



Friction and Monstrosity: Reflections on Objects in Religion and in the Study of Religion

Laura Feldt, AHKR, University of Bergen
Jane Hjarl Petersen, University of Southern Denmark

In recent decades, objects have become a major focal point in the study of religion. Across several new approaches - the aesthetics of religion, material religion, media-oriented perspectives and more - materiality and objects feature prominently. Objects have also been central research foci in other humanities and social science disciplines for some time. Grateful to have been invited to write an introduction to this inaugural issue of Religion og Tankar, I decided 1) to focus on two aspects of engagements with objects in religious contexts: friction and monstrosity and 2) to write the introduction in collaboration with archaeologist Jane Hjarl Petersen.¹ Friction and monstrosity will help highlight some of the special ways in which objects can be charged with significance in religions comparatively and hopefully be productive of further ideas and reflections for those doing research on objects. But they can also function as fruitful points of observation for the study of religion, and indicate fruitful points of collaboration with other disciplines. Before we start, let us warmly congratulate the great team of students for their initiative in founding Religion og Tankar!

Monstrosity

In religions worldwide and historically, it requires only a casual glance to realise how important objects are to the communication, practice, transmission and demise of religions, also in traditions that pride themselves on focusing on beliefs.² Materiality is entangled in how religions function at a very basic level. What I wish to suggest here is that some of the peculiarity of how religion and objects are entangled lies in the monstrosity produced via these entanglements. In religions, while many objects are straightforwardly monstrous or hybrid like Medusa or the Gorgons, other forms of materiality can seem even more monstrous, but in another way. Objects used in rituals often acquire a whiff of monstrosity over time. What do we mean by monstrosity? If we approach religious communication and practice as fundamentally mediated, it becomes clear that the other world and its culturally postulated superhuman beings can only become available to communication, interaction, and exchange via objects, via forms of materiality (and yes, the body too can be a material medium) (Feldt and Geertz 2020). This also means that religious objects can become monstrous. Crucial to the interaction with the other world, some objects function as points of access to, or possibilities for interaction and communication with, the deities, spirits, and beings of the other world. They are monstrofied in practice; they are used in ways that establish and signal their belonging to two worlds at the same time: this world and the other world. In a sense, they come to constitute a boundary zone between the worlds, an arena of exchange and translation. Let us look at some examples.

¹<https://portal.findresearcher.sdu.dk/en/persons/jhpetersen/>

²Many researchers have pointed to this, see the discussion with references in Feldt and Geertz 2020.

In ancient Mesopotamia, new cult statues underwent many forms of ritual preparation, including the “washing of the mouth” ceremony. A part of this ceremony entailed symbolically cutting off the hands of the workers who had fashioned the statue with a wooden knife. Once “cut”, a red string would be tied around their wrists to indicate the severance of all human aspects from the divine statue. Once the statue was properly prepared ritually, adorned with clothes, a wig, and jewellery, and installed in the temple, it was addressed and treated as a god and could receive cult, i.e. daily food offerings. The statue in the temple enabled the presence of the god in the city, ensured fertility, health and security, and its presence was a precondition for cult, worship, prayer, for the interaction with the deities, in short. Similar ritual preparations were done for small figurines used in households to enable the presence of protective beings from the other world and avoid the entry of demons (Feldt 2015). Matter could be made to come alive with otherworldly presence in ancient Mesopotamia and objects were fundamental in all interactions with the other world, whether with deities, monsters, spirits or demons.

We also find illustrative examples closer to us in time. In Europe in the 15th and 16th century, religious conflicts were often about materiality. Caroline Walker Bynum tells the story of how a group of Protestant visitors to a nunnery in northern Germany insisted that the nuns stopped their “idol-worship” (Bynum 2022, 92-109). The protesters referred to a glass container that was believed to contain a miraculous host, a so-called monstrans. In this era, stories abounded about hosts that could bleed, heal, or in which the face of Christ could appear. Christians of this era were anxious about how the other world could manifest and be present in matter: in relics, bones, dust, clothes, and in bread and wine (Bynum 2022, 92-109). In late medieval folklore, we also see an insistent focus on the metamorphosis of matter and reflections of a labile universe. From werewolf stories to alchemy and magic, the boundaries between worlds were permeable, but this permeability manifested itself in monstrous objects. This brings us to the second aspect of objects we want to highlight: friction.

