RM Die Religionen der Menschheit

Jörg Rüpke/Greg Woolf (Eds.)

Religion in the Roman Empire

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Die Religionen der Menschheit

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Preparation of an animal sacrifice; marble, fragment of an architectural relief, first quarter of the 2nd century CE. Department of Greek, Etruscan and Roman Antiquities, Rome, Italy.

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Fig. 1: The Roman Empire 117 A.D.

Introduction: Living Roman Religion

Jörg Rüpke and Greg Woolf

1 Approaching Roman Religion

How can we reconstruct the religious dimensions of life in the Roman empire? How were rituals entangled with the routines of everyday living and extraordinary events? How did relations with the divine intrude into the spaces Roman inhabited and the patterns of their lives? How, in short, was Roman religion lived?

Over the last decade a number of excellent general accounts of Roman religion have been produced, themselves building on a rich tradition of scholarship more than a century old. Some of these deal with the same sort of questions that exercised Roman scholars from the last century BCE on, men (and it was always men) such as Marcus Terentius Varro, Marcus Tullius Cicero, Verrius Flaccus and behind them a series of works now known only in fragments. Those first Roman experts on Roman religion were interested in particular priesthoods and religious rules. Why was the flamen of Jupiter not allowed to spend prolonged periods outside the city? They tried to distinguish elements of Greek or Etruscan origin from ancient local customs and more recent innovations. Some Roman writers, and some Greek ones too, tried to explain some more bizarre rituals such as the Lupercalia when young aristocrats ran half naked around the city striking women with leather straps, the Parilia which in some sense (but what sense?) celebrated the birthday of Rome, or the October Horse. And some ancient writers wondered about the origin of the gods, how they were related to similar gods worshipped by other ancient peoples and how to connect traditional myth with modern philosophy. Because the modern study of antiquity began as an exegetical process focused on the Greek and Latin classics, it was natural that much early scholarship dealt with the same questions that had puzzled the ancients.[1]

Parallel to that sort of investigation have been attempts to capture the broader pattern of Roman religion by standing outside it. An influential tradition, one we may trace back to Fustel de Coulanges (1864), found the key to Roman (and Greek) religion in the structures of the city state.[2] If ancient cities were fundamentally, perhaps even in origin, communities of coreligionists, then much of the shape of ancient religion could be understood as calqued on or coterminous with the shape of ancient civic societies. The boundaries of the citizen body coincided with the boundaries of participants in collective ritual or the boundaries of those whose

1 Still fundamental and useful: Wissowa 1912 (modelling his account on Varro, see Rüpke 2003).

2 Fustel de Coulanges 1984.

religious actions had consequences for the community. Generally the same groups and individuals that controlled a given city-state—aristocrats and the senate in Rome, the demos and the ecclesia in Athens—controlled ritual. The most recent formulations along these lines—sometimes termed ›civic religion‹ or ›la religion poliade‹—remain influential.[3] There are naturally many variations: some scholars treat this as a harmonious homology between the religious, the social and the political, a sign that these spheres were weakly differentiated in ancient thought, or that ritual was deeply embedded in social structure and political order. Some see polis religion as an ideological construction, created to serve the interests of the powerful and to legitimate their control of the state, always opposed to a less sharply defined field of heterodox views, deviant practices, superstitions and the like. Given most of our written sources for Roman religion derived from members of those ruling elites it is not always easy to know—at least not from texts alone—how contested their views of religion were.

The best modern accounts of Roman religion make the most of the written evidence for ancient belief and cult but do not allow these texts to determine the questions we might ask. One way to escape ancient definitions of the subject is to deploy comparative evidence. Greek, Roman and Etruscan rituals have long been compared, and at one time it was common to broaden the field of comparison to include other religions regarded as of common Indo-European descent. Fewer scholars are now comfortable with moving easily from a linguistic taxonomy to a family of related societies: in that sense the legacy of Dumézil[4] is almost extinct. It has also become less common to explain Roman religion in terms of its supposed origins (Etruscan, rustic, Indo-European etc.).[5] Most experts on Roman religion now try to elucidate particular rituals and institutions in terms of their contemporary context. So the Lupercalia as practiced in the late Republic has to have a significance in terms of the collective life of a city of several hundred thousand at the heart of vast and expanding empire, led by an elite self-consciously engaged in the creation of a distinctive cultural tradition that might rival that of the Greeks. The key question now is how to balance these contexts: which explain most, the urban? the imperial? the intellectual? or a mixture of these and others? Now we mostly approach Roman religion through synchronic rather than diachronic analysis, trying to understand rituals and utterances in the context of their performance, and we read texts not as authorities so much as as momentary crystallizations of discourse.[6] Our focus on the wider context and the contemporary has meant that the social sciences—especially anthropologies of various kinds—have provided powerful tools for interpreting and imagining Roman religion.

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3 E.g. Beard, North, Price 1998; Scheid 1998; Rüpke 2006.

4 Dumézil 1970; earlier e.g. Usener 1913; Usener 1948; Bailey 1932; Rose 1958.

5 E.g. Altheim 1931; Schilling 1954; Latte 1960; Scholz 1970.

6 E.g. Rüpke 2009.

2 The Idea of Religion

Before outlining our own approach some comment is appropriate on how we use the terms Religion, Religions and Religious since there has been much discussion in recent years of how appropriate these ideas are to describe ancient and non-Christian ritual and belief in particular.

