

EDITED BY JOHN R. HINNELLS

A Handbook of

# Ancient Religions



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# **A Handbook of Ancient Religions**

Edited by **John R. Hinnells**



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# 7 Religions in the Roman Empire

J. A. NORTH

## The study of Roman 'paganism'

The study of Roman pagan<sup>1</sup> religion as a separate subject does not go back before the early nineteenth century. In its relatively short history it has been dominated by a small number of ideas that have sometimes been seen as almost beyond challenge. The keynote was set from the very beginning as a story of 'decline'. The idea was that the religion of the very earliest Romans was closely adapted to their needs but that for one reason or another its development was stunted, so that it became progressively more and more stultified and ritualized and remote from the needs of the worshippers. Proof of all this was thought to come from the last generation of the Republic for whom religion had become nothing more or less than a meaningless set of rules. These could be freely exploited by anybody who wished to, as the source of useful political manoeuvres or for any other advantages, without thought about the gods and goddesses who were supposedly the objects of the worship.

By the end of the nineteenth century this view had become well established as an orthodoxy. At that date the great handbook of Georg Wissowa enshrined a certain approach to the subject. The book is a mine of information about the religious institutions of Rome and still provides the fullest and safest source for such information; but it is organized in a legalistic framework that implies a vision of the system in which it parallels the constitutional law so much admired at the time. Mommsen's authority lay behind this approach, since he saw religion as the least interesting area of Roman life. To some extent, this view was modified at the turn of the century by new approaches, which began to take seriously theories of human history tracing the evolution of a series of stages, beginning from simple societies and going through stages of increasing complexity. The early stages were modelled on the views of anthropologists of the time about the starting point of this evolution; but it was not at all difficult to adapt existing views to

the later stages, and to see stagnation and decline as once again the factors that prevented Rome from following the correct evolutionary path. The same basic view of the character of Roman religious experience was thus being recycled in a modern form, compatible with the anthropology of the period (Wissowa 1912; Scheid 1987; North 1997).

The most powerful and long-lasting part of this theory was best elaborated by Warde Fowler in Oxford. He argued that there were various clues that suggested a period of Roman history in which the Romans had established worship and even some of their characteristic institutions, but had not yet acquired gods and goddesses in any recognizable form. Varro, the great antiquarian writer of the late Republic, believed that for many decades the Romans made no images of their deities; the implication seemed to be that at this stage they worshipped spirits inherent in natural phenomena such as springs or fire. This ancient evidence fitted with the idea that animism was the first form of religion in all societies, so the Romans were starting out on the normal evolutionary route. The theory seemed to be confirmed by two arguments: first, that the Roman gods never developed family relationships or personalities of their own and consequently that the Romans had no mythology of their own; secondly, that a word in Latin, *numen*, seemed to correspond exactly to the spirits that early man was supposed to have worshipped. The Romans were now fitted out with the early history that the theory would have predicted. The real Roman religion was the religion of the *numina*, which had of course no personality, form or kin, because they were the powers of natural forces. The whole apparatus of pagan religion had to be borrowed from more developed peoples: images from the Etruscans, myths from the Greeks (Warde Fowler 1911; *RoRI*: 10–18).

In the course of the middle decades of the twentieth century, many variations of this basic scheme were explored, but the most radical revision of it was pioneered by the most controversial religious historian of the time. This was Georges Dumézil, the leading exponent of the claimed mythology and theology of the Indo-Europeans. His theory of the threefold structure of ideology traced back, at least in theory, to the society (supposedly divided into three classes, kings/priests, warriors and producers) as well as the mythology of the original Indo-Europeans. The theory was based not just on Romans, but on a comparison of many different ancient and later societies; but the ideology was inherited by many different peoples, Celts and Germans as well as Persians and Indians. The Roman version was just another example. There is a great deal about this which is highly controversial and puzzling today, as it was already in the 1930s,

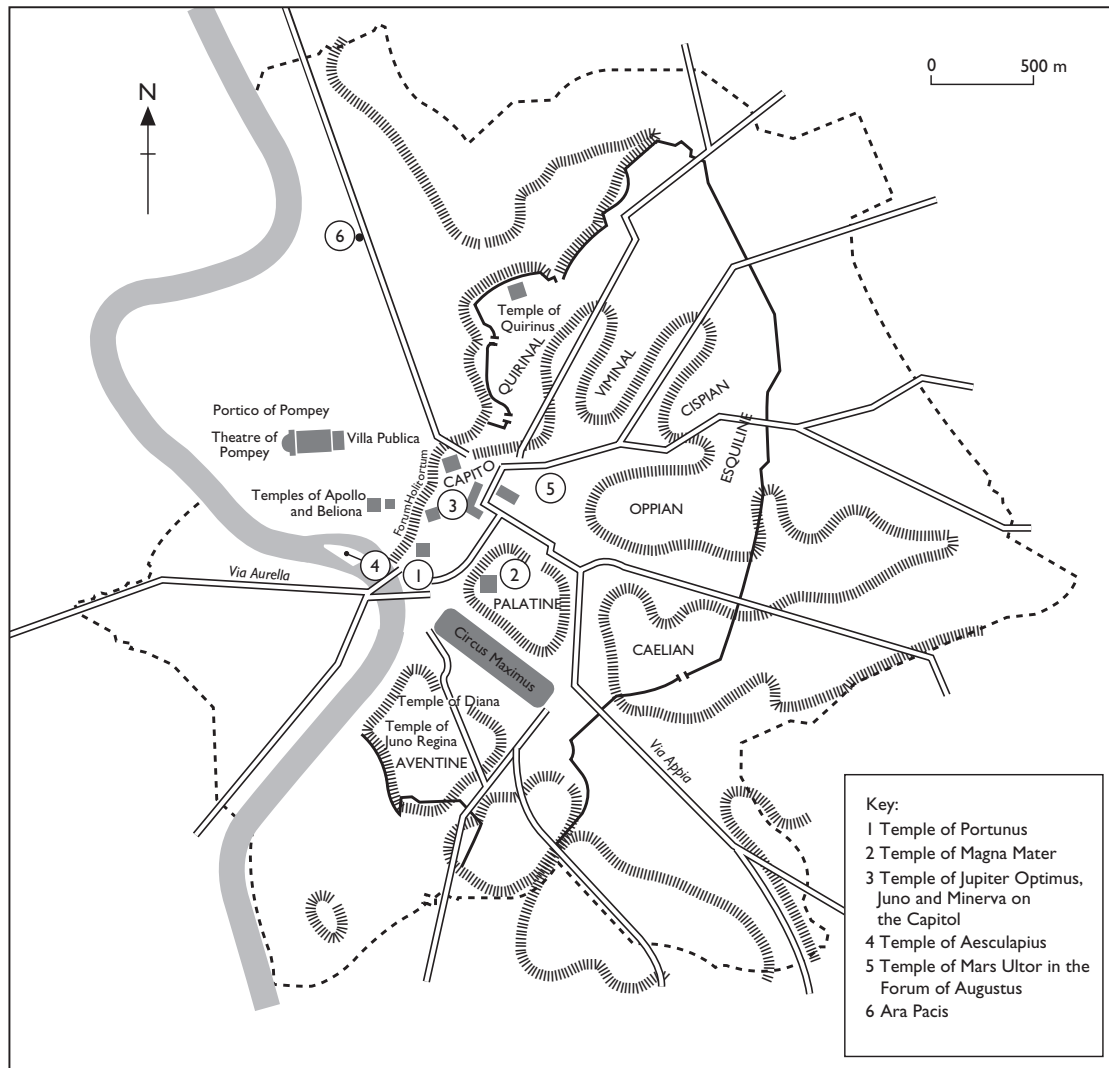


Map 7.1. The Roman Empire in 27 BCE.





