JEWISH LITERATURES AND CULTURES

CONTEXT AND INTERTEXT

Edited by
Anita Norich and Yaron Z. Eliav

Brown Judaic Studies
Providence, Rhode Island
Contents

Acknowledgments ......................................................... ix

Abbreviations ............................................................. xi

Introduction
  • Jewish Literatures and Cultures: Context and Intertext
    Anita Norich ......................................................... 1

Opening Essay
  • From Continuity to Contiguity: Thoughts on the Theory
    of Jewish Literature
    Dan Miron .............................................................. 9

Articles
  1 • Beyond Influence: Toward a New
    Historiographic Paradigm
    Michael L. Satlow .................................................. 37

  2 • Hellenistic Judaism: Myth or Reality?
    Gabriele Boccaccini ................................................. 55

  3 • "He Was Renowned to the Ends of the Earth"
    (1 Maccabees 3:9): Judaism and Hellenism in 1 Maccabees
    Martha Himmelfarb ............................................... 77

  4 • Roman Statues, Rabbis, and Greco-Roman Culture
    Yaron Z. Eliav ...................................................... 99

  5 • The Ghetto and Jewish Cultural Formation in Early Modern
    Europe: Towards a New Interpretation
    David B. Ruderman ................................................. 117
6 • Hybrid with What? The Variable Contexts of Polish Jewish Culture: Their Implications for Jewish Cultural History and Jewish Studies
   Moshe Rosman ........................................... 129

7 • Idols of the Cave and Theater: A Verbal or Visual Judaism?
   Kalman P. Bland ......................................... 155

8 • "Reverse Marranism," Translatability, and the Theory and Practice of Secular Jewish Culture in Russian
   Gabriella Safran ........................................ 177

9 • Intertextuality, Rabbinic Literature, and the Making of Hebrew Modernism
   Shachar Pinsker ........................................ 201

10 • Brooklyn Am Rhein?: The German Sources of Jewish American Literature
    Julian Levinson ......................................... 229

11 • Diaspora and Translation: The Migrations of Jewish Meaning
    Naomi Seidman ........................................ 245

Authors' Biographical Information ........................................ 259
Public sculptures were the “mass media” of the Roman world. They populated urban centers throughout the empire, serving as what art historians call a “plastic language” that communicated political, religious, and social messages. Sculptural displays evoked a complex spectrum of emotions, from fear and loathing to aesthetic admiration, and of ideas, from reflections on the nature of the divine to the implications of social hierarchy, patronage, and power. Most prominent were the three-dimensional sculptures—some life-sized, others colossal representations of mythological figures and real people. They were carved from marble or other stone, cast in bronze, and shaped out of wood, and throughout the Roman world could be found on tall pedestals, atop arches, and in special niches and aediculae. Alongside was a profusion of relief sculptures that enlivened both the exteriors and interiors of public buildings and temples, animated column capitals, and decorated entablatures of all sorts of architectural structures along the street, from the nymphaea (water fountains) to the tetrapyra (colonnaded, arched structures that marked the intersection of streets in the Roman city). Sculpted images were omnipresent in the urban landscape of the Roman realm.2

This article is a revised, second version of an earlier study of mine; see Yaron Z. Eliav, “Viewing the Sculptural Environment: Shaping the Second Commandment,” in The Talmud Yerushalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture III (ed. Peter Schäfer; Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 93; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002), 411–33. In preparing it I benefited from the comments of Elise Friedland and Anita Norich; many thanks to both.


2. Most recently, although focused mostly on the western part of the Roman Empire, see Peter Stewart, Statues in Roman Society: Representation and Response (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).
The closest (although of course not identical) parallel in the modern world is the huge billboards ubiquitous along the main streets of many cities, carrying our own political and cultural messages. It seems to me that the fascination of a small-town visitor walking into Times Square, stunned by its enormous images and neon signs, is probably somewhat analogous to the experience of the author of the Acts of the Apostles when he described Athens as *kateidólos* (17:16). (The literal meaning is "full of idols," but I think Nigel Spivey, and Richard Wycherley before him, were on target when they creatively translated this phrase as "a forest of idols.")

In the Roman Near East—the provinces of Syria, Palestine, Arabia, and Egypt—statues surrounded people wherever they went and were an integral part of the physical environment in which they lived. Anyone walking in a typical city in Palestine during this period, from Caesarea Maritima, Scythopolis, and Samaria, to Paneas and Eleutheropolis, would encounter Roman sculpture every step of the way. There is no reason to believe that major cities in regions heavily settled by Jews, such as Sephoris or Tiberias, were any different. The archaeological evidence, the varied discussions of statues in rabbinical literature (some of which will be discussed below) and even their incidental mention in non-Jewish sources all support this claim.

