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Introduction

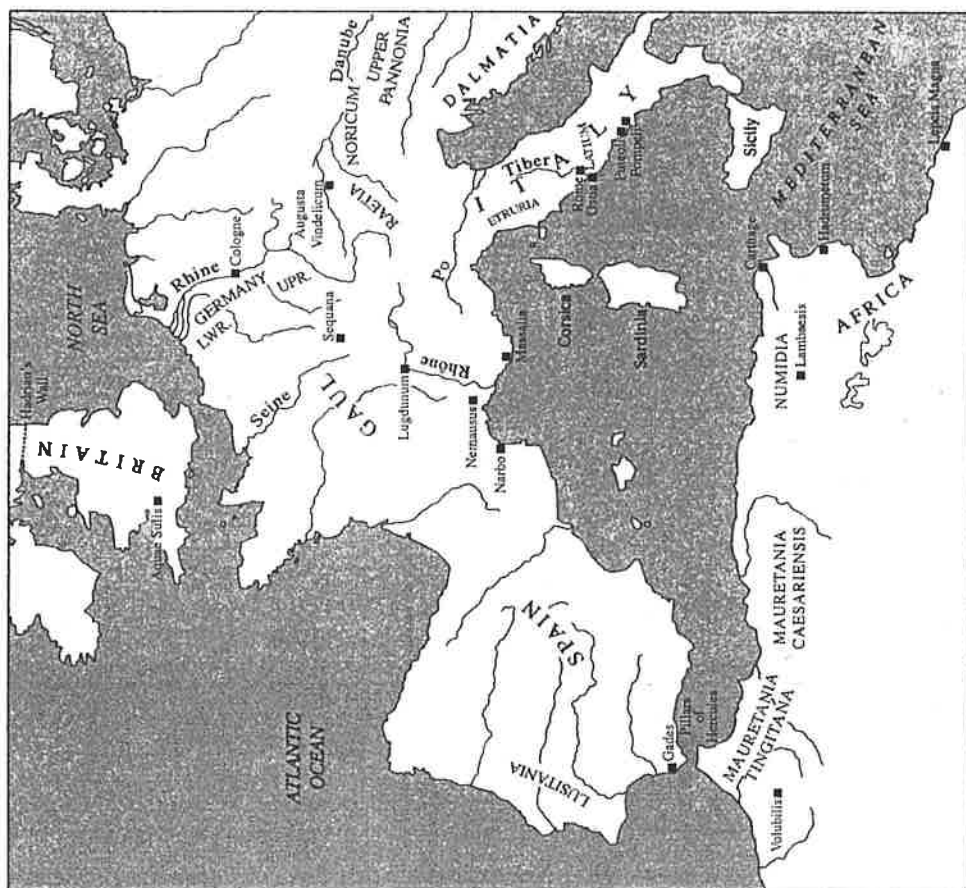


Trying to sketch an overview of religion in the Roman Empire is in some ways like putting together a jigsaw puzzle: although we can glimpse intriguing colors and shapes in the individual pieces, we cannot appreciate the overall pattern until we have put them all together. But this particular puzzle is more confusing than most, because a large number of pieces are certainly missing, and those that do exist can fit together not just in one way to form a single image, but in many different ways to produce a range of possible patterns. In order to make any progress at all, we must not only examine the available pieces, but also clarify what sort of pattern we expect to create. In the second part of this introduction I discuss the pieces, that is, the different sorts of evidence available to us, but it is important first to consider the overall pattern that I have in mind, the assumptions that shape my survey. The most basic of these assumptions are implicit in the title, and the best way to bring them out is to examine its elements more closely.

1 The Roman Empire

The phrase "the Roman Empire" refers simultaneously to a territory, a form of government, and a period of history. In this book the geographical and chronological senses will be key, although in the book itself the political sense will also be important. Moreover, since all three aspects of the term are interconnected, it is useful to consider them as a group.