Map 7.1. (cont.).



**Map 7.2.** Major Roman temples in the first century BCE.

not least the medium through which Dumézil thought his ideology was passed down from generation to generation. But, even if the details are rejected, there can be very little doubt that many Roman linguistic forms were shared with other Indo-European speakers. Both the names of many Roman gods and the words for god and goddess themselves are Indo-European. If so, then the gods themselves must have come to Latium when the Romans and Latins first arrived and cannot have been developed in Latium itself, as the theory of the *numina* required.

As for the missing mythology of the Romans, Dumézil believed that he had found that also. Roman deities do not have characteristically Roman stories told about them; but Roman kings and queens do have a whole body of narratives, regarded by the Romans themselves as history, not myth. Romulus and Remus, Numa and the other early Roman kings on Dumézil's view preserved the otherwise lost ideology of the Indo-Europeans.

So again the Romans emerge not as a people who evolved their own unique religion on their own soil, but as a branch of the Indo-European family of peoples. In this perspective, the idea of a pre-deistic phase of development loses all plausibility. By the time these theories were appearing, however, the theory that all human groups follow the same evolutionary pattern had been abandoned; and much of the classical evidence had been questioned too (Dumézil 1970; Belier 1991).

There was a link between the theory of the predeistic phase of Roman history and the idea of decline as the keynote of Roman religious experience. The link was the belief that Roman religion was very conservative and slow to evolve: the gods remained stagnant and never acquired true personality; meanwhile, the cult became more and more bogged down in ritualism and legalism. At core, there was a deeply Roman tradition, typical of a practical, unimaginative people, which failed to respond to changing conditions and became less and less capable of fulfilling the needs of the people. Many aspects of Roman religious life were thought to provide confirmation of this hypothesis. For instance, it was said that religion was simply exploited by politicians for their own ends; that new cults were imported in a desperate effort to revive a failing system; that Romans' belief in the gods and goddesses was undermined by the growth of scepticism. Well-known incidents such as the struggle between Cicero and Clodius in the last years of the Republic were interpreted on the assumption that their motives were entirely political and that the religious issues were a mere excuse for the manoeuvring.

It is important to remember that this picture can hardly be supported by any direct evidence. Our sources are on the whole very reluctant to commit themselves at all on such issues as the motives on which participants acted. The Greek historian Polybius, a visitor to Rome in the second century BCE, does indeed speak of religion as a necessary way of maintaining morale and good order; but his point is that the Romans still had a useful religious tradition of this kind, while the Greeks had irresponsibly dissipated theirs. Perhaps the most direct evidence comes from the orator Cicero, who has a good deal to say about religion, including a philosophical dialogue (*On divination*) in which two speakers, Cicero and his brother, put the case for and against belief in the sending of signs by the gods for the benefit of humans. The end of the dialogue suspends any final decision, leaving that step to readers. But at least the issues have been placed before the reader – issues that might seem to be fundamental to religion (*RoR* II: 13.1b; 13.2; Beard 1986).

So far in this section, we have seen an essentially negative account of Roman religion dominating all views about it. But very little of this negativity is really to

be found in the source material. There certainly were Romans who thought that the negligence of their leaders had allowed some of their inherited institutions to be forgotten or omitted. Both Cicero and Varro say something of this kind. But in general what the Romans and their foreign visitors tell us is that the Romans were and continued to be the most religious of peoples, the most scrupulous in the maintenance of their civic rituals: it was precisely their piety that had led directly to their conquest of the known world. If some of them lamented the loss of rituals it was because their preservation was so highly valued.

In recent years, a new way of perceiving this history has been worked out, reversing most of the assumptions on which the old views were based. It would be wrong to say that this is universally accepted or that all its supporters hold identical views. But there has been a general trend to recognize that in many respects the traditional picture of Roman religion has been constructed not on the ideas of the Romans themselves, but on judgements about the proper character of religion that are essentially anachronistic and derived from modern parallels. For example, it has often been argued that the introduction of new gods represented a progressive weakening of the true religious tradition of Rome – repeated attempts at revival that always failed. But in fact the Romans introduced new rituals and cults throughout their history and quite clearly saw this as a source of strength and pride, not of failure.

Again, the relationship of politics and religion has been seen as a clear sign that religion was virtually dead, only useful as a trick to be used by politicians in need of a cynical manoeuvre. In this case as well, it is now argued that this interpretation rests on a misunderstanding of the long-term relationship between religion and politics, which had at all dates been deeply implicated with one another. The priests had their own duty to interpret the sacred law; so, they must always have been open to the charge that they were abusing this privilege in their own political interest. We have no reason to think that this raised new problems in the late republican period, though at that time the political struggle was at its most intense and perilous, as conflicting groups and conflicting leaders such as Caesar and Pompey used every means they could of protecting their own power and diminishing that of their enemies. In all ways, the gloves were off and religion was involved in the political upheaval, as it was in all other aspects of the life of Rome. But it is quite clear that the participants almost all took the religious issues very seriously, just as they did the political issues (*RoRI*: 114–40; Scheid 2001).

The result of this shift of outlook is that a reassessment is now due of many aspects of religious life and literature in this period. The fundamental change that has taken place is the recognition that common sense and guesswork are not good

guides to this area of life. The religious ideas and actions of the ancients cannot be understood without a recognition that they were profoundly different from our own. It is from this point that future research must begin; this survey assumes that this approach is the right one to use at least at this stage in our understanding of the religion of the Romans. There are, however, quite fundamental problems of interpretation, which originate from the very nature of the information about Roman life that has survived to our time. It is therefore from the sources that we should begin.

### The sources

The character of the evidence available to us is a critical determinant of what can be said and not said about the religion or religions of this period. At some points the tradition narrows to a fragment of what would be necessary to understand the character of Roman religious life. At others it seems adequate at least to establish the general character of pagan religion. There are, however, always problems of interpretation; and even when particular sources seem to throw light on the problems, they need to be considered in the light of the religious situation as whole. Nothing causes greater misunderstanding than taking particular fragments of evidence out of their context and assuming that they can be properly criticized in the light of twenty-first-century common sense and of our ideas about religious life today. It always has to be borne in mind that the assumptions of pagans about the most fundamental issues are quite different from ours.

The first question that arises in discussing the sources is to specify what is to count as evidence about religion and what is not. In the Rome of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE at least, the religious and political activities of the Romans are thoroughly intertwined so that every action has its ritual attached to it; every campaign is interspersed with consultations of the gods, sacrifices to them, celebrations in their honour and so on. In the Roman conception at least, the actions of men and women involve a divine aspect at every stage. By the same token, it is not easy to distinguish religious buildings from secular ones, since every household contained its shrine and its sacred objects and was the location of certain rituals. The converse of this proposition is that there was no purely religious organization to which the population of Rome belonged; they were not members of any church and had no option to change religious affiliation. Their religious life was embedded in the city and its activities. The only separate religious organizations were the priestly colleges, whose membership consisted of members of the ruling elite. (For these, see below pp. 344–6 and Table 7.3).

The result of this situation is that the possible evidence for religious life is enormous and very varied: historical texts are full of information about religion in action; coins are covered with religious symbols; many inscriptions are records of religious dedications; the archaeology of Italy tells us of sanctuaries, temples, sacred groves and burial areas everywhere; the literature of Rome, especially in the Augustan Age, has much to say about ritual actions, about the gods and also about magical procedures; the art both of Rome and of the Empire in general produces images of sacrificers and of sacrificial equipment in large quantities, but also bas-reliefs of many other ceremonies – triumphs, the lustration of military camps, state sacrifices and so on. Under the Empire the mix becomes if anything richer as time goes by: not just evidence of Christianity and a mounting library of Christian literature and debate, but also the reflections of successive Christian apologists on the character of pagan life and the pagan tradition; and a mass of evidence about the various new cults that became common throughout the cities of the Empire, perhaps most dramatically the evidence of Mithraism, known to us primarily through the decoration of the grottoes which were its hallmark and which survive in quite large numbers. (See *RoR* II.12.5.)

