

# HEAVEN ON EARTH



**HEAVEN ON EARTH**  
TEMPLES, RITUAL, AND  
COSMIC SYMBOLISM IN THE  
ANCIENT WORLD

*edited by*

**DEENA RAGAVAN**

*with contributions by*

Claus Ambos, John Baines, Gary Beckman, Matthew Canepa,  
Davíd Carrasco, Elizabeth Froom, Uri Gabbay, Susanne Görke,  
Ömür Harmanşah, Julia A. B. Hegewald, Clemente Marconi,  
Michael W. Meister, Tracy Miller, Richard Neer, Deena Ragavan,  
Betsey A. Robinson, Yorke M. Rowan, and Karl Taube

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*Series Editors*

Leslie Schramer

*and*

Thomas G. Urban

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## PREFACE

The present volume is the result of the eighth annual University of Chicago Oriental Institute Seminar, held in Breasted Hall on Friday, March 2, and Saturday, March 3, 2012. Over the course of the two days, seventeen speakers, from both the United States and abroad, examined the interconnections among temples, ritual, and cosmology from a variety of regional specializations and theoretical perspectives. Our eighteenth participant, Julia Hegewald, was absent due to unforeseen circumstances, but fortunately her contribution still appears as part of this volume.

The 2012 seminar aimed to revisit a classic topic, one with a long history among scholars of the ancient world: the cosmic symbolism of sacred architecture. Bringing together archaeologists, art historians, and philologists working not only in the ancient Near East, but also Mesoamerica, Greece, South Asia, and China, we hoped to re-evaluate the significance of this topic across the ancient world. The program comprised six sessions, each of which focused on the different ways the main themes of the seminar could interact. The program was organized thematically, to encourage scholars of different regional or methodological specializations to communicate and compare their work. The two-day seminar was divided into two halves, each half culminating in a response to the preceding papers. This format, with some slight rearrangement, is followed in the present work.

Our goal was to share ideas and introduce new perspectives in order to equip scholars with new questions or theoretical and methodological tools. The topic generated considerable interest and enthusiasm in the academic community, both at the Oriental Institute and more broadly across the University of Chicago, as well as among members of the general public. The free exchange of ideas and, more importantly, the wide range of perspectives offered left each of us with potential avenues of research and new ideas, as well as a fresh outlook on our old ones.

I'd like to express my gratitude to all those who have contributed so much of their time and energy to ensuring this seminar and volume came together. In particular, I'd like to thank Gil Stein, the Director of the Oriental Institute, for this wonderful opportunity, and Chris Woods, for his guidance through the whole process. Thanks also to Theo van den Hout, Andrea Seri, Christopher Faraone, Walter Farber, Bruce Lincoln, and Janet Johnson, for chairing the individual sessions of the conference. I'd like to thank all the staff of the Oriental Institute, including Steve Camp, D'Ann Condes, Kristin Derby, Emma Harper, Anna Hill, and Anna Ressman; particular thanks to John Sanders, for the technical support, and Meghan Winston, for coordinating the catering. A special mention must go to Mariana Perlinac, without whom the organization and ultimate success of this seminar would have been impossible. I do not think I can be grateful enough to Tom Urban, Leslie Schramer, and everyone else in the publications office, not only for the beautiful poster and program, but also for all the work they have put into editing and producing this book. Most of all, my thanks go out to all of the participants, whose hard work, insight, and convivial discussion made this meeting and process such a pleasure, both intellectually and personally.

Deena Ragavan

## COSMOS AND DISCIPLINE

*Richard Neer, University of Chicago*

It is an irony of the respondent's lot that, often as not, the more a paper prompts sustained engagement, the less feasible it is to do justice to its complexities — such are the exigencies of time and space. With eight very substantial papers in Parts 4–6 to discuss, and limited space in which to do it, I am not able to address each contribution in detail. I hope merely to pull out some generalities and point to some larger conceptual questions that the papers raise in aggregate, and I beg the pardon of those colleagues whose works I do not address with the fullness they deserve. I would, however, like to underscore what a pleasure it has been both to hear and to read such a rich and broad array of work — and to be reminded, again, of how much one does not know, and how much remains to be done.

