystic" presents an orientalist undertone disconnected from the 'mystery' it is intended to reflect. Consideration of the social positioning and transmission of these cults within Britain is worthy of greater exploration than simplistic references to their 'eastern' origins, or that they offered greater emotive resonance (Chapter 7.3.1), for example their distinctive sensory experiences, or how such ethnic origins were adapted to suit Graeco-Roman expectations.

| **Museum** | **Terminology** |
|---|---|
| A3: Verulamium | 'Cybele, the eastern goddess'; 'eastern beliefs' |
| B1: British Museum | 'Eastern deities'; 'Eastern cults' |
| B2: NMS | 'Eastern mystery gods'; 'exotic gods' |
| C1: Grosvenor Museum | 'Eastern mystery cults' |
| C2: Tullie House Museum | 'Eastern religions'; 'new religions spreading from the east'; 'oriental deities' |
| C6: Museum of London | 'Religions of the east'; 'mystery cults |
| C7: Great North Museum | 'Mystery cults' |
| D3: Corbridge | 'Mystic cults from the far east of the empire' |
| D4: Vindolanda | 'Jupiter Dolichenus, an eastern weather god' |
| D5: Richborough | 'Eastern cults' |
| D6: Bloomberg Mithraeum | 'The mysteries of Mithras' |

*Table 9.1: Mystery cult terminology*

To return to the overarching language used, several of the terms in Fig 9.3 relate to concepts of intellectualised and internalised piety more familiar to modern monotheistic religion: belief, worship, faith and spirituality. Though such terms might valuably challenge preconceptions of ancient religion as dry and formulaic, their contextualised use and definition is significant. 'Spirituality' only appears once, in the title of a panel at the Museum of London, where it is used in opposition to the slightly more frequent 'superstition' (Fig 9.5). Though spirituality is not referenced again in the panel, superstition is used to describe the making of offerings at temples and the petitioning of deities through spoken and written prayers (including curses). The direct opposition of the terms suggests to visitors that actions fundamental to Graeco-Roman religious practices were merely superstitions, and therefore perhaps flippant or irrational in contrast to the monotheistic connotations of internalised spirituality. Though the display therefore offers the potential to compare expectations of religious emotion between ancient and modern belief systems, it may instead cause confusion and even denigrate the sincerity of ancient believers. Superstition is also used to describe the use of magical amulets at both the Great North Museum and NMS. At no museum is the Latin context of *superstitio*, which referenced the worship of 'false' gods (in contrast to *religio* which concerned 'true' gods), discussed (Beard *et al*. 1998: 216–7).

The word 'faith' only occurs three times in reference to polytheism, at Housesteads, the Roman Army Museum and Vindolanda. At Vindolanda it describes the "multi-faith society" at the fort and *vicus*, highlighting the army's "liberal attitude to religion" but perhaps problematically implying that different religious groups comprised different 'faiths', as monotheistic religions might be termed today. At the Roman Army Museum it appears in the display title 'Religious faith in a foreign land', whereas at Housesteads it is noted as being "important in the Roman doctrine of healing" (Chapter 7.4.4).[3] Other displays at Housesteads reference "belief" and "worship", demonstrating a commendably varied vocabulary in a relatively small display to suggest the internalised aspects of religion.

[3] 'Hospital'

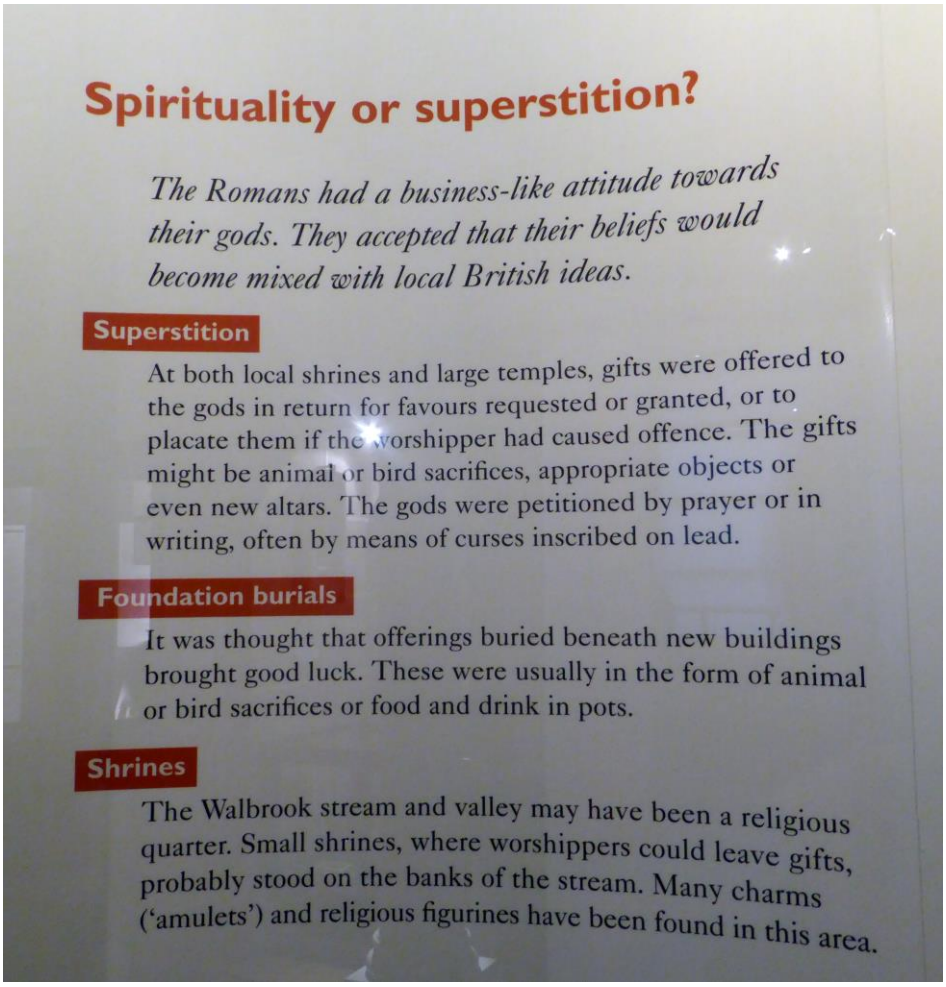



*Fig 9.5: 'Spirituality or superstition?' panel at the Museum of London. Author's photograph*

The use of such varied terminology, however, despite its value, might reflect attempts to create engaging, often alliterative, titles rather than deliberately define relationships with the divine. Displays titled 'Spirituality and Superstition?' (Museum of London), 'Religious faith in a foreign land' (Roman Army Museum), 'Worshipping on the Wall' (Great North Museum), 'The Mystery of Mithraism' (Bloomberg Mithraeum), and 'A Landscape of Work and Worship' (Housesteads) might be seen in this way. Even the alliterative appeal of 'Roman Religion' cannot be overlooked when considering why certain terminology has been chosen.

'Magic' is not regularly used in interpretation (Fig 9.3) and this contested term (Chapter 5.4) is not defined at any museum, either in its own right or, crucially, in its relationship to terms such as religion and ritual. Online survey respondents defined its usage narrowly (Fig 9.2) as primarily relating to the creation of curses and, to a lesser extent, the wearing of amulets. In museums, however, magic is generally restricted to describing the properties of certain materials (Chesters, British Museum, Bloomberg Mithraeum, Museum of London) and healing

(Great North Museum, Colchester Castle). A Hercules knot on a miniature caduceus from Uley (British Museum) is described as "a magical device", and a gold amuletic inscription at the Museum of London is a "magical message". Wiltshire Museum describes native gods as "skilled poets and story tellers, prophets and magicians, craftsmen, healers and warriors",[4] and the Museum of London calls a Janiform-carved antler a "native magical emblem" (Chapter 7.4.5). In all these instances the term remains a descriptor for acts and objects which evoke a sense of mystery, but one undifferentiated from comparanda interpreted as 'merely' religious or ritual. At Chesters, an artistic installation of photographs of coins from Coventina's Well demonstrates the contemporary complexity of the term, describing them as "magical images that may inspire the spectator".[5]

Prayers represent another culturally complex concept, carrying significant meaning in contemporary monotheisms. At Bath, curse tablets are titled 'Britain's Earliest Prayers', perhaps intended to reference the concept of prayers for justice (Chapter 5.4.3.1), but potentially causing confusion by conflating the generally positive act of 'praying' with the more sinister 'cursing' of others. Colchester Castle uses 'pray' to describe general communication with deities,[6] and the Mother Goddesses "answering (the) prayers" of a man who beseeched them. Spoken communication with deities is an often-overlooked aspect of Roman religious communication and therefore usefully highlighted. However, when disconnected from the context of reciprocally contractual vows and properly conducted acts of offering, there is a risk of reinforcing monotheistic concepts of an omnipresent deity that might be verbally beseeched at any time and place. Woolf (2013: 153) doubts that such entirely internalised communication with deities can be evidenced in the Roman world, and Rüpke (2018: 300) argues that prayer and sacrifice were implicitly interconnected. A display in Vindolanda's Domus children's gallery, though not part of the main museum display, is worthy of comparative note. A girl, 'Alba', "prays daily in her home", and is shown conducting those prayers next to an altar, her closed eyes, clasped hands, and bowed head evocative of Christian bedtime prayers (Fig 9.6).

[4] 'Gods and Goddesses'
[5] 'Coventina's Well contemporary artwork'
[6] 'Choose your god'

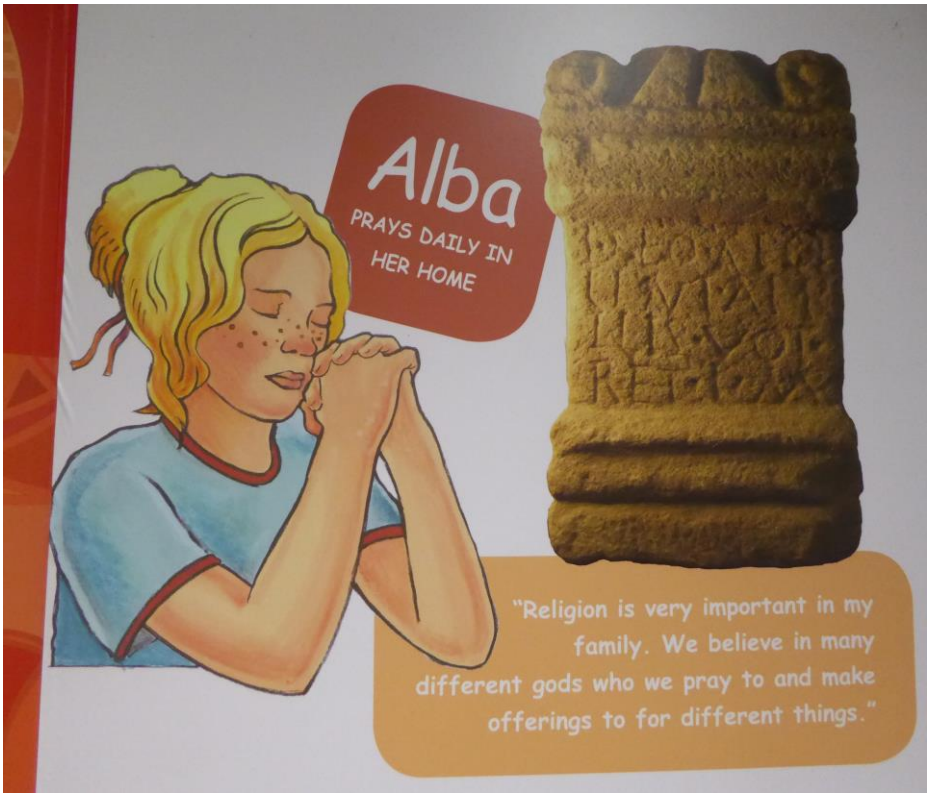



*Fig 9.6: Panel in the 'Domus' children's display at Vindolanda of a girl praying. Author's photograph*

Though the use of varied language is valuable for portraying the orthodoxic and orthopraxic aspects of religious belief and activity, at no museum are any key terms defined or discussed. The dominant use of 'religion' is unsurprising but its uncritical, 'familiar' application to the varied religious communities in Roman Britain is problematic. Though it is not expected that museums engage in detailed technical discussion or rehearse complex and shifting academic debates, raising awareness in visitors of the cultural-specificity of terminology is critical to challenging ontological presuppositions.

#### *9.2.1.2 Promoting good luck and averting evil*

The promotion of good luck and the warding off of evil forces are concepts which appear with sufficient frequency in interpretation to warrant discussion. The use of apotropaic devices to protect individuals or things from malevolent misfortune has been discussed previously (Chapters 5.4.2; 7.4.5), and the contribution of materiality to such abilities is considered below (Chapter 9.4). However, the language used to describe such practices, especially considering the monotheistic connotations of the concept of 'evil', is worthy of specific consideration.

A number of different objects, motifs and embodied actions are described as having apotropaic functionality through promoting good fortune, whether "symbolising good luck", being "lucky charms", or "bringing luck to the wearer". These include swastikas (Great North Museum), a Minerva statuette (Colchester), a Medusa mount (Museum of London), phallic amulets or rings (Museum of London, Tullie House, British Museum, Verulamium, Vindolanda), rings with religious motifs (Wiltshire), snakes (Chesters, British Museum), jet (Museum of London), throwing coins into water (Hunterian), ringing bronze bells (Great North Museum), and burying sacrificed animals or food and drink beneath new buildings (Museum of London). At NMS and the Great North Museum acts conducted to promote good fortune are described as 'superstition', an interpretation which, as mentioned above, may undermine genuine beliefs in their efficacy.

The promotion of good fortune is conflated at some museums with protection from or avoidance of 'evil' forces, and the 'evil eye' as a cause of malevolent misfortune in the ancient world was discussed in Chapter 5.4.2.1. The evil eye is specifically referenced at the Museum of London, Verulamium, Senhouse, Colchester Castle, the Hunterian, NMS and Vindolanda, with protection against it variously suggested as being provided by phallic imagery, 'eye' beads, an extended finger, *manu fica* gestures, and stone faces; all of which are justifiably supported by scholarship. At other museums, and even elsewhere at those same museums, however, a generic 'evil' is instead referenced; objects, materials and actions keeping it away (Museum of London, Grosvenor Museum Wiltshire Museum), averting its influence (Tullie House), or warding off evil spirits (Museum of London, NMS) or evil powers (Chesters). The British Museum's reference to the rattle in the Felmingham hoard "driving off demons" might also be seen as comparable. Though seemingly subtle, the difference between the 'evil eye' and simply 'evil' is significant. Concepts of good and evil are not universal, and manifestations of the 'evil eye' are still extant in the modern world. Referencing generic 'evil' risks conflating malevolent misfortune in the ancient world with monotheistic concepts of objective moral standards rooted in the character of a God.

The most commonly referenced apotropaic image is the phallus. Senhouse provides the most detailed presentation of phallic imagery, explaining it as a Mediterranean belief brought to Britain, and highlighting its contextualised architectural application on "buildings, fort walls,

kilns and ovens, quarry faces and bridges, which may be in need of protection or good luck".[7] Valuable connections are drawn between the contextualised visibility and everyday functionality of apotropaic devices. The Clayton Museum also notes the application of phallic imagery to the bridge and headquarters courtyard at Chesters, but less helpfully suggests that the belief in and use of phallic imagery was "universal", rather than requiring transmission between people and places.

Despite its widespread presence in displays, the language of 'good luck' and the aversion of 'evil' is therefore complex, simultaneously assuming pre-existing knowledge from visitors, yet risking the application of anachronistic religious concepts to Roman Britain.

#### *9.2.1.3 Describing depositional acts*

This section explores the language used to describe the deposition of objects, whether as votives at temples, in hoards or structured deposits, or in liminal or watery places. Such activities were conducted as part of holistic schemes of communication with divine forces to meet specific needs and with defined outcomes (Chapter 5.3). The moment at which an object left human hands to be transferred directly to a deity was a transformative one, and interpretative language is therefore important for communicating the significance of that act to visitors.

Structured deposition is not well represented in museums, with temple offerings a more common interpretative focus (Chapter 7.4.6). Objects given as votives are most commonly termed 'offerings' or 'gifts', but here I am specifically interested in the verbs used to describe the act of deposition. Fig 9.7 collates the terms used across all museums. The dominance of 'thrown' is apparent, with 'deposited' the second most frequent term. The use of specific terms, however, is relative to the act being interpreted. Whereas objects at shrines and temples are generally 'dedicated', 'gifted', 'donated' or 'offered', 'thrown' is predominantly used for objects placed into water. Sometimes multiple terms are used for the same act, for example in a single panel at NMS,[8] the Newstead pit deposits are described as being 'thrown', 'placed' and 'put' into wells.