In geographical terms, "the Roman Empire" was the territory ruled by the city of Rome, at least originally: starting in the third century CE Rome became increasingly less important as the seat of government, although it never lost its symbolic significance. In origin, Rome was simply one town



Map 4 Italy, North Africa, and western Europe

among many in the western coastal plains of central Italy. In the late fifth century BCE, however, the Romans began to conquer neighboring towns and in various ways incorporate them into their own territory; by the early third century BCE, the Romans controlled the entire Italian peninsula. This expansion made Rome a major power in the Mediterranean world and eventually brought it into conflict with the other powers of the time: the North African city of Carthage and the Greek states of the eastern Mediterranean. By the middle of the second century BCE the Romans had wiped out the former and either conquered or cowed the latter; a century later the Mediterranean Sea was almost entirely surrounded by Roman territory. The Romans also extended their rule further north. The acquisition of southern Spain from Carthage in the early second century BCE made it useful to pacify the Mediterranean coast of Gaul (roughly modern France) as well, and in the mid-first century BCE Julius Caesar conquered the rest of Gaul. The emperor Augustus (31 BCE–14 CE) pushed back the boundaries of Roman rule to the Rhine and the Danube, and his successor Claudius (41–54 CE) added Britain. In the early second century CE the emperor Trajan (98–117 CE) conquered Dacia (roughly modern Romania) and briefly Mesopotamia; although the latter was soon abandoned, Roman power continued to extend to the Euphrates and in some cases beyond. By the mid-second century CE the Roman Empire was an immense territory stretching from Scotland to Sudan and from Portugal to Iraq.

As long as expansion was limited to the Italian peninsula, Roman authorities did not impose direct rule on the peoples they conquered. In most cases local political institutions continued with little change, and their subject status (or “allied” status, as the Romans often preferred to call it) consisted largely in obligations to support Rome militarily. Many communities even obtained partial or full Roman citizenship, thus in a political sense becoming Roman themselves. Roman expansion overseas resulted in some new policies: instead of military support, these more distant conquests were required to contribute financially in the form of taxes. And although the Romans continued to allow or even encourage local political institutions at the municipal level, they also appointed one of their own officials as a governor of an entire region to ensure peace and order, and to ensure the smooth collection of taxes. The region for which a governor was responsible was known as a province: Sicily and Sardinia were the first provinces, followed by two in Spain, one in North Africa, and so forth. By the end of the first century CE there were 35 or more provinces. Although the Romans ruled these provinces directly, they did so for centuries with relatively little investment of manpower: the governor, one or two chief financial officers, and a fairly small staff might constitute the entire Roman bureaucracy in a region the size of many modern

European countries. Only in areas liable to internal or external military threats was the Roman presence significantly greater, because of the legions that would be stationed there. The Romans’ ability to manage their empire with so little bureaucracy was largely due to the fact that they left much of the day-to-day governance to local elites and local municipal institutions. These local elites, whose cooperation with the central power was so crucial to the smooth functioning of the empire, tended to adopt many Roman ways themselves. Roman citizenship eventually began to spread overseas as it had in Italy, and in 212 CE the emperor Caracalla issued a decree making all free inhabitants of the empire Roman citizens. Thus the empire was gradually transformed from an empire ruled by Rome into an empire of Romans, although this development did not prevent local allegiances from continuing to be strong.

The expansion of Roman power began when Rome itself was governed by a group of annually elected magistrates (consuls, praetors, and the like) who were advised and assisted by the Senate, an assembly of all magistrates and ex-magistrates that functioned in effect as the chief policy-making body. This system, conventionally known as the Republic, functioned in one form or another for almost 500 years, but in the first century BCE gradually began to collapse, in part because of the pressures created by Roman territorial expansion. A series of individual leaders began amassing more and more political and military power in their own hands, climaxing in the foundation of a monarchy by Augustus, the first “emperor” of Rome. Augustus was an extremely savvy politician, however, and realized that earlier leaders, including his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, had alienated other elite Romans by making too obvious changes in the traditional political system. He himself, therefore, made as few concrete changes as possible, and did not even create any new specific office for himself; the Senate and the traditional magistracies continued, in name at least, as before. Augustus instead made great use of propaganda and what would nowadays be called a cult of personality. The position that he established for himself and that we now call that of the “Roman emperor” was one that gradually became more fixed and defined as successor followed successor, and one whose powers gradually became more extensive and more established. The cult of personality that Augustus began also continued and even spread, but soon became attached more to the office itself than to individual emperors. This was the Roman Empire in the political sense.

