

THEORY AND METHODOLOGY FOR THE STUDY OF ANCIENT RELIGIONS

Ritual and Society

CLCL7003

Roman Pantheon

“Let this one god be **Jupiter** in the aither, **Juno** in the air, **Neptune** in the sea... **Pluto** on earth... **Vesta** on the domestic hearth, **Vulcan** in the metal-worker’s forge...” – **Augustine** *The City of God* 4.11.

“...to the goddess Cloacina (the Purifier; a cloaca is a drain), or to Volupia (whose name has the same root as ‘voluptuous’) or to Lubentina (a name derived from libido), or to Vaticanus (who presides over the wails – vagitus – of infants)... But how can I give a list, in one passage of this book, of all the names of their gods and goddesses? The Romans had difficulty in getting them into the massive volumes in which they assigned particular functions and special responsibilities to the various divine powers.” – (4.8).

▣ Varro *Human and Divine Antiquities* – (flamines minors – 2 of the 12 gods forgotten.

State Cults

The Capitoline Temple and Temple of Vesta

- Located on the Capitoline Hill - dedicated to Jupiter Optimus Maximus ('The Best and Greatest') along with the goddesses Juno and Minerva.
- The 'Capitoline triad' - here from Praeneste - begun in "Regal period" rebuilt several times over the centuries



Reconstruction & remains in
Capitoline Museum



Titus, as Caesar, AV
Aureus. 74 AD.



Domitian, as Caesar,
AV Aureus. 73 AD.

"[After the Capuans had started a fire in the Forum (210 BC), it was said that the enemy] were attempting to destroy the temple of Vesta, with its eternal flame and divine guarantee of Roman rule hidden in its inner shrine." – **Livy 26.27.14.**

The Imperial Cult

- ▣ Worship of the *Genius Augusti*.
 - Sacrifices for living emperor and deceased members emperors/members of the imperial family made at various public occasions.
- ▣ Sacrifices at Nero's accession (13th October); his first assumption of tribunician powers (4th December), etc.; and on special occasions.
- ▣ From AD 41 onwards vows for the welfare of the emperor and the *Res Publica* were held together on the 1st of January (Pliny the Younger *Panegyricus* 67.3.5).
 - *fratres arvales* (Arval Brethren).

Image of Lucius Verus as an Arval Brother (ca. AD 160)



Priesthoods and Rituals

- Four principal colleges of priests,
 - Pontifices,
 - Augures,
 - quindecimviri sacris faciundis (15 to attend to sacred matters),
 - septemviri epulonum (7 masters of the feasts).

“... after the death of the man who had taken the opportunity of civil disturbance to seize it for himself, I received the priesthood, in the consulship of Publius Sulpicius and Gaius Valgius, and such a concourse poured in from the whole of Italy to my election as has never been recorded at Rome before that time” – *Res Gestae* 10.2.

“All these *Salii* are sorts of dancers and singers of hymns in praise of the gods of war. Their festival falls about the time of the Panathenaea, in the month which they call March...” – **Dionysius 2.70.**

“...he [Tullus Hostilius, Rome’s fourth king] might himself give out a ceremonial of war, and that wars might not only be waged but also declared with some sort of formality, he copied from the ancient tribe of the Aequicoli the law, which the *fetiales* now have, by which redress is demanded. When the envoy has arrived at the frontiers of the people from whom satisfaction is sought, he covers his head with a bonnet – the covering is of wool – and says: ‘Hear, Jupiter; hear, ye boundaries of’ – naming whatever nation they belong to; – ‘let righteousness hear! I am the public herald of the Roman People; I come duly and religiously commissioned; let my words be credited.’ Then he recites his demands...” – **Livy 1.32.**

Rituals, Procedure and Politics

“...it is a general belief that without a certain form of prayer it would be useless to immolate a victim, and that, with such an informality, the gods would be consulted to little purpose. And then besides, there are different forms of address to the deities, one form for entreating, another form for averting their ire, and another for commendation... it is the duty of one person to precede the dignitary by reading the formula before him from a written ritual, of another, to keep watch upon every word, and of a third to see that silence is not ominously broken; while a musician, in the meantime, is performing on the flute to prevent any other words being heard.” – **Pliny NH 28.10-11.**

- ▣ Caesar and competition of the office of Pontifex Maximus - Plutarch *Julius Caesar* 7.1-4.

“He [Caesar] brought forward an agrarian law too, and when his colleague announced adverse omens, he resorted to arms and drove him from the Forum; and when next day Bibulus made complaint in the senate and no one could be found who ventured to make a motion... until the end of his term he [Bibulus] did not leave his house, but merely issued proclamations announcing adverse omens.” – **Suetonius *Divus Julius* 20.1.**

Roman Responses to “Foreign” Cults

Adoption and Adaptation

- ▣ *Evocatio* – inviting a foreign god/removing a foreign cult to Rome – **Macrobius *Saturnalia* 3.9.7-9.**
 - Sibylline books – collections of oracles and *remedia* – kept by the (*duoviri /quindecimviri*) **sacris faciundis.**
- ▣ Aesculapius = Ἀσκληπιός; introduced from Epidaurus - 293/92 BC - **Livy 10.47.6-7.**
- ▣ Black stone of Magna Mater brought from Pergamum – meet at Ostia by Scipio Nasica I and a procession of Roman Matrons – games begun in 194 BC – **Livy 29.14.**