[7] 'Phallic carvings'
[8] 'Offerings in water'

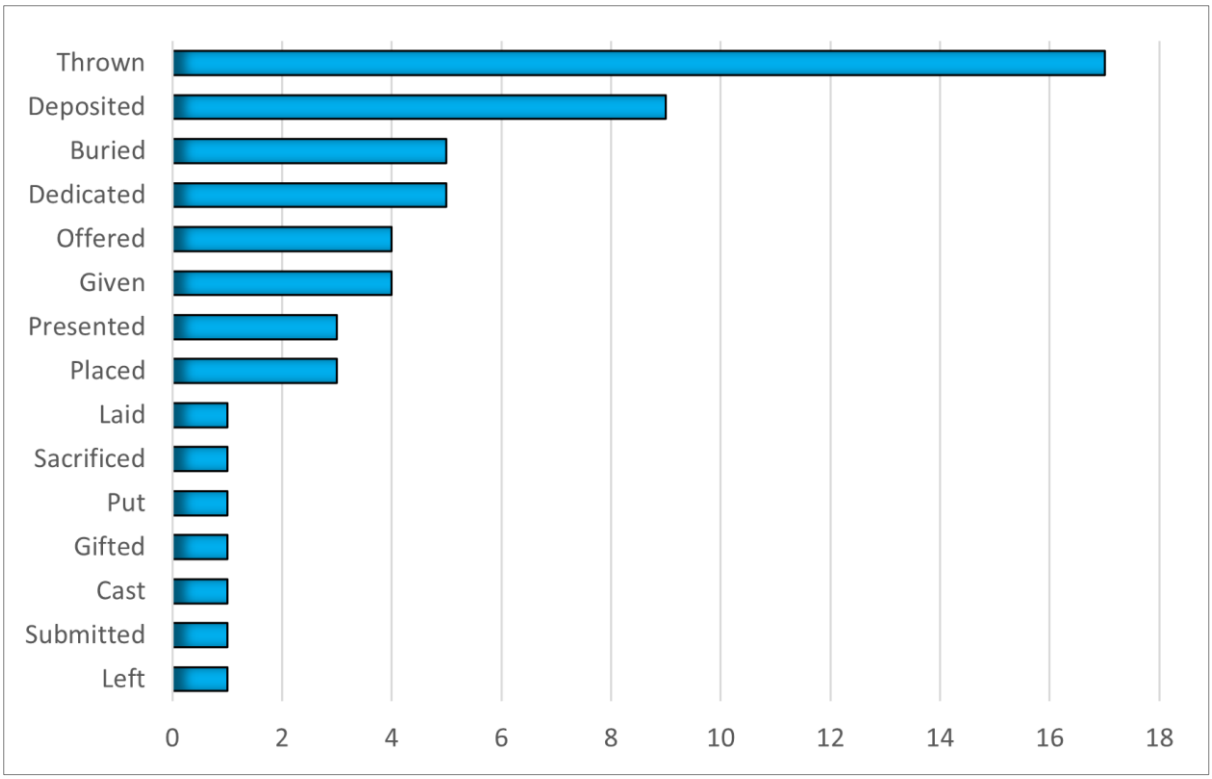



*Fig 9.7: Interpretational language used to describe acts of deposition across all surveyed museums*

'Throwing' implies a semi-controlled, even casual, release of the object by the depositor. In at least some depositional contexts, however, the object must have been placed close to or even into the water before being released from the hand. Were embodied contact with the medium or the visible and audible effects of deposition significant in the transference of the object to another realm? The use of casual terminology risks undermining both the symbolic weight and embodied experience of the act. Cousins (2014: 53) notes a tendency for watery depositions to be paralleled with modern wishing wells, offerings conducted "with no more motive than a little light-hearted superstition" and direct parallels with wishing wells are made at Bath and the Hunterian. At the latter, it is suggested with regard to coins from a well at Bar Hill that "then, as now, throwing coins into water was believed to bring good luck." At Bath, an interpretative disconnect between the temple and sacred spring has been discussed previously (Chapter 7.4.6.4), and towards the end of their visit, visitors are invited to throw coins into one of the bath's cold plunge pools (Fig 9.8). The interpretation inviting visitors to offer a coin and "make a wish" has them, rather ironically, turn their backs on the actual sacred spring. This, despite reference to it being behind the visitor, is likely not recognised by many as significant. My point here is not to argue that every act of deposition was one of deep solemnity, nor that objects were never deposited from a distance, but to highlight the risk of retrojecting modern

ontological perspectives of such acts as casual superstitions, conducted without sincere expectations of their efficacy and isolated from holistic ritual processes.

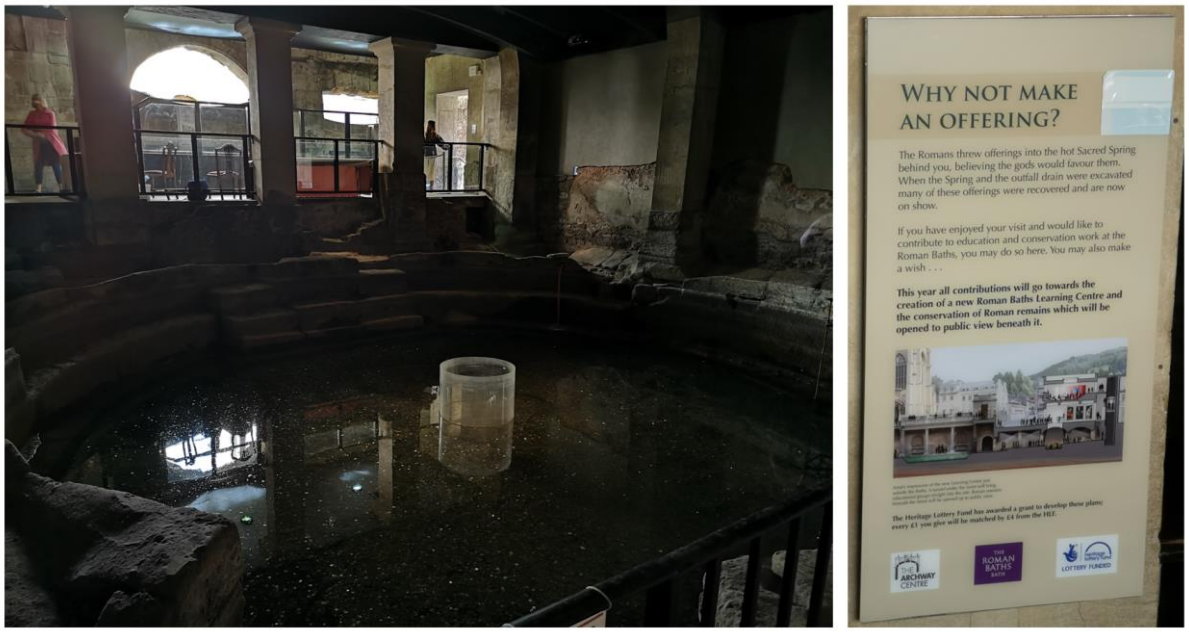



*Fig 9.8: Contemporary offerings at Bath. Author's photographs*

### 9.2.2 Use of creative language and 'storytelling'

In Chapter 4.4 I discussed the potential for creative, 'storytelling', language to 'critically disrupt' established ontologies regarding religious beliefs and activities. As discussed above, the terminology used to describe religious practices is varied but applied uncritically and without definition. However, some museums employ more creative interpretation, whether text-based or through audio-visual presentations. Such techniques were viewed positively by curatorial interviewees. A majority perceived creative interpretation as having beneficial potential, though some specific barriers were noted. These included the ability to conduct the requisite specialist research, the difficulty of integration into existing displays, avoiding stereotypes and ensuring balanced representation, maintaining authenticity (especially in language/accents), and retaining a clear distinction between evidence-based interpretation and creative speculation. Approximately half of the interviewees instinctively perceived 'storytelling' as relating to live actors or audio-visual presentations rather than occurring in written or illustrated form.

The sections below discuss three unique case studies of creative language, though some other examples are first worthy of brief highlight. The experience at the Bloomberg Mithraeum has been discussed previously (Chapter 8.4.1) and is not repeated here. At Corbridge, the 'Caring for the Body and Soul' panel has an evocative opening paragraph, demonstrating that engaging text does not have to be complex or restricted to discrete or elaborate installations:

> *"These smoky streets teem with activity. Though everyone is busy, they must find time for their spiritual and physical needs. Worries about health or big decisions can be put to rest with an offering at the temple. Doctors are available to cure their ailments, but well-being is still considered to be in the hands of the gods."*

Both Verulamium Museum and the Grosvenor Museum contain audio-video presentations related to burials, but which reference religion. At the former, the 1994 video 'Lifting the Lid' has an actor representing an individual whose skeleton is displayed nearby, talking not only about his own life and death, including his journey to the 'blessed isles' (Chapter 8.2.1.1), but also about the archaeological recovery and study of his remains. This placing of the curatorial voice into the mouth of the actor blurs the boundaries between evidence and interpretation and leads to him having awkwardly restricted knowledge about his own life. There are also (reflecting the concern of some curatorial interviewees) issues regarding representation, as a middle-class, received-pronunciation-speaking English actor portrays an elite Roman Briton. A more successful and recent presentation occurs at the Grosvenor Museum, where a 2010 video centres on the wife of Centurion Marcus Aurelius Nepos, whose tombstone is in the gallery. Focussing on his death, it engages touchingly with prayers during sickness, burial rites (including the use of music and light), and commemorative graveside ritual meals. The balance between evidence and reconstruction is handled in a successfully nuanced manner, prompting visitors to view the carved figures of Nepos and his wife on the tombstone as emotive individuals.

The enamelled bronze cockerel from a child's grave at Corinium (Chapter 8.2.1.1) represents an unexplored opportunity for creative interpretation. The gallery interpretation is minimal, but a poem was commissioned by the museum about the cockerel by the poet, Dan Simpson. It talks emotionally of the cold bronze made warm by the child that loved it in life and whom it accompanied to the afterlife, the grieving parent asking the cockerel to beseech Mercury to

keep the child safe so that they may meet again one day. The poem is available online (Simpson 2015), but the inclusion of such a powerful creative response in the gallery, or at least highlighting its existence, would significantly enhance visitors' perceptions of the object, its materiality, and of the emotions inherent in its funerary deposition.

#### *9.2.2.1 National Museum of Scotland*

> *"(Creative text) is a way of getting people's brains to fire and to make them think in a different way and I think that's really important." (*NMS curatorial interviewee*)*

The Early Peoples gallery at NMS, which opened in 1998, is structured around four major themes with 23 thematic sections (Appendix B: B2, ii), each introduced by a short (c.90-120 word) piece of first-person narrative text. These texts, and the cultural tensions they highlight, are physically separated from the generally more prosaic (and authoritative (Skeates 2002: 216)) in-case interpretation. Their restricted application and the complex gallery layout mean that, though they are prominently displayed, they are often encountered at unexpected times, and not easily connected with related displays. Two of the narrative panels are of particular interest here: 'Glimpses of the sacred' and 'Gods of the frontier, God of the Book' (Fig 9.9). These thematic sections were discussed earlier (Chapter 7.4.6.2) for their respective museographical and interpretative approaches to prehistoric and Roman religion and ritual.

The difference in tone between the descriptions of prehistoric and Roman rituals in the panels is notable. The prehistoric experience is presented as a fundamentally phenomenological one: the sun and moon are watched, the earth is felt, the birds are heard, fruits are smelled, songs and stories are communicated, art is carved into stones, and fear is emoted. Roman religion, in contrast, is about structure, power and hubris: of a destiny to conquer guided by gods of brutal warfare and the world-ruling divine emperor, and of serious vows made at stone temples. Whereas prehistoric people "spoke with gods and were humble", the rapacious Romans "always wanted more gods on their side".

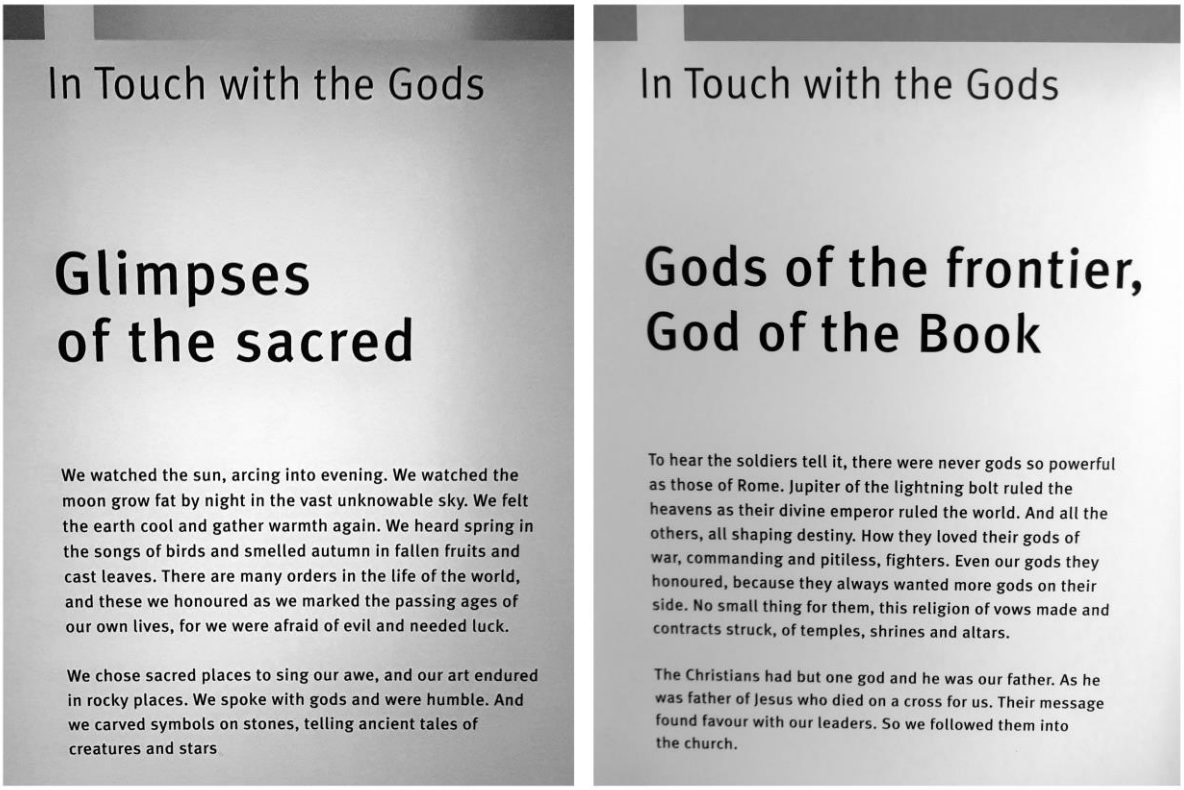



*Fig 9.9: 'Glimpses of the Sacred' and 'Gods of the frontier, God of the Book' narrative panels at the National Museum of Scotland. Author's photographs*

The inclusive 'we' of Glimpses of the sacred' and exclusive 'they' of 'Gods of the frontier' are also notable. The use of 'we' in interpretation has been criticised for excluding as many people as it incorporates (Ravelli 2006: 86; Jimson 2015: 541–2), and its presence in the NMS panels has been specifically challenged (Ascherson 2000; Clarke 2000; Skeates 2002). The curatorial interviewee rightly observed that in a Scottish context "the Romans have to be 'they', the Romans can't be 'we'". Despite this, the text implies a homogenised 'native' group with consistent opinions, experiences and ontologies, which visitors should feel part of. As Rüpke and Degelmann (2015: 291) observe, membership of a community is not granted solely through perceived ethnicity or geography, but is dynamic and maintained through constant communication and negotiation.

Despite the text's inclusivity, the identity of the speaker is deliberately anonymous. The curatorial interviewee explained, "they might be male or female, that we can't tell, but they're definitely not intended to be elite. They're definitely intended to be a more everyday person." This was also expressed by Clarke (2000: 221), who stated that the anonymous narrative voice "deliberately embraced the extensive majority at any period that do not feel a sense of significance, status or power". The texts therefore represent the perspectives not of hypothetical

individuals but, as the displays are thematic and multi-period, a homogenisation of temporally and culturally disparate peoples. The ‘Glimpses of the sacred text’ is intended to represent prehistoric voices (Clarke and Hunter 2001: 6) yet the displays in that section also include Roman acts of structured and votive deposition (Chapter 7.4.6.2) and Pictish carved stones. Similarly, the ‘we’ in the ‘Gods of the frontier’ text (Fig 9.9) seamlessly shifts from the voice of people encountering the Roman army to those of post-Roman Christians.

The texts represent some of the most prominent examples of creative language in the surveyed museums, and their presence is valuable. However, greater specificity for both the speaker and their cultural context, currently disembodied and pluralistic, could increase the potential for lived religious experiences to be explored. The ‘Gods of the frontier’ text begins with the narrator recounting what it was like “to hear the soldiers tell it”, and greater consideration of such personal transmission of religious knowledge may enhance the sense of individual experiences and interactions in frontier landscapes.

#### *9.2.2.2 Museum of London*

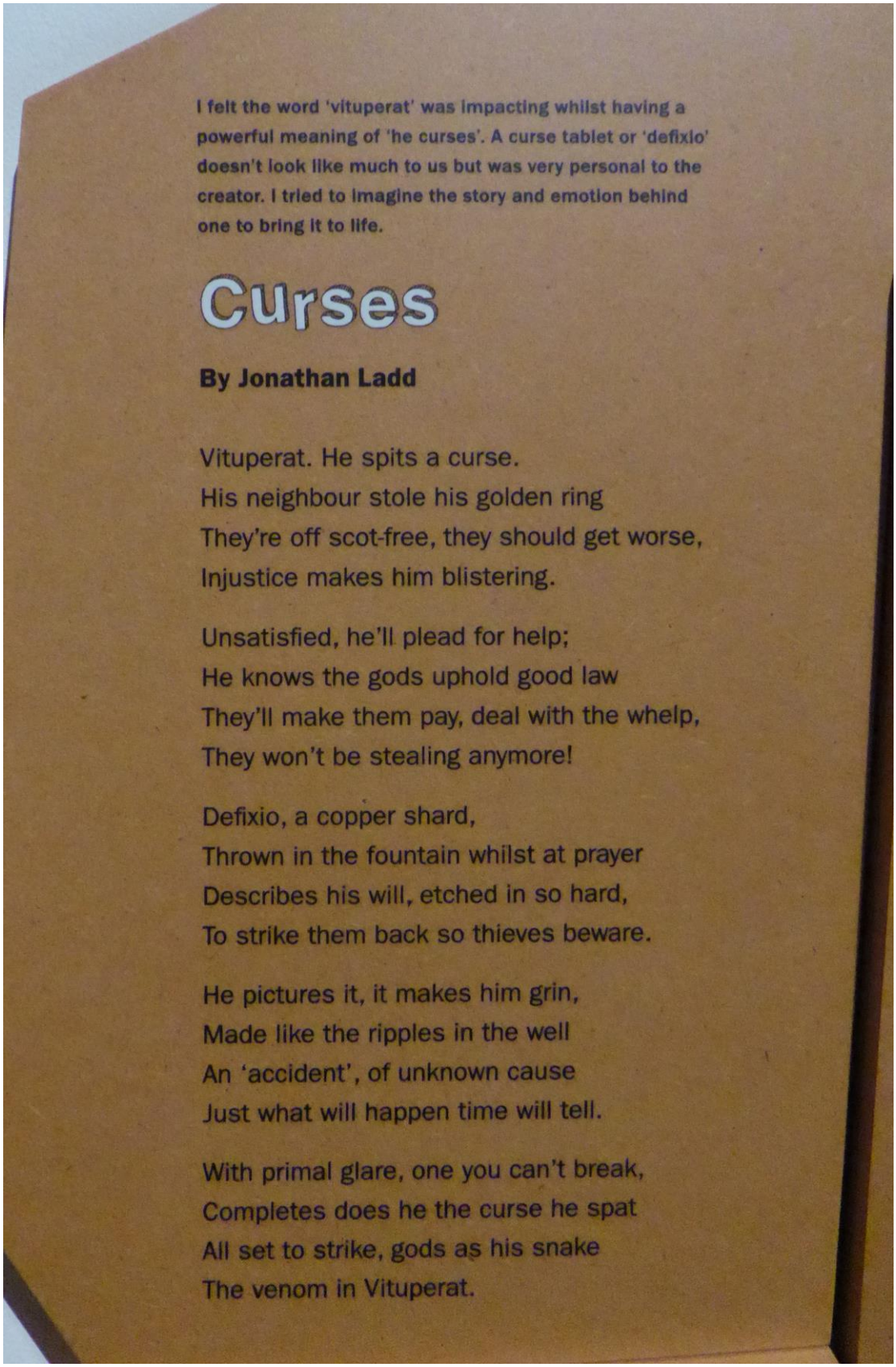
The Museum of London’s prehistoric and Roman galleries have been subjected to more academic analysis than any other in Britain (Chapter 1.5.2). My focus here is a series of poetic responses to the displays installed as part of the 2012 ‘Our Londinium’ youth programme (curatorial interview). 18 poems appear in groups across the gallery (Fig 9.10), with two poems referencing religion. ‘What Mithras did next’ by Ross Sutherland, explores public interactions around the London mithraeum when it was an open-air site, but does not significantly discuss the temple or the cult. The other, ‘Curses’ by Jonathan Ladd (Fig 9.11), however, is a work of direct relevance to lived religious experiences.