How did the Jews function within this visual environment? Modern scholars have tended to examine the relationship between Judaism and the Greco-Roman world in terms of the conflicts and tensions that purportedly divided them. Roman sculpture, in particular, seems to embody this envisioned clash between the two cultures. After all, what could be more representative of the pagan trajectory than their "idols"? What could be more contradictory to the second commandment's prohibition against the

---


5. In another paper in this volume Michael Satlow surveys these paradigms in nineteenth- and twentieth-century research and elucidates their difficulties; I have devoted a few studies to this question as well. See Michael L. Satlow, "Beyond Influence: Toward a New Historiographic Paradigm," in this volume; Yaron Z. Eliav, "The Roman Bath as a Jewish Institution: Another Look at the Encounter between Judaism and the Graeco-Roman Culture," *JSJ* 31 (2000): 416–54.
creation of images than the three-dimensional figures that inhabited the ancient world? In the centuries that followed antiquity, and arguably still in our own day, the apprehension toward and the rejection of statues came to epitomize the Jewish (disapproving) stance toward the outside world in general and art in particular.

The term "conflict," however, can be deceptive. In describing two cultures as "conflicting," we need to clarify which aspects of society manifest this hostility. Who in fact are the opposing parties? Are their ideologies inimical to each other? Is the hostility evident on the social level, among the common people, or is it only the leaders and cultural elite inflaming these differences? Enmity is an age-old tool to define identity, retain elite power, and strengthen unity. Thus, we must proceed with scholarly skepticism. When characterizing the "multicultural atmosphere" in a particular time and place, awareness of the divergent, even seemingly contradictory, attitudes of each group becomes mandatory. In the sphere of culture and religion, conflict and amity both coexist and intertwine. Shifting attention, therefore, from the fixed category of inexorable and everlasting discord between "Athens" and "Jerusalem," and concentrating instead on everyday Jewish life in Roman Palestine and on the material culture of its landscape, may provide an alternative, less ideologically fraught, perspective on the encounter between Jews and their surroundings in antiquity.

Like other Jews in Palestine, especially those living in urban centers, the sages who produced the tannaitic and amoraic literature (usually referred to as "rabbis") were well aware of the "sculptural environment," and alluded to it quite freely in their writings. Not only did the rabbis repeatedly mention statues by name, such as Aphrodite, Mercury, the figures (icons) of kings and emperors, or even the "faces which spout out water in the towns" (t. Avod. Zar. 6:6), they were also conscious of the social and political dynamics associated with the positioning of statues as well as the cultural milieu in which they functioned. They were acutely aware of the customs, myths, and emotions that revolved around these graven images.

For example, the use of statues for imperial propaganda, and the procedures of damnatio memoriae that stemmed from it, provided the context for the following rabbinic parable: "A king of flesh-and-blood entered a province and [the people] set up icons [of him], made statues [of him] and struck coins in his honor. Later on they upset his portraits, broke his statues and defaced his coins, thus diminishing the likenesses of the king." It likewise supplied the background for the story about the artisan "who [started to] fashion the icon of the king" but the king was "replaced" by another before he had a chance to complete his work (Mek. R. Ishmael, trac-

tate Bahod. 8). Frequent changes of rule during the political turmoil of the third century C.E. undoubtedly provided many opportunities to watch such events unfold in real time, whether at a formal declaration of the former emperor as hostes or simply when such actions transpired spontaneously in the heat of the moment.

Elsewhere, the rabbis mention the customs of family statuary. One tradition reads, for example, "[A person] goes to a sculptor and says to him, 'Make me a likeness of my father'; another says, 'When the eldest [son] of one of them died they made an icon of him and placed it in their house." As is well known, although less emphasized by scholars, private statues and masks of family leaders (imagines maiorum) or children who died prematurely were extremely popular with affluent families (Mek. R. Ishmael, tractate Pisha 13). Rabbinic literature mentions many other details distinctive of Greco-Roman sculpture—and not only in a negative tone. The engraved inscription that accompanies a statue, for example—a crucial factor in the way onlookers engage it—surfaces in second-century rabbinic terminology as nothing more than "[a]n inscription that runs under figures and icons." Tannaitic halakah forbids Jews to inspect the inscription on the Sabbath, apparently as part of the general prohibition against reading texts other than scripture on that day (t. Shabb. 17:1). Another example relates to the importance of personal statues in the estate of the deceased—a subject that comes up occasionally in Roman law as well. The rabbis raise it in regard to the case of a convert who inherited them from his father (m. Demai 6:10; t. Demai 6:13). Rather unexpectedly, the sages also allude to even more spiritual aspects of sculptures, such as the animistic beliefs associated with them, not to mention the aesthetic appreciation of their beauty.