The first period for which we have a quantity of evidence sufficient to ground an account of the structure and practices of religion is the last century or so of the Republic. It would not be true to say that we are wholly ignorant of what went before this, but we are very largely dependent on the sources of the first century BCE for everything that went before. The two surviving historians Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus both lived in this period and were themselves reconstructing early history from inadequate data. They very largely reflect the ideas and aspirations of their own period, believing as they did that the early years of Rome were an ideal age of piety, such that later generations could scarcely hope to emulate. They provide us mostly with the myths preserved into later periods, not records of historical truth. By the middle Republic, we have more solid ground to rest on; but the fact remains that archaeology is the best hope we have of acquiring any reliable idea at all of the religion of early Rome. The most solid achievement so far is to have established that the Rome of the sixth century BCE was far from being an unsophisticated or isolated community, but in the mainstream of western Mediterranean life in close touch with Greeks, Etruscans and Carthaginians. This in itself shows that we need to be thoroughly sceptical about the continuity of the Roman tradition.

There is yet another very sharp contrast between the record we have for the third and second centuries BCE and that for the first century BCE. By the first

**Table 7.1** *Chronology of Roman history*

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Periods</b>	<b>Personalities</b>
753 BCE	Varro's date for the foundation of Rome, Romulus and Remus	Regal period, down to 509	King Numa, founder of the religion?
509	First magistrates of the Republic	Republican period, 509–31	Junius Brutus, the first consul of Rome
390	Capture of Rome by the Gauls		Camillus, saviour of Rome
338	Abolition of the Latin League	Expansion of Roman control of Italy, 338–264	
264–241	First war between Rome and Carthage		
218–201	Second war between Rome and Carthage		Hannibal of Carthage Scipio Africanus
from 200	Roman wars in the east	Roman Empire in east	
133	Agrarian reforms; conflicts in Rome		Tiberius Gracchus, tribune of the plebs
91–83	War by Italian allies against Rome	All Italians gain citizenship	
81–79	Sulla dictator – reforms of political system		Sulla as dictator
66–61	Eastern wars	Period of Cicero's career	Pompey's campaigns in the east
58–49	Conquest of Gaul		Caesar's campaigns
59	Deal between Pompey, Caesar and Crassus	First triumvirate	
49	Civil War between Caesar and Pompey		Death of Pompey
44	Caesar assassinated	Series of Civil Wars, till 31 BCE	

*(cont.)*

Table 7.1 (*cont.*)

Date	Event	Periods	Personalities
31	Defeat of Antony and Cleopatra at Actium		
31 BCE to 14 CE	Augustus as ruler ( <i>princeps</i> ), worship of the Emperor established; wide expansion of Empire	Principate (first century BCE to third century CE)	Lifetime of Livy, Virgil, Ovid
c. 30 CE	Crucifixion of Jesus		Pontius Pilate, Prefect of Judaea
54–68	64 CE, first persecution?	Reign of Nero	Death of Paul in Rome?
98–117	Conquest of Dacia; war against Parthia	Reign of Trajan	113 CE Pliny's letter about the Christians; Tacitus historian
161–180	Attacks on frontiers begin	Reign of Marcus Aurelius	Marcus' <i>Confessions</i>
198–217	Extension of citizenship to all free inhabitants of the Empire	Reign of Caracalla	Dio Cassius historian
235–284	Wars in north and east, period of instability	Third-century 'crisis'	
284–305	Rule of four Emperors; final persecutions; reform of Empire	Reign of Diocletian and colleagues	
312–336	First Christian Emperor; first legislation favouring Christians	Late Empire; reign of Constantine	Eusebius' <i>History of the Church</i>
378–395	Laws against pagan practices	Reign of Theodosius I	Ammianus Marcellinus historian



century, we have extensive contemporary writings, including letters and even memoirs, as well as a great deal of literature. But this is true only from the age of Cicero onwards: earlier, the record is very much more distant and formal; but it does contain a great deal of methodical information, preserved by the early chronological historians. The bad fit of these two kinds of record contributes to the impression that the late republicans were far less careful in their maintenance of regular rituals; but in this case it is very probably the record not the reality that changes so dramatically. On the other hand, with Cicero we have for the first time a set of various sources giving us different visions of religious or non-religious life. This is the first period in which religion itself became a topic of discourse: first, in the writings of antiquarians, who lovingly collected the details of clothes, traditions and books of the priests and other religious officials; secondly, in philosophical discussion, including books that survive by Cicero *On the nature of the gods* and *On divination*. The impact of these debates is a subject of lively argument. Did they undermine belief and weaken the religion as a whole? Or did they rather create a debate that strengthened and developed the theology of paganism (Beard 1986)?

One very clear theme in this period, repeatedly mentioned, is the belief, clearly widespread, that the religion of Rome was badly neglected and that the gods and goddesses were betrayed in the last few years of the republican period and in the years of civil war that followed (49–45; 43–31 BCE). The civil wars were the gods' punishment for their neglected temples and rituals. This theme was literally a god-send to the propagandists of the new regime set up by Augustus and his supporters in the years after their victory over Antony and Cleopatra in 31 BCE. They could set themselves up, and duly did, as the revivalists of a religion in decline. Augustus is credited with the restoration of temples, the reinstatement of lost priesthoods and the revival of forgotten rituals. There is no doubt that some of this was real enough. But in large part, it was the loving antiquarians of the late Republic who had created the possibility of revivalism, by showing the traditions that had lapsed. With the benefit of hindsight, it is not difficult to see that this is all largely a misunderstanding; but it clearly had a powerful influence at the time.

Amongst the most important sources we have for religious attitudes are the works of the historians of the early Empire, particularly Livy writing on the Republic, but also Tacitus on the earlier Emperors, and indeed the poets, especially Ovid who provides us with a version of the Roman calendar for the months of January to June, including his thoughts about many of the major festivals of the year. A great deal of this writing is not very reliable as an account of the origins of the

various institutions; but it does tell us a great deal about the ideas and assumptions of the early imperial years, in which the authors themselves lived. Roman historical writing, however, needs to be interpreted with care and imagination. At first sight, it seems to say little, and that little rather formal and remote; but this reticence is the characteristic style of the period, which does not easily see the gods and goddesses as causing events directly. There are few miracles or epiphanies. But the narrative in fact interweaves human and divine contributions and one of Livy's themes is the care with which the great men of the past concerned themselves with signs from the gods and rituals. He reinforces the message that religious care goes with imperial success (Liebeschuetz 1967; Miles 1995; *RoR* I: 5–12).

Pagan writing is marked not only by an oblique attitude to the working of the divine, but also by a very limited range of topics on which religious writing seems ever to have existed. There are very few discussions of the significance of rituals – even of sacrifice, the basic ritual of the whole cycle; there is virtually no discussion at all of the character of priesthood. Antiquarian writing gives details of the ceremonies, clothes and proceedings of priests; philosophic writing discusses the existence of gods and of communication with the gods; but these writings are essentially external debates, not internal exegeses of the character of pagan religion. The priests themselves certainly had books, which they guarded in their colleges and which were the basis of their judgements. It may be that some of this material found its way into the antiquarian writers. But the evasiveness that marks historical writing also affects all other forms of religious discourse. One consequence of this is that many critics have seen moribund religion in what was actually guarded and reverent expression.