Religions are understood as traditions of religious practices, conceptions, and institutions, in some contexts even fully developed organisations. According to an important strain of sociological thought going back to Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), we are dealing here with social products,[7] as a rule with groups of people normally living together within a territory, who withhold the central core of their life together, their shared orientation, from the necessity of daily discussion by investing it in forms of religious symbolism. There emerges a system of signs whose immanence is preserved by the performance of rituals, and which seeks to explain the world in images, narratives, written texts, or refined dogma, and to determine behaviour by the use of ethical imperatives, often by recourse to an effective apparatus of sanctions (for instance through the power of the state), but sometimes even without that implied threat. Many volumes within the series *Die Religionen der Menschheit* are following the first, tradition-based, and the second, geographically defined, line of understanding.

Such a conception of religion meets its limits when it seeks to explain religious pluralism, the enduring coexistence of different, mutually contradictory conceptions and practices, or the quite distinct relationship of individuals with religion on which lived ancient religion is focusing. This conception of Religion has already been attacked as being too closely oriented to ›western‹, and above all Christian religious and conceptual history, and criticized for its unquestioned and unquestioning ›colonial‹ transference to other cultures.[8] It has similarly problematic ramifications when we seek to apply it to Antiquity.[9] The reason for this also lies in the present. The dissolution of traditional allegiances frequently to be observed in our time is seen as religious individualism, the disappearance of religion, or even the displacement of collective religion by individual spirituality.[10] This perspective then becomes associated with the complementary assumption that early societies and their religions must have been characterized by a high level of collectivism. We shall see how a problematic assumption in respect of the present day creates a highly distorted picture of the past.[11]

But it is not the notion of religion that we have to drop. In demand is a concept of religion that enables us to describe the aforementioned changes in the social location and individual significance of religion. This can successfully be achieved

7 Durkheim 1947; also Pickering 2008; Rosati 2009.
8 Asad 1993; McCutcheon 1997; Masuzawa 2000, 2005.
9 See Nongbri 2013.
10 Luckmann 1991; also Dobbelaere 2011, 198 and Rüpke 2016.
11 See Rüpke 2012; Rüpke 2013a.

by conceiving of religion from the standpoint of the individual and his or her social involvement. Only in rare instances does such lived ancient religion coalesce into networks and organized systems, to resemble what we normally categorize as religions, expressed in written texts that may then develop an enduring autonomous existence of enormous proportions.

How, then, is religion to be modelled? We understand the religion of the epoch in question as comprising the situative inclusion of agents (whether they be described as divine or gods, demons or angels, the dead or the immortal) who are in a particular respect beyond or above that situation. Above all, however, their presence, their collaboration, their significance in a particular situation is not simply an unquestioned given: other human participants in the situation might regard them as invisible, silent, inactive, or simply absent, perhaps even non-existent. Succinctly, religious activity is present at a time and a place where, in a particular situation, at least one human individual includes such agents in his or her communication with other humans, whether by merely referring to those agents or by directly addressing them.

Even in ancient cultures, however, such a strategy of communication or action is not simply self-evident. It was beset with risks in respect of personal and functional credibility. Opposition hardly ever implied a general statement that the gods did not exist; it would rather question the assertion that one particular deity, whether Jupiter or Hercules, had helped or would help oneself or others, or question the claim that Fortuna or ›fate‹ stood behind one's own actions. In the same vein also an occasional obvious success of a prayer or curse did not produce unquestionable proof, but it could also sustain the plausibility of such claims in the face of many unfulfilled prayers. Ascribing authority to invisible agents and exercising corresponding circumspection in one's actions appears, as postulated by evolutionists, to have been conducive to survival and accordingly favoured in human development;[12] but the same strategy has always tended to be seen by one's fellow humans as presenting an Achilles' heel, and its systematization has been liable to provoke organized dissent.[13] It is not simply the case that the past was more pious. Countless thousands brought small gifts to Roman temples to show their gratitude or give emphasis to their requests; millions did not. Millions buried their deceased children or parents with care, and provided them with grave goods; countless millions contented themselves with disposing of the corpses.

As a consequence, we have to ask, where the use of religious communication and religious activity strengthened the agency of the individual, his or her competence and creativity in dealing with problems that sometimes went beyond the everyday. Where did reference to not indisputably plausible agents contribute to the formation of collective identities that enabled the individual to act or think as part of a group, of a social formation that might vary greatly in form and strength, no matter whether it existed in actuality or only in the imagination or fevered

12 Boyer 1994.

13 Archer 1996, 225–6.

awareness of a few people? We have defined religion as the extension of particular environments beyond the immediately plausible social milieu of living humans in specific forms of agency, identity formulation, communication. What is no longer ›immediately plausible‹ in a relevant milieu may vary in ways that are entirely culture-dependent; plausibility, ›worthiness of applause‹, is itself a communicative, rhetorical category. In the one instance it might be the dead, in another gods conceived of in human form, even places that are no longer definable in terms of mere topography: or humans beyond a sea. Interpretation and assignment of what is disputed in a culture depends on the boundaries drawn by the academic observer.

A high level of investment in the construction of initially improbable actors as ›social partners‹ consistently creates an ›excess‹ of personal consolidation, power, or problem-solving capacity in the person making that investment, an outcome that in turn becomes precarious on account of the disadvantage caused to others, who may seek to defend themselves against it. Sacralisation, declaring objects or processes in the immediately plausible, visible environment to be ›holy‹, is an element of such an investment strategy.[14] The investment metaphor can easily be related to the enormous scale on which religions have recourse to media, cult images and sanctuaries, as well as complex rituals and strategies in respect of texts and communication, as has been indicated under the rubric of religious communication. We should also, however, be curious about inferior status reinforced by religion, a situation countered with strategies of social change by some individuals in a religious context, while others turn their backs on religion, to pursue social mobility on their own account (when they do not turn to quietism).