*Fig 9.10: Poetry panels at the Museum of London. Author's photograph*

The sense of frustration and anger in the language is palpable, the wronged individual "spitting" the words of the curse and grinning at the prospect of the divine punishment to be inflicted; the deeply etched characters on the curse reflecting the strength of emotion. Though the actual deposition of the curse into a fountain is only briefly mentioned and echoes casual and spontaneous wishing well offerings, the resultant rippling of the water presents a powerful metaphor for the act's future social and personal impact. The poet's introduction (Fig 9.11) perceptively highlights the disparity between the unassuming lead sheets and the visceral personal emotions that led to their creation.[9] The poem represents the most personal, emotive and experiential description of cursing offered at any museum, yet the poetry wall's physical detachment from the displayed curses (Fig 9.10; Appendix B: C6, v and vii) mean visitors will not easily connect them. As a comparative note, though Bath does not generally engage with creative interpretation, the actor reading the text of a curse on the audio guide (92) also attempts to express the indignant frustration of the wronged individual.

The Museum of London curatorial interviewee stated an ambition to include more first-person creative language in the archaeological displays of the new museum, connecting with real oral history recordings which will feature in displays of later periods.

[9] The poem erroneously calls them 'copper'



I felt the word 'vituperat' was impacting whilst having a powerful meaning of 'he curses'. A curse tablet or 'defixio' doesn't look like much to us but was very personal to the creator. I tried to imagine the story and emotion behind one to bring it to life.

# Curses

**By Jonathan Ladd**

Vituperat. He spits a curse.
His neighbour stole his golden ring
They're off scot-free, they should get worse,
Injustice makes him blistering.

Unsatisfied, he'll plead for help;
He knows the gods uphold good law
They'll make them pay, deal with the whelp,
They won't be stealing anymore!

Defixio, a copper shard,
Thrown in the fountain whilst at prayer
Describes his will, etched in so hard,
To strike them back so thieves beware.

He pictures it, it makes him grin,
Made like the ripples in the well
An 'accident', of unknown cause
Just what will happen time will tell.

With primal glare, one you can't break,
Completes does he the curse he spat
All set to strike, gods as his snake
The venom in Vituperat.

*Fig 9.11: 'Curses' by Jonathan Ladd poem panel at the Museum of London. Author's photograph*

### *9.2.2.3 Great North Museum*

The Great North Museum curatorial interviewee was positive about the potential of creative language, particularly the opportunity for multivocality and the challenging of the singular authoritative museum voice. Creative interpretation in the existing display takes the form of 15 prominent 'People Portals' consisting of a photograph of a re-enactor representing the character and a first-person quotation.[10]

Six of the Portals reference religion, three significantly (Fig 9.12), and three in a minor way. In these latter three, Aurelius Julianus expresses his distress that nobody will perform annual rites for his deceased family after he is posted elsewhere, the emperor Hadrian talks of a "divine precept" for the building of the Wall, and Centurion Florus comments that "only the gods know what's on our emperor's mind".

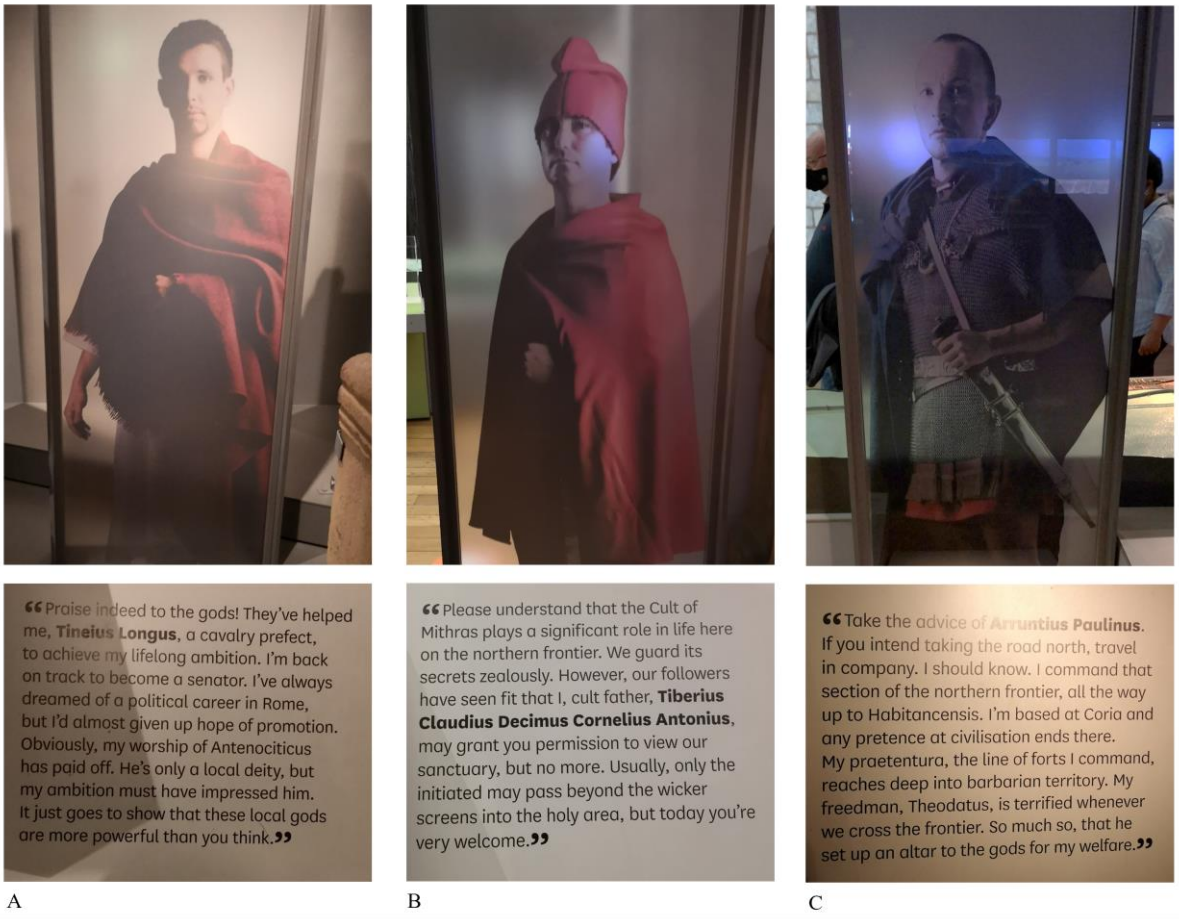



*Fig 9.12: 'People Portals' at the Great North Museum. A) Tineius Longus, B) Tiberius Claudius Decimus Cornelius Antonius, C) Arruntius Paulinus. Author's photographs*

[10] Though not titled in the gallery, the curatorial interviewee used this term

Of the significant references, Tineius Longus' (Fig 9.12A) dedication to Antenociticus has been discussed previously (Chapter 7.2.1.2) for its surprise at the influence of local deities. The Portal of Tiberius Claudius Decimus Cornelius Antonius (Fig 9.12B) is associated with the mithraeum displays; the altar he set up to record his restoration of the Rudchester mithraeum is displayed nearby. Though the altar only records his military rank (Prefect), the text calls him "cult father" and informs visitors that they are privileged to have access to the temple's interior. He states that the cult plays "a significant role in life here on the northern frontier" but does not explore how such influence manifested or whether it extended beyond initiates or even beyond the Roman military.

Finally, the Portal of Arruntius Paulinus (Fig 9.12C) relates to the risks of travel, based upon a now fragmentary altar set up by his freedman, Theodatus. The inscription is for the wellbeing (*pro salute*) of Paulinus, interpreted in the text as relating to travel north of Hadrian's Wall. Though, as discussed in Chapter 7.4.3 with regard to Fortuna dedications in bath houses, such a wish may simply relate to his general good health and fortune, rather than to a specific physical danger, the relating of prosaic acts such as travel with the need for divine protection is valuably highlighted.

### 9.2.3 Reconstructing religious acts

Considerations of interpretation must include visual language as well as written, and here I examine reconstructions of Romano-British religious sites and activity. As discussed in Chapter 4.4.1, these carry their own risks regarding authenticity, but also possess immense power to transmit challenging experiential and sensory messages. Some reconstructions have been discussed individually in previous chapters, but here they will be discussed holistically.

| Museum | Type | Display (see Appendix B for museum plans) | Description | Category | Fig/s |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| A3: Verulamium Museum | Illustration (greyscale) | The Great Monuments | Forum reconstruction with Jupiter columns | Wider setting | |
| | Illustration (line drawing) | The Great Monuments | Jupiter column | Architecture | |
| | Illustration (colour) | Sacrifice Reconstruction drawing | Temple sacrificial scene | Group act | 8.11 |
| | Illustration (colour) | The Triangular Temple | Triangular temple | Architecture | 9.15 |
| | Physical | Household shrine | Household shrine | Architecture | 7.24 |
| A2: Roman Army Museum | Illustration (greyscale) | Hadrian's Wall sites | Interior of an (unidentified) mithraeum | Architecture | |
| A4: Canterbury Roman Museum | Illustration (colour) | Early Roman Canterbury reconstruction | Early Roman Canterbury | Wider setting | |
| | Digital | Quest for the Roman Temple interactive | Temple façade and precinct | Architecture | |
| | Physical | Religious cults | Temple façade model | Architecture | 8.46 |
| | Physical | The Temple | Temple façade model | Architecture | 8.46 |
| B1: British Museum | Illustration (line drawing) | Uley | Uley temple complex | Architecture | 9.13 |
| | Illustration (greyscale) | Uley | Uley Mercury cult statue reconstruction | Statuary | |
| C1: Grosvenor Museum | Illustration (colour) | Altars | Centurion offering over altar to Nemesis | Individual act | 8.12 |
| C3: Colchester Castle Museum | Physical | Temple of Claudius model | Temple of Claudius model | Architecture | |
| | Illustration (colour) | Christianity in Roman Colchester | Butt Road church | Architecture | |
| C4: Corinium Museum | Illustration (colour) | Religious ceremony graphic panel | Sacrificial scene around altar to Genius Loci | Group act | 8.24 |
| | Physical | Replica Jupiter column with original capital | Reconstructed Jupiter column | Architecture | 6.6; 7.25 |
| | Illustration (greyscale) | The Jupiter column panel | The Jupiter column in the Corinium forum | Wider setting | |
| | Illustration (colour) | Religion panel | Romano-Celtic temple at Caerwent | Architecture | |

| Museum | Type | Display (see Appendix B for museum plans) | Description | Category | Fig/s |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| C6: Museum of London | Illustration (line drawing) | All roads lead to London panel | Springhead temple complex | Architecture | 9.14 |
| | Illustration (colour) | The Temple of Mithras | London mithraeum in its setting | Wider setting | |
| | Illustration (colour) | Inside the temple | London Mithraeum interior | Group act | 7.18 |
| C7: Great North Museum | Digital | Mithraeum AV | Carrawburgh Mithraeum interior video | Individual act | 7.19 |
| C10: Wiltshire Museum | Illustration (greyscale) | Worship | Cold Kitchen Hill temple complex | Architecture | 8.32 |
| D1: Senhouse Museum | Illustration (greyscale) | Sacrifice panel | Antiquarian drawing of military sacrifice | Group act | |
| | Illustration (colour) | Altar dedication graphic panel | Altar dedication ceremony | Group act | 8.13 |
| | Illustration (colour) | Bath house graphic panel | Bath house scene with altar | Individual act | 7.26 |
| | Illustration (colour) | Sacrifice panel | Cartoon: The altars | Group act | 8.25 |
| | Illustration (colour) | Nymphs | Cartoon: The Water Nymphs | Other | |
| | Illustration (colour) | The Shrine of the Standards panel | Cartoon: The Shrine of the Standards | Other | |
| | Illustration (colour) | Horned God | Cartoon: The Horned God | Group act | 7.9 |
| | Physical | Nymphs | Nymphs display set dressing | Other | |
| | Physical | Replica shrine | Shrine of the standards | Architecture | |
| D2: Housesteads | Illustration (colour) | A Landscape of Work and Worship panel | Housesteads Mithraeum interior | Group act | 6.15; 7.18 |
| D3: Corbridge | Illustration (greyscale) | Timeline and Public religion panel | Temple façade | Architecture | |
| D5: Richborough | Illustration (line drawing) | Roman religion panel | Temple complex at Gosbecks, Colchester | Architecture | |
| D6: Bloomberg Mithraeum | Illustration (colour) | The London Mithraeum | London mithraeum in its setting | Wider setting | |
| | Illustration (colour) | The London Mithraeum | London Mithraeum interior | Group act | 7.18 |
| D7: Bath | Digital | Ritual procession AV | Ritual Procession video | Group act | 8.27 |

| Museum | Type | Display (see Appendix B for museum plans) | Description | Category | Fig/s |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Physical | The Roman Baths and Temple of Sulis Minerva in the 4th Century AD model | Site model with buildings and religious procession | Architecture | 7.27; 8.27 |
| | Illustration (colour) | Aquae Sulis panel | Aerial view reconstruction of Aquae Sulis | Wider setting | |
| | Illustration (line drawing) | The Temple Pediment panel; Temple of Sulis Minerva panel | Temple façade | Architecture | |
| | Digital | Temple pediment | Temple pediment light projection | Architecture | 9.16 |
| | Illustration (colour) | The Temple precinct reconstruction drawing | View of the temple precinct | Architecture | 8.23 |
| | Digital | Receptus AV | Gaius Calpurnius Receptus video | Other | 8.27 |
| | Illustration (line drawing) | Luna and Sol from the Temple Courtyard | Reconstruction of architectural fragments of Luna and Sol | Architecture | |
| | Digital | Offering AV | Military officer making offering video | Individual act | 8.10 |
| | Physical | Tholos model | Tactile model of the Tholos | Architecture | |
| | Digital | Scribe AV | Scribe creating curse tablet video | Other | 8.26 |
| | Illustration (colour) | Tholos reconstruction drawing | View of tholos from temple courtyard | Architecture | |
| | Digital | Temple courtyard AV | Temple courtyard video (looking towards temple) | Architecture | 8.23 |
| | Digital | Temple courtyard AV | Temple courtyard video (looking over courtyard) | Architecture | 8.29 |
| | Illustration (colour) | Temple steps graphic panel | Temple steps and columns | Architecture | |
| | Illustration (colour) | Sacred spring reconstruction drawing | Sacred spring building interior | Architecture | 7.32 |

*Table 9.2: Religious reconstructions*

A total of 54 reconstructions referencing religion have been identified (Table 9.2), comprising 36 illustrations, nine physical reconstructions or models, and nine digital installations.[11] Of these, 28 (52%) are architectural,[12] ten (19%) depict a group religious act, six (11%) show the wider setting of a religious site (e.g. within a forum or town), four (6%) are of an individual religious act, and one (2%) reconstructs a cult statue. Five (10%) were categorised as 'other'.

Nearly half of all reconstructions have no supporting interpretation, and the majority of those that do have only a title or brief description. In no cases are interpretative processes, issues of authenticity or underlying archaeological evidence directly addressed. The visual imagery is therefore generally left to speak for itself, risking the presentation of an undue degree of certainty and created meanings based on unchallenged preconceptions. The emotive power of reconstructions can therefore become their biggest drawback. Below, I consider the reconstructions across three categories: architecture, movement and perspective, and their implications for the multisensory experiences of ancient individuals.

#### *9.2.3.1 Architecture*

The majority of reconstructions are architectural, recreating the form and appearance of specific religious structures. Aerial views of towns, such as at Canterbury and Bath, show the relative position of religious complexes within those settlements but do not discuss their integration with the wider townscape, for example their location in relation to major roads or intersections, their relationships with fora or theatres (Chapter 7.4.2) or through religious processions (Chapter 8.4.6.3). While people sometimes feature in reconstructions, such as at Uley (British Museum, Fig 9.13) or Cold Kitchen Hill (Wiltshire Museum, Fig 8.32), their inclusion is generally to bring a sense of generic life or scale, and they are not the primary focus. Some illustrations, such as those of Springhead (Museum of London, Fig 9.14) or Gosbecks, Colchester (Richborough) are presented as line drawings, devoid of life and lacking interpretation of the functionality and relationship of structures. Such drawings present a sterilised impression of sites which is also discernible in more complex and engaging reconstructions, such as the Temple Courtyard at Bath (Chapter 8.3.2; Fig 8.23). This is not to

[11] Illustrations of objects, archaeological site plans and reproductions of ancient imagery are not considered reconstructions. Reconstructions which form part of interactive activities are considered in Chapter 9.3
[12] Some architectural reconstructions include people, and their centrality to the image has determined categorisation as architectural or representing a religious act

argue that such reconstructions are inherently bad, but that they reinforce perceptions of a Roman Britain defined by architectural developments. The two reconstructions of Verulamium's Triangular Temple (Figs 8.11; 9.15), in contrast, present a more realistically messy picture, with a rich and textured colour palette. The inclusion of neighbouring structures, smoke, and the movement of people within, around and crossing the threshold of the temple precinct also situate the structure into a wider social and landscape context.