Turning to business, the basic terms under discussion in these sessions were *architecture*, *ritual practice*, and *cosmic symbolism*. To each term there corresponds an academic discipline — archaeology, the history of religion, and philology — each with its own particular methods for producing and classifying knowledge. It is one of the points of a conference such as this one to juxtapose these methods and, in so doing, to reveal incompatibilities, blind spots, or tacit assumptions. My brief is to juxtapose the *ancient, cosmic* orders that have constituted the content of these papers, with the *modern, disciplinary* orders — the ways of ordering evidence — that have determined their form.

### Architecture and *kosmos*

To begin with the notion of cosmic symbolism — the idea that, to quote the conference program, “ritual practice and temple topography provide evidence for the conception of the temple as a *reflection*, or *embodiment*, of the cosmos” (italics added). So we have the cosmos and we have the temple, and we use ritual and topography to show how the temple is a reflex or incarnation — what idealist historiography would have called “the sensuous presentation” — of the larger abstract conceptualization. The cardinal question here is, how do we order these concepts and these pieces of evidence in chains of inference?

I start with the Greek situation, not just because I know it best but because it is rather straightforward. In the Greek context, a tempting way to think about cosmic symbolism in the context of temple architecture is, literally, as the creation of the *kosmos*, that is, of the upper portion of a temple. As Clemente Marconi reminded us a few years back, everything above the architrave of a Greek temple could be called the *kosmos* in Greece, and this applied particularly to the décor.<sup>1</sup> To speak of cosmic symbolism in this context involves putting two kinds of evidence, the philological and the archaeological, words and temples, into some

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<sup>1</sup> Marconi 2004, pp. 211–24.



kind of productive relation. Which term will have logical priority? One arrangement of the evidence will see the temple as a reflection or embodiment the cosmos. But one might also urge the opposite view: that orderly architecture might provide a *model* for at least some Greek conceptions of a cosmically ordered universe. In other words, it may not be that architecture symbolizes, reflects, embodies the *kosmos*, so much as that the *kosmos* is like architecture, perhaps an extrapolation from, or a mystification of, an untheorized practice. In the Greek case, at any rate, there is some justification for this suggestion. Aryeh Finkelberg has argued convincingly that the use of the Greek word *kosmos* in an abstract and speculative sense, as a universal system or theodicy, is a late Classical and Hellenistic development, only anachronistically retrojected onto earlier periods.<sup>2</sup> Down to Xenophon's time, on this view, *kosmos* primarily meant any orderly arrangement or adornment, anything *kata kosmon*, like a well-laid table or a well-appointed coiffure. There simply was no Greek *kosmos* in the sixth century B.C. But there was architecture.

The example that immediately comes to mind is the Presocratic philosopher Anaximander, who modeled the earth in the image of a column drum, with a diameter three times its height.<sup>3</sup> We do not know enough about Anaximander to speak very intelligently about him, but one thing we can say is that architecture seems to have provided at least some of the terminology in which he thought his *kosmos* — and that is enough for my purposes. For Anaximander, the *kosmos* is like architecture, not the other way around; the column is not the symbol of some antecedent notion of the cosmic, so much as the paradigm from which the *kosmos* is theorized *ex post facto*.

The Builder or Demiurge of Plato's *Timaeus* might be thought to represent both the climax and the final defeat of this tradition — defeat, in that least part of Plato's point was to abstract philosophical knowledge from the worldly know-how of the builder. But the larger point is that we need to be careful about simply assuming that cosmic symbolism will run from base material culture to abstract ideas, like a sort of anagogical progression. Maybe religion is the epiphenomenal category. At an extreme, as the case of Anaximander might suggest, perhaps the cosmic symbolism is itself a reflex of architectural practice, not the other way around.

This raises my first pair of questions: to what extent can we see temples producing a *kosmos*, as opposed to reflecting one? And, by what specific strategies might a material or ritual generalize itself into something of universal or “cosmic” significance?