Friction

Friction as a term can be understood as a synonym for conflict. It underlines how objects in religions often become sites of conflict, as indicated in the above confrontation between the German nuns and the Protestants. In ancient Mesopotamia, it was common to see success in war as an indication of divine support. When kings attacked and conquered territory, they would claim that their god – as king Hammurabi famously did with the previously unknown god Marduk of Babylon – had secured the victory. Conquering a city meant destroying temples and plundering religious paraphernalia, including divine statues. The deities involved were understood to “have left” their homes, whereas the deities of the conquerors were seen as strong and powerful. This could result in the production of new mythologies to celebrate the new status of the deity in the pantheon. The famous composition *Enuma elish* is an example of this.

In ancient Judaism, new perspectives on materiality gradually emerged during the Persian-Hellenistic era. These revealed a deep awareness of the importance of objects for the maintenance of religious identity in situations of dislocation and diaspora (Feldt 2020). In a famous story likely originating in the Persian era (ca. 500-200 BCE), but fictionally set in the era before the exile, in the time of the First Temple, Judean king Josiah cleansed the temple in Jerusalem of what was regarded as illegitimate objects – objects devoted to other gods than Yahweh, to Ashera, Ba'al and the hosts of heaven: he smashed them, desecralised them, and also killed the religious specialists who took care of their cult. Henceforth, according to this story, anyone belonging to Israel was to worship only Yahweh, do so only in the temple in Jerusalem, and only with sanctioned religious paraphernalia, like the scroll. All objects belonging to other gods were to be treated as “disgusting”, destroyed and desecralised (2 Kings 22-23). The story is legendary and fictional but reflects new religious ideals. A new memorial and media culture was inaugurated with remarkable repercussions in the history of religions. Notably, the new memorial culture was frictional at its core by involving active reflections on how to avoid a future religious demise of the in-group and by actively rejecting the material culture of “the other”, those framed as outgroups. The temple that the story is about was destroyed and looted by the Babylonians

in a raid in the first quarter of the sixth century BCE. In the Persian era, from which the story originates, the imperial rulers allowed the Jews to build a new temple that was then named the Second Temple. The Roman campaign against Jerusalem in 70 CE, initiated under Vespasian and completed by his son Titus, culminated in the destruction of the Second Temple.³ The act was both military and symbolic: the Romans breached Jerusalem's defenses during Passover and deliberately targeted the Temple. In the aftermath, Roman forces systematically looted the Temple for its sacred objects: the golden menorah, the table of showbread, and various other precious objects and transported them to Rome. The objects were then paraded during the grand triumph of Vespasian and Titus in 71 CE, visually affirming Roman supremacy and divine favor while simultaneously framing Jewish religion as both defeated and appropriated (Beard 2007; Elsner 2002).

The spolia functioned as a concrete manifestation of evocation which was the Roman ritual extraction and redirection of a conquered people's deity. By removing the Temple's sacred objects, Rome effectively destroyed the locus of Jewish worship and asserted that the Jewish God had departed Jerusalem. The Arch of Titus, erected shortly thereafter, immortalizes this narrative through reliefs depicting the Temple spoils being paraded into Rome. The Flavian dynasty utilized the destruction and looting of the Temple not only to quell rebellion but also to reinforce its authority and divine legitimacy in Rome. The ritual display of spolia during the triumph reinforced a powerful message: by seizing and displaying the symbols of Jewish worship, the Flavians signaled both the death of one religious center and the supremacy of the Roman religious-political order (Goodman 2007; Elsner 2002).

Like the story of king Josiah, the later history of the Second Temple in Jerusalem brings out another noteworthy trait characteristic of object use in religions: how tightly objects are interwoven with emotionality. King Josiah wept when confronted with the scroll; he raged when confronted with any usage of objects he found illegitimate, just as later Jews grieved over the destruction of the Temple, while the conquest and rematerialisations evoked other emotions in Babylonian and Roman elites. Destructive logics of object-focused religion demolition can also be located much closer to us, in the contemporary era. ISIS' destruction of Mesopotamian statues and figurines in Nineveh in 2014 is an example that returns us to statue use and the very fundamental importance of material practices for the interaction with the other world in classical, locative, temple-oriented religions, but also to friction. Such practices can be framed by othering discourses in utopian religious formations (aka "monotheisms"), and thus become intensely frictional focus points in the relations between religious groups, even though material practices are also fundamental in utopian formations.