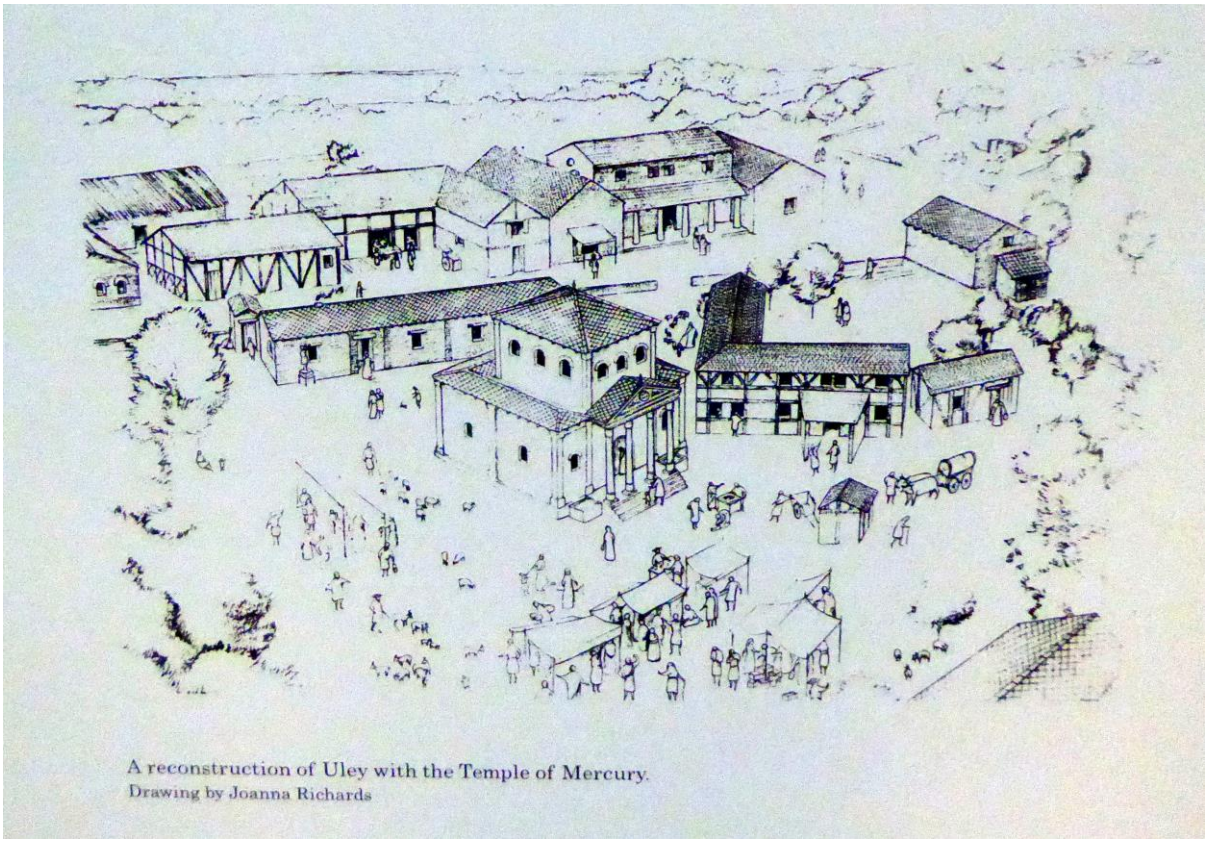



*Fig 9.13: Reconstruction drawing of the Uley temple complex at the British Museum. Author's photograph*

The temple pediment light projection at Bath (Fig 9.16) presents an effective combination of focussed architectural reconstruction and powerful visual stimulus. The projection cycles through the 'raw' surviving fragments, a line drawing reconstructing the missing elements, and a coloured reconstruction suggesting its original appearance. This not only enables an understanding of archaeological reconstructing processes to be gained, but the direct digital recolouring of the stonework powerfully recontextualises the surviving reliefs.

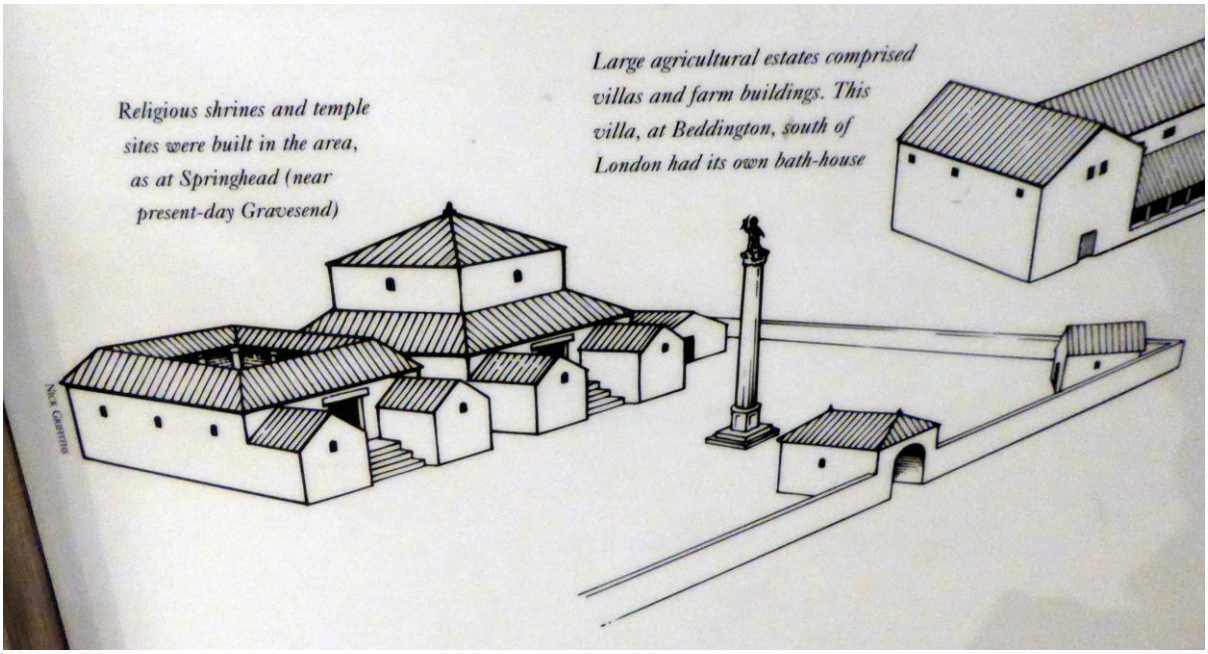



*Fig 9.14: Reconstruction drawing of the Springhead temple at the Museum of London. Author's photograph*

*Fig 9.15: Reconstruction drawing of the Triangular Temple at Verulamium Museum. Author's photograph*

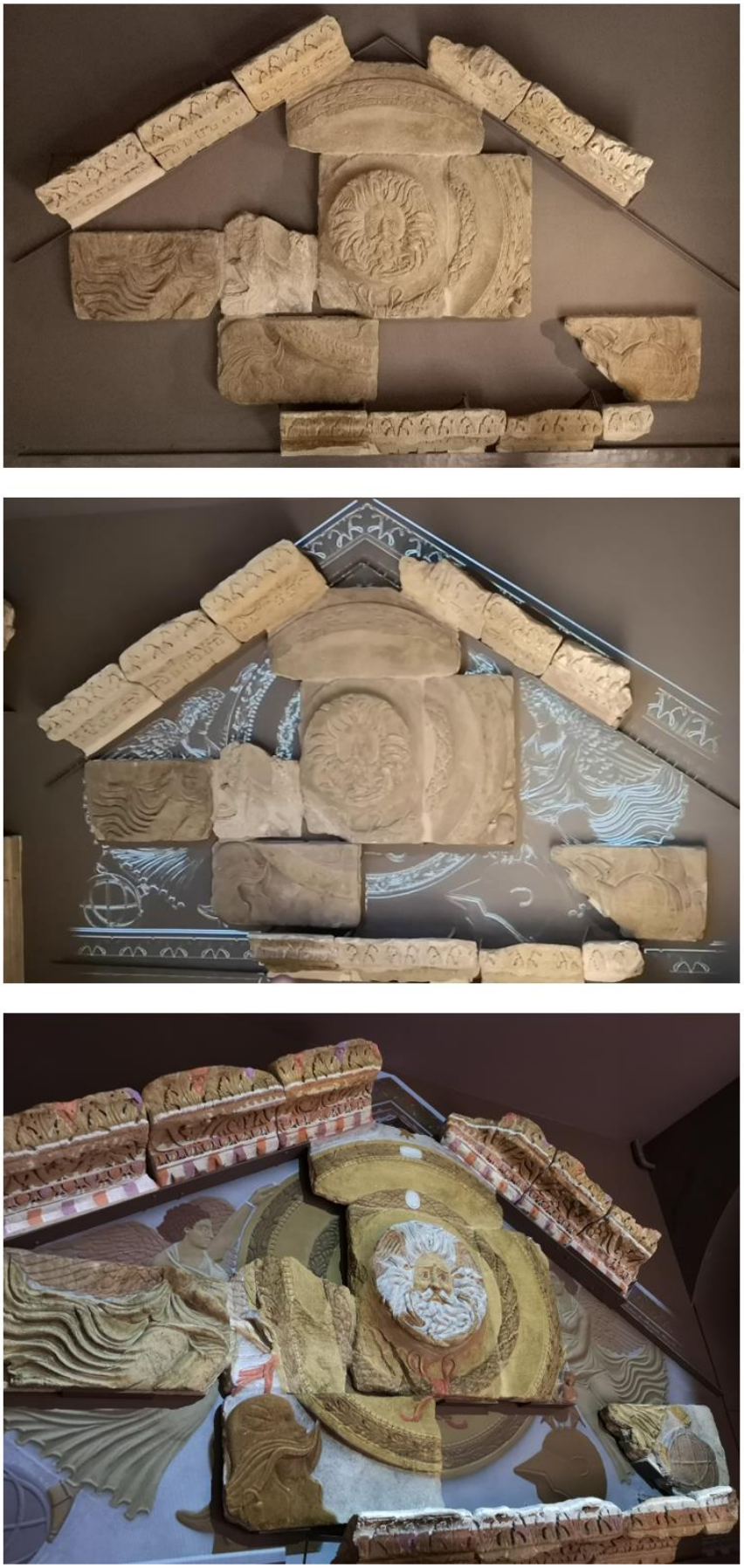


*Fig 9.16: Light projections on the temple pediment at Bath. Author's photographs*

### *9.2.3.2 Movement, gestures and viewing perspectives*

Some reconstructions demonstrate specific movements and bodily positioning by ritual actors. The Centurion offering to Nemesis at the Grosvenor Museum (Chapter 8.2.2.2; Fig 8.12), for example, gazes dramatically skyward. The sense of life in the Verulamium temple scene (Fig 9.15) demonstrates the evocative power of visual representations to reflect movement and gestures which are difficult in textual descriptions. The bustle of the outdoor street scene contrasts with the quieter temple courtyard, those entering the gateway can be imagined as passing through a liminal and transformative threshold. We can imagine the wafting smoke from the altar fire informing those outside of what is occurring; perhaps sparking their own memories of experiencing such acts. The reconstruction of a sacrificial scene within that same courtyard (Fig 8.11), though unfortunately not overtly highlighted as such to visitors (Chapter 8.2.2.2), provides a more intimate perspective, the viewer positioned just over the shoulders of the watching crowd and forming part of their revelries as attendees play instruments and the priest energetically raises his hands. Other reconstructions also place the viewer close to ritual acts, even at the same eye level as the participants, for example in the altar dedication ceremony at Senhouse (Fig 8.13) where the viewer becomes one of the watching soldiers, or the ritual scene at Corinium (Chapter 8.3.3; Fig 8.24). Here, the viewer is on the other side of the altar, not part of the attendant crowd but unwittingly taking the place of the deity. The attendees focus stern attention onto the officiant who in turn directly, even unnervingly, meets the viewer's gaze. However, making a real altar rather than an illustrated one the focus of the act presents something of a contradiction. Though providing greater contextualisation than most displayed altars, it remains lifelessly detached from its fundamental role in the ritual occurring behind it (see Chapter 10.6 for comparanda at Tullie House).

Reconstructions of the interiors of mithraea, such as those at London and Housesteads (Fig 7.18), at the Roman Army Museum, or in the Great North Museum's video presentation (Fig 7.19), consistently view the structure from just inside the anteroom looking towards the tauroctony and altars. While this centres the cult's iconic artwork, it also restricts experiences of the space to that of an outsider not permitted to progress further, as discussed above. While it might reflect the perspective of an initiate transitioning between secular and sacred space, the lack of interpretation does not encourage viewers to consider the scene through such an experiential or emotive lens.

Video reconstructions enable a greater sense of embodied movement and interactions between people, structures, and material culture. At Bath, for example, there are videos of the procession, Gaius Calpurnius Receptus meeting colleagues (Chapter 8.3.3; Fig 8.27), the military officer repeatedly bowing before making an offering (Chapter 8.2.2.2; Fig 8.10), and the people circulating around the temple courtyard (Figs 8.23; 8.29). The courtyard reconstructions are particularly valuable for their presentation of multiple groups moving through the space and enabling visitors to view the scene from two different directions.

#### *9.2.3.3 Multisensory experiences*

With the exception of the narration on the Great North Museum's mithraeum video and the sound accompanying the Verulamium sacrificial scene (Chapter 8.4.3), the reconstructions are entirely visual. Though some have smoke curling up from altars and musicians are depicted playing instruments, visitors must use these passive visual cues to imagine the multisensory experiences they represent. Architectural reconstructions present particularly sterile sensorial impressions. Graham (2020: 81) critiques studies of ancient depictions of ritual activity for remaining grounded in visual analyses, privileging the "mental recreation of experience" rather than considering how objects themselves contribute to sensory assemblages. A similar cognitive disconnect can be perceived in the surveyed museums, reconstructions remaining overwhelmingly visual, detached from the material culture which inspired their creation and which they purport to bring to life.

## 9.3 §9: "Multisensory interactivities offer the potential for challenging and emotive 'proximal' engagement with religious experiences for visitors of all age groups."

As discussed in Chapter 4, tactile and multisensory activities can contribute to the creation of engaging narratives which are of value for all visitors, not only children and families. Adopting Graham's (2020) concepts of 'proximal' and 'distal' religious experiences (Chapter 3.3.4), such interactives offer first-hand 'proximal' experiences. This section explores how museums use interactives to enable visitors to engage with the multisensorial affordances of religious objects and related experiences. The importance of researchers being able to obtain multisensory experiences of museum objects has been highlighted by Hunter-Crawley (2020),

with Skeates and Day (2020b: 559) commenting that such access is a "privilege that archaeologists should make the most of". With due consideration for conservation and security requirements, museum visitors should also be enabled to share such experiences wherever possible.

Interactivities referencing religion are collated in Table 9.3. Interactives are defined here as any elements of displays which visitors are invited to proactively engage with, whether physically or digitally. This excludes ambient audio-video presentations, reconstructions and handheld interpretation. Some activities were de-activated at the time of surveying due to Covid restrictions, though it was possible to include those that had been experienced in previous visits or displayed sufficient interpretation to determine their content. Interactives that could not be confirmed as including religious aspects have been omitted. Overall, religion is far less frequently the focus for interactives than for the static reconstructions discussed above.

The interactives can be broadly divided into two groups, those centred on objects or structures (whether original or replica) and those that provide additional interpretation about collections. A fairly equal division exists between the use of digital and low-tech technologies. It is notable that all of the activities were visual and tactile, no auditory or olfactory interactives engage with religious narratives.

### 9.3.1 'Original' objects

The only intentionally tactile religious object displayed at the surveyed museums is a stone altar fragment at Richborough, though as this is not interpreted most visitors are unlikely to recognise its religious nature (Fig 9.17). Object handling desks exist at Tullie House and the British Museum, though as they were not operational due to Covid restrictions the featured objects are unknown. A number of curatorial interviewees noted that object handling was a popular activity, though usually conducted outside of galleries by learning teams and aimed at education groups rather than general visitors. Religious content in such activities was reported in the interviews at the British Museum (a statuette), Canterbury (replica amulets and a 3D-replica of a Dea Nutrix statuette), Durham University (samianware depicting deities), Grosvenor Museum (Jupiter Amun antefixes), the Museum of London (statuettes) and Wiltshire Museum (gods and goddesses being an important focus of sessions). None, however,

| Museum | Display unit | Type | Description | Fig/s |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| A1: Chesters | My Roman Pantheon | Digital and physical | Terminal which enables visitors to take a 'lamp' around the gallery to select three deities to offer to | 8.8 |
| A4: Canterbury Roman Museum | Quest for the Roman Temple interactive | Digital | Touchscreen exploring reconstructions of a temple complex believed to have exited in the centre of Canterbury | 9.22 |
| B1: British Museum | N/A | Handling | Handling desk normally located in gallery but not in operation during surveying | |
| B2: National Museum of Scotland | Explore Roman gods | Physical | Matching the gods with their attributes wooden block activity, featuring Mercury, Minerva and Jupiter | 9.19 |
| C2: Tullie House | Interactive terminal | Digital | Three identical touchscreens with two activities: 'Dress the Romans' (including dressing a lady for a temple visit) and 'Roman jigsaws' (no religious content) | 8.30 |
| | Collections Conversations object handling desk | Handling | Object handling desk, not in operation during surveying | |
| C3: Colchester Castle | Choose your god | Physical | Flap lifting activity about the attributes of deities, featuring Abundantia, Mercury, Jupiter, Harpocrates and Venus | 8.6 |
| | Tactile Mercury | Physical | Tactile replica of the Gosbecks Mercury statuette | |
| C6: Museum of London | Londinium and Beyond interactive | Digital | Two identical touchscreens highlighting objects on a map of greater London. Religious objects are Greenwich Park temple inscription, Medusa mount, and a curse tablet from Guildhall | 9.20 |
| C7: Great North Museum | Inscriptions database | Digital | Two identical touchscreen terminals with database of inscriptions | 9.21 |
| D3: Corbridge | Powerful Gods 3D puzzle | Physical | 3D printed puzzles based on attributes, recreating statuettes of Mercury and Victory | 9.18 |
| D5: Richborough | Tactile Objects | Handling | Uninterpreted open display tactile altar fragment | 9.17 |
| D7: Bath | Tholos model | Physical | Tactile model of the Tholos | |
| | Curses interactive | Digital | Touchscreen to explore curse tablets, based on thefts of a tunic, pot, cloak, slave and coins, not in operation during surveying | 8.41 |

*Table 9.3: Religious interactives*

suggested that these handling activities forefronted multisensory experiences such as promoting consideration of the contextualised tactile, auditory or olfactory affordances of the objects. Though not related to religion, it is worth noting that a ceramics handling activity at Tullie House asks visitors "How does it feel to hold something that was made nearly 2,000 years ago?", aiming to instil a sense of awe through physical contact with ancient objects.[13]

*Fig 9.17: Tactile altar fragment at Richborough. Author's photograph*

Tactile replicas of original objects occur at Colchester Castle and Corbridge, the former a copy of the statuette of Mercury from Gosbecks, positioned near the original.[14] At Corbridge the 'Powerful Gods' activity invites visitors to rebuild fragmented 3D-prints of the museum's statuettes of Mercury and Victory (Fig 9.18). The focus is on how their attributes enable them to be identified, directly comparing them to the costumes of modern superheroes. The attributes of deities are also the focus at the flap-lifting style activities at Colchester Castle[15] (Fig 8.6) and NMS,[16] though at the latter, despite the activity title these "special symbols" are not explored or explained (Fig 9.19).

[13] The activity was de-activated but its label still present
[14] 'Tactile Mercury'
[15] 'Choose your god'
[16] 'Explore Roman Gods'

*Fig 9.18: 'Powerful Gods' interactive at Corbridge. Author's photograph, taken during a previous visit in 2015*

*Fig 9.19: 'Explore Roman gods' interactive at the National Museum of Scotland. Author's photograph*

### 9.3.2 Additional interpretation

Some digital interactives offer additional interpretation for objects. ‘Londinium and Beyond’ (Museum of London) presents selected objects on a map of London (Fig 9.20A) including a Medusa mount and a curse tablet (Fig 9.20B). The Great North Museum has touchscreens offering translations of displayed inscriptions (Fig 9.21). These both use static text and images and can be seen as extended digital labels. Canterbury’s ‘Quest for the Roman Temple’ interactive terminal (Fig 9.22), though perhaps failing to live up to its dramatic title, offers valuable landscape and architectural context for the town’s proposed main temple complex.