Such questions and problems indicate the role of concepts of ›religion‹. They help to stimulate and to systematize observations. Many of the questions thus provoked cannot be answered for ancient or ›Roman‹ religion. Many of the details will not be applicable to other cultural configurations.

3 Lived Ancient Religion

When we originally discussed how to present the religious practices of the Roman Empire in the Imperial period to the readers of *Religionen der Menschheit*, we decided not to try to summarise or replicate the high quality recent accounts framed in the terms mentioned at the beginning. This volume offers something different and complementary, although also self-sufficient and self-contained. Rather than beginning from institutions and structures, we aim to explore Roman ritual and religious thought as a lived religion, a bundle of practices and attitudes, habits and routines, practiced and understood by members of Roman society and subjects of the Roman state. The term *Lived Religion* acknowledges the inspiration of a broad set of approaches very different to the structuralist and post-structuralist anthropologies that inspired most accounts of Roman religion as a system. The concept

14 Rüpke 2013b; cf. Dobbelaere 2011 (›holy‹) and Taves 2009 (›special‹).

of ›lived religion‹ was developed in the late 1990s in the context of the study of present-day religions. In such a framework, ›religion‹ is understood as a spectrum of experiences, actions, and beliefs and communications hinging on human communication with super-human or even transcendent agent(s), for the ancient Mediterranean usually conceptualized as ›gods‹. Material symbols, elaborate forms of representation, and ritualization are called upon for the success of communication with these addressees.[15]

Such a communication at the same time implies the forging or—at times—rejection of human alliances. Thus, the existence and importance of culturally stabilized forms of rituals and concepts and people who are invested in developing and defending them cannot be denied. Traditions claimed, kept and re-invented; the religious practices of elites, demonstratively practiced; and emerging forms of institutionalised religion in complex sanctuaries or professionalised priesthoods were part and parcel of such lived religion in antiquity. Members of the elites of circum-Mediterranean ancient cities (we know much less about tribal areas) certainly used the possibilities offered by religious communication for various purposes. For political actors, reference to divine agents was ideally suited to creating a communicative space beyond the families and clans. Thus, they could emphasize shared interests and yet could also use religious activity as a field in which to compete and obtain distinction. This flexibility helped ritual activity and religious architecture to achieve a high degree of dynamism: ever new possibilities of religious communication were invented, or existing traditions appropriated and altered in order to deal with the problems thrown up by the increasing geographic extent of ancient empires, urban growth or increasing social differentiation and competition. ›Civic religion‹ as just mentioned could be reconceptualised as part of lived religion rather than as the over-arching frameworks allowing for inconsequential acts of popular religion and its irrelevant variations and innovations respectively a politically similar unimportant sector of elective cults.[16]

By contrast with contemporary anthropological research, ›ancient lived religion‹ goes far beyond concepts like ›everyday religion‹ or ›popular religion‹.[17] *Vice versa*, individual religious practices are not entirely subjective. There are religious norms, there are exemplary official practices, there are control mechanisms. For the historian ›lived religion‹ also points to the fact that our evidence is biased. It is precisely such institutions and norms that tend to predominate in the surviving evidence from antiquity. Such norms, too, are the outcome of a communicative strategy on the part of agents in positions of power or larger means. If we observe religion in the making—as is stressed here—institutions or beliefs are not simply culturally given, but are themselves aggregates of individual practices—as well as of the latters' constraints. The specific forms of religion-as-lived are barely comprehensible in the absence of specific modes of individual appropriation of motives and models

15 Bell 1992; Rüpke 2010, 2021a, b.
16 Rüpke 2018b, 83–108.
17 Cf. Bender 2016; Orsi 1999, 2010; McGuire 2008.

offered by traditions, even when this took the form of the radical rejection of dominant ways of life, as in asceticism or martyrdom. For the concrete forms and above all for their survival to the present day to be available to us as ›evidence‹, cultural techniques such as reading and writing, the interpretation of mythical or philosophical texts, rituals, pilgrimages and prayer, and the various media of representation of deities in and out of sanctuaries are decisive.

The notion of agency is important here. Agency is not about the lonely individual, but about the interaction of individuals with structures, structures, which are themselves the result of individual actions.[18] In view of the normative tagging of teachings, traditions, narratives etc. in the field of religion, and in view of the normative claims raised by some of the agents—the question of how ideas are taken up and are modified by others or in other words—the specification of processes of reception is of particular importance. Talking of lived religion offers a frame for a description of the formative influence of professional providers, of law and other legal norms, of philosophical thinking and intellectual reflections in literary or reconstructed oral form, of social networks and socialization, of lavish performances in public spaces (or performances run by associations) with recourse to individual conduct in rituals and religious context.

Against this background this volume implies a methodological reorientation in order to achieve a richer description of ancient religious practices and concepts and their interaction and change in space and over time. In the individual chapters we are focusing on religious practices as situational appropriations[19] as well as individual realizations of locally or regionally established, family or group ›traditions‹. Combining micro- and macro-historical perspective, the range of individual variations and innovations is taken seriously as a potential driver of long-term changes, even against contemporary as well as later, academic observers, who took for granted that a coherent set of religious networks[20] and cultural rules defined individual behaviour. The constitution of individual religious agents and the elaboration of collective identities (or even tangible social groups) are presented as an intertwined process.