Emotions are indeed key in our interactions with objects. Emotions help imbue our objects with significance, meaning, and that particular attachment value that make them frictional. Many of us may have a pair of favourite shoes, a jumper, or a necklace we inherited from granny or perhaps a cherished wedding ring. Children often have favourite teddy bears that acquire a huge significance for their emotional development and ability to have social relations. If we turn from such objects to religious objects, the emotional intensity is only heightened via ritual practices and their social effects, as well as via multimedia and multisensory contexts that affect our senses and bodies deeply. This goes for divine statues, amulets and Christmas trees alike.

A poignant example of this is the display and stewardship of human remains in museums that have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years, driven by growing calls for decolonisation, ethical reassessment, and legal reform. Historically, many Western museums have objectified human remains, positioning them at the intersection of scientific specimens and once-living persons - a tension that compels curators and researchers to navigate profound ethical ambiguities (Nilsson Stutz 2023). Contemporary responses range from litigation to proposals for a fundamental reconfiguration of how museums conceptualise human dignity, collective memory, and religious sensibilities in relation to individuals whose remains are held in institutional collections. For Indigenous and Diaspora communities, the retention and exhibition of human remains can be seen as a form of cultural violence. Consequently, recent debates have prompted museum governance frameworks to embed principles of religious sovereignty, enabling descendant communities to identify ancestral remains and demand culturally and religiously appropriate treatment, including repatriation (Nilsson Stutz, Peyroteo Stjerna & Tarlow 2025).

³See Josephus, *Bellum Judaicum* (The Jewish War), Book VI.

The human species is conditioned by ritual behaviours that are part of our biological make-up. With the expansion of our emotional brain, human animals have been able to externalise and materialise signifiatory and meaningful symbols as expressions of communal and individual identities. Contemporary research emphasises that the development of consciousness happened via material entanglements. The use of technologies and material media have affected human cognition and emotion and been fundamental in social development, communication and language development. So, objects might also be seen as fundamental to our humanity. They are the connectors between internal representations and the external world. Human cognition is in a basic sense extended via objects. Objects and material media have played a central role in our biocultural evolution and still do as stabilising anchors for social interactions and they are an important part of individual and collective identity formation (Feldt and Geertz 2020). From another angle, but pointing in the same direction, Michel Serres has suggested that the friction of objects may be the only thing that stands between us and the war of all against all (as explained in Connor 2023).

Stranger Things?

Today, many fields are moving further away from studies of historical sources and sociality in ways that are isolated from bodies, spaces, materiality, media, senses, networks and the more-than-human world in general. Research is moving towards the inclusion of broader contexts, where we do not approach a medium, source, image or a singular text in an isolated way, but as part of an environment where materiality, bodies, spaces, technologies, sociality, culture, historical change and the more-than-human world interact. Will it be fruitful for the study of religion to incorporate objects and material media even more in our field, also beyond, but still including, the contemporary era with its conspicuous and far-ranging usage of mass and social media? We wager that it will, and we suggest that more interaction between sociological and anthropological research, media and materiality studies, including archaeology, cognitive research and the long and broad history of religions is exciting. It needs to involve also a deepened attention to the senses, experience, immersion and environments (Grønlykke, Kytö and Bhroin 2024).

The monstrosity and friction of our engagements and entanglements with objects in the widest social and historical sense, both in and outside of religion, might have been what Durkheim was thinking about when he said that religion's (and society's) true function is "to make us act and help us live" (Fields 1995: lxi). We will end with two questions for further reflection, one from Steven Connor: how would humans be human subjects without objects to function as others to other subjects (Connor 2023)? But also: How would people be religious without those stranger things – those frictional and monstrous objects – that mediate their relations to each other and to their otherworlds?

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Illustration her: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=arch+titus+relief&title=Special%3AMediaSearch&type=image>

If we want an example perhaps this: <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2024/6/7/peabody-museum-mummies-greenland/>