*Fig 9.20: ‘Londinium and Beyond’ interactive map at the Museum of London. A) object selection screen, B) curse tablet screen. Author’s photographs*

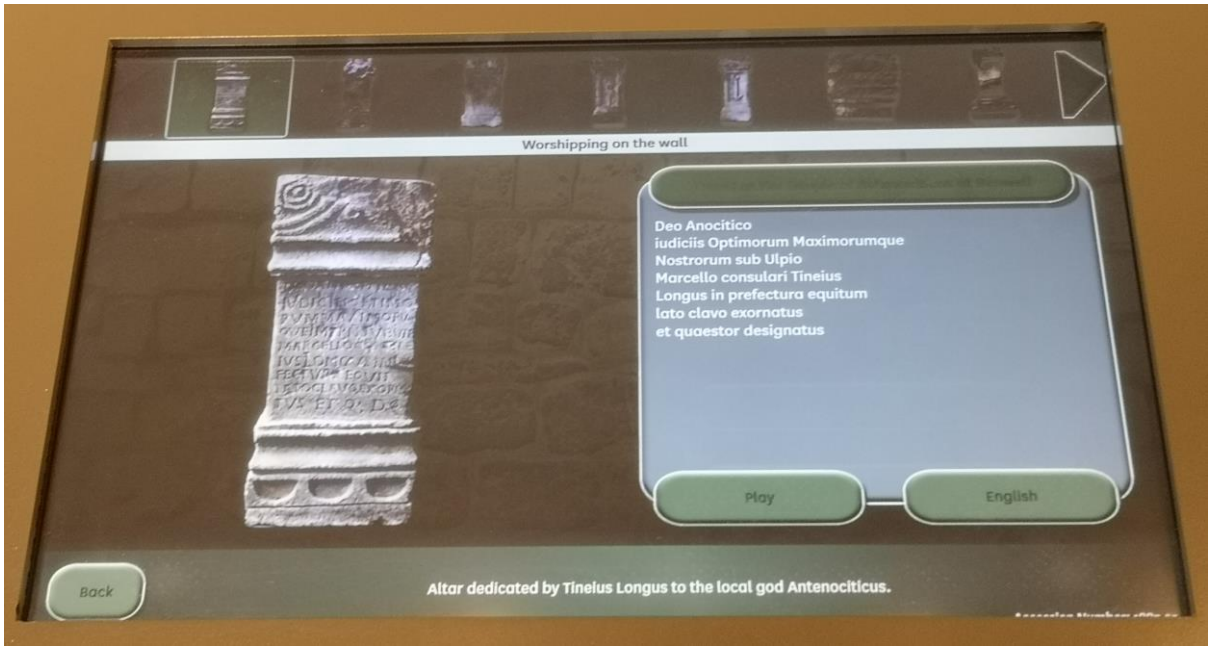



*Fig 9.21: Touchscreen at the Great North Museum. Author's photograph*

At Bath, a touchscreen enables visitors to explore the text of a small selection of curse tablets relating to the thefts of a tunic, pot, cloak, slave and coins. The dramatic 'melting' imagery accompanying the 'Vilbia' curse has been discussed previously (Chapter 8.4.7.2; Fig 8.41), but a risk associated with rigidly templated digital interactives is worth highlighting. Vilbia, interpreted as a slave and the only human featuring in the selection of stolen "items", is rather unfortunately referred to as "it".[17]

The Tullie House 'Dress the Romans' activity has been discussed previously (Chapter 8.3.4; Fig 8.30), as has the 'My Roman Pantheon' activity at Chesters (Chapter 8.2.1.2; Fig 8.8). For the latter, it is worth noting that its complex engagement with a range of original objects perhaps comes closest to realising Witcomb's (2003: 130) ambition that galleries should *be* interactive rather than simply *containing* discrete interactives. It is also notable as, outside of those offering additional information, it is the interactive perhaps most likely to be engaged with by adults as well as children and families.

[17] Though Russell (2006) argues that 'Vilbia' was a tool, not a person

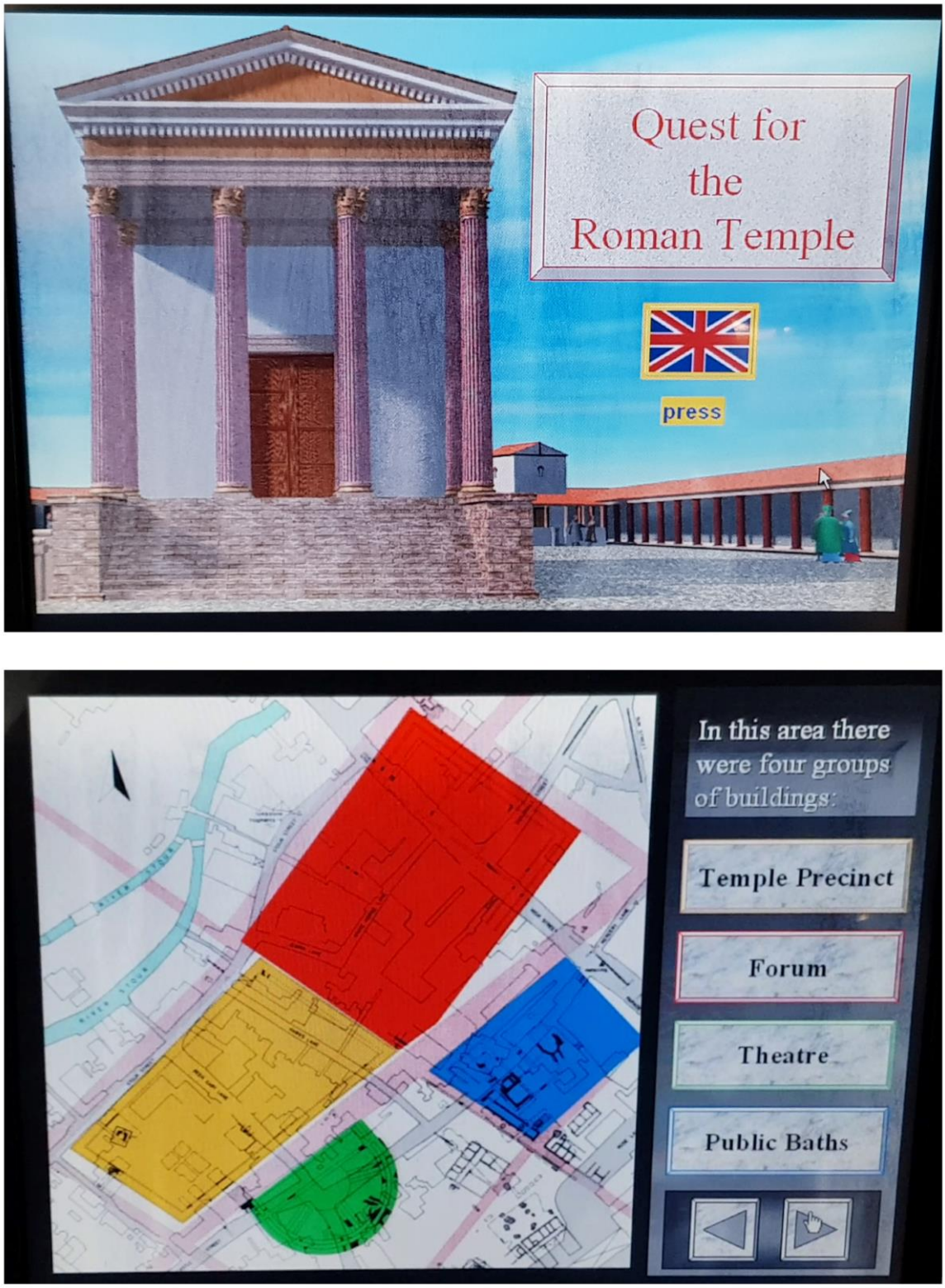



*Fig 9.22: 'Quest for the Roman Temple' at Canterbury Roman Museum. Author's photograph*

## 9.4 §10: "The materiality of objects is as significant to understanding their ritual significance and functionality as their form and iconography."

As discussed in Chapter 3.4, theoretical studies of materiality have investigated the cultural and embodied significance of materials as elements in complex post-humanist assemblages. The materials from which objects are made are routinely cited in museum interpretation, yet lying dormant on plinths can not only detach religious objects from their original contexts and assemblages, but also deny their embodied and material affordances (Chapter 4.2).

Interpretations of materials generally focus on their perceived relative economic and social values (Chapter 8.3.2) over their tactile, auditory or olfactory qualities. Apotropaic functionality is similarly generally attributed to iconography rather than materials, as discussed in Chapter 8.4.7.1. The only museum to make a positive holistic statement regarding the significance of materials is NMS: "for believers, some objects had spiritual powers because of the materials from which they were made".[18] However, this is not elaborated on, and the panel, focussed on prehistoric rather than Roman beliefs, proceeds with a focus on iconography. References at other museums are more subtle, and I consider these below, beginning with a focus on jet and amber.

### 9.4.1 Jet and amber

The perceived apotropaic qualities of jet and amber and their significance to the efficacy of amuletic devices was discussed in Chapter 5.4.2. Romano-British jet objects in particular are frequently displayed; 15 out of the 23 museums featured at least one. Though care must be taken not to over-interpret the prevalence of beliefs in such magical properties, for some objects their materiality was clearly significant and should be considered as part of their magical efficacy.

[18] 'Superstition'

A number of museums note that jet was a special material. Chesters[19] and the Museum of London[20] both state that it possessed "magical properties", with the latter separately elaborating that it had significance in burials "as a charm against evil" (see above) and to ensure a "safe journey to the underworld".[21] This is also noted at Colchester Castle where jet bears (Crummy 2010) are described as "possible guardians for children in the afterlife".[22] Jet's healing properties are referenced at Housesteads[23] and the Great North Museum,[24] the latter citing Pliny the Elder's observation that it could deter snakes. The British Museum[25] and NMS[26] more specifically reference its electrostatic properties but not the embodied significance of this for users, or how it might have manifested or been activated physically or ritually.

Like jet, amber is also highlighted at a number of museums as a special material, though its less frequent discovery archaeologically makes it accordingly rarer in museum displays, occurring in only five. Like jet, amber is a material which responds to the touch, producing not only a static charge, referenced only at NMS,[27] but also a sweet smell (Chapter 5.4.2.2). Housesteads notes its healing properties,[28] while the Bloomberg Mithraeum, in its interpretation of a miniature gladiator helmet pendant, specifically suggests it had the power to heal sick children.

The imported, and therefore likely exotic, nature of amber is noted at Tullie House, the Museum of London, and the Bloomberg Mithraeum. At Tullie House this is linked to a finger ring in the 'Luxury goods' display, described as travelling from the Baltic to Aquilea in northern Italy for carving before arriving in Carlisle. However, the ring's relief of Minerva and its high level of use-wear, indicating significant and embodied acts of rubbing (Ferris 2021: 148–9), are not referenced. The museum also displays an unusual amber knife handle in the form of a mouse,[29] though whereas the mouse is described as "a symbol of fertility and of the abundance of life in another world after rebirth", the significance of the material is not discussed.

[19] 'Admiration and Inspiration panel'
[20] 'Inside the temple'
[21] 'Death on the Roads out of Town'
[22] 'Christianity in Roman Colchester'
[23] 'Hospital'
[24] 'Kill or Cure'
[25] 'Jewellery'
[26] 'Magic and Superstition'
[27] 'Magic and Superstition'
[28] 'Hospital'
[29] 'The Roman Army'

Jet and amber are therefore discussed as special materials at a number of museums, but when their affordances are considered they are disconnected from their deliberate selection during manufacturing processes, the embodied experiences of their users in activating their abilities, or the emotional impact of receiving their perceived protection. Their properties are also only described in text; visitors can see objects behind glass, but not feel their electrostatic charge, warm them in the hand, or smell amber's sweet scent.

### 9.4.2 Other materials

Some museums also reference the significance of other materials. Lithomarge is connected at the Great North Museum with a belief in veined stones providing protection,[30] and at Housesteads it is suggested as possessing healing properties.[31] The Great North Museum also displays an 'egg-shaped amulet' of lithomarge,[32] which it describes as being held by women in childbirth, a brief but notable reference to a specific and highly contextualised embodied experience which many visitors will empathise with.

The significance of the use of lead for curse tablets has been discussed previously (Chapter 5.4.3) for the entwining of its practical affordances and symbolic associations. However, at none of the museums displaying curse tablets is the significance of the material considered in detail. At Bath, the creation of curses may have been significantly connected with the local pewter industry (Chapter 8.3.5), yet the deposition of two lead ingots into the sacred spring is not associated with the curse tablets either physically or narratively.[33] Instead it is presented as a distinct and disconnected act of deposition, reflecting the general focus on the curses' epigraphy over their materiality. At the British Museum,[34] the prevalence of pewter in hoards is noted, but highlighting it as "poor man's silver" reinforces a focus on its economic rather than any materially-derived symbolic or ritual value.

Deer antler is another material with recognised 'special' properties, such as providing apotropaic protection and possessing regenerative powers (Miller and Sykes 2016; Lee 2021).

[30] 'Ritual'
[31] 'Hospital'
[32] 'Kill or Cure'
[33] 'Using Lead'
[34] 'Lead and Pewter'

Antler roundels with phallic motifs (Greep 1994) are displayed at the Museum of London[35] and the Roman Army Museum,[36] but only the latter notes that the material had a role to play in its protective functionality as well as the phallic imagery.

Finally, to return to Bath, another interesting reference to materiality is noteworthy through the gilding of the head of the cult statue of Sulis Minerva (Fig 8.36). The audio guide (66) provides an interesting insight into the 6 layers of gilding on the head:

> *"This shows that people are coming back and after a period of time restoring the golden finish. Perhaps the most likely explanation for this is that in the dark temple where the flames were continually burning they were also giving off smoke, and so to maintain the statue in a presentable state it was necessary to polish it regularly. And so this regular polishing over time would gradually have worn it all away and there was a need periodically to apply some new layers of gilding."*

Though the focus is on the maintenance of the statue's aesthetic appearance rather than as part of religious duties to the goddess it embodied (Chapter 3.5.2.2), the reference to such cyclical restorative activity is an important one. From an LAR perspective, questions over how such work was financed or sponsored, who was commissioned to conduct it, and how it was perceived to project the success of the temple complex might also be valuably raised.

As discussed in Chapter 8.4.4, the unique materiality of the waters at Bath are central to interpretations of the bathing experience yet are absent from discussions of ritual activity. However, their distinct taste, temperature, smell and transformative qualities contributed to the site's significance at least as much as any object or building (see Graham 2020: 165).

[35] 'Spirituality or Superstition'
[36] 'Cavalry'

## 9.5 Summary

This chapter has considered a range of museological factors with the potential to influence understandings of religious experiences in Roman Britain. The language used to describe beliefs and activities regarding divine or supernatural forces occurs at the surveyed museums without definition or explanation. Despite the commonality of terms such as religion, ritual, cult and superstition, I argue that they, alongside related concepts such as 'good luck' or 'evil', should be treated as technical language requiring careful cultural contextualisation. This is to avoid the uncritical application of anachronistic modern understandings of such concepts to the ancient world, resulting in fervently held beliefs and deliberately performed actions being portrayed as insincere or superficial. This is particularly relevant for depositional acts which, especially when not associated with overt religious structures or objects, are often presented as conducted with little motivation or gravitas.

Creative first-person narratives are uncommon within the museums, but prominent examples at NMS, the Museum of London and the Great North Museum were discussed, which demonstrate its strengths and weaknesses. The thematic section introductions at NMS, for example, reveal that homogenising temporally distinct historic identities into anonymised voices can be problematic. In contrast, at the Museum of London and Corinium, the use of poetry can be seen to offer the potential to engage with the emotive power of ritual acts.

Reconstructions focussed on religious sites or acts appear at a number of museums. Architectural illustrations are the most prevalent, yet frequently present a dry and emotionless image of religion which reinforces traditional views of the period. Despite some depictions of communal acts which notably present more engaging visions of religious participation, the multisensory and emotive nature of such experiences remains muted. Interactives have been shown to much less frequently feature religion, with opportunities to handle objects generally restricted to education groups. The 'My Roman Pantheon' activity at Chesters is commendable for its tactile lamps and the physical and cognitive interactions with displayed objects they promote. Though not attempting to recreate ancient ritual processes, the selection of deities through original objects and dedications is an engaging and direct proximal experience which offers a valuable model for future religious interactives.

Finally, the materiality of objects has been discussed, particularly through consideration of the properties of jet and amber. Though these are referenced at a number of museums, they are generally presented as being passive and universal, not related to the embodied, contextualised, and experiential use of specific objects. The related lack of handling activities also restricts opportunities for the qualities central to their efficacy to be experienced by visitors.

# Chapter 10:

# Discussion and Conclusions

## 10.1 Introduction

In this research I have analysed a wide range of displays and interpretation at the surveyed museums, exploring how they engage with the aspects of lived religious experiences established through my ten Analysis Statements. The Statements have enabled holistic comparative analyses to be conducted of idiosyncratic displays across museums of different types, sizes and governance, avoiding dogmatic and sequential descriptions of individual institutions. This chapter draws these discussions together to consider them against the Research Questions established in Chapter 1.2.

Central to this research has been an understanding that museum presentations of archaeological objects, and the human communities, actions and beliefs associated with them, cannot be neutral. I have adopted a constructivist approach which perceives museums as active in the creation of ideological and theoretical narratives of the past. Museum visitors do not passively receive didactic wisdom from displays, but create meanings based on their pre-existing beliefs and understandings, influenced by a display's museography, interpretative narratives and situational atmospherics (Fig 4.3). Reflexive and creative approaches to museum display and interpretation offer the potential to challenge popular yet academically outdated perceptions of Roman Britain, and specifically engender greater consideration of lived religious experiences.

As discussed in Chapter 1, however, it is neither feasible nor desirable that every display should feature religion and it is hoped that the preceding chapters will not be read to argue that every display should be dominated by such matters. My aim has been to criticise long-established paradigms and highlight the potential for new approaches inherent within existing displays. It is important to stress that museums and their curators and designers have done nothing 'wrong', and many older displays would now be structured very differently. Curatorial interviewees

were extremely receptive to new approaches, though they understandably cited a number of practical factors affecting current and potential displays: restricted capacity to make changes and conduct specialised research, limited finances, conservation requirements, building floor loadings (for stonework), and a lack of physical space in galleries. What has hopefully been demonstrated, and is discussed further below, is that many objects and displays already offer significant potential to engage with religious experiences in myriad new ways; to be more prominent and cognitively challenging without requiring significant funding or increased volumes of interpretative text. Indeed, it is vital that new interpretative methodologies are not detached from the social and economic realities of museum work. Rather than pedantically suggesting how museums might better reflect academic discourse for its own sake, I have argued that the centring of lived experiences offers challenging and stimulating new approaches to the presentation of religion in Roman Britain, while remaining engaging and accessible. My discussions of recent approaches to materiality, meaning making and the senses in museums (Chapter 4) demonstrate that these are entirely compatible with new theoretical understandings of religious experiences in the Roman world.