In general, the rabbis' close acquaintance with these aspects of Roman culture should not be startling. After all, like their fellow Jews, they did not disengage themselves from the Greco-Roman domain, and so it is natural that the world they lived in should be reflected in their literary work. The important question is therefore not whether rabbis were familiar with the Roman world but how they assessed it. Cyril Mango, in his influential

---

7. Ed. Horovitz and Rabin, 233; translation with slight changes based on Jacob Z. Lauterbach, Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael (3 vols.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933), 2:262. For the association of this text with the damnatio memoriae, see already Saul Lieberman, Tosefta Kifshutah: A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta (10 vols.; Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1955–88), 3:281 n. 3; Lev. Rab. 23:12 (ed. Margulies, 547). Here and throughout the paper, if not otherwise noted, the translations are mine.


10. Ed. Lieberman, 96; Dig. 34.2.1, 14 (ed. Mommsen and Krueger, 522–23).
essay about Byzantine perspectives on statuary, maintains that the Byzantines' position regarding statuary can be indicative of that society's overall approach to antiquity and Greco-Roman culture in general.\textsuperscript{11} The same model may apply to the Jews as well. In the current essay, I study rabbis as a particular Jewish group from the ancient world whose literature survived and thus allows us a glimpse into their worldview.

Chapter 3 of the Mishnah tractate 	extit{Avodah Zarah} (Idolatry) presents the rabbis' "working assumptions," which forms the basis of all discussions about statuary in rabbinic literature. It reads as follows:

"All statues are forbidden because they are worshipped once a year," such is the statement of R. Meir. [But] the [other] sages say, "[a statue] is not forbidden except one that has a stick or a bird or a ball." R. Simeon b. Gamaliel says, "[a statue] which bears anything in its hand [is forbidden]." (\textit{m. Avod. Zar.} 3:1)\textsuperscript{12}

Evidently, R. Meir and the sages disagree about the extent of the prohibition of idolatry in regard to statues—whether "all" are included or only some.\textsuperscript{13} The problem arises with the causative clause adjacent to R. Meir's statement that provides his rationale. The link it creates between the noun "statues" and the verb "are worshiped" makes it apparent that the issue at the root of R. Meir's view involves the actual Greco-Roman practice of idol worship, through sacrifice, libation, and other conventional practices, to which the rabbis allude on various occasions (e.g., \textit{m. Sanh.} 7:6). So R. Meir's inclusive rejection of statues is explained by the "fact" that they are all worshiped.

Such a concept—that \textit{all} statues were worshiped as idols—already perplexed the amoraic, third-century sage R. Hiyya b. Abba, who questioned its accuracy in the Palestinian Talmud (the so-called Yerushalmi). He reinterpreted the reason for the prohibition by stating that statues "were wor-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{12} Based on ms Kaufmann (Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Sciences ms A 50; facsimile edition, Jerusalem, 1968).
\item \textsuperscript{13} The question in dispute here—that is, the extent of the prohibition against idolatry (which statues are included)—should not be confused with another issue that the rabbis discuss and disagree about, namely, the manner of implementing the ban (i.e., how to behave with a statue that is considered an idol), although the same criterion—whether the statue is worshiped—plays an essential role in that discussion as well. Consider, for example, the rabbinic dispute in \textit{Sifra Kedosh.} 1 (ed. Weiss, 87a): "Do not turn to idols'—do not turn aside to worship them; R. Judah says: certainly do not turn aside even to look at them"; trans. Jacob Neusner, \textit{Sifra: An Analytical Translation} (BJS 138-40; 3 vols.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 3:88. The issue of "looking at statues" has to do with the broader topic of aesthetics, to which, as mentioned above, I plan to devote a separate study.
\end{itemize}
shiped in the big city of Rome twice in seven years” (y. Avod. Zar. 3:42b). But this explication did not satisfy another talmudic sage, who asked logically, “and where they are not worshiped they are permitted?” To solve this problem he employed a principle of another rabbi, R. Jose: “since they were forbidden in one place they are forbidden everywhere” (ibid.). Apparently, R. Meir’s sweeping ruling confused these amoraim, because they knew that some statues were not worshiped. Their desire to preserve R. Meir’s stance in its exact formulation, a common maneuver in rabbinic hermeneutics, forced the amoraim to validate it using a faraway, almost mythological, place—Rome—in which, at least in their minds, people worshiped all statues.¹⁴

A modern, and at times sneering, reader of such rabbinic deliberations might be inclined to see them as mere argumentative casuistry, perhaps associated with some speculative exegesis of biblical commandments, but with minimum connection to notions and concepts prevailing outside their isolated legalistic world. Repeatedly, commentators have applied the rather superficial categories “lenient” and “stringent” to sum up rabbinic positions and in general have viewed them as alienated from and rejecting of their hostile, idolatrous surroundings. In fact the opposite is true: in their rulings here and elsewhere, the rabbis engage in the prevailing cultural discourse of their time by utilizing commonly held cultural notions to design their sophisticated positions. A closer view of how these specific rabbinic statements worked will illustrate the intimate connections between the rabbis and the cultural environment in which they lived and wrote.