It is at this point, obviously, that ritual comes in, but once again the problem consists in how to prioritize the evidence. The Parthenon frieze is as good an example as any (leaving aside the whole question of whether the Parthenon functioned as a temple or a treasury). I was especially glad that Clemente Marconi put paid to the old canard that the iconography of the frieze is somehow unique or unprecedented. I am also happy to go along, broadly speaking, with his idea that “inherent to these images, because of their subject and location, was their function as mirror and memory: mirror, at the time of the festival, for the community of worshippers celebrating the gods; and memory, for the rest of the time, until the next festival was performed, and beyond.” But the Parthenon frieze presents at least two specific problems, both germane. First, the ritual procession on the frieze does not correspond in many of its details to the written accounts; notoriously, it shows men carrying a type of

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<sup>2</sup> Finkelberg 1998, pp. 103–36.

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<sup>3</sup> Texts conveniently available in Graham 2010, pp. 56–59, frags. 19–20.

vessel that we are told was carried by a special class of women, it gives the cavalry a wildly exaggerated role, and in general it seems to do its best to give the iconographers headaches.<sup>4</sup> Second, the frieze is a continuous band that shows the beginning of a procession in one part of the city and the end of the procession in another part. That is to say, it shows multiple moments and multiple spaces along its length. So if it is a mirror, then there is no one place or time that the frieze as a whole may be said to reflect or represent; if it is a memory, then we have to come to grips with it as a memory of something that never happened. Marconi's remarks about the construction of the sanctuary as a liminal space, a sort of non-site, seem quite apt to this curious artifact — for the time and space of the Parthenon frieze are themselves non-times and non-spaces.

What all this points to, for present purposes, is the *constitutive* role of the frieze in the manufacture of both *kosmos* and ritual. The Parthenon frieze is not quite a reflection of ritual practice, not quite a symbol of some antecedent set of beliefs, so much as it is generative of both.

## Plan and Elevation

More generally, architecture, *kosmos*, and ritual coincide in the notion of space. So how are we to think of archaeological space? This question seemed to motivate many of the papers, in one way or another, and rather than proposing an answer of my own, I merely suggest a way to think of the various responses.

I feel that our authors might be divided into two camps depending on the conception of space — ritual, architectural, political — that subtends their research. One model of space takes it to be an abstract metric for establishing mathematically determinate relations between points. Think of a map or a site plan. Within this demarcated space we can, by means of grids, specify sacred and non-sacred “zones,” or points, the criteria of which are first and foremost architectural, that is, archaeologically visible in the form of artifacts such as walls and foundations that articulate and divide space on site plans (Yorke Rowan's paper shows this beautifully). This conception seems closely aligned to surveying practices — specifically, practices like gridding out sites preparatory to excavation and the subsequent production of site plans. If our fundamental model is the grid and our fundamental technologies are the surveyor's transit and the site plan, then we might be apt to think of space in terms of exactly these articulating features and to emphasize relations *between* these determinate zones in our research programs.

For example, Matt Canepa's magisterial survey of a thousand-plus years of sacred architecture across tens of thousands of square miles of real estate would be literally inconceivable without this conception of space and its attendant technologies, from transits and tripods to GPS. Here we have discrete cultural and political units (Greek, Achaemenid, Sasanian, and so on) articulated spatially into territories, and temporally in chronological succession, that are immediately “visualizable” in the familiar format of a historical atlas. These units provide what I am calling articulating features — within which there are determinate types of architecture, like the fire temple — and the daunting task of the scholar is to show how these units and types relate to one another within a larger cultural history. An example is when Canepa observes that “the largest and most important structures [at Ai Khanum] utilized an

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<sup>4</sup> On these issues, see Neils 2001.

official architecture that deliberately and harmoniously incorporated Greek, Babylonian, and Persian architectural features to create something quite new.”

Zooming in from macro to micro, there is something similar on offer, I feel, in Uri Gabbay’s account of propitiatory ritual. Here the operative terms are inside versus outside, and east versus west: exactly the terms for which a site plan is particularly apt. Orientation, here, is to the cardinal points and to the passage of the sun across the sky; within this system, instead of tracking the peregrinations of motifs, styles, and architectural types, we track the peregrinations of a statue from one zone to another. Yorke Rowan, similarly, performs something close to a miracle in employing minimal criteria for the identification of what he calls “clearly defined” ritual spaces, which in turn cashes out to mean clearly defined *in plan*.