It is worth keeping in mind that geographically Rome ruled an empire long before there was a Roman emperor. But “the Roman Empire” in its chronological sense refers only to the period in which the imperial system of government was in effect. Historians generally regard this as

beginning in 31 BCE, when Augustus defeated his last rival and became sole ruler of the Roman world. When the Roman Empire ends is a much more problematic question. The last emperor in the western part of the Roman world was deposed in 476 CE, but in the eastern part a virtually unbroken succession of emperors continued until 1453, when Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Turks. The reigns of Diocletian (284–305 CE) and Constantine (306–37 CE), however, saw a number of substantial changes to the organization of the Roman world, not the least being Constantine's decision to favor Christianity over all other religious traditions. It is thus conventional to describe the subsequent period as "the later Roman Empire" or "late antiquity" in distinction with the earlier Roman Empire or simply "the imperial period." In terms of religion, Constantine's recognition of Christianity naturally signals a major shift, which in a brief survey it would be impossible to treat adequately. For the purposes of this book, therefore, "the Roman Empire" refers primarily to the period from Augustus to Constantine, although I draw on earlier or later material whenever that seems useful.

2 Religion and Religions

As we move to the other term in the title, we immediately enter treacherous waters. "Religion" is an extremely difficult term to pin down, as the countless attempts to do so attest. Although there is fortunately no need here to propose a rigorous and comprehensive definition, it is nevertheless important to reflect on what assumptions the term may invoke, and how useful these are in studying the Roman Empire. Most people probably use the term "religion" in everyday speech to mean something like the following: "a conception of, reverence for, and desire to please or live in harmony with some superhuman force, as expressed through specific beliefs, principles, and actions." If we understand the term in this general sense, we can readily apply it to the culture of the Roman Empire. Evidence for a conception of and a desire to please or live in harmony with some superhuman force is both abundant and varied, and implies an equally varied array of religious beliefs, principles, and actions. To this extent it is easy enough to identify the topic of this book.

It is in the attempt to come to grips with the very variety of religion in the Roman Empire that the problems begin. These problems lie not simply in the variety itself, but more importantly in the way we think about it, in the overall pattern that we use to guide our interpretation of the evidence. Variety in religion is in itself nothing unfamiliar to most people today, given the constantly increasing interconnections between different

cultures and traditions. Indeed, the academic study of religion normally always includes an introductory survey of "the world's great religions," Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Shinto, and so forth. Such surveys might seem to provide a suitable model for discussing the variety of religion in the Roman world, and there is indeed a well-established tradition of studying "the religions of the Roman Empire." But the plural noun "religions" tends to bring with it assumptions that the singular "religion" does not, and it is important to consider whether these also fit the culture of the Roman Empire.

The plural "religions" tends to imply different and distinct conceptions of a superhuman force, or at least conceptions that are expressed in different sets of beliefs, principles, and actions. For example, people might disagree whether or not Judaism, Christianity, and Islam involve fundamentally different conceptions of God, but almost everyone would agree that these three traditions involve different sets of specific beliefs, principles, and actions. Moreover, notwithstanding their very considerable internal variety, most people would probably regard each of them as in some way a system and a unity, that is, as "a religion," and their individual varieties merely as sects or denominations or the like. "A religion," therefore, usually implies a distinct and broadly coherent system of beliefs and principles. In addition, many people would probably assume that a religion would have several if not all of the following features: a set of sacred scriptures; some sort of professional or full-time authorities; specific places and times for worship; a moral code; and a number of associated practices and customs. Again, these elements are generally regarded as peculiar to each different religion, and somehow as expressions of its distinctive beliefs and principles. The study of different "religions," then, implies the study of the different sets of core beliefs and principles together with all the other features that accompany them.

Although this may be a convenient model for studying religion across the many cultures of the world, I would argue that it is fundamentally misleading for studying religion in the Roman Empire. The diversity of religion in the Roman world was not that of separate and distinct "religions," each with its own set of core beliefs and principles and its particular scriptures, clergy, shrines, rituals, and customs. Two points are of crucial importance. First, it is almost impossible, apart from a few exceptions such as Judaism and Christianity, to identify any coherent or unified systems of religion at all (and even Judaism in this period may fit the model less well than many people would suppose). Instead, the coexistence of religious conceptions and practices that would seem incompatible to people used to the idea of "a religion" was apparently taken for granted in the Roman Empire. Furthermore, some things that many people would

regard as normal elements of a religion, such as a set of scriptures, a distinct clergy, or an associated moral code, are often largely or entirely lacking. In chapter 1 I discuss in more detail the nature of religion in the Roman Empire, or at least in its dominant cultural tradition.