A student of early periods must, of course, always remain cognizant of the fundamental differences that separate the modern era from previous ages. This is particularly true with regard to the study of religion. The dramatic advances in the natural sciences, the technological-industrial revolution, and the replacement of devout belief by secularism have radically transformed the religious experience. In ancient times, people perceived the whole scope of reality through categories that we would today call religious.

The cosmology of the Greco-Roman Mediterranean basin was replete with divine beings—deities, goddesses, spirits, souls, angels, demons, and mythological monsters.¹⁵ Today these entities are the province of special

---

¹⁴. The fantastic nature that underlines these amoraic positions was already observed by Martin Goodman, “Palestinian Rabbis and the Conversion of Constantine to Christianity,” in The Talmud Yerishalmi and Graeco-Roman Culture II (ed. Peter Schäfer; Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 79; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 6.

¹⁵. An illuminating articulation of this all-embracing religious spirit that prevailed in the ancient world, with an emphasis on the period under discussion here, can be found in Peter
effects and Hollywood cinema, but in the classical era they surrounded people wherever they were, from the heights of the temples on Mount Olympus, to the abstractions of philosophical writings, to the lowest of the latrines in which people relieved themselves. One of these latter facilities, for example, discovered almost intact in Pompey, contains a fresco of the goddess Fortuna in all her glory. The graffiti to her right reads, *caca tor cave malum* ("shitter, beware of evil"), and under it a man crouches over nothing less than a small altar, suggesting that he is defecating. To the people of that time, this resembled neither a sacrilege nor a derisive caricature. On the contrary, the elementary human function of excretion, with the odors and physical exertion involved, demanded expression—as bathroom graffiti, for all its humorous and scatological intent, demonstrate even in our day. In the ancient mind, the act registered in the language of religion, incarnated in the Roman case in the guise of Fortuna. Keith Hopkins succinctly captures this phenomenon in the title of his last book—*A World Full of Gods*.16

Pervasive and invasive, a religious mentality shaped the lens through which people of the Roman world viewed their surroundings and everyday routines. Religious vocabulary and imagery seeped into every strata of language, assisting people in mediating, explaining, and interpreting their interactions with their environment. Myths, legends, and folk beliefs, even the names and characteristics of gods, all fashioned the cognitive templates that explained and consequently validated both natural phenomena and human situations, just as scientific truth shapes the contours of our world today. Religion—or to be more precise, what we today call religion—encompassed all.

In contrast to this sweeping and unbounded religious landscape, a fundamental human tendency, going back to the earliest origins of civilizations, strives to define and delineate boundaries, especially with regard to physical space and artefacts. Just as human beings have always distinguished, for example, between private and public domains, so the Roman world established, at least in the public sphere, a fairly clear—although somewhat permeable—divide between *locus consecratus* (consecrated space, also known as the *locus sacer*, sacred space) and *locus profanus* (non-

---

consecrated space). The Romans devised clear-cut and precise procedures, known as consecratio, for turning a pre-(pro)holy place (fimnum) into a consecrated space, which then received the status of templum. This category included the architectonic structure that we now identify as a temple—what they called aedem sacra—but also comprised a much wider range of venues. For example, the judicial seat of the magistrate known as the prae­tor and the space in which it was placed, as well as the Senate’s chamber, were also tempa. By the same token, a reverse process, exauguratio, restored a site to its profane status. It is difficult to know to what extent people on the margins of the empire followed this formal modus operandi, but it seems that its basic elements were standard and familiar, even if not always performed according to the institutionalized Roman formula. In any case, it is fairly clear that people identified the sacred places in their world with relative ease, and were able, without too much difficulty, to distinguish between them and the profane realm.

The two sides of this complex, at times contradictory equation apply also to sculpture. Only a formal process of consecratio imbued a statue with the “holy spirit” — the pneuma (or the numen, that is, the divine power and will) of one of the gods or, alternatively, the numen or the genius of one of the emperors —making it sacred (res sacra). These statues of gods and deified emperors enjoyed an orderly, well-developed ceremonial system including sacrifices, libations, gifts, and processions, and sometimes even special priests or priestesses. Non-worshiped statues did not merit these privileges. Thus, built into the rituals and liturgy that developed around sacred statues was a means to distinguish between sacred and nonsacred statues.


19. On the comparative aspect of the definition of holy sites, and a survey of them across disparate times, regions, and cultures, see, e.g., David L. Carmichael et al., eds., Sacred Sites, Sacred Places (One World Archaeology 23; London/New York: Routledge, 1994). See also Ton Derks's precise definition: “Cult places are spaces intended for the worship of one or more cosmological powers, separate from the profane world, in which the members of the cult community regularly gather in order to perform their personal or collective rituals before a ritual focus” (Ton Derks, Gods, Temples and Ritual Practices: The Transformation of Religious Ideas and Values in Roman Gaul [Amsterdam Archaeological Studies 2; Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1998], 133; my emphases).