Another consequence is that there is a sharp and critical contrast between the verbal expression of pagan religion and the discourse that arrives with the evolution of Christianity. Religious language becomes far more direct. Christian writers have no such hesitation in speaking of the divine or in attributing the causes of events to divine intervention. They also engage in a debate about the exact character of the deity or rather of his incarnation in Jesus Christ. Soon enough there are creeds and explicit debates on matters of theology. In one sense, of course, all these new types of text are invaluable to the historian, providing a tool that had been missing; but the fact that such explicit texts do not exist for earlier periods should not be seen as an accident. The silence reflects what pagans thought it appropriate or not appropriate to speak of. We have to look with care at more reticent texts to see what they are thinking.

There is another consequence of the rise and elaboration of Christian writing for the historian of pagan Rome. Christian writers have among their concerns the maintaining of a polemic against pagan practices and ideas. Leading Christian writers such as Lactantius (*c.* 240 to *c.* 320 CE) and Augustine (354–430 CE) give a good deal of space to the subject; and lesser figures such as Arnobius of Sicca in North Africa (third century CE) devoted whole works to this project. To a modern judgement, they set about this task with a will, but with a very odd set of tactics. They almost wholly ignore the pagan religion of their own day; and give as their examples practices drawn from the works of long-dead first-century BCE antiquarians, such as Varro and Verrius. Their generous quotations from these works provide invaluable information about the republican cult, but it is all selected to illustrate the absurdities of Roman cult practice as seen by later Christians. Their ridicule is hard to escape when the information is transferred from their texts into the collections of antiquarian fragments. So their bitter jibes not only helped weaken pagan religion in their own day, but also served to obscure its significance from modern interpreters (Liebeschuetz 1967: 252–77; Feeney 1998; North 2000: 76–85).

### **The history of the Romans**

Our knowledge of the regal period of Roman history is limited by the fact that the sources were composed by authors living in a quite different age with little or no continuity of written tradition. The authors whose works we possess (Cicero, Livy, Dionysius of Halicarnassus) lived in the first century BCE and the sources they had available dated back only another century or so before their own time. There is sharp disagreement between historians as to whether these traditions are reliable guides to the general character of early Roman society, or whether they should be treated as Roman myths and only the archaeology of the early period regarded as evidence of history. Certainly the list of kings and their traditional dates must be a construction; it is quite incredible that seven kings should between them reign for two and a half centuries. But the accounts of the later kings do suggest that Rome was in the sixth century BCE open to a range of foreign influences, from the Etruscans to the north of them, from the Greeks of southern Italy, from Carthaginians with local trading links and, above all, from their Latin-speaking neighbours. The archaeology of the period supports the view that Rome was by this time an important town of central Italy and that it did indeed have widespread foreign contacts.

In particular, there is good reason to believe that the Latins from the archaic period onwards acted not as a number of quite separate states, but as a community with shared religious traditions and rights. Every Latin had the right to trade and inter-marry in any Latin state and also to migrate and take on the full citizenship of the host state. The Latins also acted in concert down to 338 BCE to set up new Latin communities, or colonies. The detailed history of this 'Latin League' and the question of whether it was dominated by Rome or whether Rome was simply a member like the others are all still much debated; but it seems a safe conclusion that the later Roman willingness to expand their citizenship outside the city and its immediate territory, first to adjacent areas and finally to the whole of Italy (in the first century BCE) and the whole Empire (in the third century CE), can be traced back to these open boundaries of the regal and early republican years.

It is a striking fact that the Romans' own accounts of their kings, of which the earliest are in Cicero's *Republic* and Livy's *History*, are quite positive in their assessment of them. The kings are represented as each contributing to the development of the Roman constitution and their social and religious institutions. Numa contributes the religion, Servius Tullius the organization of the army and the popular assembly, and so on. The only exception is the last king, Tarquin the Proud, who is represented as a tyrant and finally expelled, defeated and disgraced. The Tarquins had strong connections with the Etruscan cities, especially with Tarquinii and Chiusi, and they have sometimes been regarded as foreign rulers imposed on Rome by Etruria, so Tarquin's expulsion becomes the freeing of Rome from alien rule. This is, however, very far from certain, since Rome keeps its own language and traditions. It seems much likelier that Etruscan influence on Rome was a matter of both belonging to a common central Italian culture. At least, the grandest and most important temple in Rome was the triple temple of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva on the Capitoline Hill (Map 7.2): this became a symbol of Roman-ness, despite the fact that its building was attributed to the Tarquins (Cornell 1995; *OCD*<sup>3</sup> 1322–5).

Neither the date nor the detail of the end of the monarchy can be established, but it seems clear that other Italian cities too expelled their kings and created new civic institutions around the beginning of the fifth century BCE. The Romans thought that certain principles guided the Republic from its inception; we may suspect that in fact these were the product of slow growth later retrojected. They were the popular election of the magistrates for each year; the sharing of power between equal office-holders; and the guiding control of the senate, consisting

of life-members who had served as magistrates. In essence this is the system that we do find operating in the third to first centuries BCE. It is then clear that one of the functions of the system was to ensure that no excessive concentration of power could be acquired by any individual or family. The rules were gradually elaborated to make this division of authority more comprehensive: office could only be held for one year, repetition of the highest office (the consulate) was rationed so that you could hold it only at a fixed age and only once every ten years. But although these practices may date back to the earlier Republic, the rules were only formalized in the second century BCE and reflect the thinking of that period.

In the early republican period, our sources tell of a conflict between patricians and plebeians, the so-called 'struggle of the orders'. Patricians were members of a specific group of clans (*gentes*) and their status was still remembered and still went with birth even in the late Republic. Plebeians are said to have included everybody else, but especially the common people, the soldiers of Rome. Patricians are said to have claimed a monopoly of office and power; but lists of office-holders suggest that this was never completely established and that it became less and less true as time went by. Meanwhile some plebeians seem not to have been poor men at all, but landholders and men of substance. By the middle Republic, the patricians and the rich plebeians had sorted out their differences and ruled together as an elite of wealth, basing their power on keeping control of office-holding and hence of the senate (Cornell 1995).

This plebeio-patrician oligarchy dominated a highly successful period in which Roman power was gradually extended first through southern and central Italy, in the late fourth and third centuries BCE; then after a great struggle with the Carthaginians, in the third century BCE, to new areas in the western and eastern Mediterranean, second century BCE. The formation of an empire in the familiar sense was a slow, even reluctant process; the Romans conquered irresistibly, but were in no hurry to set up systems of rule or to administer their new territories. In the very late Republic (91–44 BCE) and in the age of Augustus (31 BCE – 14 CE) both conquering and reorganizing went ahead methodically for the first time and by the early Empire the whole Mediterranean area and much territory beyond were incorporated in a unified system of rule (Beard and Crawford 1999; and see Map 7.1, for the situation in 27 BCE).

From the age of Augustus onwards, it is conventional to speak of the Emperor and the Empire, but this is confusing for several reasons: first, the Empire (in the sense of the area ruled by Rome) had very largely been created in the republican

period (during the third to first centuries BCE) not in the Empire (in the sense of the period when Emperors ruled), though the reign of Augustus himself did see a dramatic increase in its size, including the conquest of the whole of eastern Europe (see Map 7.1); secondly, the title of the ruler at this date was not Emperor (*Imperator*) at all, but ‘first citizen’ (*princeps*), so that historians often refer to this period as the ‘principate’, opposing this to the ‘dominate’ in the late Empire period; thirdly, the regime itself sought to deny that there was a new constitution or that the old republican system had been abolished, emphasizing rather the continuity of their rule with that system.

