“Pervasive Aniconism: A Cognitive Approach to Elagabal’s Sacred Stone of Emesa”

Alex Hodge

20153839

Word Count: 24996

MRes Archaeology

University of Nottingham

September 2023

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors, Dr Andreas Kropp and Dr Matt Thompson, for their guidance and support throughout my studies, and for their enthusiasm and receptiveness to my methodological approach. I am grateful to Midlands4Cities for enabling me to undertake this project. I would also like to thank my friends and family for regularly checking in on me and "my rock" and for providing persistent rock jokes, numerous renditions of Elagabal's name, and frequent photos of conical rocks (claiming to have found Elagabal).

I. Introduction

1.1 Elagabal's Sacred Stone

There was no actual man-made statue of the god, the sort Greeks and Romans put up; but there was an enormous stone, rounded at the base and coming to a point on the top, conical in shape and black. This stone is worshipped as though it were sent from heaven; on it there are some small projecting pieces and markings that are pointed out, which the people would like to believe are a rough picture of the sun, because this is how they see them.[1]

Throughout the course of history, various religious communities have honoured and worshipped stones, a practise known as litholatry. One notable instance is the cult of Elagabal, the local supreme deity of Emesa (on the banks of the Orontes, Syria – now overbuilt by modern-day Homs), who was worshipped in the form of a large black conical stone. Documenting contemporary events from his lifetime, the historian Herodian describes the stone (above). Elagabal's monumental temple was visited from afar, and worship of the god is attested throughout the Roman Empire.[2] Evidence records Elagabal's worship from the first to the mid third century AD, but it is likely that Elagabal was worshipped much earlier and that his cult may have similarly outlived the evidence for some time. Elagabal's Aramaic name 'LH'GBL (El-Gabal), which translates as 'God Mountain,' is variously transcribed in Greek and Latin as Elagabalus, Aelagabalus, Helagabalus and Heliogabalus.[3] This local mountain god may have undergone a process of solarisation; by the Roman period at the very least, in and outside of Emesa, Elagabal was conceived of as a sun god.[4] This study aims to enhance our understanding of Elagabal's sacred stone, using **cognitive** methodologies to examine the relationship between the god, Elagabal, and his cult object. It challenges the notion the non-figural cult objects are primitive, underdeveloped modes of divine representation, arguing that Elagabal's stone was a complex, highly effective vehicle for communicating and creating meanings about the god, his nature, and **agency**.

[1] Hdn. 5.3.5.
[2] Hdn. 5.3.4. Virtually no trace of the monumental Emesene temple (Avienus, *Descripto orbis terrae*, 1083-90) survives. On the temple: Abdulkarim, 1997: 83; King, 2002; Young, 2003.
[3] Icks, 2008: 32.
[4] *Ibid.*; Seyrig, 1971.

The cult of Elagabal was for most of its history focused on the city of Emesa, but it saw a drastic change of fortunes with the accession of the emperor Elagabalus (r. 218-222).[5] At fourteen years old, Varius Avitus Bassianus, a member of the local Emesene dynasty and *sacerdos* of Elagabal, was proclaimed emperor by nearby troops.[6] He travelled to Rome, bringing with him the sacred stone, and attempted to instate Elagabal – presented as imperial *comes* (companion) and *conservator* (protector) – at the head of the Roman pantheon, in place of Jupiter Optimus Maximus.[7] This imposition engendered massive resistance and resentment, ultimately contributing to the emperor's demise.[8] After Elagabalus' *damnatio memoriae*, the stone likely returned to Emesa; evidence for the cult only briefly resurges on coins of the Emesene usurper, Uranius Antoninus.[9] To avoid confusion between the god and the emperor named after him, this study will address the deity as Elagabal and the emperor as Elagabalus.

Previous scholarship has predominantly explored the political significance of the Emesene deity during Elagabalus' reign.[10] The overwhelmingly negative attitudes towards the emperor presented by our sources have skewed our understanding of the cult in general.[11] Predominantly, Elagabal's cult has been considered as a supernatural legitimator for Elagabalus' reign.[12] The cult also had a significant political dimension at Emesa, probably from as early as the days of the Emesene royal dynasty of the first c. BC/AD.[13] However, studies into the religious life of the cult are limited. At the very least, the emperor's antics testify to the religious fanaticism with which the young *sacerdos* venerated his god.[14]

[5] We should be wary of overestimating Elagabal's significance before 218 (Icks, 2008: 35).
[6] The emperor's precise nomenclature is speculative (Icks, 2008: 49).
[7] Halsberghe, 1972: 72.
[8] Manders, 2005: 123; Stewart, 2008: 300. Some have erroneously viewed the cult as a form of monotheism (e.g., Halsberghe, 1972), but this notion is disproved by a vast array of sources (literary and material) that attest Elagabal alongside other deities (Icks, 2008: 84; 2009: 112).
[9] This does not necessarily mean that worship completely ceased; it may have been a formal response to Elagabalus' *damnatio memoriae* (Icks, 2009).
[10] Halsberghe, 1972: 45.
[11] Scholarly bias in portrayals of the emperor: Icks, 2008.
[12] Elsner, 2007: 227; Icks, 2008: 128.
[13] 4.2. The priesthood may have been hereditary to the dynasty (Icks, 2008: 35), but this is not certain. It seems logical that the ruling house would assume the priesthood in light of their people's affinity to Elagabal (Heliod. *Aeth.* 10.41.4; Kropp, 2021b).
[14] Icks, 2008.

In addition to the tendentious nature of our sources, a significant hurdle to our understanding of the cult's religious dimension is the sheer fragmentary and limited extent of ancient evidence at our disposal (as is generally the case for the Roman Near East). All this makes it virtually impossible to gauge a coherent impression of the cult and its rituals, especially from the perspective of worshippers.[15] The literary evidence is almost exclusively Roman senatorial class; the lack of any reliable mythological narratives (if they existed) and ritual knowledge that may have informed the worship deeply impedes any significant study of the cult.[16] Furthermore, we must acknowledge the possibility that Elagbal's cult at Rome (and the deity itself) may have differed from its Syrian cult centre, and the problems that *interpetatio Romana* may pose for our interpretation of the sources (especially, the Roman period material).[17]

But that is not to say that any study into the cult is doomed from the outset.[18] In the absence of evidence for mythological narratives, dogmas or ideologies from which cult beliefs may be reconstructed, it is productive to construe the cult not as a static entity, but in terms of shifting ideas, people, and beliefs, facilitated by the enigmatic cult symbols.[19] The symbol that dominates the cult's iconographic index, remaining remarkably consistent throughout the empire, is the cult object: the aforementioned 'stone' which, although lost to us today, survives in the historical record. Although Elagabalus' religious reforms are covered by Dio (contemporary) and the contentious author(s) of the *Historia Augusta* (probably late 4th century, using Dio and Herodian as sources), the only literary source to describe the cult object in detail is Herodian (c. 175-255), a contemporary of Elagabalus.[20] Again, the hostility of all three literary portrayals of the emperor must be emphasised.

Although Herodian, of Syrian origin, describes the stone sceptically, his description is verified by the rich numismatic repertoire. Coins offer intimate glimpses into the collective values

[15] *Ibid.,* 38.
[16] Nor should we look to 'infer' dogma/mythological narratives from other 'similar' contemporary cults, as Halsberghe (1972) attempts.
[17] Kaizer, 2013. The extent to which the Roman and Emesene cult should be regarded as distinct is debated (De Arrizabalaga, 2004a: 188).
[18] Contrary to Dirven (2013).
[19] Similar to Beck's (2006) approach to Mithraism.
[20] Dio and the *Historia Augusta*'s silence further implies that the cult object itself was not offensive or differentiated from **anthropomorphic** statues.

and ideologies of the minting communities.[21] Elagabal's stone appears on both civic coinage (of Emesa and other provincial cities) and imperial coinage (of Rome). Additionally, coins represent the wider environments that the cult object was physically embedded within in antiquity. The earliest Emesene issues, dating to the reign of Antoninus Pius (r. 138-161), portray an eagle holding a wreath in its beak, stood atop of a sacred stone which is sometimes decorated with a crescent and/or star(s) (figs 1-2).[22] Possible markings and projections like those described by Herodian may be visible on some specimens. Minted alongside types portraying the radiate bust of Helios (fig 3), these attest to the local importance accorded to the sun god early on.[23] As a symbol that appears on coins of other imperial family members, the small star on the reverse of many of Elagabalus' coins may indicate the emperor's divine connection or status; by similar logic, the astral symbols that sometimes appear on the stone may abstractly represent certain aspects of the divinity or its supreme status – at the very least, they mark the stone as sacred.[24] Emesene issues also portray similar depictions under Caracalla (r. 198-217) and Elagabalus; from these periods, representations of the stone housed in its temple begin to emerge (fig 4).

Imperial issues from Elagabalus' reign portray the stone in a quadriga, sometimes in conjunction with a sacrificial scene carried out by the emperor who is modelled as *sacerdos* in oriental priestly garb (figs 5-7).[25] The quadriga is a common motif of Elagabal's iconography.[26] During Elagabalus' reign, several other cities also minted coins of the sacred stone in a quadriga (e.g., fig 8) and paid homage to Elagabal in various dedications (however, this cannot certify that the cult was introduced in these cities).[27] Sol was also represented on imperial coinage, but was not explicitly equated with Elagabal (fig 9).[28] The final issues to represent the stone are Emesene, occurring under Uranius Antoninus. These include images of the stone in its temple (fig 10), in a quadriga, and a curious unique type which may depict

[21] Kaizer, 2006: 45.
[22] RPC IV.3 5782-5785; 6968-6969; 8999; 9000-9001; 9811; 10198.
[23] RPC IV.3 5786; 8555; 8609; 8996-8997.
[24] Icks, 2009: 106; Manders, 2005: 135; Seyrig, 1971: 354.
[25] RIC IV Elagabalus 61-62; 64-65; 143-144. Woytek, 2019.
[26] 3.1.
[27] Icks, 2009. Cities: Hierapolis-Castabala, Anazarbos, Laodicea ad Mare, Aelia Capitolina, Neapolis, Alexandria. RPC VI 7277; 7472; 8143-8144; 8915-8916; 9036-9039; 9071-9072; 10079; 10119; 30441. For extensive discussion: Bricault, 2012; Icks, 2009.
[28] Icks, 2009: 105. RIC IV Elagabalus 17; 28; 37-41; 63; 289; 300-303; 318-320.

the stone clothed or enthroned (fig 11).[29] Various coins depict the cult object flanked by unusual parasol-like items which are absent from non-numismatic evidence (figs 5; 6; 10; 11), but are nowadays often interpreted as a type of cult standard.[30]

Outside of the literary and numismatic evidence, portrayals of the sacred stone are few. A small limestone stele found approximately 80km south-east of Emesa depicts the god Arsu (left) in figural form, and an eagle with spread wings atop Elagabal's sacred stone (or mountain) (right) (fig 12).[31] A Palmyrene Aramaic inscription identifies the deities as 'RSW and 'LH'GBL. In this relief, the stone appears unusually composed of interlocking spherical lumps. Unfortunately, this relief remains in a private collection and is only known from an out-dated, low-resolution image which leaves much to be desired.

A small Corinthian capital (figs 13a-c), likely from Elagabal's Palatine temple, represents the sacred stone atop a draped platform with the eagle in front (the eagle and stone are composite).[32] The stone is flanked and caressed by two female deities on plinths (the left is identified as Minerva/Athena by the *aegis* and crest; the right is too badly damaged to identify certainly, but is likely Urania/Venus).[33] Further to the right, Victoria sacrifices a bull. Tellus reclines to the front of the scene, an infant on her right leg.

Another plausible representation of the stone is a small bronze statuette, found in southeast Turkey and from a private collection, of an eagle perched on a hemispherical object inscribed as 'Helios' in Greek (fig 14).[34] The statuette bears extraordinary resemblance to numismatic depictions of Elagabal's stone (figs 1-2), and the inscription accounts for the item's solar quality. Although not portraying the sacred stone itself, other cult-related evidence includes epigraphic dedications to the god and numismatic representations of its (Roman and Emesene) altars and temples.

From the evidence, we can infer that Emesa's sacred stone was black and conical in shape, possibly basalt or of meteoric origin, and unworked with natural irregularities that may have

[29] RPC IX 1926-1928; 1940-1943. Thrones for **aniconic** objects: 2.3.
[30] Icks, 2008: 42. Further discussion: Rowan, 2006.
[31] Starcky, 1975-6.
[32] On the capital: De Arrizabalaga, 2003-2004. On the Roman temple(s): De Arrizabalaga and de la Fuente Marcos, 2005.
[33] Icks, 2008: 38.
[34] Augé and Bellefonds, 1986: 706.

suggested astral images.[35] Its size is uncertain: although Herodian emphasises the stone's enormous size, it remained transportable by chariot (in coins depicting the stone's procession, it appears roughly half the size of the horses pulling the quadriga – although the accuracy of small-scale coin depictions is debateable).[36] Although it has been suggested that an eagle was worked onto the object, the bird fluctuates between perching atop and in front of the betyl, and could be represented without the stone (fig 15).[37] Additionally, Herodian (possibly an eye-witness) does not refer to the sacred bird, insisting that the stone was unworked and traces of astral (not avian) symbols were discerned by its worshippers. Nor does Herodian mention the bird in his description of the procession that is probably represented on imperial coinage (figs 5-7).[38] Thus, the eagle and betyl seem to have been composite. Although the eagle may have had a physical basis (e.g., as a decorative coverlet or independent statue), it is more tempting to interpret the bird as an abstract symbol from the stone's iconography.[39] A medallion portraying the Elagabalium in Rome shows eagle statues adorning the monumental entrance; eagles seem a common cultic motif (fig 16).[40]

1.2 Aniconism

Cult images operate as intermediary entities through which the human and divine worlds can communicate. By *representing* divinities, cult statues and objects make the divine tangible; they give the immaterial a material substance; they are *loci* for engagement with, or access points to, that which is perceived as 'other.'[41] However, the precise nature of the relationship between deity, material and worshipper seems to have varied cross-culturally (possibly even among individual worshippers). Were the statues *the* divinities themselves? Did ancient worshippers believe that the images were 'alive'? Did they represent a certain aspect of the divinity? How, and to what extent, did such objects transgress their physicality to the extent that they could embody the divine in various ways? Questions about the

[35] Bricault, 2012: 84.
[36] Hdn. 5.3.5.
[37] RPC VI 8353-8357; IX 1864-1903.
[38] Hdn. 5.6.7.
[39] Bellemare, 1996: 290; Bricault, 2012: 84. The eagle's symbolic meaning: 4.4.
[40] Woytek, 2019: 209.
[41] Gaifman, 2012: 305; Hundley, 2015: Kindt, 2012: 43; 206; Luchesi, 2020; Pirenne-Delforge, 2010: 122; Stewart, 2008: 297.

precise character of a statue or object's **agency** must be considered locally, investigating specific representations and their worshipping communities.[42]

In all cases, cult monuments are liminal, navigating the boundaries of the gods' inherent paradox – their absence and presence – by toying with the threshold between abstraction and concretisation.[43] For now, it is sufficient to recognise that cult images (including cult statues, objects and lesser symbols) are '**indexes of divine presence**': '**indexes**' are material forms which prompt responses, interpretations or inferences; **divine indexes** indicate the presence of a supernatural power to varying degrees.[44]

Divine indexes make use of different visual modes of representation, ranging from naturalistic figural sculptures to abstract symbols and forms. Modern scholarship often refers to sacred stones as 'betyls.' Betyls such as Elagabal's stone were **aniconic** cult objects. It is vital for any study hinging on non-figural images to address the ambiguous and complicated term, '**aniconic**.' Stereotypes often characterised the ancient Near East by the veneration of **aniconic** objects – from betyls to fixed landscape features or empty thrones.[45] Although this stereotype originated in antiquity, it formed part of a larger rhetorical discourse and did not reflect religious actualities.[46] In reality, assumptions about aniconism being a common Near Eastern phenomenon are problematic because they erroneously imply that Near Eastern religion can be viewed as a cohesive entity (in the same way that one can speak of Greco-Roman religion); that figural forms were rejected; and that all non-figural objects of worship should be treated homogeneously.[47]

Aniconism is an umbrella term, appropriated by modern scholars to encompass a vast range of phenomena.[48] By default, aniconism implies negation of an 'iconic' norm.[49] It carries with it the weight of ancient *and* modern problematic assumptions that **aniconic** representations were used by barbaric, primitive peoples on the margins of 'civilisation'; contrastingly,

[42] Gaifman, 2012: 308.
[43] Bonnet *et al.,* 2022: 1; Doak, 2015: 24; Gaifman, 2012: 8; Meskell, 2004: 250.
[44] Gaifman, 2017: 338; Gell, 1998: 13-16; 26; Van Eck, 2010: 645.
[45] Azzopardi, 2017: 69; Gaifman, 2012: 26; Maiden, 114; Stewart, 2008: 311.
[46] Gaifman, 2008; 2012: 115. Especially, Clem. Al. *Protr.* 4.40; Hdt. 1.131; Maximus of Tyre. *Or.* 2.8; Sil. *Pun.* 3.30.
[47] Erwins and Williams Reed, 2022; Kaizer, 2008.
[48] Gaifman, 2017.
[49] Aktor, 2020; Doak, 2015: 28; Gaifman, 2008: 39; 2012: 1.

iconism becomes the implied civilised, progressive standard.[50] Nor can a clear chronological development from **aniconic** to iconic modes of representation be discerned.[51] In both ancient and modern religions, **aniconic** and iconic representations could – and often did – exist alongside one another and the range of monuments that might be termed '**aniconic**' vary dramatically.[52]

'**Aniconic**' phenomena can be divided into instances of: a) 'aniconism', taken to denote a program or ideology about visual representations of the divine (i.e., Christian iconoclasm); and b) 'aniconicity', which refers to non-figural material representations.[53] This study focuses on 'aniconicity.' Even so, the scope of 'aniconicity' is huge: it is best regarded as a spectrum, not as binary opposition between figural and non-figural forms.[54] Nor should this spectrum be envisioned as a straightforward continuum between two opposing poles.[55] The breadth of phenomena that can be accounted for in terms of their aniconicity are virtually limitless – including divine symbols; theriomorphic or semi-figural forms such as *herms*; empty thrones which imply the presence of (figural) divinities; and venerated immoveable natural features like rivers and trees. The boundary between iconic and **aniconic** is further blurred by the human tendency to project certain anthropopathic behaviours and **anthropomorphic** likenesses onto non-**anthropomorphic** objects.[56]

In its breadth and fluidity, aniconism defies precise definition. Although various definitions have been proposed, none are quite so wide-ranging, yet specific enough to prove satisfactory.[57] However, we should not dismiss the term completely; frequent use of '**aniconic**' in scholarship (even outside of classics and archaeology) implies that *we*, as contemporary outsiders, distinguish between figural and non-figural modes of representation.[58] Additionally, the term invokes more nuanced interpretations of certain monuments, going *beyond* an object's pragmatic and aesthetic qualities.[59] Broadly, this

[50] Gaifman, 2012.
[51] Azzopardi, 2017: 3; Doak, 2015: 70.
[52] Gaifman, 2008; Stewart, 2008: 297.
[53] Aktor, 2020: 99; Gaifman, 2017: 342.
[54] *Ibid*.
[55] Doak, 2015: 98. Aktor (2017) attempts to outline a spectrum, but still this spectrum is not exhaustive, better demonstrating the theoretical difficulties faced in attempting to classify such a diverse phenomenon.
[56] 3. Aktor, 2020: 506; Maiden, 2020: 117; Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015: 51; Stewart, 2008.
[57] See Gaifman, 2008; 2017.
[58] Gaifman, 2012: 5.
[59] Doak, 2015: 21.

study will modify (in italics) Gaifman's (2017: 338) definition of '**aniconic**' to describe 'a physical object, monument, image or visual scheme that denotes the presence of a divine power *to human **agents*** without an *explicitly **anthropomorphic** (or theriomorphic)* representation of the deity (or deities) involved.'[60] This definition draws attention to the fact that all **divine indexes** should be understood as **matter** that is *experienced* in a causal relationship between humans and materials: human imagination shapes and/or marks them as sacred; correspondingly, divine images become models that shape human imaginations.[61] Thus, they are defined largely by their place in wider socio-cultural frameworks.[62]

Similar problems are posed by the term 'betyl.' Derived from the semitic *byt-'l* ('house of god') with the Greek *baitylos* denoting a certain animated stones with supernatural powers (not necessarily an object of worship), the term was appropriated by modern scholars to describe a non-figural cult object (often sacred stones).[63] Likewise, 'betyl' implies a general phenomenon when the ancient reality was much more locally varied – especially in the Near East.[64] Betyls could be shaped differently; they could take various sizes; be composed of different materials; be worked or unworked; fixed into the ground or freestanding…[65] Betyls, like **aniconic** cult objects generally, invite consideration at the microscale.

The challenge, then, is to attempt to reconstruct the significance of objects from the perspective of their worshipping communities.[66] The obvious difficulty behind this task is that, despite certain rituals and practices leaving material traces, belief and experience are rarely accounted for in the archaeological record.[67] This undertaking is further hampered by our modern inability to empathise with ancient worshipping communities, the term 'aniconism' in itself emphasising that – in many cases – we do not understand how and why **aniconic** representations were preferred over fully-figural statues as **indexes of divine presence**. Perhaps this indifference has arisen from western perceptions of a divide between secular (aesthetic) and religious responses to art. This divide likely emerged as a result of

[60] Gaifman's vague usage of the term 'figural' has been problematised (Aktor, 2020: 99; Johnston, 2017: 446).
[61] Mylonopoulos, 2010: 18; Van Eck, 2010.
[62] Doak, 2015: 30.
[63] On the term: Gaifman, 2008.
[64] Gaifman, 2008: 44.
[65] Azzopardi, 2017: 8.
[66] Gaifman, 2017: 340.
[67] Kielt Costello, 2021: 18.