20. For a more comprehensive description and analysis of this system, see Stewart, Stat­ues, 184–222.
On the other hand, this does not mean that individuals could not themselves set apart statues to gods—a process known as dedicatio—or that they could not interact ritually (e.g., by making a sacrifice) with a statue lacking a holy spirit. Such informal practice, even if fundamentally distinct from official consecration, was an inseparable part of religious experience in those times. Varying in intensity and commitment, this private and unofficial worship took place in daily routines, through, for example, an endless series of gestures directed toward a statue—any statue. Waving one’s hand, touching, kissing, to some more elaborate gestures that required preparation, all could be perceived as a “religious” act. This could culminate in the erection of a small, informal altar, dedicated to a specific statue, which, after receiving the sanction of the authorities (under the guidelines of the lex area, the set of laws regulating the usage of public space), placing the altar in a city street, in the forum, or in a bathhouse. All in all, to the (admittedly limited) extent that we can refer to a shared perception of the ancients, they did not view these artefacts as res sacra, and a long list of regulations distinguished them from consecrated statues. As one example among many, a person who damaged such a figure was not guilty, under Roman law, of sacrilege, sacrilegium. Still, the intricacies of these everyday practices meant that the demarcating lines could be blurred.

Along with the contextual distinctions between the sacred and the profane came the “plastic language” that identified the different statues, what we today call iconography. The repertoire of sculpture in Greco-Roman civilization was astoundingly varied and constantly changing. Greek gods of the pantheon, legendary heroes, and other mythological figures—who either acquired Roman identity or were syncretized with Near Eastern deities—accounted for a large share of the sculpture industry, along with statues of the emperors and their families, who were deified in the process of emperor worship. These figures were placed both in temples and in the public domain. At the same time, a ramified system of other statues existed that represented almost every possible aspect of life in antiquity. The streets were filled with visual expressions of the various elements that shaped people’s lives: images of local public figures, athletes, and cultural icons, from orators and philosophers to historians and poets; recreation of battle scenes, both real and mythological, and artistic depictions of all the stages of life, expressing almost every familiar human emotion, joy and pain, elation and innocence. Spectators were not indifferent to these scenes, and this resulted in an interactive system integrating emotional and spiritual symbolism and fostering a plastic language rich in themes and nuances.

22. See Spivey, Understanding Greek Sculpture (although focusing on a wider and slightly
In order to understand this plastic language somewhat better we must not confine ourselves to modern encounters with these figures, which usually take place in museums, and define them as “art” (in the modern sense). We need to consider their broader function in the context of the Roman world. In that milieu, statues could be many things at the same time: they were declarations and promoters of power and social status, they marked individual and familial rank just as they symbolized the ineffable, they were commemorators as well as “memories,” and they functioned as beckoners as well as trumpeters. In a world that did not distinguish clearly between “religious” and “secular,” every sort of artistic expression, even those that seem neutral to the modern viewer, acquired meaning within a conceptual system that we now call “religious.” For the people of antiquity this was the only language they knew. Thus, for example, even the vegetal reliefs on the exterior of the Ara pacis (the celebrated altar of the Roman goddess peace commissioned by the emperor Augustus) were seen as representing “images of abundance and fruitfulness intended to evoke the blessings of the pax Augusta” and also a “visual embodiment of the returning Golden Age, a new era of blessedness in which the limitless flowering of the earth is contingent upon the efficacious presence of a divinely appointed sovereign, Augustus himself.”

However, all this does not imply that Greco-Roman sculptures were all of the same type. Quite the contrary. Within the plethora of existing statues, several varieties could be distinguished. Two of the major categories were statues of gods and those that were not. In the first century B.C.E., for example, Cicero furnished an explicit expression of this division. In an essay discussing the various methods prevalent in his day for understanding the divine nature (De natura deorum), he maintains that “from our childhood Jupiter, Jove, Minerva, Neptune, Vulcan and Apollo have been known to us by the appearance [facies] with which painters and sculptors have chosen to represent them; and not with that appearance only, but having that equipment, age and dress” (1.29.81 [Rackham, LCL]). The literary context of this passage is illuminating, since Cicero’s argument is that precisely because the gods are presented in human form (anthropomorphic) those artistic attributes that allow the viewer to differentiate between


deities and humans are essential. Later on, statues of gods and of human beings as clearly defined categories are repeatedly referred to, for example, in the segments Pliny the Elder devoted to statues in his first-century C.E. encyclopedic work Naturalis Historia (e.g., 34.38). Similarly, references to this differentiation reappear some 150 years later throughout Philostratus’s essay on images. In echoing the commonly held conventions of his time that were used to evaluate works of art, he mentions the artists’ techniques for endowing their works with the identity of a god (Imag. 1.15.2). As noticed by many art historians, these details are not mere schemata, but rather are meant to convey meaning, thus forming the “plastic language” and consequently shaping the public’s perception of statues.25