Temple of Magna Mater, depicted on Ara Pacis

“...even though she has, in pursuance of oracles, introduced certain rites from abroad, she celebrates them in accordance with her own traditions, after banishing all fabulous clap-trap... the priest and priestess of the goddess are Phrygians... no native Roman walks in procession through the city arrayed in a multi-coloured robe, begging alms or escorted by flute-players, or worships the god with the Phrygian ceremonies...” – **Dionysius of Halicarnassus 2.19.**

Purges and persecutions in the Republican era

- 213 BC: suppression of foreign “superstitious rites” by the M. Aemilius, the City praetor – **Livy 25.1.**
- Suppression of rites of Bacchus in 186 BC – **Livy 39.8-18; *Senatus consultum de bacchanalibus* - ILS 18 = ILLRP511.**
- 139 BC: the praetor for foreigners, Gnaeus Cornelius Hispanus, issued an edict ordering the Chaldaeans to leave the city and Italy within ten days – **Valerius Maximus *Memorable Deeds and Sayings* 1.3.3.**
- 53 BC: temples, including that of Isis and Serapis, in the city torn down by decree of the Senate – **Cassius Dio 40.47.**



Obelisk set up by the Emperor Diocletian, Tetrarchic period.

First Century AD Persecutions

- ▣ Worshippers of Isis and Jews expelled from Rome in AD 19 – **Tac. *Ann.* 2.85.10.**

“In the consulships of Faustus Sulla and Salvius Otho [AD 52], Furius Scribonianus was sent into exile on the grounds that he had consulted and looked into the death of the emperor... The expulsion of the astrologers from Italy was ordered by a drastic and impotent decree of the senate. ” - **Tacitus *Annals* 12.52.**

- ▣ Rationalisation of what is and is not acceptable: “*religio* honours the gods, *superstitio* wrongs them.” – **Seneca *De Clementia* 2.5.1.**
- ▣ Organised groups threatening traditional hierarchy a key facet of responses to innovations; although individual responses may vary.

Early Christians in Rome

“Because the Jews at Rome caused continuous disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he expelled them from the city.” – *Suetonius Divus Claudius* 25.4.

“There he found [at Corinth] a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. – *Acts of the Apostles* 18.2.

“It is established that there were Jews living in Rome in the time of the apostles and that those Jews who had believed [in Christ] passed on to the Romans the tradition that they ought to profess Christ but keep the Law... they nevertheless accepted the faith in Christ, although in a Jewish manner.” – *Ambrosiaster Exposition of Romans* preface (c. AD 375).

So far, the precautions taken were recommended by human good sense: now means were sought for appeasing the deity, and reference was made to the Sibylline books; at the command of which public prayers were offered to Vulcan, Ceres, and Proserpine, while Juno was propitiated by the matrons... Ritual banquets and all-night vigils were celebrated by women in the married state. But neither human help, nor imperial munificence, nor all the means of placating Heaven, could stifle scandal or dispel the belief that the fire had taken place by order. Therefore, **to scotch the rumour, Nero substituted as culprits**, and punished with the utmost refinements of cruelty, a class of men, reviled for their vices, whom the mob styled **Christians**... First, then, the confessed members of the sect were arrested; next, on their confessions, vast numbers were convicted, **not so much on the charge of arson as for hatred of the mankind**. And mockery accompanied their end: they were covered with wild beasts' skins and torn to death by dogs; or they were fastened on crosses, and, when daylight failed were burned to serve as lamps by night. Nero had offered his Gardens for the spectacle, and gave an exhibition in his Circus, mixing with the crowd in the costume of a charioteer, or mounted on his chariot. Hence, in spite of a guilt which had earned the most exemplary punishment, there arose a feeling of pity, due to the sense that they were being sacrificed not for the welfare of the state but to the viciousness of a single man.” – **Tac. Ann. 15.44.**

“Punishments were inflicted on Christians, a sect professing a new and mischievous superstition.” – **Suet. Nero 16.2.**

Martyrdom of St Peter and St Paul

“It is recorded that the Apostles Paul and Peter were killed under Nero [AD 67/68] in Rome itself, the former by decapitation and the latter by crucifixion. That this occurred in Rome is collaborated by the existence of cemeteries in there names, and by no less an authority than Gaius a church historian who wrote when Zephyrinus was Bishop of Rome [c. AD 210]... if you care to go out to the Vatican field or the road to Ostia you will find the monuments of the founders of our Church.” – Eusebius *Ecclesiastical Histories* 2.25.5-7.



The Crucifixion of St. Peter by Michelangelo (ca. 1546-50)



Triumph of Faith by Eugene Thirion (1839-1910)

Superstitio and **Magic**

Superstitio – often a slur – irregular practices - excessive devotion, often with desire for inappropriate knowledge.

- ▣ Magic a mixture of medicine, religion and astrology, often seen as being eastern in origin – used to meet human desires, control the gods and obtain knowledge of the future.
- ▣ Anxieties in Roman literary sources about the power of magic – *Lex Cornelia de sicariis and veneficis* (81 BC).
- ▣ Thessalian witch Erichtho – undid the laws of nature, feed on corpses, foretold future through necromancy – “he knew about the mysteries of cruel magicians which the gods above abominate...” – **Lucan *Pharsalia* 6.430.**

Chaldaeans - often generic term for astrologers

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