Is the city wall the end of the world? Rituals thematising, neglecting or appropriating a physical boundary

Problems and research questions: Massive and extended walls were the defining element of many urban settlements, that is, rendered larger, a ‘city’. This holds true for the urban networks of the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean world, but likewise for many, but not all urban cultures from Bronze Age China through the Indus civilisation (e.g. Harappa) to Mesopotamia and the Western most provinces of the Roman Empire. Typically, such walls were the largest investment in terms of material and labour of these cities and seen as the most powerful visual dimension of the respective urban society. At the same time, the ritual thematisation seems to be very uneven; religious practices frequently stress the permeability or even appropriated the materiality of the wall for illegitimate ritual usage. Against this background a doctoral project might ask: How was the physical and often legal boundary of urban society inculcated in religious and non-religious ritual practices – and which was the relationship of the two? How did religious rituals translate the physical barrier into transcendent or social self–world relations, including relations of gender and power? Who were the agents of such practices?

Two hypotheses inform this research: a) City-wall related religious rituals were a field of contestation between singularising and pluralising agents. b) The materiality of the wall is ritually related to the monumentality of religious architecture within and beyond the city.

How could the topic be approached? The topic needs the integration of archaeological data, including graffiti and individual modifications in the form of burials, shrines or paintings attached to walls or gates, with literary and iconographical representations of city-walls. The focus needs to be on the reconstruction of ritual practices and, as far as possible through the tools of lived-religion methodology, experiences of such practices by different agents.

In the analysis of such archaeological and literary evidence the performance and habitualisation of mute or resonant relationships needs to be seen through ways of dealing with the materiality, the orientation of the space used, and the imagery and metaphorical use of wall images. Particular attention is to be paid to spatial metaphors of high and low, inside and outside, beyond and behind, as well as metaphors of movement of through, underneath or over the wall.

References


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