In formal terms indeed there was little change, at least during the age of Augustus himself; the elections and the passing of laws were still the work of the assemblies of the people; the annual magistrates were still called by the same titles and notionally had the same tasks to perform; the governors of the provinces were still drawn from the ranks of the senators and ex-magistrates; the senate still met and retained, in fact enhanced, its powers. Not only that, but the new regime was only too anxious to parade its devotion to the ancestral ways of the Romans and to revive ancient practices and rituals as well as ancient moral standards, as understood by contemporaries.

All this was in a sense a blind to obscure the fact that Augustus and his successors had seized the real power from the people and from the other members of the old republican oligarchy. However, it is also true that much continued as before: the Roman people had even less control; many of the same families were powerful, and the land-owning classes continued to exercise the real power in the state and individuals of that class still commanded the armies and ruled the provinces. There had certainly been nothing to be called a revolution in the modern sense of the word. The main superficial difference was that one or two families could now dominate all the other families of the ruling group, as they could not under the republican system. In fact, however, as the historians make very clear to us, the Emperor had huge power in Rome over his court and over the senators as individuals; he controlled their careers and even their lives; his private wealth was enormous, his public powers extensive, he was the governor of the major military provinces and so the commander of the legions and other forces (*OCD*<sup>3</sup> 1327–9; Zanker 1988).

The Empire (geographic) was still divided into provinces as before, some of them ruled directly by proconsuls, others by the Emperor as a proconsul himself through officers (called *legati*) that he appointed. It is important to note that this body of senior administrators was quite small, one governor with a small staff



for each province with no sign of any substantial force of administrators either attached to him or established in the provincial cities. His task was largely to command whatever forces were in the province; to tour the major cities hearing the most important legal cases; and to supervise the collection of taxes. The Emperor did make other appointments from amongst non-senators to manage his own estates and concerns and to organize the provincial finances directly. Essentially it seems that the Romans made no attempt, at least in the early Empire, to run an administration themselves (*OCD*<sup>3</sup> 1329–30; Goodman 1997: 100–10).

The Empire as Augustus set it up was astonishingly stable for more than two centuries after his death. There were of course revolts in different areas, and persistent problems, not least with Jews living in Palestine or in the diaspora; but Roman customs and city planning, the Latin language and even Roman gods spread widely in the western half of the Empire and had some influence in the east, where Greek continued to be the most visible culture. Many other cultures (Celtic, Spanish, North African) survived alongside the dominant Greek and Roman ones, but so far as we can tell, there are few occasions when local culture formed the basis for revolt. At the same time, the Roman ruling elite showed few signs of divisions except when the succession to the Empire was unresolved, as it was in 68/9 CE after the death of Nero and 192 CE after the death of Commodus. Throughout these years the Roman Citizenship, which had already been extended to all free men living in Italy by the end of the Republic, continued to be widened, partly through the emigration of citizens into the provinces, partly through grants to auxiliary troops on their discharge from military service, partly by grants to particular individuals or communities. Finally, almost all free inhabitants of the Empire obtained citizenship by decree of the Emperor in 212 CE.

The middle of the third century CE, from 235 CE onwards, saw the collapse of the stability and security that the Empire had previously assured for its inhabitants. Outside peoples broke into the Empire and at least on some occasions defeated the once invincible legions of Rome. Emperors changed with great speed and there were usurpers constantly seeking to overthrow the current ruler; areas of the Empire east and west seem to have escaped from the control of Rome at least for some time and one Emperor suffered the humiliation of being captured by Persians on the eastern frontier. Recent research, however, has become sceptical about the extent and seriousness of this so-called 'crisis': some areas (e.g. Egypt) seem to have escaped any problems and the impact of the troubles seems to have been variable across the Empire. It now seems over-simplistic to

call this an ‘age of anxiety’ and, even if in some respects or some places there were serious problems, to make any causal connections between these troubles and the rise of Christianity.

Certainly, after the 280s CE there was a strong recovery, the restoration of stability and a period of sustained cultural achievement in many spheres. The imperial regime perhaps became more centralized and bureaucratic than before and the Emperor more remote and authoritarian than before. On the other hand, for quite long periods (284–312 CE and the end of the fourth century CE) the Empire was divided and the foundation of a new capital in the east (at Constantinople, modern Istanbul) presaged the permanent division of the Empire into western and eastern halves. The most spectacular change of all (whether or not it derived from the ‘crisis’ of the third century) was that the Emperor Constantine (312–336 CE) abandoned the policy of supporting paganism against the Christians. It is unknowable whether or when he in truth converted to Christianity himself, but he certainly removed the legal limitations from the Christians and began the process of giving them support and privilege. By the end of the fourth century CE, it was the Christians who were beginning to persecute the pagans rather than *vice versa* (Lane Fox 1986; *RoR* I: 364–88).

### Society and economy

The Roman Empire was quite largely, but not entirely, organized by cities. In the east these were often old foundations with a long history of civic life and their own traditions as to how to run themselves and to worship their own gods and goddesses. They were also already accustomed to coping with imperial structures. In some ways, they still organized themselves as free communities within the Roman Empire, electing their own officials, passing their own decrees and holding their own ceremonies and festivals in vigorous competition with one another. Of course, Roman governors and imperial agents set limits to their freedom of action. When the cities conferred honours on their leading citizens, it was often for their services to the city’s fostering of a good relationship with the ruling power of Rome (Garnsey and Saller 1987: 34–40).

In at least parts of the west, there was no such tradition of urban life and the Romans responded, in much of Spain, Gaul and the newly conquered areas of central and eastern Europe, by the creation of new cities to serve as administrative and political centres and the base of activities for the local elite class. Both east and west, this process goes hand in hand with the slow spread of Roman



citizenship and lesser sets of rights for new foundations. Roman administration was entirely dependent on these local leading men, since the actual imperial administration involved tiny numbers of Roman officials from the senatorial order or from the *equites*, the members of wealthy non-senatorial Roman families. There was almost no Roman bureaucracy to back up the governor and his aides. The local families were responsible for their cities, providing the membership of the councils that ran them, and for the collection of taxes both local and payable to Rome, which they guaranteed from their own resources. They were the crucial link between the governor and the local population. We know them best from eastern decrees voting them honours and listing their services and benefactions to the local communities. We also meet them as local councillors (*decuriones*) in much later imperial legislation.

The importance of cities does not of course mean that most inhabitants of the Empire were dwellers in built-up areas. Only a handful of cities had a huge population (Rome's is estimated at 1 million in the early Empire), and the great bulk of the population of the Empire must have been engaged in food production, often on very small farms, with no chance of doing more than keeping themselves and their children alive, living in the countryside attached to villages or other small settlements. But the 'city' in the ancient sense consisted both of the built-up area and of its associated villages; the free peasants, living in the countryside, had some share in the political rights of the city. Some areas did not fit this pattern; there were large estates owned by the Emperor and run by his officials; and Egypt had its own more centralized system, in which cities developed only slowly.

While food for their own families may have been the dominant interest for many, the archaeology of the Empire leaves no room for doubt that there was a great deal of trading over quite long distances. Partly, this will have been moving basic foodstuffs, either to the great cities, where there must have been major markets, or to compensate for shortages in particular areas, especially grains, which give variable crops from year to year. Luxury goods and precious metals were also moved over long distances, as were slaves for slave-markets. It may be tempting to write off trade as only affecting the wealthy elite; but it is in fact clear that trading activity was profitable and that it played an important part in the economy of the Empire as a whole. Large numbers of people will have made their livelihoods by sea-faring and trading, or supporting these activities. To sum up, the Empire provided some areas of unchanging stability, but also elements of mobility and change. It is clear that the Mediterranean in the context of Roman

peace provided the means for regular movements of ships and goods, but also of people. Where the trade went, communities of foreigners began to settle and they took with them their own traditions and religious practices. This movement of population must have been a vital factor in the religious history of antiquity, pagan, Jewish or Christian (Garnsey and Saller 1987: 43).