This brings us to the second crucial point. As my brief discussion of the geographical extent of the empire should make clear, the Roman world encompassed a tremendous range of ethnic groups and cultural traditions. Most of these had their own local customs with respect to the divine, and in chapter 2 I briefly survey them. The two most important cultural traditions of the empire, those of the Greeks and the Romans, shared so many religious practices and beliefs that we can reasonably talk about a single Graeco-Roman religious tradition. There were of course differences between the two, and both Greeks and Romans were aware and even proud of them. But their common ground constituted a sort of implicit religious standard, a set of practices and beliefs that the social and cultural elite of the empire regarded as normal; it is this normative tradition of the Graeco-Roman elite that I examine in chapter 1. As I discuss in chapter 7, the elite often sneered at religious customs that differed from this normative tradition, and at times even restricted or banned them outright. Yet we must be careful not to make too much of this intermittent concern with difference. The fact remains that on a fundamental level the various religious traditions of the empire had more similarities than differences. As a result, when people from one tradition were confronted with another, they often found much that was familiar and immediately understandable, and tended to treat what was unfamiliar simply as a local peculiarity. In short, the impression we get from the sources is that people thought not so much in terms of "different religions," as we might today, but simply of varying local customs with regard to the gods.

This book is thus a study not of "the religions of the Roman Empire," but of "religion in the Roman Empire," the commonalities and differences in religious life as it existed throughout the Roman world. My goal is to provide a clear and systematic overview of what I regard as the most important phenomena and to locate them in the social and conceptual world of the people of the time. It is important to keep in mind that this world was not the same as ours; although we cannot simply set aside our own assumptions about the way the world works, we can at least be aware that in many cases they are different from those current in the Roman Empire. Most of the traditions that I discuss effectively ended centuries ago, although there have in modern times been various movements to revive some of them. In these cases, the challenge is to interpret sympathetically the fragments of evidence that have come down to us. With Judaism and Christianity the situation is of course very different: these traditions are

very much alive and play an important role in our own world. For that reason, it is tempting to interpret them in terms of contemporary experience and to assign to them more importance than they perhaps had at the time. It is thus all the more necessary to stress that my approach here is to treat them strictly as historical phenomena, part of the complex pattern of religious life in the Roman Empire.

After establishing some of the fundamental features of the Graeco-Roman tradition in the first chapter and surveying the main regional traditions in the second, in the following chapters I explore religion in practice. Chapter 3, "The Presence of the Gods," looks at people's experience of the divine world and its role in their lives. In chapter 4, "Religion and Community," I discuss the role of shared cult practices and beliefs in the formation of communities at various levels, from the household to the city. Chapter 5, "Religion and Empire," explores the various mechanisms that functioned to link together the different regions of the empire. In chapter 6, "Religious Options," I examine the various possibilities for connections with the divine that went beyond those available to the average person, and in chapter 7, "Roman Religious Policy," I consider the role of the ruling authorities in defining and policing the limits of acceptable religious behavior. For the sake of simplicity, my approach is for the most part a synchronic one, with only occasional discussion of change over time. For that reason it is all the more important to stress here that religion in the Roman Empire was a dynamic rather than a static phenomenon, constantly moving and developing. Indeed, it was this dynamic quality that allowed for the effective religious integration of the empire, as I suggest in chapter 2 and discuss more fully in chapter 5. In the epilogue I return to this problem, and consider more explicitly the nature of religious change in the Roman imperial period.