Placed within this convoluted context of the Greco-Roman sculptural environment, the various rabbinic views in the Mishnah gain new meaning. I would like to suggest that, similar to Cicero and Pliny, the rabbis present a position about their surroundings—that is, they set out to shape the way in which people perceive the reality that surrounded them. The majority view in the Mishnah disagrees with R. Meir’s assertion that all statues are worshiped, and claims that “[a statue] is not forbidden except one that has a stick or a bird or a ball.” This position should be read in light of remarks such as Cicero’s about the ability to identify the gods and differentiate them from the many statues that surrounded them by using widely known attributes, iconography, that the artists assigned to the figures. In other words, the rabbis are utilizing the common “plastic language” in order to create their own differentiation between statues that are worshiped (res sacra) and those that are not worshiped.

Ultimately, the rabbis are defining their own process of consecratio. The items listed by the sages in the Mishnah—the stick, the bird, and the ball—were, at least in their eyes, identifying signs of a deity. In the Tosefta other elements are added to the list, such as a sword, a crown, a ring, and a snake (t. Avot. Zar. 5:1).26 This tannaitic stance results in a more lenient prohibition than does the position of R. Meir, because it qualifies which statues are forbidden. According to the explanation presented here, however, it is not primarily the number of forbidden statues about which the sages differed with R. Meir, but rather the criteria he suggested to define the interdiction, namely, that all the statues are to be seen as worshiped.

Understanding the dispute in this way suggests that both sides agreed that in order for a statue to be prohibited it had to be a “worshiped idol.”

25. Michael Koortbojian, Myth, Meaning and Memory on Roman Sarcophagi (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 9–22, and the literature he lists in n. 27.

26. Ed. Zuckermandel, 468. The position of the third tanna in the Mishnah, R. Simon b. Gamaliel, could be explained as expanding the boundaries of the prohibition to include any kind of attribute.
However, R. Meir, voicing his position about the all-inclusive nature of Roman religiosity, maintained that all statues were considered "worshiped idols," whether they were actually consecrated or not. The majority of the sages, on the other hand, did not agree with him and argued for a more restricted view of the religious experience; they concluded that only statues originally created to be deities, and thus given an identifying "tag" (attribute), were forbidden. The disputed designations help create an iconographic language that the two rabbinic parties use to classify the statues they saw around them and differentiate between divine figures and non-divine figures. R. Meir and the other rabbis did not debate the actual situation (as it might seem from the language of the Mishnah, "because they are worshiped"). Rather, they presented two views regarding how to perceive and evaluate the sculptural environment.

The various perspectives on statues prevalent in the Roman world shed light on the general rabbinic approach that divides statues into "worshiped" and "non-worshiped." It might also assist in further clarifying the difference between R. Meir, who deemed all statues to be idols, and the sages who classified them more specifically. Close reading of Greco-Roman descriptions of their sculptural environment reveals two rather incompatible ways of looking at statues, which parallel the two positions in rabbinic literature. 27 A comparison between the accounts of the first-century author and encyclopedist Pliny the Elder with those of the second-century traveler and geographer Pausanias may illustrate these divisions further. 28

A modern reader following Pliny's writing on statues could mistake him for a contemporary art dealer. Pliny enlightens his readers with the historical backgrounds of these pieces, shares gossipy minutiae about the artists, and acknowledges with respect (even veneration) the statues' monetary values. His primary criterion in evaluating statues is their aesthetics—their beauty. This allows him to embrace all types, whether gods or not. Even though Pliny, in accordance with the all-encompassing sensibilities of Roman religiosity, applied different terminology for statues of deities and nondeities, he did not privilege either of the groups, and he definitely did not show a preference for one over the other. When it comes to the financial worth of statuary, what counts is the fame and talent of the


28. Note that despite their different cultural backgrounds, literary agendas, and the gap in time that separates them, these two authors shared thorough and first-hand acquaintance with the Roman Mediterranean basin and its realities. Lionel Casson labels these common grounds as the "one world" notion (Travel in the Ancient World [Toronto: Hakkert, 1974; repr., Baltimore/London: John Hopkins University Press, 1994], 115–27).
sculpture, or the beauty and artistic value of the piece, but the question of
whether a statue was worshiped or not becomes irrelevant.29