Throughout the Empire, slavery was legal and widely practised in the Graeco-Roman world at all dates. Many slaves were engaged in household or personal duties and, while great households had large numbers of such retainers, it is clear that slave-owning did extend below the level of the very rich. In some industries, particularly mining and agriculture, there were large numbers of slave-workers living on estates or in barracks; but again quite small farmers often possessed at least one slave to work on the farm. So slavery should be seen as a basic part of the social structure of antiquity and we hear little or nothing of any effective protest against it, either by free observers commenting or by the slaves themselves rebelling.

It is a subject of great debate amongst historians whether or not there is major historical change in the institution over the years of Roman power. One view is that there was an enormous development towards large slave-manned enterprises in the third and second centuries BCE as a result of the expansion of Roman power both east and west. The ruling class made huge profits at this point, which they invested in land; slaves were cheap because of the number of prisoners of war available on the battlefields. Roman landowners thus made their money from agriculture and from other forms of production. It is a corollary of this view that the profits of these enterprises diminished in subsequent centuries as the provision of slaves became more expensive. The decline of slave-holding accompanied the decline of the Empire more generally. All aspects of this narrative, can be challenged; but it is clear that the late republican period saw very large numbers of foreign slaves in Italy and that the prosperity of the land-owning classes was dependent on their labour (Hopkins 1978).

It is characteristic of Roman as opposed to Greek society that the slave of a Roman citizen became a Roman citizen when manumitted; this seems to have happened very frequently for various reasons, but perhaps primarily because the offer of eventual freedom motivated hard work on the part of the slave. The ex-slave himself did not at once enjoy full citizen rights and had to perform some duties for his former owner. But his descendants were full citizens, often taking the name of their ancestor's owner and continuing to be his or his descendants' clients. These rights were somewhat limited by Augustus, evidently

aiming to stop the flow of foreigners into the citizenship. All the same, the class of ex-slaves is extremely prominent in our records. They are frequent whenever we have inscribed lists of the members of clubs or of minor local officials; they are frequent among those who record their religious dedications in fulfilment of vows; they appear setting up both their own tombstones and those of their patrons and former masters. The likeliest explanation of their prominence in these contexts is that recording your own activity in this way was an important part of establishing yourself as part of the free Roman community. It is not that they were necessarily more active or pious than citizens with an older claim in the city, but that they had a greater interest in leaving a written record of their new-found status.

Again here, the picture to be found is a mixture of stability of institutions, but mobility of people and ideas. Through force and exploitation, large numbers of people were taken from their homes and resettled in the west, first as slaves and then as freedmen. The evidence bears witness clearly enough to their struggles to be accepted as part of the pattern of Roman life; but they must also have brought with them connections with the culture of their lost homelands and not least their religious traditions.

The legal systems in operation across the Empire were variable: the Romans did not try to impose their own system everywhere and it is therefore wrong to generalize too much in this area. But as time went by, the Roman legal system, which applied to Roman citizens, came to be more influential, especially amongst the well-off. The Roman family placed all legal power in the hands of men, in particular in the hands of one man – the *paterfamilias*, who was the oldest surviving male in direct line of ascent. So a man's *paterfamilias* would normally be his father, unless the father's father (grandfather) was still alive. If your father's father was still alive, then your father was in the same position as you, i.e. under the authority of grandfather. When the *paterfamilias* died, his children, male and female alike, inherited and became independent; but there was a difference: a son would become *paterfamilias* to his own children; a daughter was either subordinate to her husband or had to have a tutor, legally responsible for her, often a brother (Gardner 1986; Garnsey and Saller 1987: 126–47).

These legal rules sound very impracticable to operate, since even adult sons were made dependent on the father: they could not take on obligations or contracts of their own and the father had the right to make them marry or divorce and even (theoretically) to put them to death. In practice perhaps, there were ways in which more freedom of action was possible than the law seemed to allow.

Modern demographic studies also suggest that, given the normal expectation of life in pre-industrial societies, only a small percentage of sons would have had living fathers for much of their adult lives. But the structure of the Roman *familia*, which included not just family members but slaves and freedmen as well, set up the authority of the eldest male over the whole group; and the *familia* was in sense a religious group with its own cultic traditions and responsibilities, also in the charge of the *paterfamilias*.

In the religious life of Rome we find reflected both the authority of the male members of society and the importance of the family as a unit of society. Women are to a certain extent excluded from cult activities, not least in the public arena. There are almost no female priests; women seem to take no part in ritual processions; and only a very small number of the old festivals seem to make any room for them. They appear occasionally firmly placed in a family role as mother or aunt but especially as child-bearer. They are not eligible for any positions of authority. It has been argued that they were formally excluded from taking part in the ritual of sacrifice, but current research challenges this view. To the absence of women from public religious life there was one major exception, though that was a very significant one. The Vestal Virgins, the female priests of the cult of Vesta, were six women recruited as children of six years old and committed to the preservation of their virginity and the service of the goddess for thirty years. They were concerned with a very wide range of cults and rituals and it is clear that the security and health of the whole community depended on the maintenance of their duties. They had to keep the sacred fire on the hearth of Vesta burning at all times. In periods of extreme danger, the city sometimes turned on them and accused them of unchastity, evidently seeking to blame them for the crisis. If found guilty they were buried alive at the limit of the city. In some theories, they were originally the daughters of the old kings of Rome, so that their relationship to the fire and the hearth echoed the duties of the ordinary household. The theories are more attractive than reliable. Important though the Vestals may have been, they were no more than a single exception to the general exclusion of women from public positions of authority or power in the public life of Rome. Some women in the late Republic and early Empire did achieve personal power and influence, but this did not change the basic rules by which social institutions operated (Ross Kraemer 1989; Scheid 1992).

The strength of male domination within the family and the recognition that the family was a powerful social institution throughout this period sets the stage for much of the conflict that arises over religious issues in this period. The customs of paganism essentially reinforced and supported the established order. When

religions arose that sought to convert, that is to detach individuals from their family context and make them look to new groups for their religious ideas and practices, conflict was nothing if not predictable.

### The religion of the Roman people

Much of the practice of Roman pagan religion seems at first sight deceptively familiar to us: the conceptions were much the same – there were deities, prayers, vows, sacrifices, festivals, sacred persons and sacred spaces. There was a constant need to consult the deities about what should happen or be done and much the same acceptance that prayers might be answered or not answered, but that the pious must maintain their devotion even when the situation was at a low ebb. There was also a distinction between proper devotion to the gods and excessive concern about them, for which the Roman term was *superstitio*. A good deal of the vocabulary is the same too: *superstitio*, *religio*, *sacrificium*. But such parallels can be deeply deceptive. It is all too easy to think, without thinking too much, that the Romans had a religion just like modern ones, that we can coin a word ‘pagan-ism’ and it will mean the same as *religio* does for the Romans. But modern religions are systems of belief and systems of morality, while *religio* seems only to concern the institutions and practices of religious life. Not of course that the Romans lacked beliefs or morality, but their religious system did not explicitly connect a set of rituals with particular ideas and beliefs.

This leaves the interpreter with a particularly delicate task to perform. We must not assume that the religion of the Romans occupied the same social or imaginative space in their lives as do modern religions for modern believers. All too often, judgements have been made based on the absences from pagan religion: the absence of guidance and comfort, the absence of spiritual development, the absence of emotional appeal or the absence of a promise of a life after death in Roman *religio*. There is of course some truth in all these observations, but they should be seen as implying not deficiencies in pagan-ism, but either that religion had nothing to do with these particular areas of experience or expectation, or that these expectations did not exist. Still less can we assume that pagans saw these as deficiencies and were therefore awaiting or wanting a new religion. In other words, the interpreter has to respect the otherness of pagan religious life.