3 The Sources

In studying a particular religious tradition, the usual place to begin is with its sacred scriptures. This is not a practical option for studying religion in the Roman Empire, however, because by and large sacred scriptures played only a marginal role. In the normative Graeco-Roman tradition, there were no writings at all that were regarded as "the Word of God" and that functioned as the tradition's center or foundation. This is not to say that texts were not important; on the contrary, there was a wide range of texts dealing in one way or another with religion. Some, such as hymns, served to praise the gods by describing their distinctive qualities and powers, and by recounting their great deeds and benefits. Other writings recorded

ritual lore and prescriptions for different sorts of rites, festivals, and ceremonies, and still others, like the Sibylline books in Rome, collected the utterances attributed to various oracles or seers. Yet none of them in any way constituted the core of the Graeco-Roman religious tradition, but simply filled specific and limited functions within it. Moreover, the vast majority of these texts have not survived, and for many of them our knowledge is limited to references and citations in other writers.

Outside the mainstream of the normative Graeco-Roman tradition, texts were if anything even more important. A wide variety of prophetic and oracular texts was in circulation, and there was apparently an equally large number of texts purporting to record secret lore, many of which would now be classed as magical or astrological. Last but not least, there were divine revelations, texts that provided privileged insight into the nature of the cosmos and the relationship between the divine and the human: what we might regard as sacred scriptures in the usual sense of the term. In some traditions sacred scriptures of this sort played a central and foundational role, most notably in Judaism and its offshoot Christianity, but they existed even on the margins of the Greek tradition. I discuss this material more fully in chapter 6; here it is important to note not only that it lay largely on the fringes of the mainstream Graeco-Roman tradition, but that again the vast bulk of it has not survived.

If it is not possible or even desirable to base the study of religion in the Roman Empire on a set of sacred scriptures, what sort of evidence can we use? First of all, despite the general lack of sacred scriptures, there is an extensive and varied body of Greek and Latin literature that has come down through the manuscript tradition, copied and recopied over the centuries. Virtually all of this contains some information about conceptions of the divine or human interactions with it. Poetry, particularly epic and tragedy, is rich in descriptions of the gods and accounts of their deeds; history and oratory provides considerable information about the worship of various deities and the ways they were imagined to affect people's lives; philosophical texts often include speculation about the nature of the divine and its relationship with the physical and human spheres. Special mention should be made of what we may broadly describe as antiquarian texts, the works of scholars who gathered together information and speculation about a wide range of customs and traditions: for example, M. Terentius Varro, who in the mid-first century BCE wrote a 16-volume work on the religious traditions of the Romans, or M. Verrius Flaccus, who under Augustus compiled a detailed commentary on the Roman religious calendar. Although these works too are lost, some of their material was preserved by later writers. But a few important texts of this sort do survive, such as Pausanias' *Description of Greece*, a guidebook

to the ancient sites of the Greek mainland that provides considerable information about local shrines and rituals.

The literary evidence is thus wide-ranging and extensive; although invaluable, however, it is also limited in some very important ways. For one thing, although we occasionally find information about religious traditions in other parts of the empire, particularly in historical works, by and large these works concern only the Graeco-Roman tradition; the chief exceptions are Jewish and Christian writings. Moreover, the Graeco-Roman texts are largely limited to the most elite aspects of that tradition: we learn a fair amount about philosophical debates on the nature of the divine, but not much about what ordinary people thought; we have numerous reports about the urban shrines and festivals patronized by the socio-economic elite, but few about the practices of the masses and people in rural areas; we have access to the myths enshrined in classic works of high literature, but not to the stories that may have circulated only orally. I do not want to suggest that there was a sharp dichotomy between the religion of the elite and that of the masses, but simply to stress that the literary evidence is by and large very one-sided and that any account of religion in the Roman Empire based solely on it is necessarily a very partial one.

There are, however, several other types of evidence that allow for a much broader approach to the topic. Of crucial importance are texts written on stone or metal or papyrus that have survived by chance and been rediscovered only in the last century and a half. The papyri that have been found in large numbers in Egypt and other parts of the Middle East include such spectacular discoveries as the Jewish sectarian writings found at Qumran on the shores of the Dead Sea and the library of gnostic texts found at Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt, as well as the collections of spells collectively known as the "Greek Magical Papyri." The chance preservation of texts like these has provided access to entire religious literatures that would have otherwise been largely or entirely unknown. The epigraphic evidence (inscriptions on stone and metal) is in some ways even more important. Unlike the papyrological material, however, its importance lies not in individual large-scale texts or collections of texts, but instead in the vast numbers of brief inscriptions that document offerings to the gods. Although individually these are normally too short and stereotyped to provide much information, collectively they give us an idea of the variety of religious life in the empire that would otherwise be completely hidden.

