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

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

Robert G. Ousterhout is Professor of the History of Art at the University of Pennsylvania, where he directs the Center for Ancient Studies. A specialist in Byzantine art and architecture, his research focuses on the vanishing architectural heritage of the eastern Mediterranean. He is the author of numerous books, including Master Builders of Byzantium (second paperback edition, 2008), The Byzantine Monuments of the Evros/Meric River Valley (2007, with Ch. Bakirtzis), and A Byzantine Settlement in Cappadocia (second paperback edition, 2011).
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Space, Ritual, and Experience from Classical
Greece to Byzantium

Edited by

BONNA D. WESCOAT
Emory University

ROBERT G. OUSTERHOUT
University of Pennsylvania
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CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Joan R. Branham is Professor of Art History at Providence College. She has served as Vice President and Chair of Fellowships at the W. F. Albright Institute of Archaeological Research in Jerusalem and as Acting Director of the Women's Studies in Religion Program at Harvard University. She is the author of several critical studies on sacred space in ancient Judaism, early Christianity, and modern culture, and she is interested in the role of gender, blood, and sacrifice in these traditions.

Slobodan Ćurčić is Professor Emeritus of Art and Archaeology at Princeton University. A specialist in Late Antique and Byzantine architecture and art, his most recent work includes Secular Medieval Architecture in the Balkans, 1300–1500, and Its Preservation (with E. Hadjitryphonos, Thessaloniki, 1997); Naupara (with S. Popovic, Belgrade, 2001); and Architecture in the Balkans from Diocletian to Süleyman the Magnificent (ca. 300–ca. 1550) (New Haven and London, 2010). He also cocurated (with E. Hadjitryphonos) the exhibit “Architecture as Icon,” with an edited catalog, Architecture as Icon: Perception and Representation of Architecture in Byzantine Art (New Haven and London, 2010).

Jaš Elsner is Humfrey Payne Senior Research Fellow in Classical Art and Archaeology, Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and visiting Professor of Art History at the University of Chicago. He works on issues of art and religion in antiquity and the early Christian and Jewish worlds and the history of the reception of these themes in later European culture, including such topics as the collecting of objects, the phenomena of...

Mary B. Hollinshead is Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Rhode Island. Her chief interest is Greek architecture, particularly the use of temples in relation to the back room sometimes labeled “adyton.” She has also written about Bronze Age painting and Roman sculpture. Her chapter in this volume is a preliminary study for a book she is completing on monumental steps in Greek architecture.

Jodi Magness is Kenan Distinguished Professor for Teaching Excellence in Early Judaism in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Magness's research interests focus on Palestine in the Roman, Byzantine, and early Islamic periods and Diaspora Judaism in the Roman world. Her book, *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Eerdmans, 2002), won the 2003 Biblical Archaeology Society's Award for Best Popular Book in Archaeology in 2001–2002 and was selected as an “Outstanding Academic Book for 2003” by *Choice* magazine. Magness’s book *The Archaeology of the Early Islamic Settlement in Palestine* (Eisenbrauns, 2003) was awarded the 2006 Irene Levi-Sala Book Prize in the category of nonfiction on the archaeology of Israel.

Vasileios Marinis is Assistant Professor of Christian art and architecture at the Institute of Sacred Music and the Divinity School, Yale University. His research focuses on the interaction of architecture and ritual in the Byzantine churches of Constantinople. He is the author of “Tombs and Burials in the Monastery tou Libos in Constantinople,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 63 (2009), and “Defining Liturgical Space,” in P. Stephenson, ed., *The Byzantine World* (New York, 2010).

Margaret M. Miles is Professor of Art History and Classics at the University of California, Irvine, and the Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Classical Studies at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, Greece, where she is the head of the academic program for North American graduate students in Classics, History, and Archaeology. Her previous publications include a study of the Temple of Nemesis at
Rhamnous; a volume on the City Eleusinion (the Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone) in the Athenian Agora; and Art as Plunder, a study of the impact of Cicero’s ideas about the ethics of collecting art on our modern concept of cultural property.