Replacing the reproduction of traditional religious norms (a process usually judged as incomplete and faulty) by the selective and creative ›appropriation‹ of individual actors is central. But the ›lived ancient religion‹ approach induces further methodological modifications in the process of selecting and interpreting the evidence. Its focus is on experience rather than on symbols. We do not start from lists of gods, mythologems or an inventory of rituals. The concept of experience has not yet been brought fully to bear on ancient religion outside Judaism and Christianity, even if ›experience‹ has been used in a book title already by Fowler[21] and increasingly in phrases indicating the stress on the subjective side of ancient

18 Emirbayer, Mische 1998; Rüpke 2015.
19 Certeau 2007.
20 Rutherford 2007; Eidinow 2011; Rüpke 2013; Collar 2014.
21 Fowler 1911.

culture by French structuralists and Anglophone anthropologists.[22] For many, the very subjective nature of ›experience‹ seems to be in conflict with the dearth of ancient sources. However, there is a lot of communicated, narrated experience in even formulaic texts. The focus on ›experience‹ points to the individual prehistory and consequences of acts of religious communication and stresses the roles of the viewer and user of images, and also more or less sacralised space in open and domestic contexts. For material culture, the term ›archaeology of religious experience‹ addresses this perspective and stresses individual experience both domestically and in the service of public religious infrastructure.[23]

A second focus is on culture in interaction rather than on habitus, organisation or culture as text. Religion in the making[24] is not to be grasped in terms of individual isolation, but is characterised by diverse social contexts that are appropriated, reproduced and informed by the actors on relevant occasions. Like the anthropological concept of ›lived religion‹, the concept of ›culture in interaction‹ has been developed in the ethnographic analysis of contemporary societies. Focusing on situational communication in groups, the concept aims to identify specific ›group styles‹, which modify the use of linguistic as well as behavioural register within cultural contexts.[25]

As a consequence, we have chosen not to organise the volume in terms of a series of chapters each addressed to particular ›cults‹ treated as stable and exclusive groups of people or ›proto-religions‹. Our primary focus is not on competing ›religions‹ or ›cults‹, but symbols as they assumed ever new configurations within a broad cultural space.[26] It was religious professionals who made enormous efforts to establish and secure group boundaries. ›Religions‹ as seen ›from below‹ are the product of attempts—often by just a few individuals—to occasionally create order and boundaries, rather than an imperfect reproduction on the part of the citizens of some normative system. Thus, the people that do religion are not a group and do not behave according to that group's norms. Instead, by trying to embody imagined norms they form a group in a specific public context, according to the situational necessities of forming alliances, displaying differences, pretending membership.[27] For the most thoroughly defined and stabilised social contexts of ritual interaction—namely the nuclear and wider family (including slaves), clans, neighbourhoods, professional bodies, and voluntary associations (usually meeting three or four times a year), intellectual networks supported by letters and the exchange of manuscripts[28]—the concept helps theorise situational differences in reproducing

22 Vidal-Naquet 1960; Needham 1972; Malamat 1989; Hanson 1991.
23 Raja, Rüpke 2015.
24 For the term see Albrecht et al. 2018.
25 Eliasoph, Lichterman 2003; Lichterman 2009.
26 Here we can build on a critique of the concept of ›oriental cults‹ (or ›religions‹), e.g. Bonnet, Rüpke, Scarpi 2006; Bonnet, Rüpke 2009.
27 Rebillard 2012.
28 E.g. Haines-Eitzen 2000; Eshleman 2012; Rüpke 2018a, 327–63.

cultural religious representations as well as in evoking less widely shared knowledge and practices.

The authors of the essays gathered together in this volume are not doctrinaire followers of one particular set of investigative protocols. Our work develops out of common discussions, many framed within the ERC funded Lived Ancient Religion project.[29] But our methods are eclectic as is our inspiration. What we have in common is a commitment to begin with the agency and understanding of practitioners, with the day-to-day business of existing in a world inflected with peculiarly Roman views of the gods and of the sacred. That starting point has not just led us through a different series of theoretical orientations, some deriving from religious studies, others from a wider range of social studies. It has also led us to emphasize different categories of evidence, especially the material traces of ritual. And we have found that if one does begin an exploration of Roman religion from, say, anatomical votives or the archaeology of graves rather than Cicero's *On the Nature of the Gods* and Augustine's *City of God* a rather different picture emerges.[30] It is in the nature of an approach of this kind that we do not seek to depose the knowledge orders of an earlier generation and replace them with our own. Instead we seek to offer a different route through the religion of the Romans (writ large), one which opens up some novel panoramas, suggests new contrasts (and similarities with) other traditions, and has more to say than some other general accounts about the material traces of Roman cult and the experiences of individual members of Roman society.

4 The Story of Rome

For those less familiar with ancient Rome we offer a very short sketch.[31]

The city of Rome was one of hundreds of urban communities that came together gradually in the first centuries of the last millennium BCE. It did not appear in a sudden moment of foundation—whatever later Romans liked to believe—but coalesced from a cluster of nearby villages. Similar sequences are known from all around the Mediterranean Sea around the same time. Iron technology, agricultural expansion, a slow increase in maritime trade and perhaps climatic amelioration all seem important. The first clear signs that communities were being constructed on a large scale is usually temple building and Rome is no exception here.

Urbanization was accompanied in central Italy by state-formation. Romans in later periods believed their political community had been founded in 753 BCE and

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29 Financed under the 7th framework programme of the European Union, contract no. 295555, at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies of the University of Erfurt, Germany.