Christian polemics against **aniconic** cults (and idolatry, generally), and is a divide that we should endeavour to collapse.[68]

The sheer number of '**aniconic**' phenomena attested in different cultures throughout human history is ample evidence that non-**anthropomorphic** objects can be effective '**indexes of divine presence**.' Elagabal's betyl alone was worshipped for at least two centuries and was the primary manifestation of Emesa's supreme deity; records of the monumental temple at Emesa as a pilgrimage location also suggest the potency of the Emesene cult object.[69] Modern misconceptions, discomfort and fascinations about **aniconic** monuments necessitate enquiries into their cross-cultural persistence and prevalence. Various explanations have been proposed, most of which speculatively attempt to identify the 'value' and 'purpose' behind this representative mode.[70] Although a major pitfall of these studies seems to be assuming that communities in themselves were conscious of a divide between **aniconic** and figural cult objects (implying that certain representative means were *preferred* or *more effective* in different situations), these enquiries remain productive in that they aim to combat contemporary western misconceptions about certain ancient material forms. Suggestions include that **aniconic** monuments evoke specific aspects and knowledge in ways that fully-figural forms cannot; or that their appeal lies in their portrayal of divinities as other-than-human, evoking questions of absence and presence in ways less subtle than their **anthropomorphic** counterparts.[71] Others propose that specific (rare) aesthetic/material properties, in association with their prehistories and locations, may make certain objects more effective mediums for communicating with the divine.[72] Relatedly, their very peculiarity and uniqueness may be the source of their effectiveness, in contrast to cult statues which *can* be aptly typified.[73] Venerated natural landscape features and luminaries such as the sun, rivers and trees might offer more direct and authentic access to the gods.[74] Others stress that the embeddedness of objects and images in certain *experienced* situations, actions and movements might enable objects to transgress their materiality by

[68] Azzopardi, 2017: 4; Doak, 2015: 33; 98; Freedberg, 1989; Platt, 2011: 81. E.g., Clem. Al. *Protr.* 4.
[69] Freedberg, 1989: 99. Admittedly, there are other reasons for undertaking pilgrimages.
[70] E.g., Doak, 2015.
[71] Aktor, 2020: 103; Doak, 2015: 39.
[72] Aktor, 2020: 104; Gaifman, 2012: 30; Stewart, 2007: 158; 2008: 310.
[73] Stewart, 2007: 166.
[74] Aktor, 2020: 103.

provoking responses that are not based upon aesthetic qualities.[75] Additionally, we must acknowledge that practical, economic and political factors and artistic trends may motivate certain choices.[76] Although insightful, the applicability of these suggestions to **aniconic** objects varies locally.

This study questions the relationship between the divine Elagabal and the **matter** within which the god was physically manifested (the betyl). How and why might the sacred stone be a particularly efficacious '**index**' for this particular 'divine presence'? What was the source and nature of its **agency**?

An extended interpretation of '**materiality**' offers effective means for exploring such questions. In recent years, the notion of '**materiality**' has been broadened to *go beyond* mere physical substance – that which may be called ***matter***.[77] Instead, **materiality** is defined as 'all forms of **matter** that **agents** relate to.'[78] So-called '**materiality**' approaches do not exclude an object/environment's physical qualities, but stress human engagement with materials.[79] **Matter** is both shaped and made meaningful by human interactions; respectively, humans are shaped by their engagements with material environments.[80] This approach to '**materiality**' is **cognitive** in the sense that it acknowledges that images have both physical (i.e., tangible) and psychological basis, and endeavours to examine the relationship between the mental and material (thus it also offers effective means for exploring notions of 'immateriality' – e.g., transient beings such as gods).[81] Importantly, it is the mental aspect of **materiality** that assigns *meaning* to **matter**, often in accordance with wider socio-cultural frameworks, and it is through *meaning* that objects can be used by the body; correspondingly, the mind is organised by mental schemes of images.[82] '**Materialisation**' is the active process by which humans invest objects with meaning.[83]

[75] Platt, 2011: 82; Van Eck, 2010: 650.
[76] Doak, 2015: 135-8.
[77] Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015: 3.
[78] Arroyo-Kalin, 2004: 73.
[79] Renfrew *et al.*, 2004: 2.
[80] *Ibid*.
[81] Doak, 2015: 23; Freedberg, 1989: 188; Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015: 4.
[82] Knapett, 2004: 43; Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015.
[83] Scarre, 2004: 141.

Materials are experienced in context, and the uses, meanings, symbolism and associations of objects are many, varying contextually.[84]

Some delimitations are in order. As the extended notion of '**materiality**' demonstrates, **matter** is defined contextually and by its relation to human **agents**. Therefore, a rigid distinction between an object's context and its physical form cannot be upheld. Various actions (e.g., rituals), apparatus (e.g., garments) and environments (e.g., temples) were integral to shaping perceptions of Emesa's stone.[85] These cannot be omitted completely, but the scope of this study does not allow for treatment of each of these factors in their own right (nor does the evidence allow for them to be determined in detail). Primarily, this study focuses on the form of the sacred stone itself – i.e., its shape *and* material – asking how and why this stone might be a particularly efficacious '**index**' for this particular '**divine presence'**, and what the source and nature of its **agency** may have been.[86] Contextual factors shall be considered as secondary 'qualifying elements' – insomuch as they enhance interpretations of the stone itself.[87] After all, any object can theoretically be ritually appropriated, but – as we shall come to see – not every object can mediate divine presence as effectively.

1.3 Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR)

There are several reasons why a '**cognitive** approach' is appropriate to this subject. Firstly, the **cognitive** sciences offer an effective means for exploring the relationship between **matter** and human **agents**. **Cognitive** approaches are also interested in cross-cultural and recurrent patterns of human behaviour (especially in the religious domain), positing that our understanding of macroscale phenomena might be enhanced by understanding the microscale **processes** (of individual mental systems) that react to and inform them.[88] This is particularly relevant to a study of aniconism; in themselves, the terms 'aniconism' and '**aniconic**' draw attention to certain (albeit often highly heterogeneous) universal patterns that occur in various communities throughout human history: tendencies to physically

[84] DeMarrais, 2004: 13; Meskell, 2004: 249.
[85] DeMarrais, 2004: 13; Mohr, 2020: 130. The importance of cultic contexts to **aniconic** (and figural) cult objects: notably, Brøns, 2022; Gaifman, 2012: 135-6; Platt, 2011: 77; Stewart, 2007: 165; 2008: 309.
[86] Aktor, 2017: 508.
[87] Azzopardi, 2017: 6-7.
[88] Maiden, 2020: 2; 138; Upal, 2023: 82.

represent divinities through non-**anthropomorphic** modes of representation. Even outside of religion, art historians have long been confused by the human propensity to treat and respond to inanimate artworks and objects as though they were human-like **agents**.[89] Such phenomena seem to defy rational explanation. But their cross-cultural pervasiveness throughout human history might suggest that they occur as a result of certain psychological **mechanisms**.

The **Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR)** is predicated on the assumption that the mind is not a *tabula rasa*, but comprises various **cognitive** information-processing **mechanisms** in the nervous system that were favoured by natural selection because of their evolutionary advantages – ranging from encouraging social coalitions to detecting threats.[90] Evolution does not create specific behaviours, but creates the **cognitive mechanisms** and systems that make humans behave in certain ways; both 'religious' and 'secular' areas of human thought and behaviour involve the same **cognitive processes** and **mechanisms**.[91] Supernatural concepts and thoughts are ***by-products*** of these **cognitive mechanisms** and **processes**.[92] Because of the exceptionally slow rate of evolution, the **cognitive mechanisms** and **processes** that informed ancient thoughts and behaviours remain much the same as today.[93] Because various **cognitive mechanisms** and systems shape and constrain our thoughts and behaviours, religious thoughts and concepts often follow predictable patterns cross-culturally, and a deeper understanding of the mental **processes** that informed ancient societies remains accessible to us today.[94]

Although **CSR** has been criticised for reductionism in that it seems to reduce large-scale religious phenomena to the operations of individual mental **processes**, such criticisms are misled: although **CSR** stresses the psychological foundations of cultural facts, it does not claim that cultural facts are *only* psychological foundations.[95] Modern **cognitive** studies aim to collapse the traditional mind/brain tautology and mind/body dichotomy.[96] They

[89] Freedberg, 1989; Van Eck, 2010; 2014.
[90] Beck, 2006: 91; McCauley, 2020: 112.
[91] Boyer, 2001: 268; Guthrie, 2015: 288.
[92] Boyer, 2001; Van Slyke, 2011.
[93] Beck, 2006: 90; Maiden, 2020: 3.
[94] Larson, 2016: 3; Van Slyke, 2011: 15.
[95] Whitehouse, 2004: 3.
[96] Malafouris, 2004: 57; Van Eyghen, 2015; Van Slyke, 2011.

emphasise that the brain, body and physical environment are interrelated to such an extent that it is difficult to definitively distinguish between individual minds and their wider contexts: **cognition** is performed throughout the body, and is intrinsically intertwined with the wider environment (the physical environment *and* the socio-cultural environments that are formed from interactions with other human **agents**).[97] Simplified, minds are 'absorbed *in*' rather than 'detached *from*' the world.[98] **Cognition** cannot be reduced to an isolated part, but is embedded, enacted, extended and embodied in the body and in wider socio-cultural and physical environments.[99] Religious concepts are supernatural concepts that *matter* because of the value assigned to them by communities.[100]

CSR works from the premises that all perception is ambiguous; to make sense of the world around us, perception must involve interpretation, and interpretations are carried out in line with different mental models, known as **schemata**.[101] **Schemata** are patterns of thought or behaviour that organise categories of information and their relationships to one another. They are mental concepts that are used to interpret and form expectations about 'things' generally.[102] Nor are **schemata** fixed or definitively-bounded models. They can be modified by experience. Nevertheless, they become more stabilised referents the more they are experienced.[103] Perception is informed from the **bottom-up** (by which **cognitive processes** form representations based on sensory information in the physical world) and the **top-down** (by which perception broadly occurs in culturally-specific patterns and forms).[104] Thus, the **bottom-up** perceptions of individual minds can inform wider socio-cultural systems when they are **transmitted** beyond the individual; dually, socio-cultural systems inform perceptions of certain environmental stimuli (including objects and **agents**). Thus, **CSR** predominantly views religion as a **schema** by which humans interpret and attempt to influence the world; religions are symbolic systems that provide models *of* and *for* the world.[105]

[97] Koch and Williams, 2020: 7; Patzelt, 2021: 107; Van Slyke, 2011: 69.
[98] Malafouris, 2004: 54.
[99] McCauley, 2020: 110.
[100] Boyer, 2001: 155.
[101] Guthrie, 1995, 43; 2015: 298; Guthrie and Porubanova, 2023: 102.
[102] McIntosh, 1995.
[103] *Ibid*.
[104] Koch and Williams, 2020: 1; Sperber, 1994: 40.
[105] Beck, 2006: 67-9; Geertz, 1966; Guthrie, 1995: 178; McIntosh, 1995.

Another relevant, inter-related sub-discipline is **cognitive archaeology (CA)**. Although the **cognitive** realm is admittedly difficult to access archaeologically, **CA** stresses the importance of **cognition** as the locus of the culture(s) that archaeologists endeavour to uncover.[106] **CA** utilises the extended notion of '**materiality**', seeking to overcome the mind/**matter** dichotomy by emphasising that human engagement with materials mediates between **matter** and the mental.[107] Material forms are understood to influence **cultural memories**, values and systems *as much as* their properties are themselves shaped by human **agents**.[108] **CA** emphasises that although religion is a fundamentally *mental* phenomenon (as stressed by **CSR**), it retains a material basis, and that this material basis is integrally related to the success and survival of religions.[109] **Cognitive** interpretations of the material evidence can help archaeologists make sense of patterns (and the cultural systems that arose from/produced them) that may initially seem perplexing, especially in the absence of literary evidence.[110] Its interdisciplinary approach has important implications for studies of the ancient Near East which are hampered by the lack of literary sources. Certain material forms enhance the capabilities and dispositions of ordinary **cognition**, contributing to adaptive success as much as the mental **mechanisms** themselves.[111] Thus, the distinction between inner mental **processes** and outer material environments becomes increasingly blurred.

CSR emerged in the 1990s and underwent rapid growth.[112] Like most disciplines, **cognitive** methodologies have limitations. Neither **CSR** nor **CA** claim to be interpretative *or* to reconstruct the past (although they can be interpretative in certain contexts); predominantly, they are explanatory tools, aiming to enhance our understanding of ancient religious representations and combat imbalances in disciplines previously favouring the interpretative.[113] Concerns about reductionism already have been levelled. **CSR** is inherently multidisciplinary, involving fields such as anthropology, psychology and neuroscience.[114] Perhaps the major pitfall of **CSR** is that its main theories are yet to be integrated into a

[106] Kielt Costello, 2021: 22.
[107] Malafouris, 2004: 53; Renfrew, 2004: 23.
[108] Nũno *et al.,* 2021: 24.
[109] Day, 2004: 116; Koch and Williams, 2020: 9.
[110] Johnson, 2004: 64.
[111] Day, 2004.
[112] A useful overview of **CSR**: Barrett, 2007. **CSR** has yielded insight into diverse aspects of ancient religion – particularly, Larson (2016), Maiden (2020) and Mackey (2022).
[113] Beck, 2006: 88; McCauley and Lawson, 2007: 1.
[114] Maiden, 2020: 2.

unified blueprint, rendering it less easily accessible.[115] Nevertheless, this shortcoming is also the source of its merits: drawing from a wide range of other disciplines, new and productive theories continue to be generated. This study forms part of a larger discourse which aims to unify and reconcile approaches taken by different (inter-related yet highly disparate) disciplines – even proposing new theories – to better our understanding of the relationship between the divinity, Elagabal, and the god's primary '**index of divine presence**' (the betyl). Using **cognitive** methodologies, the study aims to enhance our understanding of human engagement with Elagabal's **aniconic** cult object and the ways that it functioned in antiquity.

Chapter two explores the cultural **transmission** of the sacred stone, proposing that **aniconic** cult objects are effective and pervasive because of how they are **transmitted** among individual minds. Chapters three and four discuss the source and nature of the stone and god's **agency**. In chapter three, it is argued that **cognitive** methodology reconciles some of the perceived differences between **anthropomorphic** cult statues and **aniconic** cult objects, and that Elagabal's sacred stone effectively embodied an **anthropomorphic** social **agent**. Chapter four explores some of the more nuanced semiotic meanings evoked and created by the stone, arguing that certain material and visual properties of the stone marked it an efficient vehicle for communicating and creating the **cultural memories** of a highly dynamic and developing social group. Although the heterogeneity of **aniconic** cult objects and images is acknowledged, the hopes are that this case study may prove insightful into cross-examinations of **aniconic** monuments more widely.

[115] Willard and Norenzayan, 2013: 379.

II. The Cultural Transmission of Elagabal's Aniconic Stone

2.1. Cultural Transmission

Attested from the first to the mid third century AD, but likely worshipped for longer than the evidence certifies, Elagabal's **aniconic** stone outlived generations and was **transmitted** throughout the empire.[116] Universally, the wide **transmission** of **aniconic** cult objects is undeniable; popular modern examples include the Kaaba's stone and the Shiva Linga. Although admittedly broad in scope, this chapter is intended to deepen our understanding of **aniconic** cult objects by demonstrating that – much like **anthropomorphic** statues – they have certain mnemonic advantages that enable them to them to **transmit** information effectively.

Cognitive scientists believe that certain **cognitive processes** and **mechanisms** have evolved to enhance sociality because of the adaptative advantages of coalitions; to aid this, humans have evolved **cognitive mechanisms** which enable cultures to be constructed.[117] Additionally, certain **cognitive mechanisms** prime humans to build supernatural and religious representations.[118] From the **bottom-up,** the creation of religious representations involves the **Agency Detection Device (ADD)**. The **ADD** is the aspect of **cognition** which detects **agents** in the environment. Because it is more advantageous to over-detect than to under-detect predatory threats, the **ADD** is prone to over-detecting **agents** where **agency** is either ambiguous or non-existent; it is a ***Hypersensitive* Agency Detection Device (HADD)**.[119] In religion, multiple evolutionary **cognitive biases** converge, rendering religions – to an extent – 'natural' **by-products** of different components of our mental machinery.[120] In their very nature, religions are the product of individual representations (deriving from evolutionary **cognitive biases** such as **HADD**) that have been **transmitted** and stabilised *beyond the individual* to form coherent systems. These coherent systems (which we might call religious cultures) are stabilised enough that they persist even in the absence of

[116] Elagabal's origins in the distant past: 4.4-5.
[117] Spolsky, 2004: 14.
[118] Beck, 2006: 89.
[119] Barrett, 2007: 773; Boyer, 2001: 165; Van Eyghen, 2015: 307.
[120] Boyer, 2001: 369.

detectable supernatural **agents** (or the activation of **HADD**).[121] However, religions exist only because they are anchored in the minds of individuals.[122] Religious communities are better considered as multiple individual minds that share relatively common religious beliefs and behaviours.[123] Thus, we must study *how* such representations are **transmitted** and stabilised amongst individual minds so much so that they become 'religions.'[124]

Culture has been defined as 'the memory of a society that is not genetically **transmitted**.'[125] Memory operates both individually (involving the neuro-mental system) and collectively. Culture has a collective context; it involves social interactions.[126] Correspondingly, it has been recognised that humans construct both '**mental representations**' *and* '**public representations**' which interact and reinforce each other to produce stable and shared group concepts.[127] Instead of being genetically **transmitted**, cultures utilise external symbols.[128] These symbols (e.g., images, built environments, verbal word, written texts) are '**public representations**': representations that are external to the inner workings of the mind (and can therefore be perceived by other **agents**), yet remain defined by their relationship to accompanying *meaningful* '**mental representations**.'[129] Although '**public representations**' are multipurpose, they facilitate the spread of similar **mental representations** amongst individuals.[130] But not all '**public representations**' are equally successful **transmitters** of information and not all '**mental representations**' are equally as **transmittable**.[131] Cultures change and religions dissipate when they are less frequently **transmitted**.[132] Widespread cultural forms and concepts prove that they are cognitively *optimal* to acquire and **transmit**; that is *why* they are widespread.[133] Human memory (individual *and* collective) is limited, and certain psychological and ecological factors (including a **mental representation**'s relevance

[121] *Ibid.,* 169.
[122] Beck, 2006: 94.
[123] Martin, 2015: 3.
[124] *Ibid*.
[125] A. Assmann, 2010: 97.
[126] J. Assmann, 2010: 109. **Cultural memory**: 4.2.
[127] Maiden, 2020: 138; Sperber, 1994: 55; 2000b: 3.
[128] A. Assmann, 2010: 97; Earle, 2004: 153.
[129] Beck, 2006: 9; McCauley and Lawson, 2007: 2.
[130] Day, 2004: 116; Sperber, 1994: 54. They are, in a sense, 'tools' analogous to external prosthetic devices that enable the mind to carry out higher level tasks (McCauley and Lawson, 2007: 6).
[131] Boyer, 2001; Maiden, 2020: 135; Sperber, 1994: 54.
[132] McCauley and Lawson, 2007: 1.
[133] Boyer, 2001: 5.

to the immediate environment) affect the chances of information being distributed so widely that it becomes stabilised in culture.[134] Innumerable concepts compete to be remembered; thus, religious concepts must have certain memorability and **transmission** advantages.[135]

Following this, **CA** stresses that material cultures are not mere remnants of past communities, but important mnemonic devices that actively helped anchor certain cultural concepts (especially, religious ones) into human minds.[136] In this light, cult statues and objects are recognised as the '**public representations**' of (fundamentally mental) supernatural beings that are **transmitted** beyond the mind of the individual; they are tangible extensions of minds that help anchor similar mental constructs in larger communities.[137] In this sense, the very existence of a religion legitimates its symbolic system. The pervasiveness of **aniconic objects** cross-culturally (much like **anthropomorphic** cult statues) is confirmation enough that they had certain mnemonic advantages, allowing **mental representations** (of the deity whose presence they suggested) to be shared by the group. Of course, cult images were not the only **public representations** that **transmitted** religious knowledge and memories among communities: other examples include verbal communication, written language (e.g., doctrines), other aspects of material culture (e.g., the cultic environment), and actions (e.g., ritual practice).[138] But, as the primary '**indexes of divine presence**' in a cult, **aniconic** objects were integral **transmitters** of religious knowledge. Their role is more crucial in cults lacking specific doctrines from which information was communicated; although the paucity of evidence means we cannot be sure whether Elagabal's cult comprised an explicit doctrine, the absence of evidence and scarcity of written theological texts in Near Eastern religions (especially, compared to the numerous portrayals of the stone which mark it as a key component of cultic identity) suggests the importance of the betyl in **transmitting** cultic information. To an extent then, the popularity

[134] A. Assmann, 2010: 97; Sperber, 1994: 55. Ecological attractors: 4.3-5.
[135] Upal, 2023: 83.
[136] Day, 2004: 116; McCauley and Lawson, 2004: 2.
[137] Day, 2004: 117; DeMarrais, 2004: 11.
[138] Nuño *et al.,* 2021: 13.

of Elagabal's cult can be explained by means of its strategy of **transmission**, rather than its cultic content (of which we know little).[139]

The process of **transmission** deserves further attention. **Mental representations** cannot be merely 'copied and pasted' from one mind to another. During **transmission**, information is not merely replicated; it is *re*-produced (and thus modified and transformed by individual minds).[140] Additionally, concepts (individual and collective) are not fixed, but are continuously reorganised and remodified according to the individual's present context.[141] The variants of religion are as plentiful as the individuals who have religious **mental representations**. **Cognitive** science explores the ways by which information is stabilised during **transmission** to the point that large-scale cultural systems are formed.[142] **Cognitive** scientists posit that evolutionary **cognitive biases** and **constraints** increase the likelihood that certain concepts will be individually re-produced in similar ways.[143] Cultural representations achieve relatively stable and similar forms because **cognitive biases** and **constraints** (alongside other ecological factors) push **mental representations** towards '**attractor positions**.'[144] Therefore, individuals' re-production of certain cultural concepts tend to gravitate in similar directions. On the macroscale, this creates largely stabilised cultures.[145] On the microscale, this creates variants of religious concepts that are meaningful to the individual. '**Attractor positions**' (sometimes known as '**cultural attractors**') also underly the fact that many different religions share largely similar concepts.[146]

Examples of '**cultural attractors**' are broad – ranging from rounded numbers to happy endings.[147] The more '**attractor positions**' that a representation adheres to, the more '**cognitively optimal**' it is (in discussing **cognitive** optimality, one should envision a spectrum ranging from costly to optimal representations).[148] Not only will the representation be less effortful to re-produce, but it will be more likely to be re-produced similarly amongst

[139] Maiden, 2020: 134. Martin (2015: 40) argues similarly for Mithraism.
[140] Boyer, 2001: 37; Claidière and Sperber, 2007; Martin, 2015: 95; Sperber, 2000a; 2012.
[141] Assmann, 2012: 27; Claidière and Sperber, 2007: 92.
[142] Boyer, 2001: 43; Martin, 2015: 96; Claidière and Sperber, 2007.
[143] Boyer, 2001: 343.
[144] Maiden, 2020: 138.
[145] Claidière and Sperber, 2007: 105.
[146] Boyer, 2001: 33.
[147] Sperber, 2012.
[148] Maiden, 2020: 11.

individuals. Therefore, it will likelier become widespread because **attractor positions** will make it easier to generate, communicate, sustain, and **transmit**. Broadly, this chapter discusses some of the **attractor positions** that made Elagabal's sacred stone (and **aniconic** cult objects generally) cognitively optimal. It hopes to demonstrate that, upon one level, the pervasiveness of **aniconic** cult objects can be explained by their gravitation towards certain **attractor positions**. Because of **certain cognitive biases** and **constraints**, concepts and representations are often constructed in the same way; thus, although certain cross-cultural influences may have contributed to the spread of **aniconic** cult objects, their adherence with certain universal **cognitive biases** underlies much of their prevalence. Simplified, it is argued that the human mind is inclined to produce and re-produce certain **aniconic** representations.