Robert G. Ousterhout is Professor of Byzantine art and architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, where he directs the Center for Ancient Studies. His research focuses on the vanishing architectural heritage of the eastern Mediterranean. He is the author of Master Builders of Byzantium (second paperback edition, Philadelphia, 2008), The Byzantine Monuments of the Evros/Meric River Valley (with Ch. Bakirtzis, Thessaloniki, 2007), and A Byzantine Settlement in Cappadocia (Washington, DC, 2005).

Ellen Perry is Associate Professor of Classics at the College of the Holy Cross. Her interests include Roman art and architecture, ancient rhetoric, and ancient aesthetics. Her publications include the book The Aesthetics of Emulation in the Visual Arts of Ancient Rome (Cambridge, 2005).

C. Brian Rose is James B. Pritchard Professor of Mediterranean Archaeology in the Department of Classical Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and Deputy Director of the Penn Museum. Since 1988 he has been Head of Post–Bronze Age excavations at Troy and English language editor of Studia Troica, the annual journal of the Troy excavations. He is codirector of the Gordion Excavation Project.

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

Ann Marie Yasin, Associate Professor of Classics and Art History at the University of Southern California, specializes in Roman and late antique art and architecture. Her book Saints and Church Spaces in the Late Antique Mediterranean: Architecture, Cult, and Community (Cambridge, 2009) examines the social, political, and commemorative dimensions of early
Contributing Authors

Christian churches and saints' shrines. Her current work explores various aspects of the materiality and temporality of Roman and early Christian buildings, examining the shifting meanings of ancient structures as they are used, appropriated, altered, and/or forgotten over time.
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Although the coeditors have long been interested in the reciprocity of space, experience, ritual, and architecture, the idea for collaborating on this volume emerged from a session we organized for the annual meeting of the College Art Association in 2005 entitled “Ritual and Sacred Space in Pre-Modern Architecture.” A second colloquium held at the annual meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America in 2006, “Circular Space and Performance,” was also important to the formation of ideas presented here. We are grateful to the participants in these colloquia, Lisa Victoria Ciresi, Meredith Cohen, Mary Hollinshead, Vasileios Marinis, Margaret Miles, and Caroline K. Quenemoen at CAA, and Chrysanthos Kannelopoulos, Charalambas Kritsas, Rush Rehm, Peter Schultz, and Bronwen Wickkiser at the AIA, for generously sharing their ideas. While we have an interest in premodern sacred architecture generally, this volume focuses on the architecture of several historical religious traditions centered in the eastern Mediterranean.

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

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Preface

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

The issues we address are basic to the discussion of sanctity and sacred ritual. How did a place or space become sacred? What or who were the active agents involved in the process of sanctification? How does the idea of inviolability become manifest in the built environment? By what process of invention and response do architects and patrons develop
architectural forms and craft spaces that meet ritual needs? How does architectural form shape ritual actions? How does it define them?

We contend that in premodern historical societies the architectural setting was an active agent in the ritual process; architecture did not simply house or frame events, it magnified and elevated them and it could also interact with them and engender the construction of ceremonial. In this volume, we hope to reassert the connection of ritual in architecture through close archaeological and architectural analysis of particular places and buildings. Each brings its constellation of questions; collectively, they may serve as building blocks to larger theoretical concerns.

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

Notes
2. For domestic, see Parker Pearson and Richards 1994; civic, Goldhill and Osborne 1999; for studies characterizing scholarship of the 1990s, note Schechner 1993, Ahlbäck 1993; for later work see Elsner, this volume. For pilgrimage, Eade and
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4. See Jones 2000 for an exploration of the sacred in architecture, although as intrinsic to the architecture and not in active relation to ritual practice.

Works Cited