This way of approaching space has obvious benefits, above and beyond the production of site plans that help us to keep track of our finds. In each of these cases, the specific conception of space enables a research agenda. That conception of space is one that I am associating — speculatively but not, I hope, implausibly — with technologies of mapping and survey, and ultimately with the gridded site plan. This is, I emphasize, no bad thing, nor is it even particularly surprising that something like this approach should loom so large in our disciplines. In observing, for instance, that Matt Canepa’s paper involves a particular conception of space and particular technological infrastructure, I do not mean to suggest that it is anything less than dazzling. My goal is to defamiliarize something, which is not to criticize it; I want to be very clear on this score. The only thing I would want to resist is the idea that there is only *one* right way to talk about space.

Because of course there are other ways to think about it, and this takes me to my second group of papers. In these cases, space is not locatory but body-based. Instead of mapping space cartographically, or orienting it to fixed compass points or celestial bodies, one might, for instance, orient it relationally, to entities — in front, behind, underneath, and so on. When it comes to architecture, plans of course are important, but elevations are surely important as well, certainly if what we are interested in is anything to do with actual lived experience: users of buildings come to know plans (if they do) through elevations both interior and exterior. Examples of a more bodily, “elevation-friendly” approach would include Elizabeth Froom’s fascinating study of the ways in which Egyptian temple personnel gave meaning to the spaces through which they passed, Ömür Harmanşah’s account of the metaphors of space and power in Mesopotamia, and John Baines’s description of the production of non-existent spaces for the gods in Egyptian architecture. Of course, some papers in other sessions also exemplified this tendency, like Betsey Robinson’s wonderful discussion of Parnassus, but these are beyond the scope of the present discussion.

At the risk of oversimplification, then, one might contrast a mode of research based on plans to a mode based on elevations. The one will define space absolutely, as a grid, and track movements or events within that space. The other will be inclined to define it relationally and — this is important — to show how practices or events *constitute* or *posit* sites, locations, or places. In the one case, the space is a given, and the scholar’s job is to track movements in it and to describe the meanings — symbolic, historical, or otherwise — of those movements. In the other, space not a given. It is a function of ritual, or of politics, and the scholar’s job is to track the process of its emergence, of spatialization or localization or what Edward Casey rather barbarously calls “placialization,” the constitution of meaningful places.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Casey 2001, pp. 683–93.

There is a reason, of course, why archaeologists tend not to talk about elevations: they rarely survive intact. We deal with foundations, which cry out to be seen in plan. But that fact only proves my point, which is that the material constraints of our discipline determine our conception of space, which in turn determines our research agendas and what counts as serious scholarship. The result is a fine example of our old friend the “hermeneutic circle.” Yet this formulation is too simple, for the circle does not remain unbroken. Elizabeth Frood’s paper demonstrates as much. Talking about writing on the vertical plane of walls — elevation — she argues that the graffiti “delineate places of devotion for temple staff” and “ritualize their regular activities and movements in association with central cult rituals and performances,” thereby “reconfiguring ... traditional hierarchical ordering of cult places.” Here the temple area is taken as given — a more or less neutral spatial array — and Frood documents a process of manipulation and transformation effected through secondary inscription on the interior elevations.

Or take Ömür Harmanşah’s fascinating piece on spatial metaphors in Mesopotamia. The real topic here is the mapping of a lived, politico-religious geography — the way in which power does not merely articulate space, as it were, by surveying it, but actually constitutes locations, sites, and spaces as they are lived and experienced in an “everyday practice” that need not entail any synoptic or cartographic schematization. “In the context of everyday practice in early Mesopotamian cities, cattlepen and sheepfold appear as the perfect spatial metaphors that speak of this very intimacy and care between the king and his subjects.” The shift from a synoptic plan to something like the phenomenology of the everyday, hence of politics, seems to me very important, and it exemplifies the second conception of space as I have described it.

Having said as much, I am not sure why Harmanşah characterizes *giš-hur* and me as “abstract concepts ... materially *manifest* or visually *expressed* in the architectural corpus, the urban fabric of Mesopotamian cities” (italics added). Once again we are back to the question of ordering evidence. This idealization of the discursive, as that which precedes material manifestation in architecture, rather as the spirit precedes its *Darstellung*, is exactly the sort of thing I hoped to put at issue with the example of Anaximander. Why not say the opposite: that the “abstract concepts” were extrapolated from the “everyday practice” of shepherding and city life, indeed, that they order and rationalize everyday practice according to an expressly political logic? Especially given that the overall thrust of Harmanşah’s paper leads us, very engagingly, away from transcendental concepts and toward a pragmatics of everyday space.