2.2 Minimally Counterintuitive Concepts (MCIs)

Religions frequently **involve minimally counterintuitive concepts (MCIs)**.[149] **Minimal counterintuitiveness** is a **cultural attractor**.[150] At an early age, all humans recognise that aspects of the material world belong to one of five **intuitive** ontological categories: animal, person, plant, natural object or artefact/tool.[151] By attaching an ontological category to a form, we are able to **intuitively** form various expectations about it. Supernatural concepts (including religious ones) violate ontological categories by breaching the category completely or by assigning concepts attributes from another category.[152] However, supernatural representations never contain so many counter-intuitive properties that they become unmemorable. By violating an ontological category only *minimally* (hence, **MCI**), cultural **transmission** of these representations and beliefs is optimised because our minds fill the blanks with **intuitive** ontological expectations.[153] Moreover, ontological violations make **MCIs** highly memorable: memory, because of its limited capacity, does not preserve fact *per*

[149] **MCIs**: Boyer, 2001. Religious concepts can also be maximally counterintuitive, but these usually rely on **transmission** through institutional aids such as texts and rituals (Maiden, 2020: 16; Whitehouse, 2004: 223-4).
[150] Sperber, 1994: 55; 2012.
[151] Mackey, 2022: 320; Maiden, 2020: 139.
[152] Maiden, 2020: 140.
[153] Boyer, 2001: 86; Van Slyke, 2011: 37.

se, but chooses certain remarkable aspects from which pre-known information can be added to, forgetting everything else.[154]

MCIs are cognitively optimal because they involve basic **intuitive** expectations and inferences.[155] **Intuitive cognitive processes** are less costly than **reflective cognitive processes** because they are fast, automatic, implicit and unconscious (**reflective processing** uses more **cognitive** resources because it is conscious, slower and more controlled).[156] Individuals re-produce **MCIs** by following the same formula (i.e., *Supernatural concept = ontological domain + counterintuitive feature(s)*).[157] This accounts for their relative stability in **transmission**. Thus, **MCIs** are memorable and salient because they confound our **intuitive** expectations, but never to the extent that we cannot make inferences about them; they finely balance being both striking *and* familiar.[158]

Not all cultic iconography or concepts must be **MCIs**.[159] Nevertheless, like the deities themselves, cult statues and objects *are* **MCIs**.[160] The specific ontology of Elagabal's stone is uncertain. **MCIs** may not be visible archaeologically; certain counterintuitive features may have been revealed by text or within rituals.[161] Additionally, the main ontological domain of a concept can very contextually.[162] Therefore, although the sources make clear that Elagabal's cult object was a stone (i.e., a 'natural object'), it is plausible that the betyl was ontologically an 'artefact/tool' because of its religious/ritual appropriation as a mediator of divine presence. It is almost certain that the ontological breach occurred with a transferral of attributes from the 'person' category.[163] This is typical for cult statues and objects which were often said to speak, sweat, and even weep.[164] Regardless, no single formula can be applied to all cult images whose **agency** was manifold. Ancient references to *baityloi* as stones with various supernatural properties (from protective to oracular powers) emphasise that – above all – ancient betyls were 'not-merely-[*ontological domain*]' (rather than

[154] Olick, 2010: 185.
[155] Maiden, 2020: 11.
[156] *Ibid.,* 6-8; Oviedo, 2015: 33.
[157] Maiden, 2020: 144.
[158] *Ibid.,* 13.
[159] Johnson, 2004: 61.
[160] Deities as MCIs: 3.3.
[161] Maiden, 2020: 168.
[162] Boyer, 2001: 116.
[163] 3.3.
[164] E.g., August. *De civ. D.* 3.11; Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 8.56.2-3; Lucian *Syr. D.* 36.

'[*ontological domain*]+[*specific counterintuitive property*]').[165] It must suffice to say that cult objects were 'other-than-[*ontological domain*]'; their ontological breach is always implied, but rarely explicit. It is likely that worshippers themselves were only aware of the fact that cult objects breached **intuitive** expectations, accounting for their elusive and heterogeneous **agency** in different accounts and cultures.

As **MCIs**, all '**divine indexes**' pertain to a powerful '**cultural attractor**', contributing to their memorability and **transmission**. This seems an important factor in their widespread surfacing across different cultures. However, **aniconic** cult objects diverge from **anthropomorphic** idols in their non-figural form. This might make them more potent and memorable **MCIs**: as **indexes** of deities who (as this study will demonstrate) are always **anthropomorphic**, they are more radically counterintuitive, yet remain **minimally counterintuitive** enough that they can be successfully **transmitted**.

2.3 Symmetry

Because aniconism is a broad and hazy term that defies much definition, previous studies have concluded that there is no single attribute or characteristic that can be applied (thus, used to interpret) the whole body of evidence.[166] Nevertheless, there are indications that some objects were more venerable than others, and studies have often noted that similar 'categories' of **aniconic** cult objects share many features.[167] For some **aniconic** objects, sacredness seems to have been inherent in their natural qualities – often, rare or precious materials – but other venerated objects (including unwrought rocks and simple stelae) were more humble.[168] Contrary to previous scholarship, I have identified that all **aniconic** cult objects *do* share a single visual quality: symmetry. Symmetry also frequently appears in other cultural symbols, ranging from Christian icons to country flags. I argue that symmetry contributes to their cross-cultural pervasiveness.

[165] Dam. *Isid.* 138; Philo. *PH.* fr. 2c.23; Plin. *HN.* 37.135; Gaifman, 2008.
[166] Aktor, 2017: 505; 2020: 100; Doak, 2015: 83; Gaifman, 2017: 349.
[167] Gaifman, 2012: 30. E.g., stelae are often free-standing with an upright shape (Gaifman, 2012: 181).
[168] Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015: 12.

Aniconic indexes of divine presence can include immoveable natural landscape features such as mountains, trees, rivers, and luminaries. The veneration of these does seem tied to their inherent natural qualities and locations within sacred landscapes, rather than their specific shape (which lies predominantly outside of human control).[169] Outside of this distinction, **aniconic** objects might be classed as artefacts (objects made or shaped by humans) or manuports (natural objects that remain unworked but are relocated by humans).[170] Artefacts and manuports are united by human movement and/or relocation. Despite being worked to varying degrees, artefacts and manuports frequently share similar visual characteristics. They are almost always geometrical (composed of regular lines and shapes): stones are often ovular, conical or pyramidal; stelae are oblong or resemble cuboids; even venerated cultic symbols such as thunderbolts (fig 17) and sun-discs (fig 18) are geometrical. Not only are **aniconic** manuports and artefacts geometrical, but specifically they almost *always* have at least one axis of symmetry.

Recording the symmetry in every known **aniconic** divine representation falls well beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, some salient examples shall prove the point.

Semi-figural 'Tanit figures' on early Carthaginian stelae, often trapezoidal/triangular bodies with circular 'heads', are bilaterally symmetrical (fig 19). Even contentious examples of 'empty space aniconism' such as the rock-cut seats of Zeus and Hekate at Chalke are symmetrical: two identical concavities have been hollowed into the stone (fig 20). The black stone of Aphrodite at Paphos, although not symmetrical in a rigid geometrical sense, has a vague symmetrical shape (fig 21). As we will see, it is particularly revealing that – even if the stone did not conform to strict symmetry – coin depictions and descriptions of the betyl represent it as a symmetrical conical object (fig 22).[171]

The ancient Near East offers numerous examples of symmetrical **aniconic** divine monuments. From semi-figural Nabataean eye-idols (fig 23) to the sun-disc used to represent Shamash in the absence of his **anthropomorphic** cult statue (fig 18), a propensity towards symmetrical forms is undeniable. Symmetry is even a defining feature of

[169] Suggested by Lucian (*Syr. D.* 34.21).
[170] Aktor, 2020: 506.
[171] Tac. *Hist.* 2.3. RPC I 3906; 3921-3922; 3924; 3926; 3934; II 1802-1803; 1806-1807; 1809; 1811; 1814-1816; 1819; 1821; 1824-1825; III 3409-3411.

anthropomorphic deities rendered in the art of Palmyra.[172] Those cases of betyls and other **aniconic** objects no longer extant today are especially revealing, portraying the object as it was mass represented – and probably, usually mentally represented.[173] An enigmatic betyl of Gennaios described by Damascius was the embodiment of symmetry, expressed as a 'perfect sphere.'[174] Coins represent the cult statue of Astarte in Sidon as a spherical object. This betyl was likely enthroned and transported in a cart during a ceremonial procession (fig 24a-b).[175] Coin types of Bostra feature an open-air sanctuary in which three betyls sit on a raised base (fig 25).[176] The entire scene conforms to a single vertical axis of symmetry.

These examples demonstrate that, in cases where an **aniconic** object's sacredness is not predominantly determined by its raw, inherent, natural properties, **aniconic** cult objects are usually highly symmetrical – or are *represented* symmetrically, both in literary and material testimonies. Even irregular natural landscape features are often regularly and symmetrically *represented* (fig 26). The betyl of Elagabal is no exception. In the stele (our most detailed representation of the betyl), the conical stone is broadly symmetrical. If the unusual, rounded convexities on the betyl in the stele (fig 12) do not present it as strictly symmetrical, it is telling that all other known visual representations of the object portray the conical stone as bilaterally symmetrical.[177]

These observations are not intended to suggest that human **agents** consciously prefer to worship regular and symmetrical objects: if a conscious decision, some indication of this preference would likely survive in the historical record; indeed, it would be verifiable today as symmetrical objects are venerated in modern-day religions, including Islam and branches of Hinduism.[178] Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that other unconscious factors are at play and that certain cultural trends might be shaped by **cognitive** factors.[179] I argue that symmetry is a powerful (religious *and* secular) **cultural attractor**. Empirical studies have

[172] Drijvers, 1990.
[173] Individual variation is acknowledged. ***Decoupled cognition*** will be discussed further in the following paragraphs.
[174] Dam. *Isid.* 138.
[175] RPC III 3870-3872; 3875; 3877; VI 8375; 8383-8385; 8397; 8403-8413; 8440; 8445; 8449-8450; 8456; 8459; 8461-8463; 8498; 8508-8509; 8514-8516; 8518; 8523-8525; 8533; 8541-8542; 8546; 8566-8571.
[176] RPC VI 9327; 9331-9334; IX 2209; 2211-2212.
[177] 1.1.
[178] On the Hindu *pañcāyatanapūjā*: Aktor, 2017.
[179] Miton *et al.,* 2020: 1.

demonstrated that multiple factors contribute to human preference for symmetry. Symmetrical shapes and objects are more cognitively manageable to perceive and remember than asymmetric forms.[180] The ease with which our brains process symmetrical objects contributes to aesthetic pleasure.[181] Symmetry is advantageous, reducing the amount of information we must collect and store internally, expending less **cognitive** resources and memory.[182] If the overall presence of symmetry is detected, the brain automatically fills in the blanks, making inferences and often distorting the form to represent it as more regular than it actually is.[183] These 'systematic distortions' might account for discrepancies in the evidence – for example, in various representations of Elagabal's betyl. If Herodian is correct in emphasising the 'unwrought' nature of the stone, the betyl will have had visual imperfections and irregularities (as it does on the stele, fig 12).[184] Nevertheless, other representations portray a betyl that is symmetrically proportionate and strikingly regular in shape. 'Systematic distortions' of our visual **cognitive** systems may underly these discrepancies, not necessarily implying a change in the prototype.[185] Material images are not necessarily the same as mental images.[186] The betyl's conical shape will have facilitated the brain's detection of overall symmetry (rather than asymmetry), thus **cognitive** representations of the betyl are highly symmetrical. Additionally, social materials – such as coins – play a dual role in memory, reinforcing certain representations due to their widespread availability.[187] Our **cognition** does not only represent and interpret its immediate environment, but also forms representations based on descriptions/stimuli provided by other people: it can be ***decoupled*** from immediate sensory input (this is known as **decoupled cognition**).[188] Deriving from descriptive media (oral and material), individual **cognitive** representations of Elagabal's cult image are likelier to be symmetrical, especially among those who have not closely seen the original. This same phenomenon can be

[180] Huang *et al.,* 2020.
[181] *Ibid*.
[182] Freyd and Tversky, 1984: 110.
[183] *Ibid*. The study also concludes that if the overall presence of asymmetry is detected, systematic distortions will often create memories/perceptions of a shape that is more irregular than the reality.
[184] Hdn. 5.3.5.
[185] Previously, these discrepancies have puzzled scholars. Starcky (1975-6: 504) has suggested that the differences may have arisen as a result of the god's transition from mountain to solar deity, but the relief (although our oldest portrayal of the deity) does not drastically predate the later evidence.
[186] Maiden, 2020: 169.
[187] Olick, 2010: 156.
[188] Boyer, 2001: 147; Day, 2004: 111.

perceived widely in representations of **aniconic** cult monuments – particularly the Paphian betyl of Aphrodite and its portrayal in coins. If the numismatic evidence especially offers insight into widespread **mental representations** of Elagabal's cult object (in Emesa and throughout the empire, even among individuals who never saw the betyl), the fact that the stone is no longer extant becomes a secondary – minimal, even – concern.[189]

Discussing the merits of iconic and aniconic representative modes, Stewart has proposed that **anthropomorphic** cult statues are more reproducible because certain aspects of their iconography enhances their recognisability.[190] But distinctiveness is not synonymous with memorability. If anything, **aniconic** cult images seem more reproducible (cognitively and materially) precisely because their overall symmetry results in widespread **cognitive** distortions that makes them easier to retain in memory and to **transmit**, contributing to their persistence across diverse cultures. Symmetry is a widespread **cultural attractor** that allows representations of **aniconic** cult objects to be produced, encoded, and **transmitted** abstractly and economically. This does not discount or contradict that other factors (e.g., artistic trends, reproductions and cross-cultural influences) may also be at work; on the contrary, **cognitive** and additional factors might be said to influence one another.[191]

Cult objects are '**public representations**' whose alignment with certain **cognitive** '**attractors**' aids their widespread **transmission** amongst groups. The widespread **transmission** of **aniconic** cult objects can, upon one level, be explained by their adherence to different **cultural attractors** or manipulation of **cultural attractors** in different ways than **anthropomorphic** statuary. Symmetry and **minimal counterintuitiveness** are notable (but by no means exhaustive) **cultural attractors** that assisted cult objects' **transmission** so much so that they came to form integral components of stable religious systems. Although this chapter has emphasised human universals, it is hoped that a deeper recognition of the **cognitive mechanisms** underlying **aniconic** cult images may help to dissolve modern

[189] Imperial portraiture is a useful analogy: it rendered the emperor visible to those who would never see him; visual motifs made him identifiable and recognisable without necessarily being naturalistic (Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015: 25; Stewart, 2007: 169).
[190] Stewart, 2008: 301.
[191] Miton *et al.,* 2020: 13.

misunderstanding and denigration of **aniconic** worship.[192] However, '**public representations**' are only meaningful because of their association with **mental representations**.[193] They are mnemonic aids which help cultures to conceptualise the world in similar ways and thus are closely tied to social identities.[194] '**Public representations**' are not just 'media of **transmission**', but are also 'media of thought.'[195] The subsequent chapters explore the type of information **transmitted** and communicated by Elagabal's sacred stone, further questioning the nature of the relationship between the material betyl and **mental representations** of Elagabal.

[192] 1.2.
[193] McCauley and Lawson, 2007: 3.
[194] Upal, 2023: 90.
[195] Day, 2004: 117.

III. The Anthropomorphism of Aniconic Objects

3.1 Betyls as Charioteers

The chariot was drawn by a team of six large, pure white horses which had been decorated with lots of gold and ornamented discs. No human person ever sat in the chariot or held the reins, which were fastened to the god as though he were driving himself. Antoninus ran along in front of the chariot, but facing backwards as he ran looking at the god and holding the bridles of the horses.[196]

Herodian's account of a midsummer procession hosted in Rome during 218-222 AD, in which the betyl was transported between Elagabal's urban and suburban temples, is doubtlessly one of the more curious attestations to the cult. How should this strange scene of the betyl appearing to drive itself be interpreted? Like most of our sources, Herodian exudes hostility to the emperor – and by association, his patron deity – and the historian's penchant for dramatic narrative must be borne in mind.[197] It might be tempting to dismiss this account as purely fictive were it not for civic and imperial numismatic depictions of remarkably similar scenes wherein the betyl (often associated with an eagle and flanked by parasol-like items) sits aloft a quadriga (figs 5; 7; 8). Numismatic surveys suggest that these types commemorated a special event – namely, the midsummer procession described by Herodian (however, some civic types *might* represent Elagabalus' journey from Emesa to Rome with the betyl).[198] There are certain discrepancies between the numismatic and written evidence: the emperor's sacrificial garb is not the *chiton* and crown described by Herodian (5.3.6) *and* the chariot is almost always depicted as a quadriga rather than six horses. The dress may be a Roman adjustment or innovation.[199] Previously, the four horses have been viewed as a numismatic abbreviation because of the limited space on coins.[200] However, the cultic importance of the quadriga is emphasised by a newly discovered medallion which clearly shows the Elagabalium decorated by statue groups of quadrigas on the monumental entrance to the precinct and probably also on the temple roof (fig 16).[201] Additionally, Elagabalus' taste for four-horse chariots is elsewhere

[196] Hdn. 5.6.6-7.
[197] Icks, 2008: 21.
[198] Bricault, 2012; Rowan, 2006: 117.
[199] Icks, 2008: 109.
[200] Rowan, 2006: 116.
[201] Woytek, 2019.

recorded.[202] Although Herodian's description contains some semblance of truth, it is unlikely that he was an eyewitness to the events (as some speculate).[203]

Herodian sceptically alludes to the emperor's deceptive commandeering of the vehicle.[204] However, this should not discount the possibility that – to many – the god may have been perceived to actively drive the quadriga. The emperor never holds the chariot's reigns in the numismatic imagery (figs 5-8), rarely appearing in the scene at all. The coin images seem intended to convey the **agency** of the betyl itself.[205] The historical record is pervaded by countless testimonies to the **agency** exerted by images.[206] One only has to look to the likes of Damascius or Lucian to find parallels in the Roman Near East.[207] Betyls are described as stones 'with life in them.'[208] Although Herodian manipulates eastern stereotypes to denigrate Elagabalus, stereotypes derive from and inform popular behaviour.[209] In itself, Herodian's account implies underlying beliefs about the animacy of images.

The ritual significance of this procession is unclear.[210] Parallels with other Near Eastern cults – notably, the Sidonian civic symbol of Astarte's betyl in a cart, also minted during Elagabalus' reign (fig 24a) – could suggest that ritual movement was incorporated into the Emesene cult.[211] Perhaps more temptingly, the procession should be interpreted as a Roman innovation. Representations of the scene appear only on coins under Elagabalus and solely on Emesene coins under Uranius Antoninus, suggesting that the Roman practice was transferred back to Emesa with the stone after Elagabalus' deposal. The procession of a cult statue could have epiphanic, transportation or installation purposes; these are not mutually exclusive.[212] The procession might be interpreted as a ritual legitimation of Elagabalus' transferral of the sacred stone to Rome.[213] However, this should not discount that the procession marked the betyl as

[202] SHA *Heliogab.* 27.
[203] E.g., Bellemare, 1996: 289.
[204] Stewart, 2008: 299.
[205] *Ibid.,* 303.
[206] Freedberg, 1989.
[207] Dam. *Isid.* 138.; Lucian *Syr. D.* 36.
[208] Philo. *PH.* fr. 2c.23.
[209] Freedberg, 1989: 314.
[210] Icks, 2008: 78.
[211] 2.3. Other transported cult images (carried by priests): the Roman Magna Mater (Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.19.3-5); the Heliopolitan Apollo (Macrob. *Sat.* 1.23.13).
[212] Beck-Schachter, 2022: 58.
[213] *Ibid.,* 62.

an important religious **agent** regardless. This chapter is less interested in the precise substance of the ritual (rendered largely inaccessible by the lack of evidence). Instead, it is predominantly concerned with the black stone's perceived **agency**, which *can* be studied by virtue of **CSR**. The passage raises important questions regarding perceptions of **aniconic** objects in antiquity. I argue that Elagabal's stone was perceived as an active **agent** – specifically, an **anthropomorphic** social **agent** (despite its minimal resemblance to human form). In this regard, Elagabal's cult image was more similar to 'typical' **anthropomorphic** Greco-Roman cult images than we may anticipate.