In contrast, Pausanias's *Periegesis* suggests that the great majority, if not
all, of the statues pervading the Greco-Roman world either were those of
gods or were other sculpture that was placed in their sanctuaries. Consis-
tently, although not definitively, Pausanias neglects most of the nondi-
vine statuary and directs his attention toward either sculpture located in
consecrated enclosures and temples or divine figures placed along the streets.
This is the case, for example, when he takes the reader along the streets of
Corinth and depicts, in the typical jargon of the *ciceroni* (the tour guides),
spiced with legends and myths, a visual panorama of the route. The lit-
ery tour winds from the eastern port through the city gates to the agora,
and then twists back and forth along its main streets. However, despite the
realistic impression created by Pausanias's writing, it is hard to accept his
description at face value—to believe that the center of second-century
Corinth contained only statues of divine figures such as those of Artemis,
Dionysus, Athena, and the like (*Descr.* 2.2.6ff.). Intensive archaeological
excavations in the area show that at the time of Pausanias, dozens of
diverse statues crowded that section of town.30

This is not to discredit (as did many nineteenth-century scholars) the
reliability of Pausanias, or to denounce him as distorting reality, but only
to claim that he does not give the whole picture. As he himself explicitly
states at the beginning of the above passage about Corinth, his text
describes only "the things worth mentioning." Despite the multitude of
statues he saw, his gaze, and consequently his narrative, was transfixed
only on statues of the gods or those that populated sanctuaries. His
description, then, reflects his own perspective on a more crowded and
complicated scene. Nigel Spivey labels this "visual theology," and in Jaś
Elsner’s unembellished but accurate formulation, "Pausanias’ interest is
almost obsessively (though not exclusively) in things religious."31

The polychromatic scenario painted by Pliny, in which statues of gods
and of humans are found side by side, is reduced to a one-sided, although
lively and charming, depiction by Pausanias, with the statues of the gods
and those located in sanctuaries dominating the entire stage. In this regard,
Pausanias and Paul, who "saw" in Athens nothing but a forest of idols (see

29. See, e.g., Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 34.63; 36.18, 27–28. See also Miranda Marvin, "Copy-
30. Franklin P. Johnson, *Corinth: Results of Excavations Conducted by the American School of
Classical Studies at Athens IX: Sculpture 1896–1923* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University
Press, 1931).
31. Spivey, *Understanding Greek Sculpture*, 13–14; Elsner, *Art*, 130 (I would change Elsner’s
phrasing a bit into “things that we now consider religious”).
above p. 100), shared a similar “perspective: in the sense that though evaluating the scene in opposite terms, they were looking at reality in the same way.

Without delving into the reasons that led Pliny to see the world in one way and Pausanias (and Paul) to see the same thing in such a different way,32 we can draw parallels between these two viewpoints and our two rabbinic approaches. R. Meir’s perception of the “sculptural environment,” which led him to envision all statues as “worshiped,” corresponds to Pausanias walking in Corinth and “seeing” only statues of gods and goddesses. In contrast, the sages’ distinction between worshiped and non-worshiped statues resonates with Cicero’s and Pliny’s perspective, in which a “plastic language” distinguishes between the various types of statues.

Following the dispute between R. Meir and the sages, the Mishnah offers an anecdote about Rabban Gamaliel in the “Aphrodite bathhouse.” This portion, which might seem at first unrelated to the previous discussion, actually further develops the same halakic/cultural issues. It reads as follows:

Proklos the son of Plaslos asked Rabban Gamaliel in Acre while he was bathing in the bath of Aphrodite [and] he said to him “it is written in your law ‘and nothing of the herem shall stick to your hand’ (Deut 13:17) why [then] are you bathing in the bath of Aphrodite? He [R. Gamaliel] replied: “it is not allowed to answer in the bath.” When he came out he said to him: I did not come within her limits; she came within my limits. [People] do not say “let us make a bath for Aphrodite,” but [rather] she, Aphrodite, is made an ornament for the bath. Furthermore, [even] if you are given a large sum of money, [would] you enter in to your idolatry naked, [or] polluted from semen, [or would you] urinate in front of her?! And she [Aphrodite] is standing by the drainage and all the people are urinating in front of her. It is said only “their gods” (Deut 12:3), [i.e.] that which he treats as a god is prohibited, [but] that which he does not treat as a god is permitted. (m. Avod. Zar. 3:4–5)33

Rabban Gamaliel’s position takes the above-mentioned distinction of the rabbis a step further, adding the practical function, what I called before the “identifying context,” of a statue to the plastic-language criterion of the

32. Many scholars have noticed the difference between the two but interpreted it rather differently. See, e.g., Karim W. Arafat, “Pausanias’ Attitude to Antiquities,” Annual of the British School at Athens 87 (1992): 387–409; Elsner, Art, 129–32; Stewart, Statues, 184–85.
33. Based on ms Kaufmann.
sages. Even though Aphrodite was surely a "worshiped deity" (in the sense defined by the sages above) with other statues of her kind receiving rituals, placed in temples, and so on, Rabban Gamaliel maintains that a statue in a given location is forbidden only if that particular one operates in ritual worship.