Because I make frequent reference to these sorts of inscriptions throughout the book, it is useful at this point to consider some representative examples in more detail (see Text Box 0.1). The first thing to note is

Text Box 0.1

- 1 Latin inscription from Africa (*ILS* 4461)

In accordance with a command; sacred to the Greek Ceres; Marcus Laridius Ambigaeus, the son of Aulus, first priest, dedicated an altar with stairs on his own property.

- 2 Greek inscription on a marble column found in Phrygia (*MAMA* 10.49)

To Zeus Bennios, on behalf of the Guild of the Gardeners of Mother Steunene, Neikophanes and Agathenor the son of Menis made [this] dedication.

- 3 Latin inscription on a small altar from a fort near Hadrian's Wall in Britain (*RIB* 1.1778)

To Fortuna Augusta, on behalf of the well being of Lucius Aelius Caesar [adopted son of the emperor Antoninus Pius], in accordance with a vision; Titus Flavius Secundus, prefect of the First Cohort of Hamian Archers, discharged his vow willingly and deservedly.

- 4 Greek inscription on a plaque from Odessus, on the coast of Lower Moesia; probably third century CE (*IGBulg* 1² 86 bis)

To Asklepios, the savior of the world; Marcus Aurelius Caecilius Junior, son of Caecilius, [made a] thank-offering for his recovery.

- 5 Latin inscription on a marble plinth from the vicinity of Rome (*ILS* 3526)

To holy Silvanus; a votive offering in accordance with a vision, on account of his freedom [from slavery]; Sextus Attius Dionysius erected a statue with its base as a gift.

- 6 Greek inscription on a limestone relief depicting the Thracian Rider God from Augusta Traiana in northern Thrace; probably third century CE (*IGBulg* 3.1597)

Good fortune! To the God Who Listens, greatest Aularchenos; Aurelius Valens, soldier of the Eleventh Claudian Legion, made [this] dedication because of his vow. With good fortune!

- 7 Latin inscription on a small altar from Upper Germany (*ILS* 4553)

To Jupiter Optimus Maximus and Mars Caturix, *genius* of the place; Gaius Julius Quietus, *beneficiarius consularis*, discharged his vow joyfully, willingly, and deservedly.

- 8 Greek inscription on a statue base from Ephesus, mid-second century CE (*Eph* 1266)

To Artemis of Ephesus; Cominia Iunia [discharged] her vow; after dedicating at her own expense a statue with all its associated adornment, she also dedicated an altar.

that these inscriptions accompanied offerings to the gods. Since most offerings consisted of perishable goods, they have left no trace. At times, however, people chose to commemorate them with permanent inscriptions. Sometimes these are found on simple plaques, but more often they adorn objects that themselves constituted part or even all of the actual gift: altars, either functional or symbolic (as in nos. 1, 3, and 8), more rarely statues (as in nos. 5 and 8) or reliefs (as in no. 6; see Figures 3.1 and 5.1 for examples). The information provided in these inscriptions is always highly select. The one item they always include is the name of the deity to whom the offering was dedicated, which is usually the first thing in the inscription. They normally, although not invariably, also include the name of the dedicator as well, and sometimes an indication of his or her social status or position as well (as in nos. 1, 3, 6, and 7; a *beneficiarius consularis* is a soldier assigned to a governor for specific duties). Other information is less standard. Occasionally they record the specific reason for the offering (for example, recovery from a health problem in no. 4, freedom from slavery in no. 5) or connect it with some manifestation of the deity (as with the divine command in no. 1 and the visions in nos. 3 and 5). In many cases they indicate that the offering was the result of a vow (Latin *votum*, Greek *euchē*). A vow was a prayer in which a person asked a deity for some blessing and promised a specific offering in return; if the deity granted the request, the person then "discharged the vow" by making the specified offering. These offerings are conventionally described as "votive." It is through inscriptions like these that we get some sense of the incredible range of deities worshipped in the Roman Empire and of the frequency with which people turned to them for blessings.