3.2 Agency and Cult Images

A recent productive turn in art history has emphasised that objects and images are material **indexes** that can (and often *do*) possess **agency**.[214] The human tendency to talk to, accredit with emotions, and claim movement of statues (treating them not as mere **matter**, but as the beings they *represent*) is central to such claims.[215] **Agency** is a contentious term. Broadly, **agency** can be ascribed to any entity that 'enters into a causal relationship with another.'[216] However, **agency** has been used in a narrower sense to denote 'the capacity to act intentionally.'[217] Dealing with issues of intentional **agency** in cult objects, the latter definition is more productive to this study. However, it is acknowledged that intentional **agency** is always defined within broader causal relationships that can involve both **agents** and **indexes**.[218] Although **agency** *can* encompass traits such as biological animacy, 'intentionality' hinges on goal-directedness (cognitively, this implies a **reflective process** with a degree of conscious deliberation).[219] Therefore, **agency** is more identifiable by behaviour/action than a specific physical form.[220] In this regard, **agency** (as a **cognitive** enterprise) is invisible; we can only ever perceive **agents** or their actions (which can consequently be misidentified).[221] This agential turn runs parallel

[214] Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015: 17; Van Eck, 2010: 645.
[215] Freedberg, 1989; Van Eck, 2010: 643; 2014: 7.
[216] Mendoza-Collazos and Zlatev, 2022: 142.
[217] *Ibid*.
[218] Arroyo-Kalin, 2004: 74.
[219] Mendoza-Collazos and Zlatev, 2022: 142.
[220] Guthrie, 2015: 300.
[221] *Ibid.,* 305.

with a non-aesthetic approach to artwork which is predicated on the recognition that an object/image's aesthetic appeal is often measured by Western beauty standards.[222] Whilst acknowledging that certain hyper-naturalistic techniques can achieve **agency**, it is recognised that these are not the only means by which an image can come to be perceived as an **agent**; likewise, vivid naturalism does not always result in **agency**.[223] It is questioned 'how' and 'why' inanimate materials are seen to 'act' in certain contexts. Although it is widely recognised that objects and images can possess **agency**, the source and nature of this **agency** remains contentious.[224] Nevertheless, most approaches stress the phenomenological relationship between **agents** and **indexes**, in light of their wider environmental/cultural context.[225] Human responses to images and objects as **agents** seem predicated on the recognition that what is *represented* by an image is, in some way or form, present (in the situation or the image itself).[226] Cult statues were partially legitimated by recognition; representation is less about visual likeness and more about enabling **cognitive** recognition.[227] That is to say, the form of the object does not necessarily have to correlate with the form or identity of the god.[228] No representation of a divinity could be an exact likeness because it is *not* the divinity; this is a tension that **aniconic** cult objects seem to acknowledge more overtly than **anthropomorphic** statues, forcing one to question the relationship between divine images and their referents.[229] This is especially notable in instances of empty thrones which anticipatorily prompt responses that are more mental than modelled on anything 'physical.'[230] All sensual perceptions are

[222] Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015: 18. Nor should we completely disregard the aesthetic; the academic separation of 'religious' and 'aesthetic' responses to images has constructed a problematic 'false dichotomy' (Platt, 2011: 82).
[223] Freedberg, 1989; Van Eck, 2010: 645.
[224] Alfred Gell, the pioneer of such approaches, proposed that **agency** derives from the social networks artworks are embedded within; consequently, artworks can have the 'distributed **agency**' of their makers (the artists or gods themselves) (Gell, 1998). Gell's approach, in its renunciation of semiotics and aesthetics, remains too narrow (Gaiger, 2014: 341; Van Eck, 2010; 2014). Others dismiss the phenomenon as 'play-acting'/ 'make-believe' (Brøns, 2022: 26; Gaiger, 2014; Stewart, 2007: 162). Relatedly, many scholars focus on the *representative* techniques that ritually frame the cult image: by representing situations, movements and actions, human-regulated contexts bring life to the images, collapsing the boundary between statue and deity (Doak, 2015: 26; Freedberg, 1989: 31; Platt, 2011: 78; Van Eck, 2010: 655).
[225] Freedberg, 1989; Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015; Van Eck, 2010.
[226] Freedberg, 1989: 30.
[227] Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015: 24; 31; Van Eck, 2014: 13.
[228] Brøns, 2022: 14; Gaifman, 2008: 64.
[229] Benzel, 2015: 162; Gaifman, 2012: 5.
[230] Gaifman, 2012: 165.

culturally defined and encoded to an extent.[231] **Aniconic** cult objects, like **anthropomorphic** statues, had certain visual qualities by which individuals could recognise them as a deity's principal '**index of divine presence**.'[232] By mass-representing the object, coins confirm that Elagabal's stone had recognisable visual qualities (there may be a correlation between recognisability and **cultural attractors**).[233] Therefore, it seems productive to speak of cult images and objects in terms of a conflation between sign and signified.[234] Naming the stone as the god established the connection between sign and signified, but it was through other cultural practices and shared knowledge that a simple stone was ultimately transformed into an important marker of divine presence.[235] Ultimately, **matter** acquired a sort of divine **agency** through this conflation; **materiality** (not mere **matter** itself) defines the bounds of an object/image's **agency**.[236] The source of the animation is the deity who, in some way, is perceived as betwixt the cult object and worshipper.[237] Decoding the **agency** of cult images involves deciphering the relationship between the material **index** itself, the deity, and human **agents**.

This approach is suited to a **cognitive** examination because it stresses the **agency** of images as a human universal, whilst acknowledging that certain socio-cultural frameworks and practices may condition these responses.[238] But wider frameworks are not solely responsible for attributions of **agency**; as we have already seen, **HADD** primes human **cognition** to (over)detect **agents** at the most basic level. Ultimately, however, it is through human intentionality that **matter** acquires its **agency**.[239] **Matter** is shaped by its relationship to **agents**; this observation can be traced to ancient times.[240] Objects and artworks should be construed of not as static objects encoded with meanings, but in performative terms – as objects experienced in wider environmental and socio-cultural settings.[241] Both Elagabal's and the betyl's **agency** was contextually defined by human

[231] Patzelt, 2021: 106.
[232] Aktor, 2020: 100.
[233] Stewart, 2008: 303.
[234] Freedberg, 1989: 32; Meskell, 2004: 250.
[235] Gaifman, 2012: 61; Platt, 2011: 78; Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015: 32.
[236] Freedberg, 1989: 32.
[237] Benzel, 2015: 164; Doak, 2015: 26.
[238] Freedberg, 1989: 22; Maiden, 2020: 121.
[239] Meskell, 2004: 254.
[240] Sen. *Ep.* 65.
[241] Van Eck, 2014: 12.

agents. A closer look into universal **cognitive biases** and patterns can enhance our understanding of Elagabal and the stone's **agency**, and our interpretations of the ancient evidence.

3.3 Religion as Anthropomorphism

Religion is just one way of interpreting the world; it provides a model *of* and *for* the world.[242] More specifically, as propounded by Guthrie (1995), religion is an ***anthropomorphic*** way of interpreting the world. The notion of **anthropomorphism** is extended to mean the attribution of human-like characteristics (be they physical, behavioural, or emotional) *even in the absence of a physical form.*[243] This 'systematic attribution of humanlike **agency** to nonhuman phenomena' is a **by-product** of human perceptual strategies.[244] All perception involves interpretation; interpretation is a basic need, shared by humans and non-human animals alike.[245] In over-detecting **agency** in our external environment (via **HADD**), our perceptual biases are prone to assigning that **agency** **anthropomorphic** likeness. This is because humans are the most powerful/predatory **agents** in the world; it is better to over-detect a more powerful/intelligent **agent** than a lesser one.[246] Additionally, humankind is most familiar to us; it is less cognitively costly to generate inferences about persons than other ontological categories.[247] Thus, religion consists in attributing **anthropomorphic agency** to the environment.[248]

More specifically, religion consists of attributing **anthropomorphic** minds to the world in the forms of supernatural gods and goddesses – i.e., gods and goddesses always have human minds.[249] **Theory of Mind (ToM)** is an aspect of **cognition** that contributes to the human tendency to anthropomorphise.[250] **ToM** comprises of the specialised brain structures that perform the basic social function of inferring and thinking about the

[242] 1.3.
[243] Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015: 36.
[244] Guthrie, 2015: 284.
[245] Guthrie, 1995: 21.
[246] Guthrie, 2015: 287; Guthrie and Porubanova, 2023.
[247] Guthrie, 2015: 298; McCauley and Lawson, 2007: 16.
[248] Guthrie, 1995: 177.
[249] Boyer, 2001: 163.
[250] Shaman *et al.,* 2018: 12.

cognitive processes (e.g. representations/beliefs/intentions/responsiveness) of others (these do not correlate to a single neural structure).[251] **ToM** is not **agency**: **agency** comprises of goal-directed actions *that are produced by internal thoughts, beliefs, emotions and desires*.[252] **ToM** is the aspect of **cognition** that enables us to think about various **agents** and **indexes** (including deities and cult objects) as **intentional agents** that are closely modelled on humans (as opposed to other entities with minds – i.e., animals). **Cognitive** research into **mind-body dualism** has demonstrated that minds are perceived as related to, but separate from bodies.[253] Biological bodies are most important as loci of minds; minds, on the other hand, do not need to be biologically embodied.[254] Therefore, although the physical and biological properties of deities may vary, they *always* have humanlike minds.[255] Evolutionarily, this bias seems to stem from the fact that humans are powerful **agents** *because* they have human minds.[256] Resultingly, deities and **indexes** of their presence largely gain **agency** from being **MCIs.** Ontologically, they are other-than-human, yet they have **anthropomorphic** features – not limited to, but always including humanlike psychological traits such as minds. They either violate the ontological 'person' domain, or contain violations from the 'person' domain; in both cases, they possess humanlike psychological characteristics.[257]

Anthropomorphism is a process that is mostly unconscious and **intuitive**, the **by-product** of various perceptual strategies.[258] The perceptual bias of over-detecting **anthropomorphic agents** can be seen even beyond religion – notably, in art and the attribution of **anthropomorphic agency** to material forms, generally.[259] Neuroimaging studies demonstrate that similar **cognitive processes** occur when other humans and anthropomorphised objects are perceived.[260] Resultingly, people are likelier to form stronger attachments to anthropomorphised objects. Additionally, anthropomorphism

[251] Boyer, 2001: 140; Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015: 51; Willard and Norenzayan, 2013: 381.
[252] Shaman *et al.,* 2018: 2.
[253] *Ibid.,* 9; Willard and Norenzayan, 2013: 380.
[254] Guthrie, 2015: 284.
[255] Boyer, 2001: 163; Guthrie, 2015: 291; Shaman *et al*., 2018: 4.
[256] Guthrie, 2015: 287; Guthrie and Porubanova, 2023: 97.
[257] Maiden, 2020: 15.
[258] Guthrie, 1995: 186.
[259] Guthrie, 2015.
[260] Wan and Chen, 2021.

makes unfamiliar objects easier to comprehend.[261] The sacred stone's **agency** derives from its association with humanlike psychological properties. This does not contradict the fact that Elagabal's cult object had basis as **matter** – i.e., that it was a stone. Rather, a tension between responses to artworks as '**agents**' and as '**matter**' is visible both in the general ancient evidence and Herodian's sceptical account of the stone.[262] Inanimate objects and artefacts are recognised as such, yet appear able to possess the **agency** of living beings.[263] This tension results from **intuitive cognitive processes** that occur simultaneously, but yield different responses to objects.[264] As a mostly **intuitive process**, **anthropomorphism** endows cult objects and statues with humanlike psychologies. But cult statues and objects remain 'artefacts' and/or 'natural objects' of which **intuitive** ontological expectations of (e.g., that they are inanimate) are difficult to overcome.[265] **Reflective cognitive processes** occur simultaneously and can contradict **intuitive processes**.[266] Ancient expressions of these tensions **reflectively** voice the dissonance between the inanimate domain of the object and its intentional properties, both of which are inferred **intuitively**. Probably the underlying knowledge that the image has material basis, and the confluence and contradictory responses of **cognitive** inference systems triggered, contributed to the epiphanic experience of the object.[267] The Roman capital from the Palatine (fig 13) visually expresses the paradox of living statues by representing the goddesses flanking the stone in naturalistic movement, despite their statue-like placement on plinths.[268] By implication, the betyl might also be said to possess lifelike animacy.

The source of the betyl's **anthropomorphism** seems twofold. Firstly, it may partially derive from the betyl's conflation with the divine presence that it signified (of the god, Elagabal). Linguistically, Herodian conflates the betyl with 'the god.'[269] This practice is well attested for **anthropomorphic** statues.[270] Deities always have humanlike minds. Elagabal's implied equivalence with the **anthropomorphic** Sol suggests that the god, Elagabal had

[261] *Ibid.*; Min Lee *et al*.
[262] E.g., '*as though* he were driving himself.' Notably, Lucian *Alex.* 26 (more examples: Stewart, 2007).
[263] Aktor, 2020: 103.
[264] Maiden, 2020: 181.
[265] *Ibid.,* 187.
[266] Willard and Norenzayan, 2013: 380.
[267] Beck-Schachter, 2022: 61.
[268] De Arrizabalaga, 2004b: 233.
[269] Hdn. 5.6.6-7.
[270] Elsner, 2007: 11.

anthropomorphic attributes and characteristics. Sol became prominent on coins under Commodus and the Severans (the Severans may have promoted Sol in tribute to the local Emesene deity).[271] Although never explicitly referred to as Sol Elagabal on imperial coinage, issues depicting Sol continued to be minted under Elagabalus.[272] These issues became more frequent throughout Elagabalus' reign (totalling 17).[273] In these types, Sol is commonly represented striding purposefully, the god's motion emphasised by his billowing cloak (fig 9). This purposeful, goal-directed movement represents intentional **agency** (facilitated by a humanlike mind), conforming with the god's physical **anthropomorphism**. Additionally, the Corinthian capital (probably from the Elagabalium in Rome) suggests Elagabal's association with the Roman Sol. On the grounds of their stylistic similarities, decorative motifs and nearby findspots, the capital has been connected to fragments of other capitals. In sculptural relief, one associated capital portrays a male frontal charioteer driving a horse-drawn chariot towards the viewer (fig 27).[274] Again, the figure's billowing cloak and chariot's speed (insinuated by the horses' legs) implies intentional **anthropomorphic agency**. Despite the missing bust, this figure is identified with Sol (on account of Sol's wider visual motifs and other general trends discernible in Elagabalus' reign) and suggests that Elagabal and Sol were associated even in Elagabal's Palatine temple.[275] Additionally, numerous Emesene issues bearing the **anthropomorphic** radiate bust of Helios (minted contemporaneously to typical renditions of the betyl) imply, at the very least, an association – if not an outright assimilation – between the deities before the cult's official spread to Rome.[276] Under Antoninus Pius, Emesene types of the betyl and Helios are die-linked, suggesting they were issued together, possibly as a pair (figs 1; 3).[277] Regardless, Elagabal's association with Sol (in Rome and Emesa) suggests that Elagabal **possessed** certain **anthropomorphic** mental properties which, by default, the betyl also embodied. The stone's conflation with the **anthropomorphic** Elagabal is indicated by two of the three known sculptural representations of Elagabal. On the capital and stele, the

[271] Manders, 2005: 130. This is paralleled by attestations to a priestly college of *sacerdotes Dei Solis* from this period.
[272] 1.1.
[273] *Ibid*.
[274] De Arrizabalaga, 2003: 120.
[275] De Arrizabalaga, 2004a: 212.
[276] 1.1.
[277] RPC IV.3 6968; 8609.

betyl is situated next to and amidst **anthropomorphic** renditions of deities – in place of, yet presented as equivalent to, an **anthropomorphic** depiction. The stone resides next to Arsu on the stele (fig 12), and amid a narrative scene on the Corinthian capital (fig 13) within which all other divine actors are represented by physical **anthropomorphism.**

Objects cannot be separated from their wider environmental contexts. If, on the one hand, the betyl's **agency** derived from its conflation with the anthropomorphic god, on the other hand, the environment was pivotal in transforming the image into the deity it came to represent.[278] Often, consecratory practices are central in transforming mere material **indexes** into **indexes of divine presence**.[279] Consecratory practices for Elagabal's stone are not attested; they do not seem to have been pivotal in shaping perceptions of the betyl. Nevertheless, certain human practises and the wider environments that the stone was embedded in shaped perceptions of the betyl as an **anthropomorphic agent**. These also influenced **mental representations** regarding the nature and character of Elagabal (the betyl's **cognitive** referent). The scope of this essay does not allow for these to be dwelt upon in detail. It is sufficient to recognise that certain widespread motifs and the material context of an object's encounter may contribute to preconceived notions of an event, triggering error signals that confirm an individual's predetermined expectations of an event (i.e., that the betyl was a material extension of the god and/or that the god/betyl had certain **anthropomorphic** qualities).[280] These factors increased the likelihood that individuals would perceive the cult object as possessing intentional, **anthropomorphic agency**. Elagabal's association with Sol may have contributed to **anthropomorphic** assumptions about the god and its **agency**. It has been noted prior that the betyl could be seen to engage in goal-oriented, humanlike action by 'driving' the quadriga; the physical setting of the quadriga itself may contribute to these inferences.[281] The striking similarity of two imperial aurei (figs 7; 28) (which bear the same obverse legend and were probably issued as a commemorative pair), representing both the emperor and the betyl in a

[278] Freedberg, 1989: 31.
[279] *Ibid.,* 83. This is particularly prevalent in ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian mouth-opening/washing rituals. Consecratory practices in Greece and Rome are suggested (e.g, Min. Fel. *Oct.* 22.5), but rarely explicitly documented (see Pirenne-Delforge, 2010).
[280] Johannsen and Kirsch, 2020: 146.
[281] Hdn. 5.6.6-7.

quadriga, are insightful.[282] It is plausible that the *sacerdos* acted as the god's human surrogate, embodying an aspect of Elagabal's **agency** in a way similar to (although arguably lesser than) the stone itself. The notion of the 'surrogate' (often, a cult priest) is attested in many religious communities – notably the Mithraic *Pater*.[283] At the very least, visual parallels between the betyl and emperor divinely legitimate the emperor, whilst reinforcing **anthropomorphic** expectations of the cult object as an **index** with humanlike capabilities. Additional **anthropomorphic** inferences might be derived from representations of the betyl clothed or enthroned (fig 11), and the actual practices these portrayed.[284] Further implicit deductions about the betyl's **anthropomorphic** sociality are evoked by Elagabal's humanlike marriages to Athena and Urania.[285] The divine marriages may have found their **anthropomorphic** counterpart in Elagabalus' marital unions with Cornelia Paula and the Vestal Virgin, Aquilia Severa.[286] In addition to divinely legitimating the emperor's marriages, human-divine parallels ground the divinity in distinctively human social practises (one recalls the earlier surrogate argument). **Anthropomorphic** assumptions about the god and betyl's humanlike psychological attributes (facilitated by **ToM**) underly their **agency**. More specifically, **anthropomorphic** mental properties allow both the divine **agent** and **index** to exhibit a degree of humanlike *social* **agency**.

3.4 Social Agency

The tendency to anthropomorphise by assigning **ToM** to perceived **agents/agencies** seems socially motivated.[287] The desire to communicate with other-than-human **agents** is central to religious **anthropomorphism**.[288] Social relations are advantageous to humankind: task distribution allows us to maximise our potential, drastically increasing chances of survival.[289]

[282] RIC IV Elagabalus 35c; 61d.
[283] Martin, 2015: 45.
[284] RPC IX 1943. Even if enthroned, the drapery suggests some form of decorative clothing/coverlet. This might represent the eagle; its rough shape *might* be discerned in the gathering of the folds near the stone's base.
[285] Cass. Dio 80.12; Hdn. 5.6.3-5. *SEG IV* 164 and the Roman capital might also corroborate the marriages (Icks, 2008: 39; Seyrig, 1971: 345).
[286] Cass. Dio 80.9; Hdn. 5.6.2; SHA *Heliogab.* 6. Although the sources never explicitly equate the imperial and divine marriages (Icks, 2008: 81).
[287] Boyer, 2001: 26; 31; Guthrie and Porubanova, 2023: 97; Shaman *et al*., 2018: 2.
[288] Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015: 36.
[289] Guthrie and Porubanova, 2023: 101; McCauley, 2020: 114.

Thus, the human mind has evolved to enhance our chances of effectively forming coalitions; this same 'social mind' facilitates interactions with **agents**.[290] Coalitions are predicated on reciprocal altruism; reciprocal altruism seems to have a physiological basis in the brain, evolved to aid co-operation among primitive peoples.[291] **ToM** is one important component of the 'social mind.' By assigning other-than-human **agents** a humanlike mind, **ToM** allows us to infer and think about their mental states. Gods, like humans, have perceptions, memories and intentions.[292] As a result of **intuitive** inferences prompted by gods' **anthropomorphic** psychologies, studies prove that we interact with them using the same **cognitive** inference systems that would be engaged in our interactions with other humans.[293] However, studies show that people *do* differentiate between the mental abilities of deities and humans.[294] Whereas humans have limited access to information, the assumption is that gods have complete access; they know *more,* not better.[295] Consequently, the reciprocal relationship between deities and their worshippers is highly asymmetrical: although worshippers are required to act as promised, the gods are not obligated to grant favours.[296] That this asymmetrical type of relationship was enacted between Elagabal and the god's worshippers is substantiated by the evidence. It is nowadays accepted that the emperor's commitment to Elagabal was genuine; Elagabalus' extreme religious policies testify that at least one religious fanatic 'felt' the effects of Elagabal's **agency** in the environment, probably in response to the various honours and practices that the emperor dedicated to the god.[297] According to the *Historia Augusta*, Aurelian held Elagabal responsible for his victory over Queen Zenobia of Palmyra, personally thanking the god in Elagabal's temple after the battle.[298] Furthermore, Tacitus remarks that it was also customary for the Emesene troops to appeal to the sun for victory in battle.[299] Numerous votives following similar formulae from throughout the Roman empire further confirm the reciprocal nature of the relationship

[290] Boyer, 2001: 143; 171.
[291] *Ibid.,* 138-9; Van Slyke, 2011: 125.
[292] Boyer, 2001: 177.
[293] Guthrie, 2015: 303-4; Nũno, 2021: 21.
[294] Shaman *et al*., 2018: 5.
[295] Boyer, 2001: 178.
[296] Larson, 2016: 43.
[297] Icks, 2008: 51.
[298] SHA *Aurel*. 25.3-4.
[299] Tac. *Hist.* 3.24.

between god and worshippers.[300] Altars and testimonies to rituals testify to worshippers' actions in these relations.[301]

Both religious **anthropomorphism** and object **anthropomorphism** are **by-products** of perceptual **cognitive biases**; similar mental systems are engaged when perceiving both other humans and anthropomorphised objects.[302] Therefore, when inanimate objects are anthropomorphised, they can become partners in social interactions. This has long been recognised as one of the primary functions of **anthropomorphic** idols (material and those involving human actors); in fact, communicative potential seems one of the main reasons we find physical **anthropomorphism** to be so effective and pervasive in religious iconography and ritual.[303] Elsner's widely-accepted theory of the 'reciprocal gaze' (1995; 2007) holds that ritual and religious settings transport the viewer out of their social reality. Resultingly, when the viewer comes face to face with a cult statue, they face the deity.[304] The dual process of 'gazing' is highly reciprocal with both the deity – represented through the cult statue – and the viewer being active participants (i.e., **agents** in this social interaction): the viewer gazes at the deity; simultaneously, the deity looks back at the viewer.[305] Elsner's '**materiality**' approach is reminiscent of **CA**, stressing that an object's meaning derives from its relationship to human **agents** and that certain environments stress different **schemata**: religious and ritual settings prompt inferences about cult images to be drawn from religious **schemata**. From the perspective of art history, gaze is understood as one of the most effective means of attracting and retaining attention.[306] Eyes are often visually emphasised by enlarging or temporarily covering them: 'eye-betyls' (fig 23) provide a striking example of this, and, in certain Hindu practises, **aniconic** objects are decorated with eyes to facilitate contact with

[300] Bricault, 2012: 83. Notably, *AE* (1962) 229; Moussli, 1983: 257, *no.2*; and a lion sculpture dedicated to the god, discovered on Homs' tell (King, 2002: 39).
[301] Second century altar to Elagabal, found on Homs' tell (Moussli, 1983: 257, *no.2*). Herodian (5.5.8) describes the Palatine temple as having 'many altars.' Numismatic representations of altars and sacrifices: figs 5; 6; 16; 29. The capital (fig 13) has been interpreted as a sacrificial narrative scene with Elagabal as the recipient (De Arrizabalaga, 2004b). Cassius Dio (11) and Herodian (5.5.3-4; 5.5.8) record that the cult included rites, although their descriptions are vague and probably inaccurate. Even (likely falsified) accusations of human sacrifice suggests that reciprocal practices were involved in Elagabal's cult (SHA *Heliogab.* 8).
[302] Wan and Chen, 2021: 88.
[303] Aktor, 2020: 104; Doak, 2015: 39; Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015; Stewart, 2007: 162; Van Eck, 2010: 648.
[304] Elsner, 2007, 23.
[305] Platt, 2011: 78.
[306] Freedberg, 1989.