30 See e.g. Van Andringa 2009; Woolf 2017; Rüpke 2018a.

31 For more details, Woolf 2012; for religious change Rüpke 2018a; for urbanization Woolf 2020.

that until 509 BCE it was ruled by kings, the last of which were Etruscan in origin. The expulsion of the kings gave birth, in tradition, to a Republican government in which the interests of the high status patricians were repeatedly rebalanced with those of the more numerous plebeians. Like most of the ancient city-states we know of Rome had a series of assemblies where the masses convened, and a council—in Rome the senate—which in practice represented the interests of the property classes. Those property classes provided civil magistrates, generals and priests, and in Rome there was a strong overlap between those categories. The details of this political system evolved over time, partly in response to the extension of the citizen body as a result of successive wars against Rome's neighbours. No reliable narrative is possible, however, until Rome attracted the attention of historians as a consequence of wars fought on a larger scale beginning in the third century BCE. By that point it already had some unusual political features. For one thing it was quite willing to extend its territory and its influence and to consolidate victories by settling citizens in new centres—*coloniae*—often anchored on roads that began to form an infrastructure for the peninsula as a whole. Secondly it was unusually ready to extend its citizenship, first to citizens of other Latin towns, then to former slaves and successively to more and more groups until it no longer looked very like a conventional city-state. One theme of Roman history from the third century BCE to the third century CE is the creation of this growing and dispersed citizen body, all carrying with them Roman ideas of ritual and propriety, all bound in principle to the same gods.

By the middle of the millennium, Rome was probably already one of the biggest urban centres in Italy: it owed this to its geopolitical location, to its nodal position on key communication routes and perhaps because of the wide range of natural resources found close by, including clay and salt. The Servian Walls constructed in the fourth century BCE formed an 11 km circuit which suggests political dominance of Italy even in this early period. By the end of the third century BCE Rome had become the dominant Mediterranean power, defeating the largest cities of the western Mediterranean—Phoenician Carthage, Greek Syracuse and Tarentum. Its armies and navies consisted of citizen soldiers supplemented by former enemies compelled to become part of a military alliance on their defeat. During the first half of the second century BCE these armies went on to defeat the main kingdoms founded by the generals who had divided up Alexander the Great's empire. Rome had no rival within the Mediterranean region, even if few areas beyond Italy were converted into provinces. Historians ancient and modern have debated what advantages or tactics had ensured Roman supremacy: Romans themselves seemed to believe that their unusual piety towards the gods was an important factor, alongside the virtue of Roman men, particularly aristocratic men.

At first Roman hegemony over the remaining petty kingdoms, leagues and much smaller city-states was chaotic and inconsistent. The political system of the city was critically destabilized by the pace of growth and the uneven distribution of the proceeds of empire. Not much effort was put into creating the fiscal, administrative and military infrastructure needed to run an empire and as a result Rome very nearly lost it on a number of occasions between the middle of the second and

the middle of the last centuries BCE. Provincials antagonized by brutal troops and greedy tax collectors (the infamous *publicani* or publicans) made common cause with client kings seeking to exploit Rome's lack of attention. Competition between factions and individuals in Rome was swollen by bribery and eventually the armies created to reconquer the empire and reestablish Rome's hegemony made common cause with generals whom the senate now distrusted. The last century of the Republican period was characterised by revolts and civil wars of various kinds. Ancient historical writing was obsessed with these multi-level conflicts. But in the background we can now see the emergence of more enduring structures. One was the emergence of Italy as a region increasingly unified by the Latin language, Roman citizenship, a mixture of Roman *coloniae* and local *municipia* that resembled each other more and more, and on the religious plane a shared vocabulary of rituals, symbols, images, beliefs and practices. Another was the emergence around the Mediterranean of major sanctuaries that attracted visitors from some distance to participate in games, to consult oracles, and to undergo initiations Gods moved too, often with their worshippers but sometimes in more dramatic fashion as when the Roman state began importing cults to the City. It would be an exaggeration to describe the Mediterranean world as religiously unified by the turn of the millennia, but a number of deities and rituals had become widely shared, and conversely those traditions that did not use Greek or Latin, and did not represent the gods in anthropomorphic form, and which did not invest places and temples with complex mythologies were becoming marginalized. A few practices, such as human sacrifice and a bundle of efforts to control divine beings through magic, were now widely distrusted.

Rome emerged from two generations of sporadic war—in which most of the Mediterranean had eventually been involved—as a monarchy. The last general standing took the religiously inflected title Augustus and set about harnessing the considerable religious resources available within his domain. Hailed as a pharaoh in Egypt, given god-like honours in Greek cities, Augustus created temples and leagues devoted to the worship of Rome and himself in the west and in Italy accumulated priesthoods and religious qualities. His image was everywhere, his name inserted into countless prayers and even the calendar. His power rested too on the control of the army and of taxation but ritual provided one means to offer his subjects the seductive idea that all this had come about not by chance or villainy but through the will of the divine, a theodicy of good fortune. Provincials, soldiers, city-dwellers and even the elite had their own versions of what modern writers have collectively termed ruler cult.

Part of the process of adjusting to empire was the development of an intellectual culture that included historical and antiquarian investigations. Much of what we know of early Roman religion originates in the educated guesswork of members of a ruling class in the process of tearing itself to bits, and then learning to live with the consequence of peace. The theological works of Varro and Cicero, the philosophical epic of Lucretius, and the learned discussions of later intellectuals like Plutarch and Gellius all show, in different ways, the search for a systematic and philosophically satisfying version of Roman religion that cohered with history

(the official version) and the imperial order. This activity was not the lived experience of the masses but informed the practice of the enlarged Roman aristocracy that still played a key part in the ruling of the empire.

That political system evolved rather more slowly during the first two centuries CE. Local cultures persisted, but some parts of the empire followed the same path as Italy had done in the last century BCE. Across the empire a network of between two and three thousand cities emerged, most using Latin or Greek as their public languages. Religious institutions that had originated in central Italy or around the Aegean became widespread. Economic growth, a modest increase in mobility and peace all provide conditions for religious exchanges of all kinds. Italian style priesthoods and temples were imitated (and modified) in much of the west and temple-states in the east came to resemble Greek poleis. Not all movement was from the centre to the edge. A number of local deities from Anatolia, Syria, Palestine and Egypt travelled, sometimes in modified forms throughout the empire. No Reichsreligion, no Religion of the Empire, ever emerged. But the empire provided a capacious zone of interaction.