Another category of evidence is not textual at all, although it sometimes includes texts as a subordinate element. This is what might broadly be classed as material evidence, and takes a wide range of forms. Images of the gods constitute one obviously important type; these exist in every medium and every size, from larger-than-life marble statues and reliefs to small terracotta figurines, from costly and elaborate mosaics to crude engravings; I discuss these further in chapter 1. Coins also provide valuable evidence, particularly about which deities were honored in different cities and in different periods. Lastly, there are the remains of buildings

and shrines, both the buildings themselves and their contents, which can include statues and votive dedications of all sorts. In the absence of inscriptions, it is often impossible to identify the deity for whom a shrine was built, and sometimes difficult to determine whether a given structure was in fact a shrine or not. Yet even so we can learn much from these remains about the integration of worship into a particular area and the cultural forms that worship might assume in different times and places.

It is important to draw on as many types of evidence as possible in order to build up an overview of religion in the Roman Empire, but to do so is far from easy: the interpretation of each type of evidence requires specialized knowledge and training. The student of religion in the Roman Empire must therefore rely on the work of philologists and literary critics, papyrologists and epigraphers, art historians and archaeologists, whose interests are often quite removed from his or her own. Nevertheless, it is with these pieces that he or she must work, and we must remember that any larger picture is made up from them. Although this is not a sourcebook, I have tried so far as possible to incorporate specific pieces of evidence into the discussion, at times including images or more extensive quotations in sidebars, as with the inscriptions discussed above. It is only through the integration of these individual pieces into the overall pattern that a general overview of religion in the Roman Empire is possible.

FURTHER READING

Many overviews of the Roman Empire are available: recommended are Wells 1992 (very brief) and Goodman 1997 (more detailed), although neither goes beyond the second century CE. Huskinson 2000 takes a thematic approach to some key issues; Potter (forthcoming) provides a very recent and more comprehensive survey. The bibliography on the study of religion is enormous; good starting points are J. Z. Smith 1998, short yet provocative, and the more thorough discussion of W. C. Smith 1963. Other studies of religion in the Roman Empire do things that the present book does not, and therefore serve as useful complements. Koester 1995 and Klauck 2003 are excellent examples of the "survey of religions" approach; they contain much information, systematically and intelligently presented. MacMullen 1981 and Lane Fox 1986 are impressionistic rather than systematic, but abound with interesting material and striking observations; Kraemer 1992 surveys the role of women. Useful sourcebooks, all of which extend beyond the period considered here, include Grant 1953, MacMullen and Lane 1992, and Kraemer 2004 (largely Jewish and Christian material).

CHAPTER 1

Identifying "Religion" in the Graeco-Roman World



In the introduction, I asserted that in the normative Graeco-Roman tradition it is difficult to identify any coherent and unified system of beliefs, practices, and institutions that we could label "a religion" in the usual sense of the term. Even the concept of "a religion" does not seem to have been part of traditional Graeco-Roman culture, although it perhaps began to develop in the second century CE. Although it is impossible to know how people really view the world, especially the people of a now-lost civilization, the words they used can give us some important insights into the way they thought.

It is thus significant that in neither Greek nor Latin was there a word that really corresponds to the English term "a religion." In both languages there were words for "sacred" or "holy," such as *hieros* and *hagios* in Greek and *sacer* in Latin, and words for the proper reverence that a person should have towards the divine, such as *eusebeia* in Greek and *pietas* in Latin. Both languages also had words to describe what people did to demonstrate that reverence. Greek terms included *latreia*, literally "service," and *thráskeia*, "worship" or "ritual." In Latin, the verb *colere* meant literally "to tend, look after" someone or something and thus, with specific reference to the gods, "to make the object of religious devotion"; the related noun *cultus* often meant "worship." We can even find terms that approximate the English word "religion" in its more general sense of "a conception of, reverence for, and desire to please some superhuman force." In Greek the phrase *nomizein theous* meant something like "to acknowledge the gods by engaging in customary practices." In Latin there was the noun *religio*, which as the source of the English word "religion" requires somewhat more detailed discussion.

The original meaning of *religio* is rather hard to pin down. Its primary connotation seems broadly to have been "an obligation with respect to