the gods.[307] Brain studies substantiate this claim: the areas of the brain involved in **processing** face-to-face gaze also preside over social interaction and communication, evolved to aid co-operation in primitive societies.[308] Meeting the eyes is associated with successful exchange and aversion with rejection.[309] However, **aniconic** objects (such as Elagabal's betyl) are often characterised by the near absence of obvious figural features. Notwithstanding, I suggest that the 'reciprocal gaze' was a key component of worshippers' interactions with **aniconic** cult objects, allowing the reciprocal relationship between invisible **agent** and their perceived **agency** to be enacted in the physical world of the worshipper's existence. This seems to have been the case in the passage quoted by Herodian (above). Gazing at the deity seems so crucial that the devout emperor ran backward (his route allegedly being lined with sand to prevent injury); we can assume that, in the established visual connection between god and emperor, Elagabal was perceived to 'look back.' This is not the only way that the evidence suggests the importance of viewing the Emesene stone. Public access to a temple's *cella* where the cult object/statue was housed seems to have varied amongst temples.[310] Although coins portray the stone as visible in the colonnaded *pronaos* (fig 4), the stone would have almost certainly resided in the *cella* where doors could have been closed and access controlled, being taken out only on certain religious occasions. Thus, mobile cult objects and images allowed beholders to see the **divine index**, whilst closely controlling the viewing experience.[311] Many rituals also involve ritually covering and revealing the faces of cult statues, powerfully manipulating a worshipper's grounds for social contact with a deity.[312] It is possible that Elagabal's cult involved a similar practice wherein the betyl may have been ritually covered and unveiled by a ceremonial coverlet (fig 11).[313] Additionally, the importance of the divine gaze to reciprocal cultic exchange is suggested by the presence of divine images (as recipients) during sacrificial acts: not only does the sacred stone loom over sacrificial acts carried out by the emperor (figs 5-6), but frontal

[307] Aktor, 2017: 512; Fleming, 2015; Gaifman, 2008: 61; Guthrie, 2015: 299; Luchesi, 2020: 215.
[308] Chernorizov *et al*., 2016: 40; Guthrie and Porubanova, 2023: 104; Miton *et al.,* 2020: 2-3.
[309] Fleming, 2015: 205; 209.
[310] MacMullen, 1981: 44.
[311] Luchesi, 2020: 210.
[312] See especially, Dagan at the *zukru* festival (Fleming, 2015).
[313] RPC IX 1943.

anthropomorphic figures (likely divinities) adorned cultic sacrificial altars (fig 16; 29), observing the rites performed.[314]

Not all objects are anthropomorphised as readily. Research demonstrates that object **anthropomorphism** is closely related to the visual system's detection of certain physical traits, of which eye-like features are merely one (albeit salient) example.[315] Symmetry is another key feature of aniconic objects that offers mnemonic advantages, as discussed in chapter two. We can now specify this symmetry more closely: **aniconic** cult objects are often characterised by a bilateral vertical axis of symmetry, as seen in the examples cited earlier.[316] There are some exceptions (e.g., Damascius' spherical betyl with multiple axes of symmetry), but vertical symmetry is the rule. Additionally, objects usually have some worked indication that they should be perceived bilaterally. This is especially apparent in semi-anthropomorphised pillars and *stelai* (fig 23) which are bilaterally engraved. Even objects separate from the cult object itself, such as the symmetrical throne for the Astarte *betyl* at Sidon (fig 24b), indicate the frontality of aniconic objects.

Cognitive research demonstrates that the human visual system's sensitivity to symmetry can be traced to evolutionary development. From an early age, humans are cognitively primed to search for signs of humanlike **agency** (e.g., faces or human form).[317] Although our visual systems are especially sensitive to eyes, bilateral symmetry is also salient because important natural **agents** (i.e., animals) are often bilaterally symmetrical.[318] Our perceptual systems are especially sensitive to bilateral symmetry when it is detected in conjunction with vertical orientation or a rounded shape.[319] This may underly the frequency of conical cult objects – including Elagabal's stone, but also the Paphian Aphrodite and the stone from Byblos, to name a few (figs 21; 22; 30).[320] Symmetrical axes – especially bilateral axes – help us to determine the proper orientation of an object.[321] Triggering visual inferences about

[314] The coins likely represent two separate altars: three rows of niches (each niche bearing an **anthropomorphic** deity) on the imperial medallion and two on Emesene coinage (Abdulkarim, 1997: 84; Kropp, 2021a: 225; Woytek, 2019: 216).
[315] Kühn *et al*., 2014.
[316] 2.3.
[317] Guthrie, 2015: 294.
[318] McCauley and Lawson, 2007: 12; Miton *et al.,* 2020: 3.
[319] Guthrie, 2015: 300.
[320] Tac. *Hist.* 2.3.
[321] Freyd and Tversky, 1984: 110.

humanlike form automatically activates the **cognitive** systems that are fundamental to **processing** persons and/or social relations.[322] When our brains detect bilateral symmetry (particularly, in human/animal forms), it generates the inference that an object/form is facing us.[323] Resultingly, we can interact with it.[324] Therefore, it seems that, on the **cognitive** level, the same fundamental **processes** are triggered by **aniconic** cult objects as **anthropomorphic** statues. Both were '**public representations**' that aided the enactment of a reciprocal relationship with otherwise unseen **anthropomorphic agents**. Unconsciously, it seems that the very shape of an object may have contributed to its ability to mediate with invisible **agents**. The evolutionary benefits of detecting bilateral symmetry might also partially underly its frequency as a **cultural attractor** (that is especially common in religious **anthropomorphism**). However, it is worth reiterating that various other factors may have influenced the prevalence of bilateral symmetry in cult objects (but do not discount **cognitive** factors) – for example, bilateral proportions enable objects to be vertically free-standing which reduces the need for external presentation aids and may enhance their visibility.

As perceptions of **agency** are activated more by behaviour than specific form, **agency** must be felt to be exerted in the environment to determine the presence of an **agent**.[325] Evidence suggests that Elagabal's **agency** was 'felt' and that the cult object was generally regarded as effective. Cult objects were legitimated more so by the power *of* their **agency** than the mere **agency** itself.[326] Nevertheless, the persistent use of the betyl throughout antiquity attests to its perceived success in maintaining the reciprocal relationship between god (a **decoupled mental representation** whose **agency** was felt to be affected in the wider environment) and worshipper.[327] The **cognitive** approach provides insight into *how* and *why* such material **indexes** functioned in a religious context. It grounds and explains a phenomenon that has been recognised, yet not always comprehensively understood: that **anthropomorphic** form is not a prerequisite to **anthropomorphic agency**, and that defining aniconism in opposition to

[322] Guthrie, 2015: 304.
[323] Boyer, 2001: 151.
[324] Miton *et al.,* 2020: 3.
[325] Guthrie, 2015: 300; Larson, 2016: 198.
[326] Meskell, 2004: 251.
[327] Platt, 2011: 118.

anthropomorphism risks misinterpreting the object completely.[328] Put simply, **aniconic** objects functioned largely in the same ways as **anthropomorphic** cult statues. They were material extensions of **cognitive** intuitions about **agency**, anchored firmly in the environment. Resultingly, they aided the process of **transmitting** similar **mental representations** of divinities among groups of individuals and assisted the enactment of a reciprocal relationship between groups of worshippers and perceived deities. Like the deities they represent, cult objects and statues are counter-intuitive, ***anthropomorphic*** ways of representing **agency** that is perceived in the wider world. Nevertheless, **aniconic** objects should not be too closely conflated with their figural counterparts. We have already touched upon their mnemonic advantages. Unlike figural idols, **aniconic** cult objects have other advantages: they defy definition, flaunting the ineffability of their divine counterparts, transcending the limits of human comprehension in their uniqueness.

[328] Aktor, 2020: 99; Doak, 2015: 98; Erwins and Williams Reed, 2022: 429; Gaifman, 2008: 64; Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015: 120; Stewart, 2008: 297.

IV. Cultural Iconotropy

Chapter one established that **public representations** such as **aniconic** objects are widespread and effective **transmitters** of cultural information because they pertain to certain **cultural attractors**. Despite individual **mental representations** of culture varying, cultural information is stabilised in shared understandings.[329] But stabilisation does not imply stagnancy. The Roman Near East was a melting-pot of cultural influences; resultingly, gods are characteristically allusive, typically lacking written narratives and being continuously reinterpreted and renegotiated with the ongoing interaction of different peoples.[330] Elagabal's cult centre at Emesa is no exception: evidence (notably, grave goods) attests to a multi-faceted culture featuring Hellenistic, Roman and Eastern influences.[331] Probably, the inhabitants of Emesa consisted mostly of different population groups under common leadership.[332] **Materiality** approaches hold that **matter** is *experienced* by human **agents**; thus, it is continuously reinterpreted and redefined.[333] Gods and their material **indexes** must be interpreted in the context that they functioned within; these contexts, owing to a rich and dynamic cultural interplay, are highly variable.[334] This chapter proposes that **aniconic** cult objects (including Elagabal's sacred stone) were complex semiotic symbols, exploring *how* they were invested with cultural meanings, memories and identities; *what* these may have been; and *how* these might have been communicated in different geographical and historical contexts.

4.1 Semiotics

Cult objects and images merge sign and signified.[335] On the one hand, they signify the presence of the god, an **anthropomorphic agent** whose **agency** was explored in chapter three.[336] However, signs and symbols are multivocal, and thus a cult object's form might

[329] DeMarrais, 2004: 12.
[330] Kaizer, 2006: 29.
[331] Hoffman-Salz, 2022; Konrad, 2017; Kropp, 2010.
[332] Hoffman-Salz, 2022.
[333] Renfrew, 2004: 23.
[334] Kaizer, 2013: 124.
[335] 3.2.
[336] 3.

have evoked cultural information that was perhaps more subtle than simply denoting the presence of a divine **agent**.[337] Recent semiotic approaches have begun to question not just *what* signs and symbols may mean in various contexts, but *how* such meanings are evoked. Unlike language signs which have a more codified meaning, iconographic signs and symbols are more nuanced, their meanings more flexible and adaptable.[338]

Aniconic cult objects have been said to have 'the aura of the unique object.'[339] They are frequently unique, irreplicable, and – in some respects – can be defined by their ambiguity. Although semiotic approaches have been applied to **aniconic** objects, they yield results that are frequently hypothetical and conjectural, owing to the general, unspecific visual qualities of the objects – especially in the near absence of ancient interpretations from which possible meanings can be convincingly derived.[340] However, perhaps this visual ambiguity and the problems it poses for modern interpretations might be viewed as a strength of the **aniconic** representative mode. Just as **aniconic** objects invite modern scholars' imaginations, ancient interpretations of their enigmatic visual qualities were likely numerous.[341] As **public representations** of deities, **aniconic** cult objects were inherently related to the **cultural memories** that they embodied and helped shape. It is proposed that the abstract visual qualities of **aniconic** cult objects – such as Elagabal's stone – rendered them more efficient vehicles for expressing aspects of a highly dynamic and developing social identity. Potentially, this may contribute to the prominence of **aniconic** cult objects in Near Eastern contexts generally.

4.2 Cultural Memory

Although a broad and ambiguous term, '**cultural memory**' shall henceforth be defined as systems of symbols (media, institutions and practises) through which social groups construct a shared past spanning many generations and which functions predominantly to unify a

[337] Aktor, 2017: 509; 2020: 103; Stewart, 2008: 302.
[338] Beck, 2006: 25; 159.
[339] Stewart, 2007: 166; 2008: 301.
[340] Gaifman, 2012: 6.
[341] *Ibid.,* 237.

common identity (of course, cultures do not *remember* in a literal, neurological sense).[342] **Cultural memory** emphasises the relationship between memory and socio-cultural contexts; like **cognitive** studies, **cultural memory** studies investigate the interplay between human **agents** (and the communities they create), **cognition**, and material culture.[343] All individual memories are shaped by collective contexts (social and material), through which people acquire **schemata**.[344] Different **schemata** are involved in perceiving different contexts. It is productive to construe cultures and religions as **schemata**.[345] Although individual memories refer to cultural **schemata**, memories conversely shape and stabilise cultures.[346]

As a social phenomenon, **cultural memory** is communicated amongst individuals.[347] Unlike **collective memories** involving the recent past (events that occurred less than three-four generations ago, c. 80-100 years), **cultural memories** frequently evoke the distant past.[348] **Cultural memories** utilise **public representations** (e.g., objects, monuments, built environments, rituals…) to a greater extent than **collective memories** (which are more frequently communicated in everyday interactions).[349] **Public representations** function as external mnemonic tools which provoke and shape **cultural memories**.[350] Unlike neural memory stores, **public representations** are more permanent, stable and require less direct experience of an event for it to be remembered.[351] In practise, **collective** and **cultural memories** blur into one another; present identity involves distant events as much as recent ones and new memories continue to be created and reformulated until the 'present' moment.[352]

Thus, memory involves the present as much as it invokes the past.[353] **Cultural memories** are not merely shared memories of a distant past, but they serve a social function, anchoring

[342] Erll, 2010: 5. Memory studies are another transdisciplinary field that lack unified terminology. On the problems of '**cultural memory**': Erll, 2010.
[343] Erll, 2010: 4.
[344] Assmann, 2012: 22; Erll, 2010: 5; Olick, 2010: 156; Straub, 2010: 222.
[345] 1.3.
[346] Erll, 2010: 5.
[347] J. Assmann, 2010: 111; 2012: 23.
[348] J. Assmann, 2010: 112; 2012: 36; Welzer, 2010: 285.
[349] J. Assman, 2010: 111; 2012: 9.
[350] Assmann, 2012: 41; Malafouris, 2004: 56; Welzer, 2010: 289.
[351] Welzer, 2010: 289.
[352] J. Assmann, 2010: 112; 2012: 35; Renfrew, 2004: 28.
[353] Olick, 2010: 155.

the self-visualisation of communal identity.[354] **Cultural memories** involve historical events by which groups "can claim a continuous identity throughout time."[355] This does not necessarily imply that they are factual, nor that 'factuality' is a productive measure of societal identity. Memory studies emphasise that no version of the past is truly objective, and that different versions of the past are continuously renegotiated and reconstructed in people's minds (chapter one demonstrated that **cultural memories** are *re-constructed*; individual variations are inevitable).[356] **Cultural memories** are processual: they are perceived events, ideas and knowledge that are *actively* renegotiated and reinterpreted according to the desires of individuals and communities in the present.[357]

Remembering involves semioticising (i.e., giving meaning to something – be it a **public representation** or the past itself).[358] As **public representations** of culture, material culture transforms communal memories of the past, alongside present values and future ideas, into a physical reality.[359] Conversely, certain material forms may actively shape or emphasise various aspects of social identities and ideologies.[360] Elagabal's stone was not mere **matter** invested with ideas about a divinity, but qualities of the betyl may have shaped aspects of the deity itself. Because of the complex nexus by which communities and material cultures interact, it is not productive to question what a single image or monument may 'stand for'; one must seek to explore its potential values, associations, memories and meanings from a semiotic perspective.[361]

Although a neologism predominantly applied to myth, recent studies have emphasised the productiveness of '**iconotropy**' as an analytical tool for interpreting material culture.[362] **Iconotropy** is inherently related to memory, underscoring that **cultural memories** (e.g., mythological and foundational narratives) and their **public representations** are not static, but dynamic.[363] **Iconotropy** denotes the process by which **cultural memories** (including the

[354] J. Assmann, 2010: 114; 2012: 2; Manier and Hirst, 2010: 253.
[355] Olick, 2015: 156.
[356] Assmann, 2012: 27; Erll, 2010: 7; Straub, 2010: 220.
[357] Olick, 2010: 159; Straub, 2010: 218.
[358] Assmann, 2012: 60.
[359] DeMarrais, 2004: 11.
[360] Bovin, 2004: 65; Nũno, 2021: 24; Scarre, 2004: 141.
[361] DeMarrais, 2004: 13.
[362] Tomás García and Sáenz-López Pérez, 2022.
[363] *Ibid.,* 5.

meanings suggested by material images and objects) are reinterpreted and reformulated by human **agents**, especially in cases when original meanings were lost, forgotten, or purposefully ignored.[364] If '**materialisation**' denotes the process by which humans invest objects with meaning, '**iconotropy**' emphasises that this process is not finite or unidirectional, but that it can be highly diverse, seemingly random, and/or unconscious.[365] **Materiality**, involving **agents'** interactions with **matter**, is an 'ongoing outcome.'[366]

Religious **MCIs** such as gods and cult objects (as opposed to 'secular' **MCIs** e.g., superheroes) elicit strong emotional responses because they are interwoven with **cultural memories** and social identities.[367] Elagabal was not only entwined with the identity of Elagabalus, but also with the identity of the Emesene dynasty and people. The *Emisēnoi* tribe (from which Emesa derived its name) was characterised by their relationship to the sun.[368] Worship of the sun's consorts, Azizos and Monimos, are attested at Emesa; the common theophoric personal names, Azizos and Monimos, might attest the deities' importance at Emesa.[369] Additionally, the cosmic deities, Yarhibol and Aglibol, were worshipped.[370] It seems no coincidence that Sampsigeramus, containing the name of the solar deity Shamash and meaning 'the sun has decided', was a name common to the Emesene royal house and recurs often in inscriptions from the region.[371] Additionally, the common dynastic names, Soaimos and Iamblichos, might be theophoric, having been translated as 'black/precious stone' and 'the law of god.'[372] In studying the cult of Elagabal, one must question not only the implications that the god and betyl might have had on the self-identity of the worshipping community, but also the effects that the dynamic development of the worshipping community might have had on the god and cult object.

[364] Bacci, 2022: 143; Brøns, 2022: 14.
[365] 1.2.
[366] Arroyo-Kalin, 2004: 74.
[367] Upal, 2023: 90.
[368] Heliod. *Aeth.* 10.41.4.
[369] Julian. *Or.* 4.150d. *IGLS V* 2218; 2251; 2303; 2383.
[370] *IGLS V* 2220.
[371] Joseph *AJ* 18.135; Str. 16.2.11.; *IGLS V* 2212; 2216; 2217; 2225; 2362; 2385. Icks, 2008: 34; Seyrig, 1971: 240; Starcky, 1975-6: 511.
[372] Hoffman-Salz, 2022: 296.

4.3 Threat Ecology

Religion consists of assigning **anthropomorphic** mental states to the external world; it frequently attributes humanlike characteristics *to nature.*[373] In various religious communities throughout history, humans have interpreted natural phenomena such as fires, storms, droughts and landslides as the actions of gods. Often, luminaries and natural landscape features such as rivers and mountains are worshipped as manifestations of gods or regarded as sacred in one way or another. This seems especially common in the eastern Mediterranean.[374] From the worshipper's perspective, gods organise natural landscapes and environments; dually, events in the natural landscape legitimate the agency of the god.[375]

CSR holds that religious **anthropomorphism** is a perceptual strategy that responds to an unpredictable and potentially dangerous natural world.[376] **Cognition** actively draws upon and structures the external environment, contributing to our adaptative success as a species.[377] Studies suggest that human **cognition** is primed to account for events in the environment in terms of causal stories, allowing us to calculate potential risks.[378] However, we are prone to representing more risks in the environment than we actually experience. These precautionary risks are often perceived in terms of humanlike **agency** because they are efficient and effective perceptive bets.[379] Additionally, **HADD** may over-detect **agency** in natural phenomena (e.g., storms, rivers, fire) because of its exposure to instances of natural deception (e.g., camouflage) and because natural phenomena exhibit traits common to living **agents** (e.g., motion and unpredictability).[380] **Anthropomorphism** endows otherwise capricious natural phenomena with an air of order.[381] **Cognitive** ecology suggests that we may be able to work from environmental considerations upwards, questioning what kinds of **cognitive** strategies may have responded to wider environmental concerns, and what kind of religions might have occurred as **by-products**.[382]

---

[373] Guthrie, 1995; 2015.
[374] Doak, 2015: 137.
[375] Williams Reed, 2020: 88.
[376] Kindt, 2012: 42.
[377] Day, 2004: 105.
[378] Boyer, 2001: 233.
[379] 3.3.
[380] Guthrie, 2015: 303.
[381] Guthrie and Porubanova, 2023: 97.
[382] Sperber, 1994: 45.

Although descriptions of the *Emisēnoi* as 'Arabs' alongside use of the terms *ethnos* and *phylarch* have prompted scholarship to view the Emesene peoples as originally non-sedentary and nomadic, a recent study by Hoffman-Salz has demonstrated that these terms do not necessarily imply nomadic tent-dwellers, noting that the region around Emesa seems more characterised by settlements than non-sedentary populations.[383] Strabo records that the *Emisēnoi* were originally settled in Arethusa.[384] The *Emeseni* dynasts seem to have relocated and re-founded Emesa relatively late in the Roman period, likely atop of a pre-existing local settlement; Homs has yielded traces of bronze-age occupation.[385] Although the site's location seems to have been strategic, the basaltic landscape of Homs and its environs have been dubbed 'sub-optimal' – i.e., having potential for human occupation, but posing significant difficulties for settlers.[386] To this day, this is reflected in the region's popular name *al-Wa'ar* ('difficult').[387] Because of the significant difficulties posed by the landscape, we might expect the self-identity of early settlers to be intrinsically interwoven with a powerful deity by which they attempted to impose order on a capricious and threatening natural world.

Although Elagabal's cult was most acclaimed at Emesa, it enjoyed prominence throughout the Roman Empire during Elagabalus' reign. The worship of Sol and Mithras expanded in the Roman empire in the second century AD under Commodus and the Severans.[388] The latter's promotion of gods with solar attributes resembling Elagabal only partially explains the sudden rise of solar cults within the empire. Although Elagabal should not be identified with Sol and Mithras, scholars are right to note the parallel expansion of solar cults during this period.[389] The rapid growth and popularity of Mithras' cult in the Roman Empire has been associated with rising anxieties about an uncertain, unpredictable and incomprehensible cosmological environment after the second century adoption of the Ptolemaic model of the cosmos.[390] It has been suggested that the Mithraic cult combated these anxieties in various ways – notably, including remapping the incomprehensible Ptolemaic cosmos to be

[383] Cass. Dio 50.13.7; Cic. *Fam.* 15.1; Plin. *HN.* 5.81; Str. 16.2.11. Hoffman-Salz, 2022.
[384] Str. 16.2.11.
[385] King, 2002: 39.
[386] Philip and Bradbury, 2010.
[387] *Ibid.*
[388] 3.3.
[389] Particularly, Halsberghe (1972) although his work is admittedly problematic.
[390] See especially, Martin, 2015: 57-74.

accessible, observable and controllable in the form of the Mithraic sanctuary and cult image.[391] On one level at least, the sanctuary and cult image are microcosms of the universe.[392] Despite the settlement of the Emesene people in Emesa, the threat of a potentially-dangerous and unstable political situation and cosmos still loomed. Political instability may also trigger **cognitive** precautionary threat systems, and Emesa's position in the empire was by no means stable: in 30BC, the royal family was temporarily stripped of its power by Augustus and suddenly disappears from the historical record in the 70s AD, probably eliminated under Vespasian.[393] It is also highly plausible that further problems for the Emesene dynasts could have been poised by the mixed population in their area of rule.[394] Of course, one must be wary of misinterpreting the significance of material objects. Nevertheless, I propose that Elagabal's stone might be construed of as a microcosm, an abstract representation of a large, dangerous and unpredictable environment rendered into a comprehensible and accessible **index**. Recalling the principles of **iconotropy**, however, it is proposed that the microcosmic function of the betyl may not have been static, and that the visual ambiguity of the stone was effectively suited to influence and combat the changing needs and dynamics of the worshipping community.