The gods and goddesses of the Roman people were literally without number. There were some high gods and goddesses, with complex different functions and rituals – Jupiter, Juno, Apollo, Mars, Diana – who were consistently important in all periods. They were, however, not formed into a pantheon, but they certainly

did have areas in which they specialized. Mostly they were shared with other Italian communities, especially Mars who was important throughout Italy, not just where Latin was spoken as by the Romans, but also in the areas of southern Italy where the language was Oscan, as for example by the Samnites. It is clear that these deities were very early on identified with corresponding Greek ones, and these identifications remain constant over time. So far as we can tell, there were few local myths that belonged to the Roman gods and no tradition that they had family relationships like Greek gods. They borrowed Greek stories and it is often these that we meet in later poets.

There were then innumerable grades of lesser gods. Some were specific to one particular place or one natural process, for example the growing of crops. Some were identified with what might be seen as human products, such as Terminus who was the boundary marker of the farm. Specific deities were the patrons of the household and the farm, especially the Lares and Penates, and were worshipped in individual families. Other gods were associated with a specific moment in the calendar of festivals and never occur except in that single annual ritual moment. Some gods seem not to receive worship in the city, but belong to the countryside or the wilds. Some are revealed and defined by a single spot and a single moment in history (Table 7.2 and see *RoR* I: ch. 2.)

New gods were discovered or introduced at most periods of Roman history. Romans had a strong sense of the Roman-ness of the gods of Rome, but no sense that they should constitute a closed list or that newcomers would not be welcome. Gods are sometimes introduced from abroad, as the healing god Aesculapius from Greece in 296 BCE or Magna Mater (Cybele) from Asia Minor in 207 BCE; or tempted out from enemy cities and offered cult by the Romans; or identified with the many personifications recognized by the Romans in the course of the third–second centuries BCE. This preparedness to experiment and innovate continued in the imperial period, not least in the inscribed records, preserved in large quantities, of a priestly group called the Arval Brethren, where we still find a constant process of adaptation and development.

This all raises some problems for the understanding of the whole situation. In many ways the Roman religious tradition was and had to be deeply conservative: it placed huge emphasis on the accurate repetition of religious rituals – even the smallest aberration led to a repeat performance (*instauratio*) of the whole; the rituals were supposed to have been handed by the religious founder Numa Pompilius, the second Roman king (traditional dates 715–673 BCE), to the first of the Roman priests; so the Roman religious order depended fundamentally on the retention of this revealed ritual practice. In many cases, we do not know how



**Table 7.2** *Gods and goddesses of the Romans*

<b>Latin name</b>	<b>Greek name</b>	<b>Area of major activity</b>	<b>Roman festival</b>
Aesculapius	Asklepios	Curing of illness	
Apollo	Apollo	Health; prophecy	Ludi Apollinares (July)
Liber Pater	Dionysus/ Bacchus	Wine, ecstatic possession	Liberalia (17 March)
Ceres	Demeter	Corn	Cerialia, Ludi Ceriales (April)
Diana	Artemis	Marginal areas	
Dis Pater	Hades	Death and the underworld	Secular Games, at century-long intervals
Fortuna	Tyche	Fortune, luck	
Juno	Hera	Goddess of the state; protector of childbirth	
Jupiter	Zeus	First god of the state, warfare	Ludi Romani (Sept.), Ludi Plebeii (Nov.)
Magna Mater	Cybele	Fertility; ecstatic dance	Ludi Megalenses (April)
Mars	Ares	War; protection of agriculture	Salian dances (March, October)
Mercury	Hermes	Business, commerce, communications	
Minerva	Athena	Skilled crafts	Quinquatrus (19 March)
Neptune	Poseidon	Water, transport by sea	Neptunalia (23 July)
Quirinus		Identified with Romulus	Quirinalia (17 Feb.)
Saturn	Chronos	?	Saturnalia (17 Dec. etc.)
Venus	Aphrodite	Charm, seduction, mediation between humans and deities	
Vesta	Hestia	The hearth	Vestalia (9 June)
Vulcan	Hephaestus	Metalworking	Volcanalia (23 Aug.)

the apparent opposition between conservatism and innovation was reconciled in practice; but part of the answer must lie in the Romans' tendency to see as the revival of some ancient practice or forgotten deity what we might prefer to call an innovation. Thus, for instance, the Magna Mater, apparently a strange and foreign goddess, turns out in Roman poets to be the goddess of Troy, and so an ancestral power re-accepted. In any case, the reality for the historian must be innovation, even when contemporaries could not or did not accept it as such (North 1976; Beard 1994).

The Romans from a very early date had a rich variety of priestly groups (*collegia* or *sodalitates*) with defined and specialized functions (see Table 7.3). These seem always to have been responsible for choosing their own members and for keeping their own records and lists of members, though their numbers seem to have been fixed and changes were made by state legislation not by the colleges themselves. The duties of the groups varied widely, from officiating or performing at a single occasion in the calendar (as the Luperici on 15 February – the Lupercalia; see Table 7.3) to taking general responsibility for a whole area of religious activity (as the *fetiales* take responsibility for the rituals of declaring war and making treaties). Four groups (*pontifices*, *augures*, *quindecimviri*, *septemviri*) were regarded as the major colleges and their affairs were controlled by law in the late Republic, while others remained under their own control.

All the priests had some ritual duties to perform and it might be assumed that originally they were primarily ritual officers. By the late Republic and later, when we have reliable information, they presided over the rituals and carried out symbolic actions, but had many assistants who carried out the killing of victims and the watching of birds on their behalf. The priests themselves, at least in the most important colleges, were almost all leading men of the political oligarchy; in many cases we know the priesthoods they held – Cicero and Mark Antony were *augures*, Caesar the *pontifex maximus*. Members of the top families of the ruling elite often took these priesthoods at an early age, before they had become senators and started on their political careers.

The role in which we know them best and can see them at work through the surviving sources is not as religious agents, but as religious advisors. The state's main religious agents were in fact the high magistrates (consuls and praetors), who held the sacrifices, formally consulted the gods/goddesses and took vows to them binding the state to future actions. The priests appear as helpers and advisors, dictating the formulas to the magistrate; or else as experts on the religious law (the *ius divinum*). They kept books which contained (or were supposed to contain) the rituals and the precedents from earlier rulings on points of religious



Table 7.3 *Roman priests*

Name	Number	Duties	Other
* <i>Augures</i> (Augurs)	3; 9 (300 BCE); 15 (81/80 BCE); 16 (Caesar)	Seeking divine approval or disapproval by divination through birds. Defining sacred space	Hold office even if exiled
* <i>Pontifices</i> (Pontiffs)	?; 9 (300 BCE); 15 (81/80 BCE); 16 (Caesar)	Advice to senate/citizens on religious law; responsible for rituals, sacrifices etc.	Head is <i>pontifex maximus</i> (after Augustus, always = reigning Emperor)
<i>Virgines vestales</i> (vestals) (members of pontifical college)	6	Cult of Vesta, inc. sacred hearth; ritual duties in many festivals	Full-time presence, special privileges, dress etc; must preserve virginity and sacred flame
<i>Flamines</i> (flamens) (members of pontifical college)	3 major; 12 minor	Priests of specific gods/goddesses	Flamen of Jupiter has special taboos, restrictions. All major flamens have political restrictions
<i>Rex sacrorum</i> (king) (member of pontifical college)	1	Carrying out the religious rituals of the king, after the fall of the monarchy	Prohibited from politics
* <i>Quindecimviri sacris faciundis</i>	2; 10 (367 BCE); 15 (81/80 BCE); 16 (Caesar)	Charge of and consultation of the Sibylline Books	Responsibility for foreign cults in Rome
*† <i>Septemviri epulones</i>	3 (196 BCE); 7 (81/80 BCE); 10 (Caesar)	Organize ritual meals for gods at Games	
<i>Fetiales</i>	20	Ritual conduct of war and peace	
<i>Salii</i>	2 groups of 12	Warrior-priests, sing and dance for Mars in March and Oct.	
<i>Luperci</i>	2 groups	Ritual run at Lupercalia (15 Feb.)	
<i>Fratres Arvales</i>	12	Ritual for goddess at grove outside Rome	Renewed by Augustus, known from records in the imperial period
<i>Sodales Titii</i>	?	Ritual functions	Little known

\*Priests were elected by the Roman people between 104 and 81 BCE and again after 63 BCE.