Insufficient research has been conducted into popular understandings of Roman Britain (Chapter 1). My online survey (Q22, Appendix D) asked respondents to give their opinions on how well, in general, they felt museums presented certain issues of relevance to religion in Roman Britain. The question used a 1-5 Likert scale, and many respondents took the opportunity to add free-text comments. Though based on general perceptions rather than specific museum visits, the 192 responses, arranged by mean average response rather than the order in which the questions were asked, reveal significant trends in opinion (Fig 10.1). The aspects perceived as most poorly represented are of particular relevance to the issues raised in this research: the religious experiences of individuals of varying identities; multisensory experiences; the regionality of practices; differences between urban/rural practices; changes in practices over time; and displays of bulk finds. In contrast, religion as an aspect of everyday life, Christianity, priests and religious officials, and sacrificial processes were generally thought to be better represented. In this research I have argued these are areas in which lived experiences might be more fully considered. Individual religious experiences, definitions of religious terminology, religious activity outside of formal locations, and public/private practices received mixed responses.

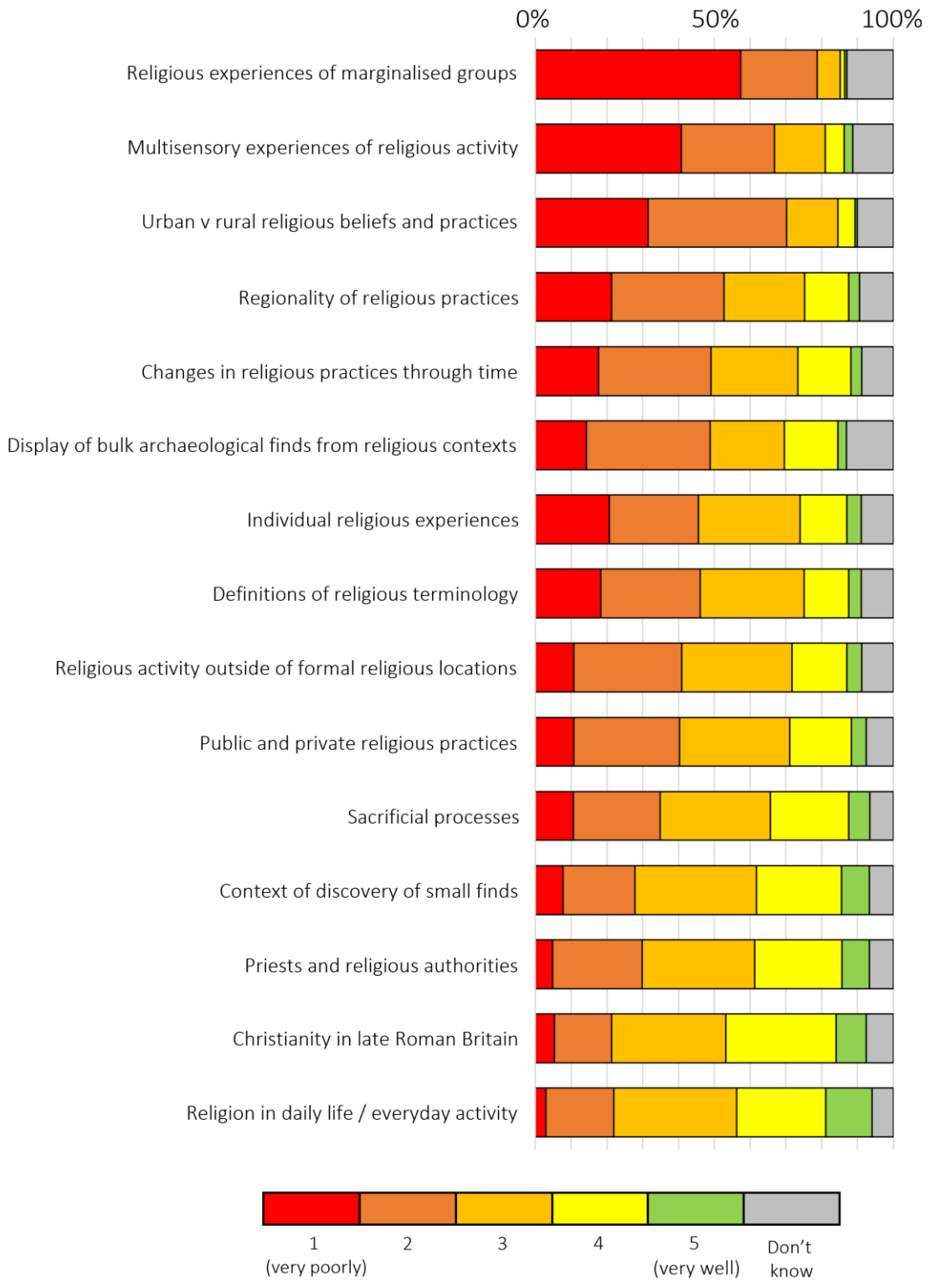



*Fig 10.1: Responses to online survey Q22, representation of selected aspects of life and religion in Roman Britain*

Respondents' free-text comments elaborated on these perceptions. One specifically noted the absence of individual experiences and emotions, commenting that there is "little discussion of experience and interaction between the individual and wider religious/ritual, or the impact that such beliefs hold on the lives and actions of the individuals or groups." Another respondent similarly said "glad you are investigating this. Its a difficult field trying to discern the reasons why a person felt a certain way or acted a certain way in the past especially in ancient history." One drew connections between the active beliefs of museum professionals and the narratives they create, suggesting that a reason why "generally religion is not well described" might be "embarrassment by present day historians/archaeologists who perhaps have little understanding of religion." A particularly thoughtful response recognised the potential for more reflexive and personal presentations of Roman Britain and its religious landscape which connect with contemporary beliefs:

> *"The theme of religion and religious integration in Roman Britain has the potential to make Roman archaeology more personal and move museum visitors to consider and relate to the individual lived experience of people in the past. Hopefully this may also encourage them to consider similarities and differences between people in the past, themselves and those around them ... Roman religion, a topic with many great artefacts and stories to illustrate it, has often been poorly served by museum displays."*

Not all visitors (or indeed non-visitors) are so desirous for new approaches to be explored, however (see Meijer-van Mensch *et al*. 2022: 219). Though one respondent commented (Q21) that "no one will be offended however you display Roman objects", other responses demonstrated that this is not the case. While some negative comments to Q22 were relatively mild, such as "some of these things really aren't of interest to visitors!" or "many of the things ... may be done poorly, but that doesn't mean I want to see them done well, or at all", others (including some responses to Q21) were more strongly expressed. Notably, these did not present objections on religious grounds, but the wider social role of museums and expectations of how Roman Britain should be presented. As discussed in Chapter 1, museums must accept that reflexive approaches to the ancient world will be perceived by some as the modern politicising or 'rewriting' of long-established narratives thought to be founded on unchanging and unchallengeable 'facts'. One respondent (Q21) commented:

> *"It is not the job of a museum to make political or religious statements. Those that do reflect only the bias of the sort of people who obstructed Brexit and just got hammered in the election: it just pisses off the public. It reduces public support for and trust in the institution."*

The same respondent's comment to Q22 reiterated these sentiments: "I don't give a shit about how well museums explain politics. Lost interest in this 'question'." Which particular aspects were thought to be 'political' were unstated, though another response to Q22 more overtly and aggressively connected it with the reference to LGBTQ+ individuals in the list of under-represented identities alongside women, children and people with disabilities:

> *"Why is the 2nd question even given? Firstly, LGBTQ is a modern concept with modern sexual mores … doesn't really fit the sexual habits of ancient Greece or Rome. Pederasty might be better to include in an ancient context, if you insist on the pursuit of sexual demarcations. Secondly, I wouldn't expect a representation of religious experiences for a dedicated anorak wearer either. Seems an odd and overly political intrusion and betrays the biases and obsessions of the person compiling this survey."*

Such mixed positive and negative responses were also revealed in Goodwin's research into representations of ethnicity (Chapter 1.5). His surveying identified both a desire for more inclusive and empathetic presentations of the past promoting greater connectivity with contemporary issues, and frustration at museums perceived as engaging in "liberal social engineering" (2020: 178–181). Manchester Museum's temporary Lindow Man exhibition (2008-9) provides a useful example. It presented a polyvocal interpretation which included the personal testimonies of various stakeholders, including archaeologists and a modern pagan, with displays featuring a "wand used in a pagan ceremony". This challenging and unorthodox approach prompted vitriolic responses from some commentators and visitors (Sitch 2009: 52).

These insights highlight the varied social landscapes which museums attempting to consider lived religious experiences must engage, and I now consider how my analyses have contributed to answering my specific Research Questions.

## 10.2 RQ1: How is religion physically and conceptually integrated into museum displays of Roman Britain?

Chapter 6 examined the integration of religion into displays of Roman Britain using the Space Syntax concepts of *centrality*, *configuration* and *depth*. Using 'display units' as an analytical tool to deconstruct displays and explore the integration (*configuration*) of religion into wider narratives of Roman Britain, I demonstrated that religion is clearly perceived as foundational to presentations of the period, featuring prominently alongside the military, architecture and 'daily life'. At a majority of museums, the primary religious narratives occur in displays dedicated to religion. While it can be argued such focussed displays highlight attention and facilitate detailed discussion, they also serve to present religion as a discrete aspect of life, distinct and distinguishable from other activities. Communication with divine forces is reified as a neat and singular phenomenon, reflecting expectations of separations between religious and secular life within modern societies. This is reinforced through interpretational language. Where displays are overtly titled, they often use terms such as 'Religion' (preceded by 'Roman', 'Pagan' or 'Public'), 'Cults', 'Gods and Goddesses', and, more rarely, 'Worship', 'Faith', 'Spirituality', 'Rites' or 'Belief'. However, as discussed in Chapter 9, despite this variety of language no museum defines or discusses such terms, and I have argued that their cultural relativity and monotheistic connotations make them technical terms in need of contextualisation and explanation.

Displays commonly arrange religious objects around the deities they depict or represent. This serves to reinforce a restricted definition of religion as the worship of anthropomorphic divine beings existing as part of a universal and tension-free 'catalogue' of (mainly classical) gods from which worshippers might select. Displayed objects become attestations to the existence of those deities rather than reflecting the varied needs, communicative strategies and related experiences of individuals. This approach also promotes the museumification of religious objects, viewing them as aesthetic and charismatic individual items rather than as parts of larger assemblages. 'Assemblages' here does not only refer to the wider site or depositional assemblages that particular objects come from (discussed further below), but also to post-human conceptual assemblages. As discussed in Chapter 3.5, these comprise the messy networks of humans, non-humans, and cultural, natural and immaterial things, places and actions that combine to create 'religion'. Strategies of communication with broader

supernatural forces such as through acts of structured deposition or seeking magical protection against malevolent misfortune, are also minimised. However, such broader definitions of religion are crucial if the tangible and specific needs, actions and experiences of individuals and communities are to be recognised.

The Mercury display at Corinium, discussed in Chapter 8.2.1.2 (Fig 8.1), serves as an example. It features copper alloy and pipeclay figurines of the deity and his attributes (cockerels and *caducei*), cockerel leg bones, and monumental stone objects such as a votive relief, an altar fragment, and fragments of statuary, one of which is over life-sized. These varied objects represent highly contextualised methods of communicating with or invoking the protection of the deity. The statue fragments might represent temple cult imagery, perhaps perceived and physically treated as the very embodiment of Mercury. The commissioning and installation of the votive relief and altar represent significant public and lasting proclamations of devotion by named worshippers, possibly subsequently becoming cult foci in their own right. These represent different instantiations of religious activity to the smaller figurines, perhaps produced to be cult imagery at more intimate shrines, presented as less ostentatious offerings, or carried about the body. Similarly, at Canterbury Roman Museum, the positioning of small figurines to represent life-size cult statuary within models of temples (Fig 8.46), though an attractive display technique, projects an erroneous message that such statues served the same purpose but on a different scale. The use of an image of a copper alloy statuette of Vulcan at Senhouse to complete a fragmentary stone relief presents the same problem (Fig 10.2).

To return to the Corinium display, the cockerel bones represent living animals, perhaps acquired specifically to be sacrificial offerings with the leg bones deliberately retained for special burial. The creation, acquisition, activation and eventual deposition of these animals and objects therefore represent unique assemblages of situational religious needs, access to specific specialist knowledge, and engagement with various social, economic and religious networks. These resulted in diverse embodied, sensory and emotive experiences which may have varied depending on the ethnicity, gender or other identities of the worshipper. From the perspectives of individual worshippers, there is perhaps more to differentiate the displayed objects than connects them through their shared association with Mercury. Displays based around needs and experiences rather than deities therefore offer more personal and contextualised explorations of religious beliefs and activities.

*Fig 10.2: Vulcan relief at Senhouse Museum. Author's photograph*

Despite the prevalence of dedicated displays, references to religion do appear in discussions of other aspects of life; 39% of the display units not categorised as 'religion' still made some reference to it (Chapter 6.2.2). A high frequency of overall religious references was particularly notable at category D museums and the British Museum (Fig 6.18). Religious references in general have been shown to predominantly focus on the iconographic aspects of objects and, to a lesser extent, their archaeological contexts. Translating inscriptions and describing images of deities and their attributes, though important, takes precedence over the contextualisation of objects and their experiential affordances as part of religious assemblages. This interpretative approach reinforces the primacy of the 'catalogue of gods' and homogenises contextually diverse objects and practices. In Chapter 7.4 I considered interpretations of religious activity at non-temple locations. Religion in domestic settings is discussed at a small number of museums, often through suggestions that smaller-scale statuary was associated with such contexts. When domestic religion is discussed in more detail, as at Verulamium, it is grounded in assumptions of the universality of Mediterranean practices. Connections between temples and theatres, meanwhile, are most prominently highlighted at Verulamium and Wiltshire

Museum, though the significant relationship at the former is lessened through the physical separation of displays on the theatre and theatre temple. Evidence of the worship of the goddess Fortuna in bath houses is discussed at several museums, notably at Tullie House and the Great North Museum, where the goddess' presence is considered in practical terms through the need for good luck during gambling or while naked. Broader connections between water and communication with the supernatural, or that praying to Fortuna might relate to holistic regimes of physical and ritual cleanliness and wellbeing, are not considered.

References to religion are generally encountered by visitors early in their gallery journeys (Fig 6.28), reinforcing its importance to narratives of the period. It is notable that category A (specialist Roman) museums not only had a lower overall representation of religious content (28% of total display units) but presented religious narratives later in the visitor journey than museums in other categories. Key religious objects are prominently placed at some museums, for example the late Roman silver hoards at the British Museum. These are positioned along the main thoroughfare of the gallery, presenting visitors who quickly pass through with prominent messages of the importance of Roman Christianity, and that artistic quality in late Roman Britain rivalled that of the classical world (Chapter 6.2.1.1). At Corinium Museum, visitors are faced with an altar and accompanying reconstruction drawing (Fig 8.24) immediately on entering the gallery, and later encounter an impressively looming reconstruction of a Jupiter column (Fig 6.6). At Bath, the iconic head of Sulis Minerva (Figs 8.36; 8.45) entices visitors from across the temple courtyard.

Definitions of ritual which challenge dichotomies of 'sacred' and 'profane' activity were discussed in Chapter 1 and developed in Chapter 5 through more specific discussion of structured deposition. Chapter 7 examined interpretations of specific depositional acts at a selection of museums. Despite the significance of context to archaeology as a discipline, museums overwhelmingly focus on the use-life of religious objects rather than the acts and beliefs involved in their deposition in the ground. The uniquely emotive and atmospheric acts of depositing objects into the sacred spring at Bath are considered below (Chapter 10.4). At the Clayton Museum, finds from Coventina's Well are dispersed across the displays (Chapter 7.4.6.5). The established but misleading description of the shrine's central reservoir as a 'well' is used without explanation or challenge, reflecting a focus on quantifying rather than contextualising the finds. Though quotes from Clayton provide valuable references to changing scholarly interpretations of ritual deposition, these are not thoroughly explored.

At the British Museum, depositional assemblages are generally connected with 'temple treasures' when their burial contexts or contents are overtly religious, with objects selected for display prioritising charismatic, aesthetic finds rather than representing the holistic assemblages. The display about the goddess Senuna from Ashwell (Chapter 7.4.6.1) is particularly notable as the contextual information provided through excavation situates the deposition within an area of long-established ritual activity and processional movement. However, the interpretation focuses on the previously unknown deity (another entry in the 'catalogue of gods'), minimising the significance of the deposition and suggesting that it was "perhaps for safekeeping" and with the intention of retrieval. The interpretation that depositions were conducted for primarily economic purposes is also prevalent for hoards not containing overtly religious material. The pre-depositional treatment of objects, such as the crushing of the Hockwold cups or folding of curse tablets, are not presented as ritually significant acts but as barriers to art-historical or literary interpretation.

The Museum of London also makes numerous references to the votive or structured deposition of objects (Chapter 7.4.6.3), particularly the statuary from the London mithraeum, the well under Southwark Cathedral, and deposits at the Tabard Square temple. The mithraeum sculpture is interpreted as respectful decommissioning, the Tabard Square deposits as 'ritual' (but without further explanation), and the Southwark Cathedral well assemblage as evidence of a nearby temple due to the statuary present. Though these differing interpretations present a valuable opportunity to explore the beliefs and actions associated with such contextually and compositionally differing deposits, no holistic discussion of ritual deposition is presented.

Religion is not generally displayed differently to any other aspects of Roman Britain in terms of interpretative methodologies or atmospherics such as lighting effects. However, the displays at NMS (Chapter 7.4.6.2) are worthy of note in this regard; the 'Glimpses of the sacred' thematic section present structured deposition as a primarily prehistoric act, displayed in a claustrophobic space in contrast to the airy and well-lit presentation of Roman religion in the nearby 'Gods of the frontier, God of the Book' section. Despite the inclusion of Roman military deposits in the former section, the narrative, reinforced by creative text panels (Chapter 9.2.2.1 and discussed further below), serves to disconnect such acts from the presentation of a literate and anthropomorphic Roman religion which was a precursor to Christianity. It also contributes to wider gallery narratives which stress the differences between native and ("alien") Roman practices rather than exploring their mutually influential interactions.