The structure of the empire evolved too in ways that were slow and unplanned, punctuated by dramatic decisions at the centre. Military crises in the middle of the third century triggered by war with Persia and movements on the steppe meant that emperors and their courts spent longer and longer away from Rome. The public religion of late antique Rome, once the emperors had departed, looks self consciously archaizing, but even those senators most committed to projects of traditionalism and restoration were also involved in mystery cults and various theological speculations. The population of Rome, and of most cities, was reducing in this period, and in many part of the empire local traditions were revived or invented. Against this background of slow change the interventions of emperors appear as dramatic acts the impact of which is never completely clear. This applies to Decius' requirement that all Romans (now effectively all his subjects) produce proof of sacrifice, it applies to imperial initiatives to persecute Manicheans and then Christians, it applies to edicts about magic and about the Jews. In many times and places we suspect lived religion did not change rapidly.

The conversion of the emperor Constantine to Christianity in the early fourth century had an immediate impact on the imperial court, and restrictions on the public funding of the worship of other gods and of sacrifice itself had an impact on many cities by the end of the fourth century CE. Yet polytheism flourished in some parts of the empire through the fourth century, survived in pockets into the sixth, and perhaps for many made less of a difference than church leaders claimed. Funerary rituals show no sudden shift. The Lupercalia survived in Rome into the fifth century CE, and Roman games in connection with the cult of Roman emperors were performed in Carthage under the (Christian) Vandal kings. Bishops vacillated between a pragmatic rebadging and appropriation of existing ritual traditions and occasional prohibitions, the efficacy of which has often been doubted.

No society remains the same over 1500 years, and no empire that takes weeks to cross is socially homogenous. Beneath the Latin and Greek rhetorical cultures of civic elites and imperial officials, every kind of local diversity could be found.

These microcultures were not all of them very conservative—notoriously many communities in the west of the empire and the Roman Near East retained almost no public memory of the world before Rome. When something new arrived—the cult of the emperors, the worship of Christ—it almost always fragmented into a myriad of local traditions. Part of this was a process analogous to modern globalization, the local appropriation of the global—and part of this was simply a feature of the narrow horizons within which most ancient lives were lived. Women rarely moved long distances and almost never without the men to who they were related or who owned them. Many men too rarely travelled beyond their own community and those that bordered it. The inhabitants of inland communities often never saw the sea, many inhabitants of the empire had very imperfect knowledge of any language beyond the ones spoken where they had been borne. Writing was widely used, but the capacity to read long texts (and access to them) was very restricted.

The organisation of our chapters attempts to capture some of that diversity and mutability, but cannot offer a comprehensive account of it. Chronologically we have most to say about the period from the end of the first century BCE to the third centuries CE when literary texts, inscriptions and monumental building are more numerous than ever before or after. But we reach back, when we can, to the world of Varro and Cicero and occasionally beyond. And we have tried not to overemphasised the immediate impact of Christianity.

5 Themes and Methods

The themes we have chosen are those for which a lived religion approach seems to us to have most to offer. Objects and well explored locales feature, as a result, more than does law or philosophical theology. Other thematics were discussed and would have been possible, and sometimes we have made difficult choices in order to avoid duplication or artificial demarcations. One example is the question of how to deal with the body, a key locus for ritual action and prohibition in the Christian period and also before. It would be been possible and interesting to explore Roman religion in these terms. But after discussion we decided that since knowledge and practice are both embodied, it would be better to stress this integrally within other chapters, so we could explore lived spaces in terms of the bodies that passed through them, connect images of bodies and body parts to those of the worshippers who dedicated them and so on.

This instance illustrates one other distinctive feature of this book, its collaborative nature. Encyclopaedic projects often divide authorial responsibilities between a team of authors who work more or less autonomously if in parallel. We felt it was important that this subject be more deeply and routinely collaborative. One expression is that almost every chapter is co-authored. But our collaboration goes deeper than this. The conception and design of the project has been a shared one from the start, and although the editors share the final responsibility, they are glad to acknowledge, with gratitude, the degree of participation by all involved.

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Empire as a field of religious action

Greg Woolf and Miguel John Versluys

1 A Religion of the Empire?

Official papyri from Egypt are often dated quite precisely, which is how we know that forty-six certificates (*libelli*), each testifying that its recipient had performed a sacrifice to the gods in the proper way, were all produced in the summer of AD 250.[1] Women and men, all over Roman Egypt, were conforming to an edict issued by the Roman emperor Decius, a universal edict in fact that commanded all Roman citizens to sacrifice on behalf of the empire. That edict has been interpreted by modern scholars both as a deliberate exercise to root out atheists—as Christians were often described—and as a desperate attempt to win divine support in the depths of the military crisis of the third century. Either way it seems to express the sense of the Roman Empire as a single worshipping community, united by particular ritual practices and directed unambiguously by a single authority. Nothing could be further from the truth.[2]

Decius' edict was only possible because one generation before most inhabitants of the empire had been enfranchised through an earlier universal edict, the Constitutio Antoniniana issued by Caracalla in AD 212. Caracalla's motives have been much discussed and the decision certainly had many unintended consequences, including major consequences for the use of the *ius civile* documented in the works of the jurist Ulpian.[3] Before that point perhaps only a third of the empire's inhabitants were Roman citizens.[4] The remainder were either foreigners (*peregrini*) or had one or other of a range of statuses that can be thought of as part citizenships, among them Latins, Junian Latins, Alexandrines and the former slaves of Roman citizens.