4.4 God Mountain

A major contradiction that has puzzled scholars is the discrepancy between the translation of 'LH'GBL (El-Gabal) as 'God Mountain' and Elagabal's solar qualities.[395] Although we must acknowledge the possibility of mistranslation, 'God Mountain' remains the likeliest translation.[396] Divine names are not random; they are powerful markers of identity.[397] 'God Mountain' implies that, on at least one level, Elagabal *was* the mountain.[398] However, a deity's qualities and associations might be multifaceted and, as in cases of other local mountain gods, this does not necessarily discount that Elagabal may also have been

[391] *Ibid*., 85.
[392] Propounded by Beck, 2006
[393] Cass. Dio 51.2; 54.9; Bowersock, 1978: 140; Icks, 2008: 30.
[394] Hoffman-Salz, 2022: 300.
[395] The stele is the only Aramaic inscription referring to the god.
[396] Alternative proposals: Halsberghe, 1972: 62-3.
[397] Bonnet *et al.*, 2022: 3-4.
[398] Starcky, 1975-6: 504.

perceived to inhabit or influence the mountain.[399] Epithets, like divine names, also express divine identities, but epithets usually indicate more specific stable traits and identities.[400] By the Roman Period, Elagabal was conceived of as a sun god in Rome and Emesa. A Greek dedication discovered on Homs' tell was addressed to '*Theos Hēlios Elagabalos'*, the epithet emphasising a stable solar identity.[401] In the provinces, Emesene soldiers erected an inscription to '*Deo Soli Aelagabalo.'*[402] Several of Elagabalus' imperial coins bear the legend 'SANCT(O) DEO SOLI ELAGABAL(O)' and Elagabal's priesthood is referred to as that of '*Solis Elagabali*.'[403] The mountain god was solarised somehow.[404] I suggest that **CSR** and the principles of threat ecology might deproblematise this contradictory and seemingly drastic reformation of Elagabal's attributes. Conflicting names and titles suggest a close relationship between deity and certain **cultural memories**, but also the involvement of **iconotropic** processes through which old **cultural memories** came to lack clarity and were reinterpreted/reformulated.[405]

Outside of the deity's nomenclature, it must be admitted that evidence that Elagabal was originally a mountain god is scarce. Of course, the onomastic argument is especially cogent. On the stele (fig 12), it is speculated that 'LH'GBL might be represented by either the sacred stone or a mountain.[406] Elagabal seems to be decorated with fruits and branches, possibly suggesting the representation of a natural landscape feature (the betyl is never associated with these in coins, other sculptural representations, or descriptions).[407] By logical extension, the betyl might represent the mountain which *was* El-Gabal. Furthermore, Elagabal's possible connections with other mountainous gods have been noted.[408] Especially striking is the betyl's association with the sacred mountain Gerizim on coins of Neapolis (fig 31) which portray both the mountain and Emesene stone in quadrigas.[409] Coins from

[399] E.g., Zeus Kaisos (Williams Reed, 2020: 93).
[400] Smith, 2022.
[401] Moussli, 1983: 257, *no.2.*
[402] *AE* (1910) 141; Icks, 2008: 34.
[403] RPC IV Elagabalus 131-135; 369-371. *CIL XVI* 139; 140; Icks, 2008: 33.
[404] Icks, 2008: 38; Millar, 1993: 305; Seyrig, 1971: 338.
[405] Smith, 2022: 53.
[406] Augé and Bellefonds, 1986: 705; Millar, 1993: 301; Starcky, 1975-6.
[407] Starcky, 1975-6: 506.
[408] Icks, 2009: 117.
[409] RPC VI 8915-8916. *Ibid*.

Caesarea in Cappadocia sometimes represent mount Argaeus in a similar fashion to the stele, also topped by an eagle (fig 32).[410]

Elagabal's association with Zeus/Jupiter has also been used to strengthen the argument that the deity was originally a mountain god.[411] Numismatic parallels between Sol and Jupiter have been noted, possibly foreshadowing Elagabal's displacement of Jupiter or expressing his comparable power/status.[412] However, Elagabalus did not attempt to equate Jupiter and Elagabal; rather, he attempted for Elagabal to supplant Jupiter's supreme position.[413] After 220, Elagabal officially replaces Jupiter as the emperor's divine protector on coins.[414] A strong argument can be advanced for Elagabalus rededicating the temple of Jupiter Victor to Elagabal in Rome.[415] Thus, an association with Zeus/Jupiter is more suggestive of supreme status than mountainous qualities. Eagles might also suggest an *interpretatio* with Jupiter/Zeus with whom they were often associated.[416] Although commonly thought to symbolise the god's solar *or* mountainous quality, Elagabal's eagle is best interpreted as a symbol of the deity's supreme status.[417] The connection between solar divinities, mountain gods, Zeus/Jupiter and eagles derives from a common pool, united in their association with supreme divine statuses. Possibly, Elagabal's connection to sacred mountains such as Gerizim may have derived from their association with various elements from this common pool.[418]

Still, the idea that Elagabal was once a deity with mountainous attributes remains attractive. I should like to take this argument a step further, to propose that Elagabal's sacred stone can be perceived of as a microcosm of the mountain, probably an unconscious extension of early worshippers' reaction to the difficult environment around Homs. Unfortunately, comparative evidence must be drawn upon to advance this argument. Comparative material must be approached warily, especially when examining localities in the Near East, a region defined by

[410] Icks, 2008: 33.
[411] *Ibid.,* 123.
[412] *Ibid.,* 106.
[413] Cass. Dio 80.11; Icks, 2009: 111. The *Historia Augusta*'s claims of monotheism seem to hyperbolise this (SHA. *Heliogab.* 7.4).
[414] Icks, 2008: 73.
[415] De Arrizabalaga and de la Fuente Marcos, 2005.
[416] Seyrig, 1971: 371.
[417] Dussaud, 1903: 16; Seyrig, 1971: 371-3. *E.g.*, Halsberghe, 1972: 82; Rowan, 2006: 118; Starcky, 1975-6: 503. Eagle as a symbol: 1.1.
[418] Icks, 2008: 123; 2009: 118.

its heterogeneity. However, the Near East was a rich melting pot of cultural influences; resultingly, certain religious patterns and similarities *can* broadly be discerned.[419] Therefore, comparative material *can* be productive, especially to supplement areas where evidence is lacking or absent.[420] Additionally, **aniconic** cult objects pervade human history; universal patterns in themselves imply that cross-cultural comparisons may yield productive insights in certain contexts.

The influence of geology in shaping religions – especially in the Near East – should not be underestimated.[421] Rooted in the desire to exert control over the natural landscape, mountain gods were common to Anatolia and northern Syria.[422] Coins from Neapolis (fig 31) transform the sacred landscape of Mount Gerizim into a symbol of local identity by miniaturising and abstracting aspects of the mountain sanctuary.[423] It simultaneously symbolises the city and god.[424] Previously, it has been speculated that the conical shape of some betyls might denote a mountain.[425] Particularly, the aniconic betyl of Zeus Kasios (fig 33) seems correlated with the shape of the sacred mountain that the god both *was* and was associated *with*.[426] Zeus Kasios organised the unique and unpredictable landscape of Mount Kasios in the eyes of the worshipper; correspondingly, the betyl microcosmically rendered the mountain accessible, controllable and worshippable.[427] As an important and sacred landscape feature, the god, betyl and mountain were crucial to the self-identity and **cultural memory** of the worshipping community.[428] Like Elagabal, this god had ancient origins (Zeus Kasios' earliest form, Baal-zaphon, appears in Ugaritic texts) and was worshipped further up the Orontes; cultural contact with this deity might be expected.[429] But an object's shape is not the only way that it may create or evoke meanings.

[419] Erwins and Williams Reed, 2022: 424; Kaizer, 2008: 16; 2013: 116.
[420] Kaizer, 2013.
[421] Kaizer, 2008: 10.
[422] Icks, 2008: 32; Roller, 1999.
[423] Evans, 2011; Kropp, 2021a: 233.
[424] Evans, 2011.
[425] Stewart, 2008: 302.
[426] RPC III 3766-3777; 3788-3791; IV.3 3819; 6281; 8109; 8114-8115; 8118; 8122-8123; 8125; 9013. Williams Reed, 2020.
[427] *Ibid*.
[428] Apollod. *Bibl. Epit.* 1.6.3.
[429] Niehr, 1998.

Cult objects and images were often specifically crafted from or revered because of certain qualities inherent in their physical substance. This observation seems particularly relevant to **aniconic** cult objects which were not required to be worked. Resultingly, emphasis was placed on qualities of their raw **matter**, which might be associated with (or conversely create/emphasise) certain aspects of the deity.[430] Simplified, certain physical properties can influence the way that objects are socially determined and the symbolic values that are assigned to them.[431] The stone remains lost to us today; we must be cautious in making unverifiable claims about its material form. It is often assumed that the stone was a meteorite, while others consider it a basalt rock of volcanic origin.[432] The latter is the more plausible option, as I shall set out below.[433]

The only possible unworked betyl that might be known to us today is the Paphian Aphrodite (fig 21).[434] The conical stone was recognised as the betyl after being discovered in the South Roman Stoa.[435] Unfortunately, the validity of these claims cannot be assessed.[436] Although popular opinion asserts that the stone is a meteorite, it has since been revealed to be a basalt boulder. [437] Basalt is common to Paphos, often found in the riverbeds that carry it down from the Troodos mountains.[438] The hypothesis that Elagabal's stone was also a basalt boulder is attractive considering that both ancient Emesa and Arethusa (just north of Emesa) are basaltic regions, strewn with basalt boulders.[439] Even to this day, basalt architecture forms an important element of Homs' **cultural memory** and identity.[440] Likewise, basalt was a frequently manipulated material in ancient times, basalt-tempered pottery being prevalent at Homs' earliest settlements (significantly predating Emesa's foundation).[441] Often, manuports are associated with their origins.[442] In the Hindu *pañcāyatanapūjā*, specific

[430] Aktor, 2017: 505; Benzel, 2015.
[431] Bovin, 2004: 65; Gaiger, 2014: 341; Scarre, 2004: 142.
[432] Al-Sabouni, 2022: 209; King, 2002: 44.
[433] 4.5.
[434] 2.3.
[435] Monzel and Morden, 2006: 150.
[436] Gaifman, 2012: 179
[437] Monzel and Morden, 2006.
[438] *Ibid.,* 153.
[439] Elisséeff, 2007: 156; Newson, 2015: 270.
[440] Al-Sabouni, 2022.
[441] Philip and Bradbury, 2013: 153.
[442] Aktor, 2017: 515.

stones are chosen for their association with certain sacred landscapes.[443] The unworked nature of megalithic stones was a conscious choice: megaliths were often transported from places in the natural landscape where they were already visible (as opposed to being quarried), and seem to have signified or symbolised the landscapes they originated from; thus, they likely **materialised** an aspect(s) of the group's **cultural memory**.[444] Gaelic stone amulets often derived their **agency** from the mountains of their origins. Specific mountains were associated with deities and corresponding **cultural memories**; mountain deities are also attested in larger **aniconic** stone forms. Both Gaelic amulets and larger **aniconic** forms operated as microcosms of the mountain, small scale embodiments of orographic deities.[445] In Rome, a small black unworked stone was deemed fitting for Cybele, the 'Mother of the Mountain.'[446] Neither stones nor natural landscapes are passive; they actively shape the meanings that they embody.

Some have speculated that Elagabal may have originated in the mountainous regions of Anatolia, brought further south by the nomadic tribes.[447] However, others suggest that the *Emisēnoi* brought a solar cult and attached it to a pre-existing local mountain god.[448] Although both theories remain valid, the latter seems more plausible in light of the aforementioned solar, theophoric names of the royal house before their settlement at Emesa and the hypothesis about the (re)foundation of Emesa atop of a pre-existing settlement.[449] The natural landscape of Homs and its surrounding territory, where evidence of Elagabal's cult is concentrated, is also insightful. I argue that the basaltic landscape of Homs which strategically lies to the north of the Homs Gap, a passage in the mountainous territory to the south, is perfectly suited to a mountain god. When exposed to a new macro-environment, a select few elements are usually used to create a **cognitive** representation of it; the mind represents a cognitively-costly environment by tying it to a selection of less-costly aspects.[450] Microcosms remap large and unpredictable environments, making them

[443] *Ibid*.
[444] Scarre, 2004.
[445] Johnston, 2017.
[446] Arn. *Adv. nat.* 7.49. Monzel and Morden, 2006: 150; Roller, 1999. However, in her Phrygian and Greek forms, Cybele was iconic.
[447] Starcky, 1975-6: 510.
[448] Butcher, 2003: 343; Kropp, 2013: 280.
[449] 4.3.
[450] Martin, 2015: 70.

familiar, accessible, predictable and controllable. A basalt microcosm of the mountain (and its god) would offer appropriate means for exerting order on the sub-optimal local environs. Additionally, ecological attractors (including a **mental representation**'s relevance to the immediate environment) can contribute to a concept becoming largely stable and widespread.[451]

Of course, such hypotheses are purely conjectural and could only be verified by new evidence. However, the recognition that symbols are multivocal and can actively shape the meanings they embody strengthens this argument. Because of the god's nomenclature, we might expect the ancients – as scholars do today – to actively search the stone for mountainous meanings. And, in the basaltic context of Emesa, we might expect such meanings to be found in the shape and rough, black and unworked substance of the stone which suggests its origin in the natural world.

4.5 Solar Divinity

By the Roman period, Elagabal was a solar divinity. The sacred stone seems to have undergone a kind of **iconotropy**. New **cultural memories** surrounded the stone: it was believed to have fallen from the heavens, and natural irregularities in the unworked stone were regarded to resemble an image of the sun.[452] **Iconotropic** processes which transform or alter the meanings of cult objects might occur in one of two ways.[453] They might transpire as a result of the changing dynamics and values of the worshipping community; changes in **cultural memories** affect the meanings of their **public representations**. This *can* lead to the invention of new iconographic elements and schemes. However, the **aniconic** stone's visual ambiguity might be an effective vehicle for embodying drastic changes in meaning with only minor alterations to the visual character of the cult object and its associated iconography. Conversely, misinterpreting iconographic details can engender changes in **cultural memories** (e.g., myths). Both types of **iconotropy** may influence one another; the changing social dynamics and increased cultural contact at Emesa likely exacerbated misunderstandings,

[451] 2.1.
[452] Hdn. 5.3.5.
[453] Bacci, 2022: 150.

misinterpretations and secondary meanings of the sacred stone. Over time, these gradually replaced the original meanings as **cultural memories** continued to shift. Although **iconotropy** can involve conscious and intentional destruction and creation of meaning (e.g., iconoclasm), there is little reason to believe that this was the case in Emesa.[454] Variations and changes in local deities are common in the Near East because of the region's unique social dynamics. Additionally, we might infer that a conscious destruction of Elagabal's previous attributes would involve altering the deity's name (which distinctly implies a different era of worship).

Subsequently, we might be prompted to question specifically *how* the gradual **iconotropy** of god and betyl occurred. Perhaps, the alteration in meaning stemmed from Elagabal's associations with Zeus/Jupiter who was often identified or associated with luminaries – especially the sun.[455] This may underly beliefs about the betyl falling from the heavens, the domain of Zeus/Jupiter.[456] However, **iconotropy** – as inherently related to the selectivity and limitations of memory – is a fluid and complex phenomenon. Unless there is evidence of a conscious and intentional erasure of **cultural memories**, **iconotropy** is difficult to underpin. Broadly, I suggest that Elagabal's **iconotropy** resulted from the changing dynamics at Emesa. Probably, the betyl came to embody both the sun worship of the 'Arab' *Emisēnoi* tribe and the religion of pre-existing regional communities. Roman period evidence documents a flourishing city with a high level of integration into the wider Roman empire. The increased urbanisation of the landscape probably reduced its threatening hold over the population, lessening the need for a 'God Mountain' by whom they could influence the natural environment. The escalated cultural contact and changing social dynamics of the settlement probably also engendered misinterpretations of and new meanings for the sacred stone. The formation of new **cultural memories** would have also consolidated the group's self-identity; this is especially relevant considering Emesa's alleged composition of multiple ethnic groups.[457] Although likely, this is not certain; it is sufficient to recognise that meanings *have* been reformulated, and to investigate the consequential implications for the cult object.

[454] A. Assmann, 2010: 97.
[455] Cook, 1914.
[456] De Arrizabalaga, 2003: 167.
[457] Hoffman-Salz, 2022: 302.

As a sun god, **cultural memories** of Elagabal's stone were rooted in the distant past where it was believed to have fallen from heaven.'[458] Often, the **agency** of **aniconic** objects partially derived from **cultural memories** about their origins, which regularly involved the miraculous.[459] Unlike **anthropomorphic** cult statues which are remembered as divinely *inspired*, **aniconic** cult objects are frequently accompanied by memories of epiphanic arrival.[460] Particularly, betyls are repeatedly said to have fallen from heaven.[461] Resultingly, modern scholarship frequently assumes that many betyls – including Elagabal's stone – were meteorites.[462] As the stone is not extant, these claims cannot be empirically tested. However, Herodian's account of the stone falling from heaven should not be taken literally. Traditions of Greek wooden cult images falling from heaven are also prevalent; these cannot have quite literally fallen from the sky.[463] Although commonly believed to have been meteoric, recent analyses of Aphrodite's betyl at Paphos have determined that it is a basalt boulder.[464] Probably, the ancient tradition of sacred objects falling from the heavens stemmed from beliefs that they were god-sent; the gods resided in the heavens.[465] Such memories signify the sacred nature of the object, rather than specific meteorological associations.

Although Herodian's description of the stone's arrival cannot be taken literally, it remains insightful. To third century worshippers, the stone's heavenly origins formed a core **cultural memory**. Memories of the past are only relevant insomuch as they are referred to in the present.[466] An acknowledgement that **cultural memory** is at play does not render mythical origin stories 'false'; contrarily, **cultural memories** of mythical events ground them as 'real.'[467] Mythical narrative stories also illuminate present-day desires, highlighting a change

[458] Hdn. 5.3.5. The passage suggests that people genuinely believed the stone fell from heaven (σεμνολογοῦσιν), although διοπετῆ implies Herodian's scepticism.
[459] Platt, 2011: 93; Stewart, 2007: 158.
[460] Platt, 2011: 98.
[461] E.g., Cybele (Hdn. 1.11), Gennaios (Dam. *Isid.* 138). Stewart, 2008: 297.
[462] Monzel and Morden, 2006; Stewart, 2008: 298. E.g., Cybele and the Delphic omphalos (despite the convoluted mythical traditions surrounding the latter, the ancient evidence does not even state that it fell from the sky). Even the Kaaba's stone is sometimes assumed to be a meteorite (Bellemare, 1996: 291). Elagabal: Azzopardi, 2017: 1; Bellemare, 1996; Doak, 2015: 76; Halsberghe, 1972: 64; Monzel and Morden, 2006: 152; De Arrizabalaga, 2003: 167.
[463] E.g., Apollod. *Bibl. Epit.* 3.12.3; Paus. 1.26.6; 9.12.4.
[464] Monzel and Morden, 2006.
[465] *Ibid.,* 153.
[466] Assmann, 2012.
[467] *Ibid.,* 38.

in the values of worshippers.[468] Part of the betyl's authority derived from its origin in a past so distant that clear **cultural memories** could not be formed.[469] In this light, the discrepancy between the god's mountainous name and solar identity might even have legitimated its potency.

To an extent, epiphanic arrival myths compensate for the object's unassuming form and underly attributions of **agency** to specific stones/materials.[470] Although **cultural memories** about divine images falling from the heavens were common, the trope aligns with Elagabal's solar qualities: it may imply that the betyl had a cosmic origin, perhaps as a microcosm of the sun.[471] However, material forms can actively influence the meanings which may be derived from them.[472] Herodian reveals that the stone's surface was imperfect with various marks and irregularities. In these, he remarks that some saw an 'image of the sun.'[473] Precisely what Herodian means by this is unclear. Possibly, some saw astral images in the texture of the stone.[474] Coins portraying the betyl decorated by a projecting crescent and/or star(s) (figs 1-2) may validate this reading.[475] An alternative interpretation might be that the rough surface of the stone was regarded as evidence for its celestial origin; this would fit nicely with the idea of the stone falling from the sun, implying its origins as a solar microcosm. Both interpretations are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. They highlight the visual ambiguity posed by the betyl even in antiquity, but predominantly that this visual ambiguity allowed the betyl to be a highly provocative and effective communicator of a diverse range of cultural information. Herodian's scepticism in itself implies that the meanings conveyed by the stone were not unitary or particularly obvious. Instead, worshippers interpreted the stone with reference to pre-existing cultural **schemata**. They could search for meaning about a solar *or* a mountain deity and correspondingly find it in the stone's enigmatic physical qualities.

[468] *Ibid*.
[469] Smith, 2022: 53.
[470] Freedberg, 1989: 34; Pongratz-Leisten and Sonik, 2015: 46.
[471] Icks, 2008: 33.
[472] Bovin, 2004: 64.
[473] Hdn. 5.3.5.
[474] Bricault, 2012: 84.
[475] 1.1.

The ritual appropriation of the sacred Emesene stone pronounced it an important **public representation** of cultural information about the deity, Elagabal. Although one must be on guard against *misinterpreting* objects, **iconotropy** emphasises that meaning is created somewhere in the midst of a convoluted nexus involving **cultural memories**, material objects, the ecological environment and present-day **agents**. Meanings are multivocal and dynamic. It is proposed that Elagabal's stone was an effective vehicle for embodying and actively shaping the **cultural memories** of a developing and dynamic society. The stone was a physical manifestation of both the mountain *and* later the sun, a microcosm that unconsciously responded to anxieties about a dangerous and unpredictable environment.

V. Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the cult stone of Elagabal – particularly, its shape and material – questioning the relationship between the **public representation** and **mental representations** of Elagabal. In light of a wider discourse which traditionally viewed **aniconic** cult objects as primitive, barbaric, and underdeveloped **indexes of divine presence**, this study has followed in the footsteps of more recent scholarship which has noted that **aniconic** cult objects often existed alongside figural cult statues – and continue to do so into the present day. As such, the research conducted within this thesis has suggested that **aniconic** objects are in no way deficient; rather, they simply represent divinities in ways different – although not necessarily dissimilar – to cult statues. At the most basic level, **aniconic** cult objects pervade the historical record, assisting the stabilisation of **mental representations** of religious **agents** and the formation of religious communities. This function also underlies the creation of figural cult statues.

Studies of **aniconic** cult objects must finely balance acknowledging the individualistic, local character of each **aniconic divine index**, whilst advancing ideas that are relevant to the phenomenon in general. As such, this case study into the sacred stone of Emesa has yielded insight that – it is hoped – may prove applicable and insightful to other instances of **aniconic** worship. By stressing human universals and identifying the mechanisms underlying pervasive cross-cultural patterns, **cognitive** methodology has also enabled this outcome. Additionally, the principles underlying both **CA** and **CSR** have allowed this study to go beyond the physical and pragmatic qualities of the object, stressing that its interrelatedness with external human **agents** and environments endows mere **matter** with a degree of supernatural **agency**.

Elagabal's cult should not be lampooned as mere 'rock worship', nor should the paucity and hostility of the evidence completely restrict our access to the cult. **Cognitive** methodologies suggest that the sacred Emesene stone was a complex and deeply nuanced object, and that certain objects are more prone to religious appropriation than others. The stone played an integral role in the formation and **transmission** of **cultural memories**. Its adherence with cultural and ecological attractors (including symmetry and **minimal counterintuitiveness**)

underlay the prominence of both the cult object and – to an extent – the cult itself at Emesa. The stone exhibited a degree of intentional **agency**, embodying a highly-developed **anthropomorphic** social **agent**, despite bearing little resemblance to human form. This was achieved not only through human engagement with the stone, but also through its upright bilateral shape which actively invited humanlike interactions. Nor was the stone passive in terms of the nuanced semiotic meanings that it embodied; the Emesene sacred stone actively shaped the nature of the deity whose presence it suggested *and* the **cultural memories** of a dynamic worshipping community. Through the stone, the deity was able to efficiently and effectively meet the changing demands of its worshippers, imposing order and stability on a potentially capricious environment through the principles of reciprocal exchange. Specifically, this thesis proposes that the Emesene stone microcosmically embodied various aspects of the natural world (the basaltic landscape surrounding Homs and the sun).

The sacred stone of Emesa was not merely a simple 'stone.' Intrinsically tied up in a convoluted nexus involving material culture, human **agents** and the ecological environment, Elagabal's stone embodied the natural world, the lives and values of its worshippers, and much more. The sheer scope of the function, nature and meanings of **aniconic** objects is difficult to underpin. But it is by reason of their enigmatic qualities that, throughout cultures and histories – into this very day – they continue to pervade.

Appendix 1: Glossary

*Boldened in text.

Agency	The capacity to act intentionally.
Agent	An entity with the capacity to act.
Aniconic	A physical object, monument, image or visual scheme that denotes the presence of a divine power to human agents without an explicitly anthropomorphic (or theriomorphic) representation of the deity (or deities).
Anthropomorphic	Relating to or characterised by anthropomorphism.
Anthropomorphism	The attribution of human-like characteristics even in the absence of a physical form.
Attractor Positions	See 'Cultural Attractors.'
Bottom-up Processes	Cognitive processes that draw sensory information from the physical environment.
By-Product Theory	The theory that religious representations can be traced to evolutionary adaptations of cognition (these adaptations were not formed specifically to generate religious representations but are involved in other areas of human behaviour).
Cognition	The mental process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses, with physical basis in the brain
Cognitive	Relating to cognition.
Cognitive Archaeology (CA)	An approach that explores the relationship between material culture(s) and ancient minds.
Cognitive Biases	A systematic error that occurs when processing information from the world.
Cognitive Constraints	Restrictions imposed by limitations in cognition.
Cognitive Mechanisms	A smaller component involved in cognitive processing, performing a particular function (these do not necessarily correlate with a single neural structure or area of the brain).

Cognitive Processes	Operations of the mental functions involved in the acquisition, storage, interpretation, and use of knowledge.
Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR)	A discipline that applies theories from the cognitive sciences to explain why patterns of religious thought and action are so common among humans and why religious phenomena have the features that they do.
Collective Memory	Memories that involve events that occurred less than three-four generations ago.
Cultural Attractors	Abstract, statistical constructs around which mental representations tend to gather.
Cultural Memory	Systems of symbols through which social groups construct a shared past spanning many generations and which functions predominantly to unify a common identity.
Decoupled Cognition	The mental ability to form representations of or about things that are not immediately present in the sensory environment.
Hypersensitive Agency Detection Device (HADD)	An evolutionary device that is prone to over-attributing intention to agents.
Iconotropy	The process by which cultural memories and their public representations are reinterpreted and reformulated, especially in the cases when original meanings were lost, forgotten, or purposefully ignored.
Index(es)	Material forms which prompt responses, interpretations or inferences.
Index(es) of Divine Presence	Material forms which prompt various responses, interpretations or inferences about the presence of a supernatural power.
Intuitive	Fast, automatic, implicit and unconscious cognitive processes.
Materialisation	The active process by which humans invest objects with meaning.
Materiality	All forms of matter that agents relate to.
Matter	Physical stuff of the cosmos.
Mental Representations	Objects and structures in the mind that contain semantic information.

Mind-Body Dualism	The belief that mind and body/matter are in some way distinct from one another.
Minimally Counterintuitive Concepts (MCIs)	Concepts that violate a small number of intuitive expectations.
Public Representations	Physical and material representations that exist in the environment, being external to the inner workings of the mind.
Reflective	Relatively slow, effortful, and analytical cognitive processes.
Schemata	Patterns of thought or behaviour that organise categories of information and their relationships to one another.
Theory of Mind (ToM)	The capacity to attribute mental states to others.
Top-down Processes	Cognitive processes that draw information from pre-existing stored information.
Transmission (Cognitive)	The process of mental representations being passed from one person to another, involving re-production.

Appendix 2: List of Illustrations

Figure 1. Coin of Emesa, r. Antoninus Pius. RPC IV.3 6968 (11). Obv.: AVT KAI TI AIΛ AΔPI(A) ANTΩNEINOC CEB EYCE. Laureate head of Antoninus Pius. Rev.: EMICHNΩN B. Eagle standing on sacred stone of Elagabal, holding wreath in beak; stone decorated with two stars surmounted by a crescent. A. Kropp coll. Source: https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coin/455596

Figure 2. Coin of Emesa, r. Antoninus Pius. RPC IV.3 5785 (1). Obv.: AYT KAI TI AIΛ AΔPI ANTΩNEINOC CEB EY([CE?]). Laureate head of Antoninus Pius. Rev.: EMICHNΩN E. Eagle standing on sacred stone of Elagabal, holding wreath in beak; stone decorated with star. Source: https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coin/185798

Figure 3. Coin of Emesa, r. Antoninus Pius. RPC IV.3 8609 (4). Obv.: AYT KAI TI AIΛ AΔPIA AN[. Laureate head of Antoninus Pius. Rev.: EMICHNΩN B. Radiate and draped bust of Helios. A. Kropp coll. Source: https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coin/399672

Figure 4. Reverse coin of Emesa, r. Caracalla. The temple of Elagabal opened to reveal the cult stone above an altar/base. Source: Price and Trell 1977, fig 297.

Figure 5. Imperial antoninianus, r. Elagabalus. Unpublished. Obv.: IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG. Radiate draped, cuirassed bust of Elagabalus. Rev.: CON-SERVA-TOR AVG. Elagabalus standing facing, head left, sacrificing out of patera in right hand over lighted altar, cypress (?) branch in left hand. Quadriga behind with conical stone of Emesa with eagle facing with spread wings, head left with wreath in beak. 'Umbrella' either side. Source: Heritage Auctions: https://coins.ha.com/itm/ancients/roman-imperial/ancients-elagabalus-ad-218-222-ar-antoninianus-23mm-565-gm-12h-ngc-choice-xf-and-9733-5-5-4-5/a/3071-32178.s

Figure 6. Copper medallion, r. Elagabalus. British Museum, inv. 1992,0509.364. Obv.: IMP ANTONINVS AVG [...] AVG. Busts of Elagabalus (laureate, draped and cuirassed) and Aquilia Severa (? or Annia Faustina) (draped and wearing diadem). Rev.: [CONSERVAT]OR IMPERII. Emperor and empress standing either side of lighted altar with attendants; the emperor on right, sacrificing out of patera with right hand. Elagabal above with eagle in front, flanked by parasols. Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1992-0509-364

Figure 7. Aureus. RIC IV Elagabalus 61d. Obv.: IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG. Laureate, draped, cuirassed bust of Elagabalus. Rev.: CONSERVATOR AVG. Stone of Emesa with eagle in front in quadriga moving left; in field, star. Source: https://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.4.el.61d

Figure 8. Coin of Hierapolis-Castabala, r. Elagabalus. RPC VI 7472 (13). Obv.: AYT K M AYP ANTΩNINOC. Laureate, draped, cuirassed bust of Elagabalus. Rev.: KACTABAΛEΩN. Front view of quadriga carrying the stone of Emesa surmounted by eagle. Source: https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coin/416111

Figure 9. Denarius. RIC IV Elagabalus 40b. Obv.: IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG. Laureate, draped bust of Elagabalus. Rev.: P M TR P IIII COS III P P. Sol, radiate, naked except for cloak over left shoulder and flying behind, advancing left, raising right hand and holding whip in left hand; in field, star. Source: https://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.4.el.40b

Figure 10. Coin of Emesa, r. Uranius Antoninus. RPC IX, 1927 (12). Obv.: ΑΥΤΟ Κ CΟΥΛΠ ΑΝΤΩΝΙΝΟC CЄ. Laureate, draped, cuirassed bust of Uranius Antoninus. Rev.: ЄΜΙCΩΝ ΚΟΛΩΝ, ЄΞΦ. Temple with six columns enclosing conical stone of Elagabal, with eagle in front, between two 'umbrellas'; crescent on pediment. Source: https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/9/1927

Figure 11. Coin of Emesa, r. Uranius Antoninus. RPC IX, 1943. Obv.: L IVL AVR SVLP VRA ANTONINVS. Laureate, draped, cuirassed bust of Uranius Antoninus. Rev.: CONSERVATOR AVG. Stone of Elagabal, draped and ornamented, between two 'umbrellas.' Source: https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/9/1943

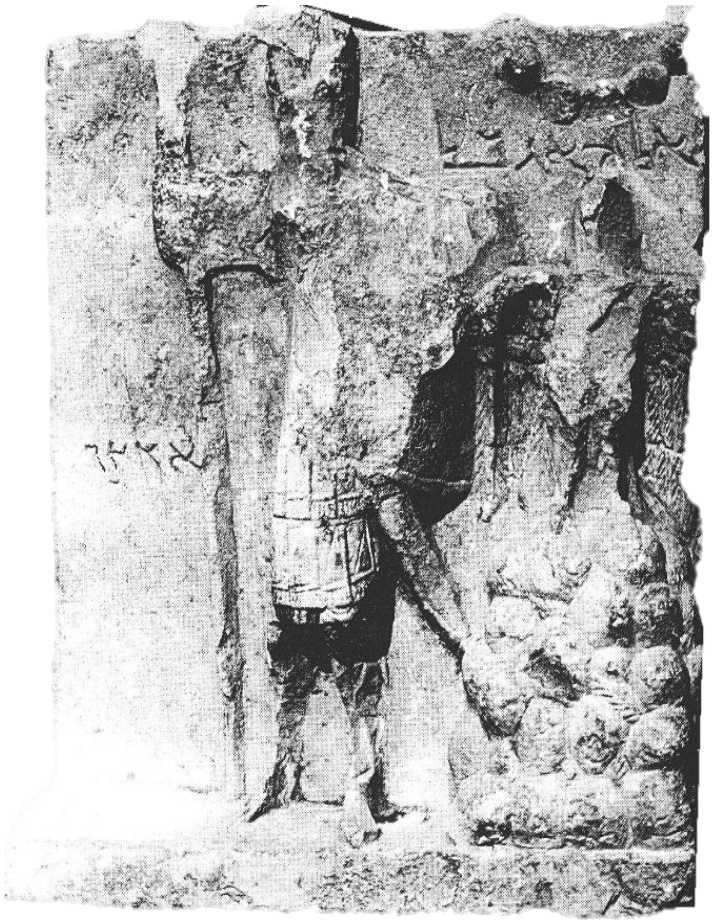

Figure 12. Stele depicting Elagabal and Arsu found in al-Quaryatayn. Limestone. 34.5(h) x 31(w) x 7(d) cm. Private collection. Source: Starcky 1975-6.

Figure 13a. Corinthian capital from the Forum Romanum. Marble. 66(h) cm. Stone of Elagabal with eagle in front atop draped platform. Flanked by Minerva/Athena(/Allat?) (left) and (Urania/Venus/Aphrodite/Juno/Atargatis?) (right) on plinths. Source: Robert Coates-Stephens.

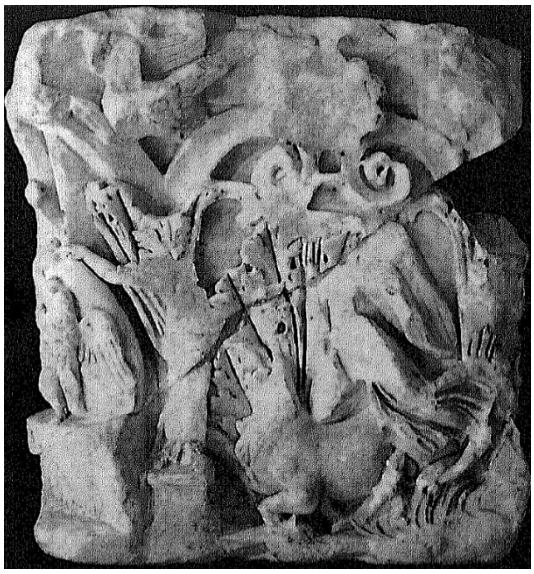

Figure 13b. Right side of capital. Victoria sacrificing bull. Tellus reclines to forefront with cornucopia in right hand and child on shank. Griffins above. Source: De Arrizabalaga 2003, 127.

Figure 13c. Reconstruction of scene on capital. Source: De Arrizabalaga 2004, 205.

Figure 14. Bronze statuette. Syria. Private collection. Eagle atop stone. Source: Dussaud 1903, fig 9.

Figure 15. Coin of Emesa, r. Uranius Antoninus. RPC IX, 1867. Obv.: ΑΥΤΟ Κ ϹΟΥΛΠ ΑΝΤΩΝΙΝΟϹ Ϲ€. Laureate, draped, cuirassed bust of Uranius Antoninus. Rev.: ΔΗΜΑΡΧ ΕΞΟΥϹΙΑϹ, ΕΜΙϹΑ, S C. Eagle standing on line, holding wreath in beak. Source: https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/9/1867

Figure 16. Bronze medallion, r. Elagabalus. Private collection. Obv.: IMP CAES M. AVREL ANTONINVS PIVS FELIX AVG. Laureate but of bearded Elagabalus. Rev.: P M TR P V COS IUI P P. Sacrificial scene with four persons in Elagabal's sanctuary. Source: Woytek 2019, plate 1a.

Figure 17. Coin of Seleucia, c. 36-7 BC. RPC I, 4324 (10). Obv.: veiled head of Tyche. Rev.: ΣΕΛΕΥΚΕΩΝ ΤΗΣ ΙΕΡΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΑΥΤΟΝΟΜΟΥ, ΓΟ, Μ Ι Δ. Thunderbolt on cushion, placed on stool. Source: https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/1/4324

Figure 18. Sun-god tablet from Sippar (text cropped); ninth-century BCE. 29.21(h) x 17.78(w) cm. British Museum, inv. 1881,0428.34.a. Sun-disc (central) and sun-god (right). Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1881-0428-34-a

Figure 19. Variety of the Tanit figure from Carthaginian stelae. Source: Doak 2015, fig 4.15.

Figure 20. Rock-cut seats of Zeus and Hekate, Chalke. Source: Gaifman 2017, fig. 3.

Figure 21. Black stone of Aphrodite, Paphos. Sanctuary of Aphrodite. Source: https://visitworldheritage.com/en/eu/the-sanctuary-of-aphrodite/ace29a88-1dab-46fa-8076-5debd0b1cdeb

Figure 22. Coin of Cyprus, r. Vespasian. RPC II, 1803 (34). Obv.: ΑΥΤΟΚΡΑΤΩΡ ΟΥΕΣΠΑΣΙΑΝΟΣ ΚΑΙΣΑΡ. Laureate head of Vespasian.
Rev.: ΕΤΟΥΣ ΝΕΟΥ ΙΕΡΟΥ, H. Temple of Aphrodite, Paphos, with conical stone.
Source: https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/2/1803

Figure 23. Eye-idol from the Temple of the Winged Lions, Petra. Limestone. 1st-2nd century AD
32(h) x 20(w) x 12.4(d) cm.
Petra Museum. Source: Alpass 2010, fig 7.

Figure 24a. Coin of Sidon, r. Elagabalus. RPC VI, 8505 (10). Obv.: IM C M AV(R) ANTONINVS AVG (P). Laureate, draped, cuirassed bust of Elagabalus. Rev.: COL AVR PIA METR(O) SID. Two-wheel car of Astarte, with four-columned shrine within which baetyl on base; on either side, priest(?) standing, holding torch; on the roof, four palm branches. Source: https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/6/8405

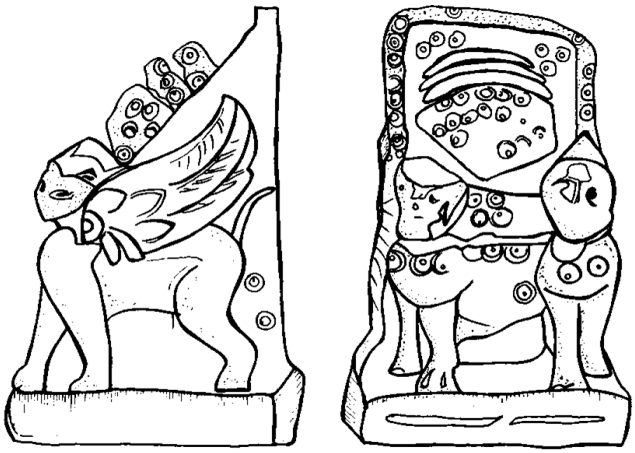

Figure 24b. Throne with ovoid object. Sidon. Second-first century BCE (?). 6-7(h) cm. Source: Doak 2015, fig. 5.43.

Figure 25. Coin of Bostra, r. Trajan Decius. RPC IX, 2209 (1). Obv.: IMP C M Q TRAIANVS DECIVS AVG. Laureate, draped, cuirassed bust of Decius. Rev.: ACTIA DVSARIA COL METR BOSTRENORVM. In wreath, in wreath, the baetyls of the god Dusares: large baetyl between two small baetyls on raised platform; the large baetyl is surmounted by several flat stones, the other ones are surmounted by a single stone. Source: https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/9/2209

Figure 26. Coin of Selge, r. Severus Alexander. RPC VI, 6359 (6). Obv.: ΙΟΥ ΜΑΜΕΑΝ CΕΒ. Diademed, draped bust of Julia Mamaea. Rev.: CΕΛΓΕΩΝ. Two altars on monumental base, each one with a sacred tree. Source: https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/6/6359

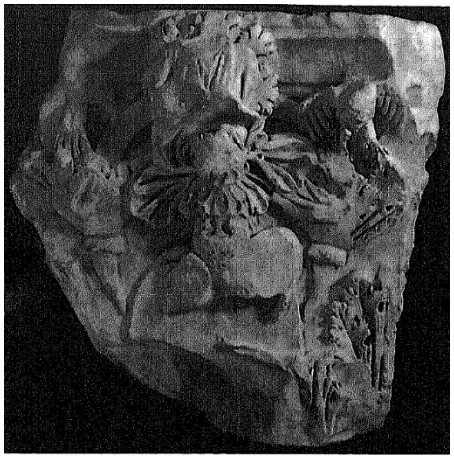

Figure 27. Corinthian capital from the Forum Romanum. Marble. 65(h) cm. Male figure, frontally depicted as charioteer, driving a horse-drawn chariot towards the viewer. Source: De Arrizabalaga 2003, plate 16.

Figure 28. Aureus. RIC IV Elagabalus 35c. Obv.: IMP ANTONINVS PIVS AVG. Laureate, cuirassed bust of Elagabalus. Rev.: P M TR P III COS III P P. Elagabalus, laureate, standing left in slow quadriga, holding branch in right hand and sceptre in left hand; in field above, sometimes star. Source: https://numismatics.org/ocre/id/ric.4.el.35c

Figure 29. Coin of Emesa, r. Caracalla. British Museum, inv. 1840,1226.456. Obv.: Head of Julia Domna. Rev.: ЄMICΩN KOΛΩNIAC / ZKΦ. Monumental altar decorated with two rows of niches with statues; small altar with flames above. Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_1840-1226-456

Figure 30. Coin of Byblos, r. Macrinus. Sanctuary with conical stone. Source: Price and Trell 1977, fig 271.

Figure 31. Coin of Neapolis, r. Elagabalus. RPC VI, 8915 (5). Obv.: AYT K M AY ANTΩNINOC. Laureate, cuirassed bust of Elagabalus. Rev.: ΦΛ NEAC Π(O) CY(P) ΠA(Λ). Facing quadriga carrying the conical stone of Emesa, with eagle in front (left) and Mount Gerizim surmounted by temple (right). Source: https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/6/8915

Figure 32. Coin of Caesarea, c 9/8 BC. RPC I, 3614 (3). Obv.: Head of Heracles with lion skin. Rev.: KAIΣAPEIAΣ, KH. Mount Argaeus; above, eagle. Source: https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/1/3614

Figure 32. Coin of Seleucia, r. Severus Alexander. RPC VI, 8123 (8). Obv.: AYT KAI MAP AYP CЄ(Y) ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟC CЄ. Laureate head of Severus Alexander. Rev.: CЄΛЄΥΚЄΩΝ ΠΙЄΡΙΑC ΟΒΘ. Temple with four columns, betyl of Zeus Kasios within; on roof, eagle; in pediment, sometimes star and crescent. Source: https://rpc.ashmus.ox.ac.uk/coins/6/8123

Ancient Sources

Apollodorus, *The Library*, tr. J. Frazer (Cambridge, 1921).

Arnobius, *Against the Heathen*, tr. H. Bryce, H. Campbell (Buffalo, 1886).