At the Hunterian, deposition is presented as a similarly culturally-restricted act, a Roman jug interpretated as being deposited into water by a high-status native. That it might have been the gift of a wealthy Roman is readily accepted, but not that it might have been deposited by that same Roman. In contrast, at the British Museum, deposition into water is interpreted as a specifically pagan Roman act rather than one conducted by Christians. The crucial consistency is that such depositions, no matter who is conducting them, are presented as representing older, and by implication outdated, beliefs and practices being replaced by something more sophisticated; a march of progress narrative in which practices ultimately rooted in prehistory are replaced with ones more recognisable and understandable from a monotheistic perspective of religion.

The potential for some religious sites to have their complex stories presented holistically is restricted by historic collecting practices which have divided assemblages between institutions, and by traditional museum display paradigms which prioritise individual objects. The Housesteads mithraeum, for example, features at the Housesteads site museum, the Great North Museum and the Clayton Museum, yet none of these displays reference each other, and at none can a comprehensive understanding of the temple and its finds be attained. At Corbridge, the museum successfully engages with the diversity of religious worship in the town yet two significant and unusual altars being displayed at the British Museum and Tullie House means that each museum presents an incomplete narrative.

Display design decisions can also disrupt more intimate contextual relationships between religious objects. Although museum displays are inherently artificial and assemblages are often dispersed throughout displays to support diverse narratives, retaining contextual connections between objects can support interpretations of their experiential affordances. At the Great North Museum, the repositioning of the three focal altars from the Carrawburgh mithraeum to centralise the taller, figurative altar, serves to replace their original symmetry, based on functionality, with one imposed by museum aesthetic considerations (Chapter 6.2.1.1; Fig 6.11). Similarly, at Vindolanda, the display of altars from the temple of Jupiter Dolichenus disconnects the smallest altar, likely dedicated by a female worshipper, from its contextual position outside the temple door. The display decision to mount it on a wall diminishes its relationship with the other altars, the potential significance of its dedication, and the ongoing social impact of its original exterior location.

The LAR rubric stresses religious activity as dynamic and situational, constantly adapting to the needs of existing and potential new adherents. Individuals or groups professing religious knowledge might need to repeatedly reposition themselves in the face of new ideas or competition. Religious change in museum displays, however, generally follows larger-scale religious shifts, initially through the arrival of Rome itself and its impact on native religious ideas (discussed below), and then through the introduction of mystery cults and Christianity. These are presented as impactful, a number of museums for example suggesting that mystery cults provided more personal and transformative religious experiences (Chapter 7.3.1), though the prevalence of language uncritically describing them as 'mysterious' and 'eastern' is problematic (Chapter 9.2.1.1). The Cult of Mithras is notably prominent, forming the most frequently discussed religious community in Roman Britain despite its relative rarity, its restriction to specific military and urban contexts, and a lack of knowledge of its rituals. Its presence in displays likely reflects wider popular recognition of Mithras (Fig 7.1), but this prominence risks overstating its restricted archaeological presence and reinforcing perceptions that it was a distinct religion.

Other individual religious communities are only discussed generically, rather than being presented as influential in regional, communal or individual religious landscapes. Christianity is similarly presented as being adopted rather abruptly and universally through the agency of Constantine, often following a period of equally imperially-driven persecution. Interactions between pagans and Christians are rarely discussed, but when they are they are often seen through a lens of religious tension and iconoclastic violence. In contrast, possible evidence of syncretic practices, such as the Christian votive plaque in the Water Newton hoard at the British Museum, are downplayed in favour of rigid distinctions between pagans and Christians.

## 10.3 RQ2: To what extent are post-colonial perspectives of religious belief, identities and interactions reflected in displays?

If familiarity breeds contempt, then the Roman period may be the most disliked in British history. As discussed in Chapter 1, long-established and commonly-held perceptions of the Roman world as a proactive imperial project spreading civilisation across Europe remain influential to modern identity formation and political debate. However, scholarly consensus in recent decades has shifted markedly away from such notions of benign imperialism and

processes of acculturation through Romanization, to consider more diverse perspectives and identities (Chapter 5). Though visitor expectations of displays of Roman Britain may be well established, fresh narratives around the transmission of new religious ideas and the creation of hybrid identities and practices present valuable opportunities for museums to challenge visitors' preconceptions.

Central to post-colonial conceptualisations of Roman Britain are challenges to dichotomous identities, yet the Romanization paradigm's legacy is powerful, and museums consistently employ the language of 'Romans' and 'natives'. The use of 'Roman' presents particular complexities, as it is used interchangeably to refer to both the time period and as a cultural identifier. Consequently, references to 'Roman gods' might equally refer to either religion in Britain during the Roman period (1st to 5th centuries CE) or deities of the classical pantheon. The two might easily become conflated in the minds of visitors. This is problematic as it further reinforces the primacy of the classical pantheon, already extremely familiar to visitors through its broader western cultural impact (Fig 7.1). Classical deities have been demonstrated to be the most commonly represented across all categories of museum, especially at national museums (Fig 7.2), and this bias is exacerbated through prominent supplementary imagery of classical statuary (Chapter 7.2.1.1; Fig 7.6).

Imbalances in the representation of deities may be the result of a combination of historic museum collecting practices, and that classical deities are more likely to be depicted (or at least recognised) through material culture. Museum interpretation need not be restricted to describing only the museum's displayed collections, however, and should also consider modes of religious activity not evidenced through surviving material culture. The potential for classical imagery to have been appropriated to represent non-classical deities is particularly important, as demonstrated through both Senuna and Brigantia being depicted as Minerva, the Barkway hoard's Vulcan/Sucellos imagery, and Arecurius/Mercury at Corbridge (Chapter 7.2.1.2). Assumptions that worshippers always considered depictions of classical deities to represent them in their Mediterranean forms seem increasingly unsafe. Whether they reflect syncretism, genuine confusion, attempts to adapt new artistic repertoires to traditionally non-anthropomorphic deities, or were even deliberate acts of resistance, modern desires for neat categorisations of deities should not override their existential complexity.

Though likely unintentional, displays often project the message that native deities, and artistic depictions of them, were of inferior quality and significance. Classical deities, for example, are described variously as 'main', 'official', 'major', or 'well-known', while other deities are 'less important' or 'unusual', and their depictions referred to as 'crude', 'primitive', or 'stern' in comparison to classical standards (Chapter 7.2.1.1). Such hierarchies are compounded by expectations of the worship of certain deities by individuals of differing cultural and ethnic backgrounds. While the adoption of 'Roman' gods by natives is presented as natural and inevitable, the worship of native deities by, often high-ranking, Romans, is seen as an oddity requiring explanation; this despite its prevalence in the archaeological record, especially on Hadrian's Wall. Tineius Longus' dedication to Antenociticus at the Great North Museum, for example, resulted in his promotion in Rome despite Antenociticus being "only a local deity", a view reflecting modern rather than ancient perceptions of the deity's powers. Similarly, silver plaques to Cocidius at Tullie House are presented as evidence of the religion of the "Nasty Little Brits" (Chapter 7.2.1.2), yet their discovery at the Bewcastle fort *principia* is omitted.

The difficulties in assigning simplistic 'Roman' identities to the actions of individuals of varying ethnic and cultural origins are further demonstrated through interpretations of decapitation as an uncivilised, 'barbarian' and therefore definitively 'un-Roman' act (Chapter 7.2.1.4). The presentation of a homogenised 'Roman' identity can also be discerned in statements regarding seemingly universal beliefs at a number of museums (Chapter 8.2.1.1; Table 8.1). These generally present socially, geographically and temporally restricted classical literary sources as reflective of beliefs and practices throughout the Roman world.

That the coming of Rome brought changes to religious beliefs and practices in Britain is well reflected in museums, yet these are predominantly presented as inevitable and tension-free. They exist within broader narratives highlighting the cultural and technological influence of 'the Romans in Britain' ('what the Romans did for us') rather than the creation of hybrid Romano-British practices. The message is therefore of the passive native adoption of new ideas instigated by entirely Roman religious agency, the conquerors absorbing a variety of animistic native deities into their expanding, anthropomorphic and structured pantheon. The mechanisms by which the existence, efficacy and specific ritual requirements of certain deities were transmitted or altered are not considered at any museum. This model of dominant Roman religious agency is often discussed in terms of tolerance (Chapter 7.2.2.3); a general lack of suppression of the varied beliefs and practices within the expanding Roman world presented

as evidence of Rome's virtuous religious inclusivity. However, religious suppression should not be seen only through prohibitions on extreme acts such as human sacrifice or cannibalism (suggested at the Great North Museum and Senhouse). The suppression, coercion, or even adoption of any religious activity and its practitioners at more local levels might also undermine notions of Roman tolerance. Though difficult to attest archaeologically, such influences, perhaps carrying the threat of military or administrative violence, should not be readily discounted in favour of empire-wide narratives of polytheistic acceptance and harmony.

Syncretisation represents an important aspect of religious encounters, and syncretised deities, though not common archaeologically, appear at a number of museums (Figs 7.2-7.5). Even so, the phenomenon and its implications are little discussed, instead generally presented as a passive and agentless 'linking' of classical and native deities (Chapter 7.2.2.2). At Bath, the most prominent example of Romano-British syncretism, how Sulis Minerva was addressed was clearly deliberate and significant. The deity appears as 'Sulis Minerva' on pewter vessels, as 'Sulis' on the majority of inscriptions and half of the curse tablets, but never as just 'Minerva'. Individual worshippers therefore engaged with the deity's complex identity in different ways, at different times and for different ritual purposes. The display narratives, however, simply reflect a Roman merging of a native and a classical deity based on presumptions of their similar healing functionality, even though this itself is questionable.

A factor which unites the various issues discussed above is the concept of a singular and consistent provincial religious landscape into which museums often attempt to fit their own site or regional collections. Such an approach is driven by wider perceptions of the Roman world as culturally, materially and systemically consistent, especially in contrast to the more regionally conceived Iron Age and Early Medieval periods. Revell (2008: 147–148) criticises scholarly homogenisation of idiosyncratic evidence to produce generic narratives which are then applied back onto individual sites, yet museums pursue just this agenda. When asked about the key message of their displays, a majority of curatorial interviewees said it was to tell a site or local story. However, normative interpretation contributes to perspectives of provincial religion as standardised and formulaic, rather than reflecting the dynamic and innovative religious experiences offered by differing sites and communities. Local idiosyncrasies, and their potential for varied visitor experiences and participation, are marginalised. Site museums in particular are powerfully situated to consider such experiences due to their intimate

proximity to physical remains, yet have been generally criticised for insufficiently capturing visitor imaginations (Skeates 2017: 17).

My analyses discussed northern and southern museum groups in Britain, broadly reflecting what are traditionally seen as the military and civilian zones respectively. Though such a distinction is not unproblematic, material culture evidence for religious practices demonstrably differs, the north of Britain for example accounting for 80% of votive inscriptions (Ferris 2021: 42). My analysis of display units reflects that southern group museums contain significantly fewer 'stonework' display units than their northern counterparts (Figs 6.21; 6.22), with altars specifically showing strong regionalisation (Fig 8.20). However, isolated institutional approaches to interpretation mean that at no museum are the representativeness of collections and the varying religious practices and experiences they reflect contextualised against wider regional and provincial data.

## 10.4 RQ3: How are individual religious experiences in Britain and the wider Roman world defined and expressed?

The analyses presented in previous chapters have demonstrated a tendency for religion to be approached in display narratives as something that was *done* rather than something that was *experienced*. This is not entirely surprising; as discussed in Chapter 3.3.2, approaches to religion in the Roman world have long stressed its focus on the correct performance of rituals (orthopraxy) over internalised piety (orthodoxy). However, recognising a focus on ritual performances should not undermine sincere emotive engagements with those acts and their related beliefs. Though 56% of respondents to the online survey (Q11) said they thought orthopraxy was more important in Roman Britain than orthodoxy, 34% responded that they were unsure, supported by free-text comments. This reveals some instinctive unease with the idea that communication with divine forces through ritual performances did not also carry internalised, emotive, and even transformative significance.

A foundational tenet of LAR (Chapter 3.3) is the concept of religion as always 'in the making', a dynamic phenomenon requiring pragmatic human agency; the performance of ritual acts and communication of beliefs being sanctioned by tradition but possessing the potential for future innovation. Religious traditions and communities are therefore the result of myriad individual

actions. This crucial concept is absent from museum interpretations of religion, which are presented instead as passive and universal (Chapter 8.2). Paradoxically, though ancient worshippers are often present in displays, for example through their inscribed names on dedications, they are not truly present as agentic, sensing individuals operating within real or imagined social and religious communities. They are simultaneously included in the narrative yet absent from it, the cause of the religious act but neither influential upon it nor influenced by it. This is particularly notable in interpretations of the Cult of Mithras, generally presented as something people joined, but without consideration of what membership of a dynamic religious community and receiving restricted knowledge meant. Only at the successfully experiential Bloomberg Mithraeum is a sense of communal feasting and ritual drama tangibly portrayed, yet even there the wider social implications of membership beyond temple rituals are absent, such as dramatic initiation rituals or the potential for the mithraeum to have been connected to a private house. Religion is often portrayed as being part of daily life, but this is rarely explored in any meaningful manner, such as how the materials required to perform ritual activities were acquired, or how the wielding of religious knowledge enhanced or even threatened wider social or political status.

Connected to the overlooking of the individual in religious practices is the general absence of embodied, sensing humans in museum representations. Graham's concepts of proximal and distal experiences (Chapter 3.3.4) highlight that the performance or observation of ritual activities created distinct sensory and experiential assemblages. However, the trend across museums is for the sensory experiences of religion to be engaged with on a generic rather than a contextualised or individual level. For example, though many museums reference the use of light in rituals, light-emitting objects such as lamps are often presented as being either practical (lighting a temple) or as potential votive offerings. The contextually specific use or restriction of light in creating influential sensory assemblages is not considered. The importance of the cave-like interior of mithraea, for example, is frequently referenced, yet reconstruction drawings show the spaces as relatively well-lit (Chapter 7.3.1.1; Fig 7.18). The perforations in the 'Sol' altar at the Great North Museum, manufactured to create intense and specific ritual impact, are not discussed, and even the lighting effects at the Bloomberg Mithraeum relate to the reconstruction of missing architecture rather than recreating specific ritual instantiations of light (Chapter 8.4.1). Ritual sounds are similarly generic. Despite valuable references being made to the practical functionality of noises in communication with deities or averting misfortune, these remain overarching and incidental, related to the interpretation of particular

objects and decontextualised from specific and defined ritual sensory acts and assemblages. The Bridgeness slab's depiction of a sacrificial ritual features a prominent piper, yet only at Senhouse is his presence even noted (Chapter 8.4.3; Fig 8.17).

As discussed in Chapter 3.5.2.1, ritual movements and gestures can be considered as either *explicit* or *implicit*, and while both occur in museum narratives, the lack of individual experiences is apparent. Though embodied gestures occur on some objects such as carved reliefs (e.g. Fig 8.15), and appear in reconstructions through bowing, kneeling, looking skyward or raising hands (e.g. Figs 8.10-8.13), their specificity to particular cultural or religious communities or acts is not considered. At both Bath and the Bloomberg Mithraeum, movement around religious sites is more directly imaginable, modern visitor routes often directly reflecting those of ancient worshippers. This intense experiential opportunity might be more fully exploited through, for example, consideration of the crossing of significant transitional thresholds such as the descent into the cave or entry into the temple *temenos* or sacred spring. More formal religious movements in the form of pilgrimages and processions are rarely discussed. They are most prominent at Bath, where visitors encounter a video and model of a procession early in their visit, and it is suggested that Bath attracted visitors from across the Roman world. While highlighting the importance of the site, there is no reference to the experiences and expectations of those pilgrims and their journeys, or how knowledge of the site was transmitted across the Roman world.

Connections between medicine and religion are discussed at several museums, and this represents an area where the integration of specific religious needs and activities within daily life is more successfully communicated. Though greater consideration of the definition, creation and intensely embodied use of amulets would be valuable, that amulets formed part of the holistic religious landscape is expressed at various museums (Chapter 7.4.5), including some limited consideration of the significance of their materiality. The suggestion at Bath that Aesculapian incubation occurred presents a tangible opportunity to engage with unique and intense healing experiences, including the implications of receiving visions and perhaps even direct contact with the deity (Chapter 7.4.4).

Another experience which might be explored in greater detail at Bath is the creation and deposition of curses (Chapter 8.4.7.2). Cursing perhaps offers greater potential for experiential approaches to religion than any other act discussed during this research. It represents a powerful

combination of intense multisensory, emotive and embodied processes of creation and deposition, the use of specifically acquired and ritually significant materials, and recourse to specialist religious knowledge. It was based on socially-significant needs and a desire for tangible and dramatic outcomes, representing the blurring of traditional boundaries between religion and magic. Resorting to cursing, perhaps in the face of desperate social or legal injustice, and the raw emotive power of wishing extreme harm on another offers unprecedented opportunities to encourage visitors to empathetically engage with the needs and experiences of ancient individuals. Whether or not they possess active beliefs in magic or the supernatural, visitors might valuably be asked to consider whether they would feel able to create and deposit their own curses as a means of resolving social and judicial problems. Instead, cursing is presented as of primarily literary interest only, and even the act of folding prior to deposition considered a modern scholarly inconvenience rather than the final sealing of powerful messages before they are transferred to a divine realm.

## 10.5 RQ4: What potential exists for theoretical approaches such as ontological alterity, materiality, embodiment and sensory studies to provide new models for the display and interpretation of religious experiences?

This research has argued for a refocusing of praxis regarding approaches to the display of religion in Roman Britain. This is to challenge the viewing of religious material culture from an entirely archaeological perspective where description and categorisation are key, to an experiential one based on the situational needs, actions and experiences of ancient individuals and communities. To reposition religious material culture as not merely demonstrative of beliefs and practices but constitutive of them. This represents a re-sacralisation of ancient religion which, while fully integrated with other aspects of life, possessed material and sensorial assemblages which distinguished it from other activities. These assemblages were the result of creative and dynamic individual agency operating within local, provincial, and wider social, economic and political networks.

A fundamental aspect of such a conceptual shift is the recentring of individuals as sensing, embodied, emotive and agentic religious actors. These individuals, the real and imagined communities they formed part of, and the material religious assemblages they engaged with

and influenced are more significant to religious belief, activity and change than the homogenised provincial or empire-wide narratives of beliefs and activities which currently dominate displays. In this way, generalised narratives about religious practices and assumptions about the cultural, ethnic or gender identities of individuals and their relationships and engagements with specific deities or votive practices can begin to be challenged. Displays of religion in Roman Britain should feel less comfortable and familiar to modern audiences than they currently do. Interpretative narratives which creatively promote ontologically varied perspectives of the nature of divine forces and how they can be communicated with or coerced should feel culturally alien and, at times, unsettling. As previously discussed, these might include the making and fulfilling of vows, acts of structured deposition in varied and significant locations, creating and depositing curses, decapitating people prior to burial, the wearing of protective amulets, or encountering the living embodiment of a deity at a temple.