Almost all inhabitants of the empire had at least one additional citizenship of a much more local and immediate kind, membership of one or more of the many communities of which the empire was made up, such as the Treveri, formerly a powerful Iron Age tribe living around the Mosel Valley in western Germany; or the Athenians once an imperial people themselves; the Corinthians, descendants of

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1 Rives 1999; Schubert 2016.

2 Hopkins 1978; Gordon 1990a, b; Cancik, Rüpke 1997; Ando 2003, 2007; Cancik, Rüpke 2009 for contrasting approaches to the question of imperial religion.

3 Ando 2016 for discussion of some of the implications.

4 Lavan 2016.

Roman colonists settled on the site of a Greek city sacked a century before by a Roman army, and so on. There were between two and three thousand such communities in the empire. Local citizenships were often proudly proclaimed on tombstones even by those whose families were also Romans. Local identity never lost its importance in antiquity.[5] Indeed the local and the universal went hand in hand, and were rarely mutually exclusive or even opposed categories, as modern scholars sometimes seem to think when writing about ›Roman identity‹.[6]

The collective rituals in which individuals participated were almost always conducted at the local scale, whether it was the worship of gods with strange indigenous names sometimes through ancient ritual forms; prayers and vows to Mars, Saturn, Apollo or Jupiter; the worship of Roman emperors, living and dead; and eventually rituals performed at the tombs of Christian martyrs. When dedicators in Greek speaking areas of the east set up inscriptions to *patrioi theoi* (the ancestral gods) they did not mean the gods of the Romans, but the gods of their own cities. There were even more localised forms of collective cult, in villages, in city quarters, and in households.

Many of the same people also took part in worshipping communities that were not defined by existing ties of kin, locality or citizenship.[7] Little clusters of male worshippers came together in many of the western provinces to take part in the mysteries of the Persian god Mithras.[8] And as individuals some men and women made their way to healing shrines like those of Asclepius at Epidauros and Pergamum; visited places like Bath and Mainz where they could enrol the gods in cursing their enemies; consulted oracles in Delphi, Dodona, Praeneste, Grand, Abonouteichos, the Siwa Oasis and countless other places; promised offerings if they returned safely from dangerous journeys as they did at shrines to Nehalennia at the Rhine mouth; traveled huge distances to undergo initiations like those performed at Eleusis; climbed to mountaintop sanctuaries like Mount Casius in Syria or the Puy de Dôme in the Auvergne, travelled to temples at sources of rivers like the Clitumnus or visited sacred lakes like lake Avernus; and everywhere they prayed for fertility and good health.[9] Most of these religious traditions were not new, and some of these sanctuaries claimed to be very ancient indeed. Our question in this chapter is what difference did Empire make to the religious practices and experiences of individuals on all these different levels of participation?

Our answer is that Empire did operate as a distinct field of religious action, but not in a straightforward sense. Imperial authority constrained where it could not

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5 Bickerman 1952; Millar 1968, 1998; Erskine 2001; van Nijf 2001; Woolf 2004; Price 2005; Clarke 2008; Whitmarsh 2010 explore different manifestations of local identity from one end of the empire to the other. For the persistance of local identity in late antiquity Mitchell, Greatrex 2000.

6 For examples of combining local and global perspectives see Gardner, Herring, Lomas 2013; Pitts, Versluys 2015.

7 North 1992.

8 Clauss 1992.

9 Elsner, Rutherford 2005.

direct, and accidently facilitated developments no emperor could have dreamt of. Few of these transformations were planned and the consequences of empire building were mostly unintended.[10] The limits of empire, vague as they sometimes seem, created a vessel within which religious change followed a distinctive course. That vessel was, however, a leaky one. The last part of this chapter will consider the space of empire as just one part of a much more extensive set of cultural spaces through which objects and images and ideas as well as people circulated quite freely, with consequences of their own for religious developments.

2 Emperors in the Religious life of the Roman World

Let us start, however, with what was clearly the most recognizable universal aspect of this religious field: the emperor. Decius' edict was the first of a series of attempts by emperors to extend their *fiat* over ritual practice. During the decades that followed there would be imperially instigated persecutions of Christians and Manicheans, imperial constitutions prohibiting Jews from converting Christians, bans on public funding for sacrifices to the gods, and attempts to impose particular varieties of Christian dogma and discipline. In parallel to this process the emperors began to claim a special relationship to the divine and a divine mandate. This had been a strand in imperial ideology from the very start but became more explicit during the military crisis of the third century AD. Decius' predecessor Philip celebrated Rome's Thousand Year Birthday, and the rhetoric of the tetrarchs allocated the ruling emperors to Jovian and Herculean dynasties. Constantine's decision to proclaim himself a follower of Christ was just the latest version of this. An unintended consequence was that from the early fourth century Christian bishops began to press emperors to assist them against those they regarded as pagans, schismatics or heretics. Some resisted but by the end of the fourth century a new explicitly Christian Roman Empire had emerged.

The increased involvement of imperial authorities in religious affairs was not unique to Rome. Around the same time Christians in the Persian Empire found their loyalty suspect, and Sasanian Emperors began to persecute Manichaeans and to develop a closer connection to the Zoroastrian priesthood.[11] These changes in the religious conduct of emperors respond to the emergence of the precursors of modern religions, in the sense of organized and disciplined entities that demanded exclusive adherence and made claims to uniquely authoritative accounts of the cosmos.[12] This includes the spread of monotheisms, the precursors of modern religions such as Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and the appearance of priesthoods that asserted an authority independent of that of early propertied classes, political elites and monarchs.