Avienus, *Descripto orbis terrae*, tr. M. Icks (Nimegen, 2008).

Cicero, *Letters to Friends,* tr. D. Shackleton Bailey (Cambridge, 2001).

Clement of Alexandria, *Exhortation to the Greeks,* tr. G. Butterworth (Cambridge, 1919).

Damascius, *Philosophical History*, tr. P. Athanassiadi (Athens, 1999).

Dio Cassius, *Roman History,* tr. E. Cary (Cambridge, 1914-27).

Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, tr. C. Oldfather (Cambridge, 1933-67).

Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities*, tr. E. Cary (Cambridge, 1937-50).

Heliodorus, *Aethiopica*, tr. F. Millar (Cambridge, 1993).

Herodian, *History of the Empire*, tr. C. Whittaker (Cambridge, 1969).

Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, tr. A. Godley (Cambridge, 1920).

Historia Augusta, tr. D. Magie (Cambridge, 1921-32).

Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, tr. L. Feldman (Cambridge, 1930-65).

Julian, *Orations*, tr. W. Wright (Cambridge, 1913).

Lucian, *Alexander the False Prophet*, tr. A. Harmon (Cambridge, 1925).

Lucian, *De Dea Syria*, tr. J. Lightfoot (Oxford, 2003).

Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, tr. R. Kaster (Cambridge, 2011).

Maximus of Tyre, *Philosophical Orations*, tr. M. Trapp (Oxford, 1997).

Minucius Felix, *Octavius,* tr. T. Glover, G. Rendall (Cambridge, 1931).

Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, tr. W. Jones (Cambridge, 1918).

Philo of Byblos, *Phoenician History*, tr. A. Kaldellis, Anthony, C. López Ruiz (Leiden, 2009).

Pliny, *Natural History*, tr. H. Rackham (Cambridge, 1938-62).

Seneca, *Epistles*, tr. R. Gummere (Cambridge, 1917).

Silius Italicus, *Punica*, tr. J. Duff (Cambridge, 1934).

Strabo, *Geography*, tr. H. Jones (Cambridge, 1917-32).

Tacitus, *Histories*, tr. C. Moore (Cambridge, 1925).

Abbreviations

Aesthetics of Religion	A. Koch, K. Williams (eds.) (2020) *The Bloomsbury Handbook of the Cultural and Cognitive Aesthetics of Religion* (London).
Cultural Memory Studies	A. Erll (ed.) (2010) *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies* (Berlin).
Divine Agency	B. Pongratz-Leisten and K. Sonik (eds.) (2015) *The Materiality of Divine Agency* (Berlin).
Iconotropy	J. Tomás García and S. Sáenz-López Pérez (eds.) (2022) *Iconotropy and Cult Images from the Ancient to Modern World* (New York).
Naming the Gods	C. Bonnet *et al*. (eds.) (2022) *Naming and Mapping the Gods in the Ancient Mediterranean: Space, Mobilities and Imaginaries* (Berlin).
Rethinking Materiality	E. DeMarrais *et al.* (eds.) (2004) *Rethinking Materiality: The Engagement of Mind With the Material World* (Exeter).
Theorizing Religions	H. Whitehouse and L. Martin (eds.) (2004) *Theorizing Religions Past. Archaeology, History and Cognition* (Walnut Creek).

Bibliography

Abdulkarim, M. (1997) “Recherches sur la cite de’Émèse á l’epoque romaine (Syrie centrale)”, PhD dissertation, Université de Versailles Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines.

Aktor, M. (2017) “The Hindu *pañcāyatanapūjā* in the aniconism spectrum”, *Religion 47:3*, 503-519.

Aktor, M. (2020) “Aniconicity and Aniconism” in *Aesthetics of Religion*, 97-106.

Arroyo-Kalin, M. (2004) “An Ongoing Outcome, a Surrounding World: Materiality, Agency and History” in *Rethinking Materiality*, 73-84.

Assmann, A. (2010) “Canon and Archive” in *Cultural Memory Studies*, 97-108.

Assmann, J. (2010) “Communicative and Cultural Memory” in *Cultural Memory Studies*, 109-118.

Assmann, J. (2012) *Cultural Memory and Early Civilisation: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge).

Augé, C., and Bellefonds, P. (1986) “Elagabalos”, *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae III.I* (Zurich), 129-130.

Azzopardi, G. (2017) *Elements of Continuity: Stone Cult in the Maltese Islands* (Oxford).

Bacci, M. (2022) “Cross-Mediterranean misinterpretations of sacred imagery” in *Iconotropy*, 142-163.

Barrett, J. (2007) “Cognitive Science of Religion: What Is It and Why Is It?”, *Religion Compass 1:6*, 768-786.

Beck, R. (2006) *The Religion of the Mithras Cult in the Roman Empire: Mysteries of the Unconquered Sun* (Oxford).

Beck-Schnater, A. (2022) “The religion of theft: stolen cult images in ancient Greek ritual and cult” in *Iconotropy*, 58-76.

Bellemare, P. (1996) “Meteorite Sparks A Cult”, *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada 90,* 287-291.

Benzel, K. (2015) “’What Goes In Is What Comes Out’ – But What Was Already There? Divine Materials and Materiality in Ancient Mesopotamia” in *Divine Agency*, 89-118.

Bonnet, C., Galoppin, T., Guillon, E., Luaces, M., Lätzer-Lasar, A., Lebreton, S., Porzia, F., Rüpke, J., Rubens Urciuoli, E. (2022) “Introduction” in *Naming the Gods*, 1-9.

Bovin, N. (2004) “Mind over Matter? Collapsing the Mind-Matter Dichotomy in Material Culture Studies” in *Rethinking Materiality*, 63-72.

Bowersock, G. (1978) “Syria under Vespasian”, *Journal of Roman Studies*, 133-140.

Boyer, P. (2001) *Religion Explained: The human instincts that fashion gods, spirits and ancestors* (London).

Bricault, P. (2012) “Antoninus à reculons. Sur les pas d’Élagabal” in D. Hostein and S. Lalanne (eds.) *Les Voyages Des Empereurs Dans L’Orient Romain: Époques Antonine et Séveŕienne* (Arles), 83-105.

Brøns, C. (2022) “Sensuous Encounters: The Adornment of Cult Statues in Ancient Greece” in *Iconotropy*, 14-35.

Butcher, K. (2003) *Roman Syria and the Near East* (London).

Chernorizov, A., Zinchenko, Y., Zhong-Quing, Y., Petrakova, J. (2016) “Face cognition in humans: Psychophysiological, developmental, and cross-cultural aspects”, *Psychology in Russia: State of the Art 9:4*, 37-50.

Claidière, N., Sperber, D. (2007) “The role of attraction in cultural evolution”, *Journal of Cognition and Culture 7*, 89-111.

Cook, B. (1914) *Zeus: a Study in Ancient Religion* (Cambridge).

Day, M. (2004) “Religion, Off-Line Cognition and the Extended Mind”, *Journal of Cognition and Culture,* 101-121.

De Arrizabalaga, L. (2003-2004) “Anaglyptica Variana: Column capitals with sculptural relief, and associated fragments, related to the cult of Elagabal”, *Tsukuba Studies in Language and Literature 43*, *45, 46*.

De Arrizabalaga, L., de la Fuente Marcos, R. (2005) “The Site of the Varian Temple of Elagabal in Rome: Topographical and astronomical approach to the question”, *Tsukuba Studies in Language and Literature 47*, 89-124.

DeMarrais, E. (2004) “The Materialization of Culture” in *Rethinking Materiality*, 11-22.

Dirven, L. (2013) “Religion, Syria”, *The Encyclopaedia of Ancient History*.

Doak, B. (2015) *Phoenician Aniconism in Its Mediterranean and Near Eastern Contexts* (Atlanta).

Drijvers, H. (1990) “The Syrian Cult Relief” in H. Kippenberg (ed.) *Genres in Visual Representations* (Leiden), 69-82.

Dussaud, R. (1903) *Notes De Mythologie Syrienne* (Paris).

Earle, T. (2004) “Culture Matters: Why Symbolic Objects Change” in *Rethinking Materiality*, 153-165.

Erll, A. (2010) “Cultural Memory Studies: An Introduction” in *Cultural Memory Studies*, 1-18.

Erwins, A., Williams Reed, E. (2022) “Religious Life” in T. Kaizer (ed.) *A Companion to the Hellenistic and Roman East* (Hoboken), 423-434.

Elisséeff, N. (2007) “Homs (Ḥimṣ)” in E. Bosworth (ed.) *Historic Cities of the Islamic World* (Leiden), 155-162.

Elsner, J. (1995) *Art and the Roman Viewer. The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity* (Cambridge).

Elsner, J. (2007) *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text* (Princeton).

Evans, J. (2011) “FROM MOUNTAIN TO ICON: Mount Gerizim on Roman Provincial Coins from Neapolis, Samaria”, *Near Eastern Archaeology 74:3,* 170-182.

Fleming, D. (2015) “Seeing and Socialising with Dagan at Emar’s *Zukru* Festival” in *Divine Agency*, 197-210.

Freedberg, D. (1989) *The Power of Images: Studies in the History of Theory and Response* (Chicago).

Freyd, J., Tversky, B. (1984) “Force of symmetry in form perception”, *American Journal of Psychology 97:1*, 109-126.

Gaifman, M. (2008) “The Aniconic Image of the Roman Near East” in T. Kaizer (ed.) *The variety of local religious life in the Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Leiden), 37-72.

Gaifman, M. (2012) *Aniconism in Greek Antiquity* (Oxford).

Gaifman, M. (2017) “Aniconism: definitions, examples and comparative perspectives”, *Religion 47:3*, 335-352.

Gaiger, J. (2014) “Depiction, Make-Believe and Participatory Imagining” in C. Van Eck *et al.* (eds.) *The Secret Lives of Artworks: Exploring the Boundaries between Art and Life* (Leiden), 340-359.

Geertz, C. (1973) [1966] “Religion as a Cultural System”, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York), 87-125.

Gell, A. (1998) *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford).

Guthrie, S. (1995) *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion* (Oxford).

Guthrie, S. (2015) “Religion and Art: A Cognitive and Evolutionary Approach*”, Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture 9:3*, 283-311.

Guthrie, S. and Porubanova, M. (2023) “Faces in Clouds and Voices in Wind: Anthropomorphism in Religion and Human Cognition” in J. Lane and Y. Lior (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Evolutionary Approaches to Religion* (Abingdon), 94-110.

Halsberghe, G. (1972) *The Cult of Sol Invictus* (Leiden).

Hoffman-Salz, J. (2022) *Im Land Der Rauberischen Nomaden? Die Eigenherrschaften Der Ituraier Und Emesener Zwischen Seleukiden Und Romern* (Göttingen).

Huang, Y., Lyu, J., Xue, X., Peng, K. (2020) “Cognitive basis for the development of aesthetic preference: Findings from symmetry preference”, *PLoS ONE*, 1-15.

Hundley, M. (2015) “Divine Presence in Ancient Near Eastern Temples”, *Religion Compass 9*, 203-215.

Icks, M. (2008) *Images of Elagabalus* (Nijmegen).

Icks, M. (2009) “Empire of the Sun? Civic Responses to the Rise and Fall of Sol Elagabal in the Roman Empire” in O. Hekster *et al.* (eds.) *Ritual Dynamics and Religious Change in the Roman Empire* (Leiden), 111-120.

Johannsen, D., Kirsch, A. (2020) “Narrative Strategies” in *Aesthetics of Religion*, 143-154.

Johnson, K. (2004) “Primary Emergence of the Doctrinal Mode of Religiosity in Prehistoric Southwestern Iran” in *Theorizing Religions*, 45-66.

Johnston, J. (2017) “Stone-agency: sense, sight and magical efficacy in traditions of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland”, *Religion 47:3,* 445-458.

Kaizer, T. (2006) “In Search of Oriental Cults. Methodological Problems Concerning ‘the Particular’ and ‘the General’ in Near Eastern Religion in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods”, *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* 55:1, 26-47.

Kaizer, T. (2008) “Introduction” in T. Kaizer (ed.) *The variety of local religious life in the Near East in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* (Leiden), 1-36.

Kaizer, T. (2013) “Identifying the Divine in the Roman Near East” in L. Bricault, C. Bonnet (eds.) *Pantheé: religious transformations in the Greco-Roman Empire* (Boston), 113-128.

Kielt Costello, S. (2011) “Contextualising the Study of Ecstatic Experience in Ancient Old World Societies” in D. Stein, S. Kielt Costello, K. Polinger Foster (eds.) *The Routledge Companion to Ecstatic Experience in the Ancient World* (Abingdon), 15-25.

Kindt, J. (2012) *Rethinking Greek Religion* (Cambridge).

King, G. (2002) “Archaeological Fieldwork at the Citadel of Homs, Syria: 1995 – 1999”, *Levant 34*, 39-58.

Koch, A., Williams, K. (2020) “Introduction” in *Aesthetics of Religion*, 1-10.

Konrad, M. (2017) “The Client Kings of Emesa: a study of local identities in the Roman Near East”, *Syria 94*, 261-295.

Kropp, A. (2010) “Earrings, *nefesh* and *opus reticulatum*: self-representation of the royal house of Emesa in the first century AD” in T. Kaizer and M. Facella (eds.) *Kingdoms and Principalities in the Roman Near East* (Stuttgart), 199-216.

Kropp, A. (2013) *Images and Monuments of Near Eastern Dynasts, 100BC – 100AD* (Oxford).

Kropp, A, (2021a) “A Roman altar on Mount Gerizim: Rediscovering a civic icon on tetradrachms of Neapolis (Samaria)”, *Journal of Roman Archaeology 34*, 220-236.

Kropp, A. (2021b) “Emesa”, *The Encyclopaedia of Ancient History.*

Kühn, S., Brick, T., Müller, B., Gallinat, J. (2014) “Is This Car Looking At You? How Anthropomorphism Predicts Fusiform Face Area Activation When Seeing Cars”, *PLoS ONE*, 1-14.

Larson, J. (2016) *Understanding Greek Religion* (Abingdon).

Lawson, E. (2004) “The Wedding of Psychology, Ethnography and History: Methodological Bigamy or Tripartite Free Love?” in *Theorizing Religions*, 1-6.

Luchesi, B. (2020) “Cult Images” in *Aesthetics of Religion*, 207-218.

Mackey, J. (2022) *Belief and Cult: Reimagining Roman Religion* (Princeton).

MacMullen, R. (1981) *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (London).

Maiden, B. (2020) *Cognitive Science and Ancient Israelite Religion: New Perspectives on Texts, Artifacts and Culture* (Cambridge).

Malafouris, C. (2004) “The Cognitive Bias of Material Engagement: Where Brain, Body and Culture Conflate” in *Rethinking Materiality*, 53-62.

Manders, E. (2005) “Religion and Coinage: Heliogabalus and Alexander Severus: two extremes?”, *Talanta 36*, 123-138.

Manier, D., Hirst, W. (2010) “A Cognitive Taxonomy of Collective Memories” in *Cultural Memory Studies*, 253-262.

Martin, L. (2015) *The Mind of Mithraists: Historical and Cognitive Studies in the Roman Cult of Mithras* (London).

McCauley, R. and Lawson, E. (2007) “Cognition, Religious Ritual and Archaeology” in E. Kyriakidis (ed.) *The Archaeology of Ritual* (Los Angeles), 209-254.

McCauley, R. (2020) “Recent Trends in the Cognitive Science of Religion: Neuroscience, Religious Experience, and the Confluence of Cognitive and Evolutionary Research”, *Zygon 55:1*, 97-124.

Mendoza-Collazos, J., Zlatev, J. (2022) “A Cognitive-Semiotic Approach to Agency: Assessing Ideas from Cognitive Science and Neuroscience”, *Biosemiotics 15,* 141-170.

Meskell, L. (2004) “Divine Things” in *Rethinking Materiality*, 249-260.

Millar, F. (1993) *The Roman Near East, 31 BC – AD 337* (Cambridge).

Min Lee, J., Baek, J., Young, D. (2018) “Anthropomorphic Design: Emotional Perception for Deformable Object”, *Frontiers in Psychology*, 1-12.

Miton, H., Sperber, D., Hernik, M. (2020) “A Forward Bias in Human Profile-Oriented Portraits”, *Cognitive Science 44:2*, 1-17.

Mohr, H. (2020) “Sensory Strategies” in *Aesthetics of Religion*, 129-142.

Monzel, P., Morden, M. (2006) “The Cult Statue of Aphrodite at Palaepaphos: A Meteorite?”, *Journal of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada*, 149-155.

Moussli, M. (1983) “Griechische Inschriften Aus Emesa Und Laodicea Ad Libanum”, *Philologus 127,* 254-264.

Newson, P. (2015) “The consequences of Roman imperialism: cultural change in the Basalt Region of Homs, Syria”, *Levant 47:3*, 267-292.

Niehr, H. (1998) “Baal-Zaphon” in K. van der Horst (ed.) *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden), 152-154.

Nuño, A., Ezquerra, J., Woolf, G. (2021) “Introduction” in A. Nuño *et al.* (eds.) *SENSORIVM. The Senses in Roman Polytheism* (Leiden), 1-34.

Olick, J. (2010) “From Collective Memory to the Sociology of Mnemonic Practices and Products” in *Cultural Memory Studies*, 151-162.

Patzelt, M. (2021) “*Favete Linguis* and the Experience of the Divine: A Cognitively Grounded Approach to Sensory Perception in Roman Religion” in A. Nuño *et al.* (eds.) *SENSORIVM. The Senses in Roman Polytheism* (Leiden), 103-124.

Philip, G., Bradbury, J. (2010) “Pre-Classical Activity in the Basalt Landscape of the Homs Region, Syria: Implications for the Development of ‘Sub-Optimal’ Zones in the Levant During the Chalcolithic-Early Bronze Age”, *Levant 42:2*, 136-169.

Pirenne-Delforge, V. (2010) “Greek priests and “cult statues”: In how far are they unnecessary?” in J. Mylonopoulos (ed.) *Divine Images and Human Imaginations in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Leiden), 121-142.

Platt, V. (2011) *Facing the Gods: Epiphany and Representation in Greco-Roman Art, Literature and Religion* (Cambridge).

Pongratz-Leisten, B. (2015) “Imperial Allegories: Divine Agency and Monstrous Bodies in Mesopotamia’s Body Description Texts” in *Divine Agency*, 119-141.

Pongratz-Leisten, B., Sonik, K. (2015) “Between Cognition and Culture. Theorizing the Materiality of Divine Agency in Cross-Cultural Perspective” in *Divine Agency*, 3-69.

Renfrew, C. (2004) “Towards s Theory of Material Engagement” in *Rethinking Materiality*, 23-32.

Roller, L. (1999) *In Search of God the Mother: the Cult of Anatolian Cybele* (Berkeley).

Rowan, C. (2006) “The Procession of Elagabalus and the Problem of the Parasols”, *Journal of the Numismatic Association of Australia 17,* 114-119.

Scarre, C. (2004) “Displaying the Stones: The Materiality of ‘Megalithic’ Monuments” in *Rethinking Materiality*, 141-152.

Seyrig, H. (1971) “Le culte du Soleil en Syrie a l’époque romaine”, *Syria 48:3/4*, 337-373.

Shaman, N., Saide, A., Richert, R. (2018) “Dimesional Structure of and Variation in Anthropomorphic Concepts of God”, *Frontiers in Psychology 9*, 1-16.

Smith, M. (2022) “Divine Epithets as Perspectival Discourse” in *Naming the Gods*, 41-70.

Sperber, D. (1994) “The modularity of thought and the epistemology of representations” in L. Hirschfield and S. Gelman (eds.) *Mapping the Mind: Domain Specificity in Cognition and Culture* (Cambridge), 39-67.

Sperber, D. (2000a) “An objection to the mimetic approach to culture” in R. Auger (ed.) *Darwinizing Culture: The Status of Mimetics as a Science* (Oxford), 163-173.

Sperber, D. (2000b) “Introduction” in D. Sperber (ed.) *Metarepresentations: A Multidisciplinary Perspective* (Oxford), 3-13.

Sperber, D. (2012) “Cultural attractors” in J. Brockman (ed.) *This will make you smarter* (New York), 180-183.

Spolsky, E. (2004) “Introduction: Iconotropism, or Turning Toward Pictures” in E. Spolsky (ed.) *Iconotropism: Turning Toward Pictures* (Lewisburg), 11-20.

Starcky, J. (1975-6) “Stèle D’Elahgabal”, *Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph,* 503-520.

Stewart, P. (2007) “Gell’s Idols and Roman Cult”, *Art’s Agency and Art History 170,* 158-178.

Stewart, P. (2008) “Baetyls as Statues? Cult Images in the Roman Near East” in Y. Eliav *et al.* (eds.) *The Sculptural Environment of the Roman Near East* (Leuven), 297-314.

Straub, J. (2010) “Psychology, Narrative and Cultural Memory: Past and Present” in *Cultural Memory Studies*, 215-228.

Tomás García, J. and Sáenz-López Pérez, S. (2022) “Introduction: iconotropy and the alteration of religious images” in *Iconotropy*, 1-13.

Upal, M. (2023) “Minimally Counterintuitive Concepts: A Unified Theory in the Cognitive Science of Religion?” in J. Lane and Y. Lior (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Evolutionary Approaches to Religion* (Abingdon), 82-93.

Van Eck, C. (2010) “Living Statues: Alfred Gell’s *Art and Agency*, Living Presence Response and the Sublime”, *Art History 33:4*, 642-659.

Van Eck, C., Van Gastel, J., Van Kessel, E. (2014) “Introduction: Exploring the Boundaries Between Art and Life” in C. Van Eck *et al.* (eds.) *The Secret Lives of Artworks: Exploring the Boundaries between Art and Life* (Leiden), 7-20.

Van Eyghen, H. (2015) “Religious Cognition as Social Cognition”, *Studia Religiologica 48:4*, 301-312.

Van Slyke (2011) *The Cognitive Science of Religion* (Abingdon).

Wan, E. and Chen, R. (2021) “Anthropomorphism and object attachment”, *Current Opinion in Psychology 39,* 88-93.

Welzer, H. (2010) “Communicative Memory” in *Cultural Memory Studies*, 285-300.

Whitehouse, H. (2004) “Theorizing Religions Past” in *Theorizing Religions*, 215-232.

Williams Reed, E. (2020) “Environments and gods: creating the sacred landscape of Mount Kaisos” in R. Häussler and G. Franco Chiai (eds.) *Sacred Landscapes in Antiquity* (Oxford), 87-94.

Woytek, B. (2019) “Elagabalus and the “Aedes Dei Invicti Solis Elagabali” in Rome: the Numismatic Evidence”, *The Numismatic Chronicle 179*, 205-224.

Young, G. (2003) “Emesa and Baalbek: Where is the Temple of Elahagabal?”, *Levant 35:1*, 159-162.