

Jury Report

KHMW Jan Brouwer Thesis Award 2025 - Religious Studies and Theology

Ariella Goldberg MA, Universiteit van Amsterdam

Divine Machines: Hero of Alexandria's Religious Technology

The jury hereby would like to announce that the KHMW Jan Brouwer Thesis Award for Religious Studies and Theology 2025 has been awarded to Ms. Ariella Goldberg for her MA thesis 'Divine Machines: Hero of Alexandria's Religious Technology'.

First of all, our sincere and heartfelt congratulations on behalf of the entire committee with this award, and with the achievement that lies behind it.

Our congratulations for Ariella concern the thesis that she wrote for the research MA in Theology & Religious Studies at the University of Amsterdam, where she was directed by dr. Dylan Burns and dr. Peter Forshaw. The jury congratulates them as well.

Most of us on the committee were blissfully unaware of Hero of Alexandria. But this is exactly where the power of Ariella's thesis came in: it introduced an author unknown to us so powerfully that at the end of reading the thesis we had received quite an intimate professional portrait of his work. From ignoramuses we had ourselves now become Platonists, or at least, had become much more involved in the ancient Platonic world.

That is indeed quite a feat. For when one faces someone who is unknown, there is often a healthy skepticism that has to be overcome. By fulfilling this kind of bridge-function Ariella's research, written elegantly and convincingly, proved to be very valuable. She not only introduced the author, and put him in historical context, but she also brought in the relevant scholarly literature and thereby put him in conversation with our own day and time. In other words, she really made him and the problems of performance and religion he represents come alive to us.

Operating in the field of Roman religious technology, Ariella demonstrated how the first century author Hero of Alexandria had an enormous impact on his audience. The thesis focuses especially on how Hero's pneumatic devices and automata cultivated a sense of divine presence and acknowledgement. The specific research questions were how these devices related to nature and how the spectators responded to Hero's devices. As to the first question, Hero's devices do not merely imitate nature according to Ariella but rather work with a notion of εἰκος/likelihood, which allowed her to bring in a new range of interdisciplinary interpretations. As to the second question, since the automata's prime aim is not the imitation of nature, they do not merely elicit uncanny sensations. Rather, Ariella argues for the coexistence of knowledge and wonder as kindling the spectators' interest.

Through the use of helpful drawings, manuscript pages, and various photographs, the thesis is both enlightening and clarifying, showing us how Hero worked and how the gods were represented and evoked on the stage, which so enthralled ancient spectators. The conclusion, benefiting from the material turn in ancient studies, is that Hero's self-animated devices engage in what Ariella calls "a culturally contingent visual rhetoric of εἰκος." This is quite more

subtle and dynamic than the old, essentializing idea of mimesis and allows for a more sophisticated narratological exegesis of these ancient cultural and religious practices.

For an entertaining and highly relevant thesis on an underappreciated ancient author, Ariella Goldberg fully deserves the 2025 KMHW Jan Brouwer Thesis Award for Religious Studies and Theology.

Prof. dr. C. (Kees) van der Kooi, Distinguished Lecturer ESAA/EURAC Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam, emeritus-hoogleraar systematische theologie Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Prof. dr. C.R. (Christian) Lange, hoogleraar Arabische en Islamitische studies Universiteit Utrecht

Prof. dr. W. (Willemien) Otten, Professor of the Theology and History of Christianity, University of Chicago Divinity School

The meeting of the jury, chaired by KHMW social member drs. F.M. (Fusien) Bijl de Vroe, took place on December 4th, 2024 via Zoom. Also present at the meeting was prof. W.B. (Wim) Drees, academic secretary for the social sciences and humanities of the KHMW.