There is, of course, an answer to this question as well. It is that we, as historians, tend to use the texts to make sense of the artifacts, so it is the most natural thing in the world to give logical priority to those texts. The result is a view of architecture and space as the symbolization of a discursive content extracted from texts, which makes archaeology and art history into the handmaidens of philology. But the path of our inferences need not correspond to the actual order, or *kosmos*, of the historical situation. We need the texts to make sense of the ruins, but that does not mean that the ruins were, historically, symbols of the “cosmic” ideas found in those texts. I cannot help feeling that in some cases the purely forensic ordering of the evidence may have taken on a life of its own, that the *kosmos* being symbolized is that of the scholarly disciplines and a well-ordered argument.

So this leads to my second question or proposition: if, inspired by Anaximander, we try the experiment of flipping our hierarchy and take “cosmic symbolism” to imply a *kosmos* reflecting architecture, and not architecture reflecting a *kosmos*, then what happens to the

notion of architecture and ritual space? The seminar broached this question, and I certainly am not in a position to answer it; but I suggest that we will tend to move from plans to elevations in our agendas of research, and from assuming architecture to be a function of belief and liturgy to at least taking seriously the possibility that belief and liturgy are functions of architecture, or at any rate stand in a dynamic and reciprocal relation to same.

## Other Senses

If all this seems rather too schematic, then that may be because we have reduced the number of variables in play perhaps a bit too much. Plan versus elevation, locatory space versus bodily space, this is all a bit Manichean. With this thought in mind, I have one more question, which I can state more succinctly. Ömür Harmanşah's emphasis on what he calls "visual metaphors" seems extremely promising, but it raises a point that may be a bit odd to hear from a historian of art. It is simply this: whether interested in tracing cartographies or in mapping metaphors, all these papers have strongly emphasized *vision* as the prime means of access to ancient spatialities and also as the prime means by which the ancients themselves articulated space. Space is now, and was in antiquity, something to *see* or *read*. This special place for vision holds true even when discussing ritual practices that were extremely rich sensorially, involving song and food and smoke and drums and lowing beasts and drinks and sweaty crowds. I do not mean to suggest that there is anything particularly wrong with this emphasis on the visual, but it is worth noting that there are at least four other senses, and we probably should not assume that vision was the most important — certainly when it comes to ritual space, and at least potentially in the case of temple architecture as well. In the case of, say, a nocturnal procession accompanied by song and fire, smell and hearing may be equally if not more important in spatial orientation.

Recalling the other four senses can suggest potentially fruitful lines for future research: what happens if we think of a ritual landscape as something experienced other than visually? This question is not necessarily any more challenging than the more familiar visual ones. We extrapolate visual experience from site plans, and there is no reason in principle why we could not extrapolate other sensoria as well. Ritual landscapes are a fascinating topic, but what about ritual soundscapes and "smellscapes"?<sup>6</sup> Anybody who has ever heard the muezzin's call as the sun goes down, or been woken by it at the crack of dawn — or, for that matter, anybody who has even heard a churchbell ring on Sunday morning — knows the importance of sound in establishing a ritual topography. Smell, touch, and taste have their places as well. A sweaty, jostling crowd; the sound of a victim's demise; the stink of its blood, or of incense or smoke; a thirsty procession ending in a drink — these too are integral to the spatialization of ritual. To be sure, there are significant practical difficulties to mounting arguments about the full range of the ancient sensorium. Yet it may be helpful merely to raise the question, if only because it is a reminder of how incomplete our evidence is, hence how theory-laden our conclusions are. Even to talk about space in bodily terms, near and far, before and behind, will be reductive and impoverished if we conceive those spatial relations exclusively in visual terms.

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Hung 2005, ch. 4; Drobnick 2006.

We need the transit and the grid, and we need the ancient texts. Yet if we do not attend to the phenomenology of sacred space, but constitute it from the outset in the absolute terms of the measured site plan, then we risk begging the question of cosmic symbolism. Exactly because we will have based our research from the outset on an abstract structuring principle — will have made it *cosmic*, so to speak — the results will inevitably be the symbol of our own disciplinary *kosmos*.

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