

New Centre at the Faculty of Theology

How was the relationship between Christians and pagans in antiquity? The newly established Centre for the Study of Antiquity and Christianity will strengthen the research in this particular area through a strong interdisciplinary and international profile

By Uffe Holmsgaard Eriksen

On Friday 5 March, the Dean of Aarhus University's Faculty of Theology, Carsten Riis, officially declared the new *Centre for the Study of Antiquity and Christianity* open. The centre is located at the Faculty of Theology, but the aim is to reach out to other disciplines as for instance Classics and History. Special attention is paid to collaborating with leading international scholars in the field.

It is the Faculty's 10-year old research group "Antiquity and Christianity" that has now become formalised as a centre. This is the third time that the research group has been favoured by the Faculty. In 2002, it was chosen as a special research priority and, in 2005, as one of the three themes under the research priority area "Religion and Normativity".



Carsten Riis, Dean of the Faculty of Theology

In his opening speech, the Dean commended the researchers behind the new centre for working interdisciplinary and with an international profile. He also lauded their recent work as very active

and ambitious and emphasised that their efforts to establish two book series, in respectively Danish and English, and an international Master programme, *The Religious Roots of Europe*, are nothing less than model research. – "You represent an ideal in the world of scholarship", the Dean said before declaring the centre open.

Religious associations in antiquity

The opening speech by the Dean was followed by a guest lecture by the renowned Danish classical archaeologist, Professor, *dr. phil.* Inge Nielsen, presently at the University of Hamburg. She gave a lecture on "Religious Associations in Antiquity".



Professor Inge Nielsen

Whereas previous researchers like Theodor Mommsen focused on studying the literary sources, Inge Nielsen stressed the need to combine the literary sources with archaeological finds when looking at religious associations. She has special interest in the rooms and buildings where the religious associations met and held their ceremonies because these rooms and buildings give evidence about, for instance, how they met.

Professor Nielsen presented a variety of archaeological material to the many people in attendance. The presentation showed that the differences between the various religious associations – mystery cults, Christians, Jews – were only slight and that the rooms of the religious associations were often located in bigger houses and mansions.

The Velux-Project: Conversion and Initiation in Antiquity

The opening of the centre also marked the beginning of a new research project under the auspices of the Centre and supported financially by the Danish Velux Foundation.

The project is called *Transformation of Religious Identity in the Hellenistic-Roman World, 100-600 AD* and focuses on the topics of conversion and initiation, especially on the role of narratives on conversion and initiation rites played in the formation – and transformation – of religious identity.

The Velux-project is headed by Associate Professor Anders-Christian Jacobsen, Faculty of Theology, and Associate Professor Rubina Raja, Department of Classical Archaeology, Faculty of Arts, both at Aarhus University.



Associate Professor Rubina Raja and Associate Professor Anders-Christian Jacobsen

The Velux Foundation also supports the following three postdoctoral projects:

- *Associate Professor Jakob Engberg* will focus on conversion narratives and how they contributed in forming and transforming religious identity in antiquity.
- *Postdoc Birgitte Bøgh* will examine the aspect of initiation and conversion in the ancient mystery religions (100-500 AD).

She will combine studies in the literary sources with archaeological finds.

- *Postdoc Carmen Cvetkovic* will do research in the famous autobiography of the great church father Augustine's *Confessions*. Her project will question the long held view about Augustine's conversion as a singular and sudden movement of change, looking instead at the conversion as a long process towards reconciling with Christianity.



Associate Professor Jakob Engberg and Postdoc Birgitte Bøgh

Congratulations to the *Centre for the Study of Antiquity and Christianity* and the Velux-Project!