The two explanations that the Mishnah ascribes to Rabban Gamaliel to justify his visit to the Aphrodite bathhouse support this interpretation. The first claims that "[People] do not say 'let us make a bath for Aphrodite,' but [rather] she, Aphrodite, is made an ornament for the bath." Here Rabban Gamaliel appeals to the general opinion, to the view on the street, to prove that people did not apprehend the particular statue of Aphrodite that stood in the bathhouse as a worshiped idol. He did not reason that Aphrodite and the other statues were "mere decorations," as some scholars believe, but he based his view on the ritual status of this particular statue. This view uses the adornment of the statue only as an indicator of its lack of ritual status. The Romans too applied the same designation—"decorative" (what they called ornamentum, and what the Mishnah in the story about Rabban Gamaliel labels noy)—to classify a statue as not formally consecrated (e.g., Suetonius, Tib. 26).

The second justification in the Rabban Gamaliel story lists the debased acts that people performed before the statue of Aphrodite in the bathhouse—urinating, walking around naked, and the like—linking this with a midrash on the verse in Deuteronomy (12:3), "cut down the images of their gods," which asserts "that which he treats as a god is prohibited, [but] that which he does not treat as god is permitted." Rabban Gamaliel's position may be formulated as follows: even a statue of a deity like Aphrodite is not forbidden if people do not treat it with the respect reserved for the gods. Here too, it was not the particular conduct of people—urinating or exposing themselves—that "secularized" the statues, but rather what such actions reflected about how the public perceived these sculptures. Significantly, the Tosefta uses the same verse to reach the opposite conclusion: "Whether one treats it as a deity or whether one does not treat it as a deity, it is forbidden" (t. Avod. Zar. 5:6). These legal prescriptions represent opposing responses to the question of what determines the ritual nature of a statue—whether it is the objective identity or the subjective function of the particular statue.

Another well-known and much-debated tradition in the Yerushalmi can be explained along similar lines. In the passage describing this incident, the famous third-century amora, R. Simeon b. Lakish, encountered a group of people sprinkling liquids in honor of a statue of Aphrodite in the bathhouse of Bostra. According to the talmudic report, after relating this

34. Ed. Zuckermanandel, 468.
incident to his colleague R. Yohanan, the latter permitted it retroactively (i.e., he ruled that the act did not turn the statue into an idol and consequently the bath into a prohibited location), and asserted "A thing of the public is not forbidden" (y. Sheb. 8.8b-c). It seems to me that this anecdote further elaborates the halakic principle developed in the above story of Rabban Gamaliel, and both advance beyond the legal regulations of the tannaitic sages in their dispute with R. Meir. According to the position presented in the anecdote here, not only is a statue of a deity that is standing outside of a ritual context not considered a forbidden idol (R. Gamaliel's position), but even the actual performance of an informal ritual deed in its honor does not revoke its previous nonidolatrous status. The explanation provided for this ruling—"A thing of the public is not forbidden"—conveys the reasoning behind R. Yohanan's interdiction. According to his view, if a statue of a god stands in a public, noncultic context and is considered nonidolatrous (profanum), the unofficial dedicatio of individuals cannot change its unsanctioned status. This statement should be seen against the background of the ancient world as depicted above, where informal veneration of statues, including processions, semi-pagan games and celebrations, were very common.

To conclude: the rabbinic differentiation between the various statues, based on whether they were worshiped or not, is anchored in the conceptual framework of the Roman world. These are not some peculiar classifications of the rabbis that would have sounded ridiculous to the people of the time, whether Jewish or not; rather they are halakic formulations of accepted, widespread conceptions stemming from the various ways of "viewing" statuary. Furthermore, seeing this distinction in the broad cultural context presented here overturns the commonly held characterization of the attitudes of the sages, and of Jews in general, toward Greco-Roman culture as unrelentingly hostile and overwhelmingly confrontational. At least from the standpoint of their daily contact with the statues of Roman cities, it seems that the sages did not hold a single, fixed position but rather a diverse, wide range of ideas that were based on common ways of looking at statues in those days. While some, like R. Meir, perceived the entire sculptural environment as homogeneous, as made up solely of idols, others classified statues into different categories, distinguishing between those that transgress Jewish norms and those that did not constitute a problem. This halakic formula allowed those who accepted it to live a "normal" Jew-

35. For a detailed discussion of this passage in the context of rabbinic attitudes toward the bathhouse and for bibliographical references regarding the various readings that were suggested for this text, see Eliav, "Roman Bath," 433–34 and n. 57.
ish life in the presence of Roman sculpture. The rabbis' ruling on Roman
statuary, far from expressing hostility toward all manifestations of the dom-
inat culture, instead reflects the discerning attitudes of a minority group
within the Roman world, a group that strove to shape its own way of life
by utilizing its profound awareness of the cultural and physical landscapes
in which it was living.