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10 See chapter ›Artefacts and their Humans‹, p. 219.

11 Barnes 1985. Canepa 2009 explores some parallels.

12 North 2005; Woolf 2017; Rüpke 2018

Earlier emperors had tried to centre themselves in religious practice in different ways. From Julius Caesar on emperors had claimed the senior priesthood in Rome, as *pontifex maximus*, been members of the more important priestly colleges, had their names inserted into public vows, performed sacrifices and dedicated temples and had had themselves portrayed in the likeness of gods.[13] Formally all this was in relation to the local cults of the city of Rome and the community of the Romans: neither the emperor nor the Roman priestly colleges had jurisdiction in the territory of subject populations. In practice echoes of these titles and powers can be found in the cults of Roman colonies and municipia in the west, while in other regions emperors were assimilated to local traditions of divine monarchy, such as the Pharaohs of Egypt.

There was never an official pantheon for the empire as a whole: hundreds of gods received cult even if some were much more widely worshipped than others. The municipal charters issued to new Latin communities in the west provide some direction. Oaths were to be sworn by Jupiter, by each of the Divi (deified emperors) by name, by the genius of the living emperor and by the Penates. But each community determined for themselves which other gods would receive collective worship.[14] The Treveri chose Lenus Mars, the Arverni Mercury, the Athenians continued their cults of Athena and other deities, the inhabitants of Crocodilopolus Sobek and so on. Most communities had major temples to a number of deities, some often given Greek or Roman names, some more transparently alien. The Baalim of Syrian cities had mostly become Zeuses under the rule of Alexander's Macedonian successors: now they were assimilated to Jupiter so we read inscriptions to Jupiter Optimus Maximus Hierapolitanus or Jupiter Optimus Maximus Dolichenus. There is no sign of any process of formal approval of these choices outside the community itself. Even within the community there was no sense that only the deities mentioned in official inscriptions or whose cults were public funded could be worshipped. Civic cults included the most spectacular rituals performed in most cities, but as far as individuals were concerned no gods had to be worshipped and the worship of none was prohibited.

Even ruler cult was not centrally co-ordinated. Images exist on Egyptian temple walls of Roman Pharaohs worshipping the Apis bull even though Octavian apparently declined to do so.[15] Jews and even some Christians prayed for the emperor, even if not to him. Where there were traditions of paying cult to kings and generals, carrying their images in processions, or inserting their names into hymns and prayers this continued with Roman generals and then emperors supplanting their predecessors. A detailed account of civic ritual at Ephesos provides an excellent example of how the names, images and birthdays of emperors were fitted into larger ceremonies and religious spaces.[16] Emperors sometimes had their own temples, like those set

13 Hopkins 1978; Gordon 1990b.
14 Scheid 1991; Van Andringa 2002.
15 Hölbl 2000–2005.
16 Rogers 1991. For the general pattern Price 1984.

up in Asian cities which had won the privilege of being *neokoroi* (temple wardens) for their provincial cult, but often were found cohabiting with more famous and older gods, as *theoi sunnaioi*.[17] Emperors, imperial princes and governors were certainly involved in making some of these arrangements: both in Asia/Bithynia and in the Gallic provinces separate arrangements were made for resident Romans and for the provincial associations (*koina* or *concilia*) of local communities, and in both cases members of the imperial family were on hand for the inauguration of the new cults. Military units also payed annual cult to the emperors, led by their commanders, and we have one calendar from Dura Europus on the eastern frontier which preserves what is probably a military transformation of a Roman civic model and includes many imperial anniversaries. Yet none of this was systematic or Empire wide. As late as the middle of the first century AD there were still some places where ruler cult did not take place at the provincial level.[18] The diversity of titles—sacerdotes, flamines, Asiarchs, augustales, seviri and the like—and the regional distribution of most of these titles, strongly suggests that local initiatives lay behind the creation of new priesthoods and the rituals they conducted.[19] Roman religion came into being through all kinds of bottom-up initiatives and their consequences rather than as a top-down construction from the imperial centre.

There was, in short, no Imperial Religion, no Reichsreligion and no Religionspolitik.[20] Nor was there any religious description of the person of the emperor that was widely disseminated or recognised. The nearest thing to an empire-wide object of cult was Jupiter Optimus Maximus, one of the chief deities of the Roman community, the central figure of the triad of deities worshipped since before the Republic was founded on the Capitol.[21] The touchstone of oaths in Roman Spain, he became Zeus Kapitolios in Egypt, was associated with endless male chief deities in eastern cities who came to be known as IOM Heliopolitanus, Dolichenus, Hierapolitanus and so on. Jupiter was seated on the top of columns in the Rhineland with Juno Regina, or else was depicted there fighting serpent footed giants. In school rooms across the empire the children of the better off heard Jupiter give Aeneas his mission statement for Rome, and those who had already learned their Greek from Homer recognised in him the cosmic deity of the *Iliad.* Most Roman gods did not travel far from Italy, but he—along with Mars, Hercules, Mercury, Fortuna, Venus and a few others—got everywhere.[22] That unity of focus did not reflect an empire-wide organization of cult, nor any widely held dogma or widely practiced ritual. Simply the chief god of an imperial power became a model everywhere for divine authority.[23] But custom (*nomos*) remained king, as it had been in the time of Herod-

17 Nock 1930; Price 1984; Burrell 2004.
18 Fishwick 1987–2005.
19 Lozano 2007; McIntyre 2016.
20 Cancik, Rüpke 1997; Naerebout 2014; Rüpke 2011.
21 MacMullen 1981.
22 Bonnet, Bricault 2016.
23 Woolf 2008.