Distributions of temples and objects with iconographic depictions of deities no more explain ancient religious experiences than a map of churches and a crucifix explain what it means to be Christian. Though there is inherent risk when directly comparing ancient and modern religions, not least through the reinforcing of anachronistic definitions of terminology, greater archaeological engagement with the scholarship of contemporary material religion offers potential for mutually beneficial new perspectives. There is evidence for the ongoing spiritual significance of Iron Age and Romano-British religious imagery to some modern pagans, though this is generally overlooked by museums and archaeology (Chapter 4.3.2). Coming face-to-face with a deity in a museum, for example, presents opportunities to consider ancient experiences of divine presence beyond feelings of wonder at an object's age or appearance (Chapter 8.4.8.2). Though we cannot be certain how ancient worshippers experienced such statuary, we can be confident that the casual, detached, art-historical museum gaze does not reflect it.

Chapter 1.4 considered the representation of archaeology in museums, and that the seeds of change might be sown within museum cataloguing processes and the networks of associations influencing object selections (Fig 1.3). Definitions of religious objects and the retention and accessibility of contextual relationships through documentation are essential to the implementation of experiential approaches to religion. The translation of theoretical concepts into museum interpretation must begin at these foundational stages, not only considered during the writing of interpretative texts. Such approaches should also, crucially, not require the

creation of significantly longer, more complex, or more academic interpretation. Instead, it is both *what* is said and *how* it is said which must be considered if cognitively, ontologically and emotively challenging interpretation is to be produced.

The desire to create engaging or provocative interpretation does not always translate into word-limited final labels, and creative storytelling narratives have been proposed throughout this research as one method of achieving these ambitions. Museum gallery environments generally promote disengaged viewing rather than active inquisitiveness. Interpretation relies upon visitors' preconceived notions of Roman Britain as a place of recognisable political and social structures, and cultural and technological sophistication, and these permeate discussions of beliefs in the supernatural. Creative language offers a means of disrupting such ingrained perceptions, for example through offering multiple perspectives of specific ritual acts. These might include religious officials, dedicators with differing needs, non-participatory (even dissenting) observers, and representing individuals of differing social, ethnic and gender identities. Though the use of creative language is not currently commonplace (Chapter 9.2.2), its emotive potential is evident, such as through the 'Curses' poem at the Museum of London (Chapter 9.2.2.2) and the immersive audio presentation at the Bloomberg Mithraeum (Chapter 8.4.1). At NMS, where creative language is most prominent, criticisms have centred around the inclusivity of the voices presented rather than the effectiveness of the approach.

It is increasingly apparent that aesthetically-driven 'glass case' based displays are insufficient on their own for engagement with the multisensory and material realities of objects. Here again, Graham's (2020) concept of proximal and distal religious experiences can be applied to museum visitors, the detached aesthetic viewing of objects behind glass akin to distal experiences, and direct engagement with contextualised and multisensory religious objects and experiences more proximal. Though both are significant in the creation of meaning, the former currently dominates within galleries. Interactivity, broadly defined here to include any imaginative, emotive or multisensory activity, therefore has an important role to play. Though it has been argued that interactivity should be child-accessible yet not child-focused (Chapter 4.2.2), museum activities based on objects (as opposed to offering additional interpretation) are primarily aimed at children and families (Chapter 9.3). Handling activities are similarly aimed at family and education groups rather than offering all visitors the opportunity to consider the embodied material affordances of objects, though refocussing this approach would require recalibration of visitor expectations. The My Roman Pantheon interactive at Chesters

(Chapter 8.2.1.2) offers a particularly valuable example of how tactile activities can be engaging for multiple audiences and promote direct consideration of original objects and concepts of individual religious choice.

The NMS curatorial interviewee referenced displays at the Vienna Natural History Museum where small video screens inside display cases were used to show objects being worn and handled. Though remaining distal rather than offering fully proximal experiences, such interventions enable greater tactile and embodied considerations of objects. They also allow for varying interpretations and contexts of use to be suggested, challenging the purely aesthetic appreciation of objects lying lifeless on display plinths.

*Fig 10.3: Piercebridge display at the Durham University Archaeology Museum. Author's photograph*

## 10.6 Post-surveying museum developments

Museum galleries are dynamic spaces, with smaller interventions and updates occurring in even the most seemingly static of displays.[1] The curatorial interviews revealed an enthusiastic desire to develop new approaches for gallery spaces and since the data gathering for this research was completed, in October 2020, changes have been made to some galleries which are worth specific consideration. The Museum of London is, at the time of writing, planning the displays for its new West Smithfield home and a completely new display at Richborough is being planned which will include the influences of religion on people's lives in an 'identity strand' (curatorial interview). The Durham University Archaeology Museum has moved to a different gallery space, and although the displays remain mostly unchanged, they have been significantly enhanced through the addition of the recently acquired votive deposits from Piercebridge (Chapter 5.3.1; Fig 10.3).

At the Great North Museum, an installation of projections onto seven of the museum's altars was installed in October 2021 (Fig 10.4), creating a dramatic highlight within the gallery space. The project hopes to inspire greater consideration of the original polychromy (Chapter 8.4.2.2) present on Roman stonework (Blair 2022). The projections include highlighting inscriptions and projecting images reflecting the nature of the invoked deities, such as Jupiter's thunder and lightning, and sea plants and creatures on altars to Oceanus and Neptune. An altar to Fortuna is of particular note as its projection reconstructs the altar in use, in a similar manner to that at Nîmes (Chapter 8.2.2.2; Fig 8.14). A silhouetted figure pours a libation of blood, which then oozes down the face of the real altar (Fig 10.5), powerfully connecting the depicted act with the materiality of the altar and its messy ritual reality. Public reaction to the installation is not known, but the altars are undeniably transformed from static stone blocks into evocative, dynamic and intriguing objects with connections to wider landscapes, divine and natural forces, and human actions.

[1] In curatorial interviews, only the NMS interviewee said that displays had never been updated

*Fig 10.4: Light projections on altars at the Great North Museum. Author's photograph*

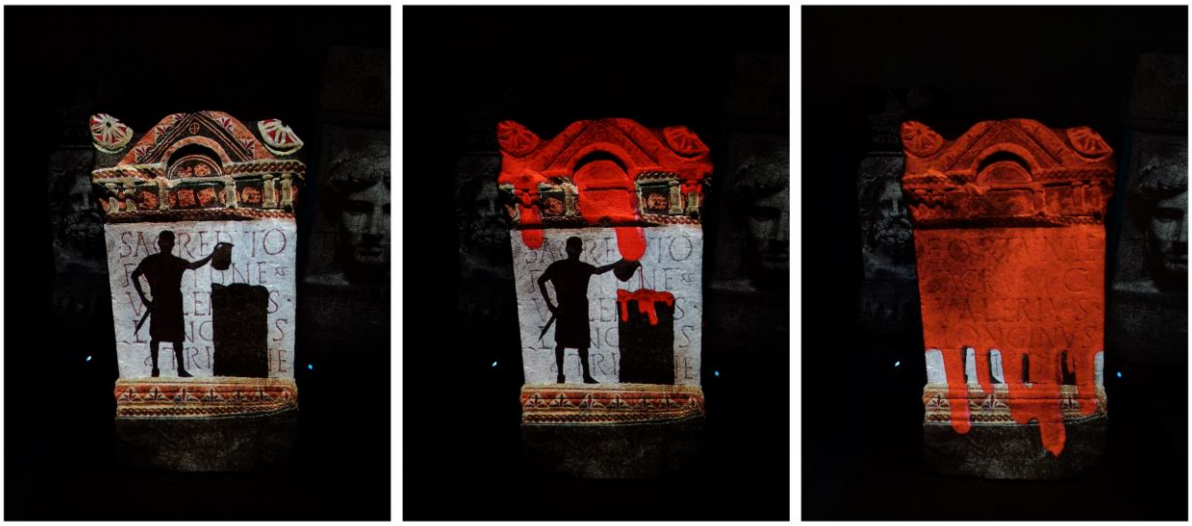


*Fig 10.5: Stills from projections onto an altar to Fortuna at the Great North Museum. Author's photographs*

The Border Gallery at Tullie House underwent a comprehensive redisplay in 2021/2. A new 'Occupation' banner now marks the entrance to the Roman displays, and cases are more clearly focussed upon themes such as 'Inspired by Nature' and 'Life and Death', and specific sites such as Birdoswald, Hardknott and Bewcastle. Though there is significantly less religious content, with much of the religious stonework and the 'stonemason's yard' removed, what is displayed is now much better contextualised and presented to a high quality. Of particular relevance is the commissioning of new artworks, including backdrop images behind the open display of altars (Fig 10.6), a project which I was invited to contribute to as a result of the curatorial interview discussions. Key to the new backdrop was the contextualisation of the altars, avoiding the common disconnect between original objects and reconstruction drawings. This has been achieved through key ritual acts such as the pouring of a libation onto the altar flames and the resulting smoke being directly related to the displayed altars (Fig 10.7). The interpretative text explains that the gods were perceived as receiving their offering through smelling the curling smoke, highlighting the significance of a non-visual aspect of the ritual. The jug being held in the hand of the officer conducting the military sacrifice is a subtle reference to the one discussed in Chapters 1.1 and 8.4.7.3.

## 10.7 Further research

This research has focused on the construction and interpretation of museum displays. It has involved direct communication with museum curators, and the online survey, though open to all respondents, primarily received responses from heritage sector colleagues. Engagement with the wider public, representing both museum visitor and non-visitor demographics, would represent a significant next step. Within museum spaces, this might mean data gathering on visitor motivations and physical engagements with displays of religion such as route tracking and dwell time. Museum visitor studies (e.g. Falk 2009; Falk and Dierking 2013) have been criticised for their focus on institutional learning-based motivations at the expense of more diverse identity-driven motivations (Smith 2015: 463). Personal Meaning Maps (Tully 2010: 113) might instead enable creative exploration of perceptions of religion in Roman Britain and the impact of interpretational language on making meaning and challenging preconceptions.

Further research is required into wider public understandings, attitudes and opinions regarding religion in Roman Britain. To this end, the 'living heritage' approach (Gilchrist 2020: 3) is

*Fig 10.6: Religious offerings graphics installation at Tullie House Museum's Border Gallery*

*Fig 10.7: Detail of graphics installation at Tullie House Museum's Border Gallery*

potentially of value, exploring the Roman past and its material remains as formative and ongoing elements of the identities of modern communities and individuals, and not just as worthy yet dry remnants of history. Such approaches should include intangible and spiritual cultural heritage, of which religion in Roman Britain plays a part. This is particularly relevant for some modern pagans who do not see the religious beliefs of the Roman period as entirely 'dead', but whose beliefs and opinions have generally only been considered in relation to prehistoric monuments, despite evidence of their spiritual interactions with Romano-British material culture in museums and at archaeological sites (Chapter 4.3.2).

As has been demonstrated above, new approaches to ancient religion will not be universally welcomed, especially when they challenge traditional interpretations of imperialism, tolerance and identities within the Roman world and are seen to reflect the intrusion of contemporary 'politics'. Though the curatorial interviews and recent museum developments discussed above reflect a positivity towards new approaches, the museum sector more widely must also be willing to adopt revised ways of thinking about the Roman past and its religious landscapes. An important factor in this would be education programmes which, though not engaged with in this research, represent a prominent museum user demographic and a powerful driver of display narratives. As the Canterbury curatorial interviewee stated: "we want to get the schools in, so we do what they want." The Key Stage 2 History Curriculum presents Roman Britain through the lenses of Romanization and civilisation, an approach recently criticised (Hingley 2021a: 2; Bonacchi 2022: 177–178), and frames religion entirely as an aspect of that Romanization (Department for Education 2014: 247). Seventy percent of respondents to the online survey (Q8) felt that better understanding of beliefs and practices in Roman Britain would benefit contemporary society. There may therefore be value in greater discussion with education providers regarding the relevance of religion in Roman Britain to issues of contemporary social change, integration, tolerance and identity formation.

## 10.8 Concluding thoughts

This research project has presented the first focused analysis of museum displays of religion in Roman Britain, uniquely considering the concept of lived religious experiences through a multidisciplinary study of complementary and evolving theoretical approaches to religion, material culture, museology, and Roman archaeology. Through the analysis of displays at a

range of museums of varying sizes, types, governance models and geographical locations a representation of the wider sector has been achieved. The creation and application of theoretically-informed Analysis Statements, the use of 'display units' as an analytical tool, and the adoption of selected concepts of Space Syntax and Discourse Analysis, have enabled thematic discussions of displays across these museums, including their use of technical and creative language, display construction, interpretational narratives, and use of reconstructions and interactives. These analyses have been supported through interviews with relevant curators and an online survey reflecting the views of a wider demographic of heritage professionals.

I have demonstrated that religion is seen as foundational to life in Roman Britain and is prominently represented in displays. However, interpretative narratives often reflect outdated approaches to material culture, beliefs and practices. I argue that new approaches to presenting religion in Roman Britain should be embedded in museum practices from the outset of display planning and reflected in documentation methodologies. Descriptive museum paradigms based on interpreting the aesthetics of available collections and fitting them to provincial narratives should be challenged in favour of contextualised experiential approaches based on the idiosyncratic religious needs and actions of individuals and communities. Rather than such approaches making religion more complex for visitors to understand, they may instead serve to make them more engaging and relatable.

Religion should be presented as a dynamic and socially-relative construct centred upon the actions of individual emotive, sensing, agents influentially acting within real and imagined communities. Ritual acts should be considered as situationally significant assemblages of people, places and things (including their material, sensory and transformative affordances), moving them beyond a simplistic and undefined recognition that religion was 'part of daily life'. The religious landscape of Roman Britain should be broadly defined to consider interactions with divine forces through varied communicative strategies and at diverse locations, rather than centred upon a tensionless and classically-dominated 'catalogue of gods'. Terminology such as 'religion', 'ritual' and 'cults' are not universally applicable or understood, and should be treated as technical language requiring culturally-specific definition and contextualisation. Visitors should be creatively challenged to reconsider their own ontological preconceptions about religious beliefs and activities in the Roman world, as part of wider discussion of religious hybridity and change within Roman Britain. Through offering proximal

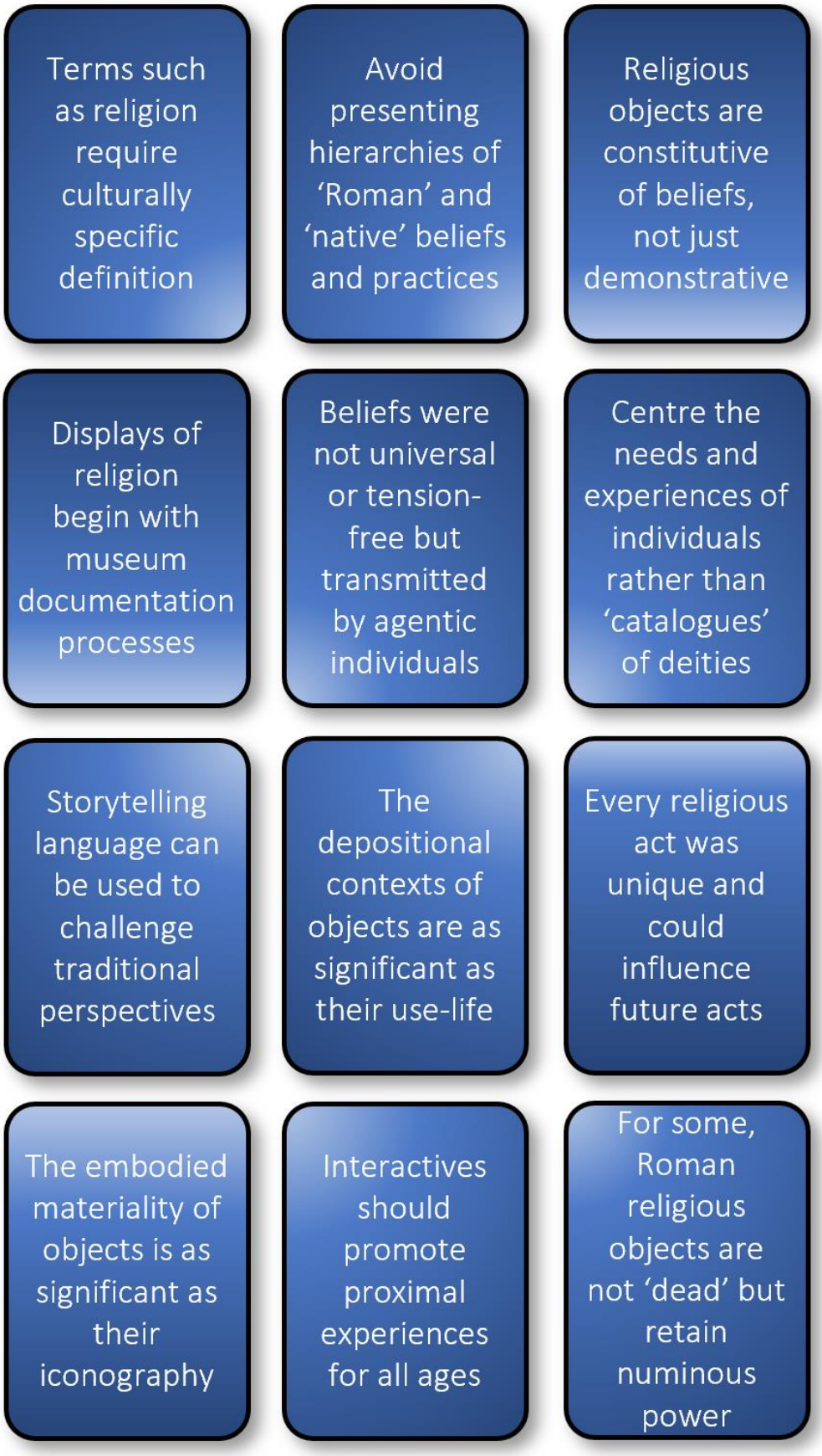



*Fig 10.8: Principles for considering lived religious experiences in museums*

as well as distal experiences, a more engaging, sensorially and cognitively stimulating, and ontologically challenging interpretation can be created.

This research will hopefully prove stimulating and valuable to museum professionals wishing to present their unique collections and stories to their visitors. Discussions of religion are integral to wider narratives of conquest, civilization, urbanism and cultural change, and can provide an emotive and sensory catalyst for communicating changing perspectives of Roman Britain more generally. The recent projects discussed above suggest that such changes are not only possible but desirable and synchronise with other developments in museology. Fig 10.8 visualises the major principles discussed in this research and will hopefully serve as an accessible and useful stimulus for museum professionals wishing to give greater consideration to lived religious experiences when designing displays of Roman Britain in the future.

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