† This college was introduced in 196 BCE, the only such innovation in the republican period.

law. It was in this capacity that the senate when faced with religious decisions consulted the priests. Even here, however, the final decision lay not with the priests, who only gave a statement as to the rules of the sacred law, but with the senate itself; only they could produce action, even though they followed the priests' advice (Beard and North 1990: 17–31).

The origins of this complex system of priesthood must go back to very early times, but in the form we actually meet it in the second/third centuries BCE it is clear that it expresses in religious terms the dominant theory of the republican era. Power over religious matters in the state was distributed as widely as it could be: the priesthoods themselves had rules that prevented more than one member of any family from joining any particular college and any individual from joining more than one college; meanwhile the religious issues concerning the state were divided between the colleges so that none had a monopoly of advice. It is true that the *pontifex maximus* had great authority, but in no sense was he or anyone else the head of the system. The significance of this system became dramatically apparent as soon as the Republic broke down and the new emperor almost at once appropriated all the priesthoods of any significance and also became permanently the *pontifex maximus* (Gordon 1990).

The ritual of sacrifice is a key to the whole religious order of the Romans. Sacrifices were involved in all the main festivals and occurred before any military action or in any celebration of victory. Images of sacrifice are to be found not just when sacrificial events are recorded as on bas-reliefs, but also when sacrificial instruments are depicted regularly as artistic motifs. The imagery of a monument such as the Ara Pacis – whose primary references are to victory, peace and the glory of the ruling dynasty – is in fact full of sacrificial elements. Meanwhile, under the Empire, the image of the sacrificer, presented as a magistrate with his toga pulled over his head pouring incense from a saucer onto an altar, became virtually the monopoly of the reigning emperor, a familiar expression of his power (Gordon 1990: 202–19).

The ritual was quite elaborate and governed by rules that had to be respected and an order of events to be followed. The victim had to be selected in relation to the god or goddess to whom the sacrifice was to be addressed, in terms of its sex, age and colour; it had to be brought willingly to the altar of the appropriate deity, and sanctified by placing wine and meal on its head (this element was called the immolation (*immolatio*)); a prayer had to be spoken, naming the deity for whom the victim was intended. The killing had to be instantaneous and the monuments show us how in the case of a large victim the animal was stunned by a blow from

a mallet, while a knife was simultaneously slipped into its neck. Any struggle or escape by the victim was very unpropitious. The next stage was the extispicy, the inspection of the entrails by a diviner; at its simplest this confirmed that the sacrifice was acceptable, but more explicit interpretations could be sought and given. Then, when the sacrifice had been confirmed, the carcass was elaborately butchered and the entrails returned to the gods, together with their particular share of the meat. The rest was cooked on the spot and eaten at a feast by the participants; alternatively at least some of the meat found its way on to the meat market (*RoR* II: ch. 6).

The Romans are remarkably silent on the significance of this ritual to them. We have no interpretation at all from a believing Roman, only one from a Greek observer and one from a third-century CE Christian convert (Dionysius of Halicarnassus; Arnobius, *Against the Gentiles* Book VII). Some aspects can be clearly established: the victims were almost invariably farm animals, and were normally eaten – and it may be that a sacrifice gave much of the population their only opportunity to eat meat at all. The effect of the sacrifice must have been to identify the separation, but also the interaction, of men and gods – sharing in the ritual and even sharing in the food, but in food carefully divided between them. It is relevant here that the Romans regularly brought out their gods and goddesses from inside their temple-homes and offered them meals. The second clear point is that there were communications between humans and deities implicit in the ritual programme: the behaviour of the victim and the state of its entrails indicated the acceptance or otherwise of the gods; humans communicated verbally by prayer, but also symbolically by the choice of victim, by the conduct of the ritual, by the offering of the deity's share. Finally, the whole procedure was informed by the skills and knowledge of the participants on which success of the transaction depended.

In many ways, the most important evidence we have about the religious history of Rome comes from a set of records, mostly though not exclusively preserved on stone, and mostly dating from the age of the first emperor, Augustus (31 BCE–14 CE). They provide us with quite elaborate calendars of Roman religion, mainly as it was in the republican era, though with some more recent anniversaries noted. These calendars in their fullest versions encode a great deal of information not just about religious festivals, but about the legal status of different days and the organization of time in relation to public life. Days are given individual markings, showing whether the popular assemblies could meet, the courts sit and so on. All these matters fell within the responsibility of the college of *pontifices*. Some

sets of calendars also have attached notes explaining the entries and probably derived from the work of Roman scholars of the late republican period.

The calendars seem to reveal a distinction between festivals marked in capital letters and those, seemingly added to the calendar at a later date, in smaller letters. The capital-letter festivals seem to represent some older stage of the calendar's history: they do not, for instance, include the different sets of games (*ludi*) which became important later on and which are mostly recorded as introductions of the republican period; again, the great gods of the later period do not have festivals of their own, whereas many gods and goddesses, later completely obscure, do. So, the calendars provide us with another example of the pattern of slow change and adjustment of Roman religious life, even in a document intended to reflect an unchanging annual rhythm. The copies of this calendar, widely distributed under the rule of Augustus, must show what importance was attached to the religious tradition as a marker of what it was to share a Roman identity, as all Italians were by the late Republic supposed to do, since they had all received the citizenship of Rome during the preceding century (Wallace-Hadrill 1987).

When it comes to the interpretation of these festivals, we have a quite rich tradition to turn to – especially a poetic account of the calendar written by the Augustan poet Ovid (43 BCE–17 CE) and covering the first six months of the year, but also including scattered writings derived from the antiquarian tradition of the late republican period. At one time this body of material was methodically scoured to see whether it could tell us about the earliest periods of Roman history; scholars today often regard that as a misguided search, but use the same material to assess the religious attitudes of the writers' own period. The results are surprising: what characterizes the tradition is the variety of different interpretations of the same festivals that emerges. Ovid in particular is proud to display a number of different views: sometimes he calls them Greek, sometimes Italian, sometimes they contradict one another, sometimes they are compatible. Ovid does not declare his choice among the possibilities he expounds. The view now being argued is that Romans did not expect their festivals to have a fixed canonical meaning. The rituals were thought of as never-changing, but evidently the meaning for those experiencing them was not fixed, at least over any period of time. We can prove this clearly in a handful of cases: for example, the Parilia is celebrated as a festival of shepherds, but later as the Birthday of Rome. If this is right, then the later commentators, like Ovid, are simply echoing the range of possible meanings that participants would have attributed to them at the time.

At least for most of the festivals, there was no established myth or exposition that fixed meanings or even limited the formation of new meanings (Beard 1987).

Divination was an area to which the Romans gave a good deal of attention and on which they prided themselves for their care and concern – at least as remembered from the time of their ancestors. Late republicans tell us that originally nothing was done, no action attempted, without a prior consultation of the gods. Various priests (*haruspices*, *quindecimviri*, *augures*) were involved and could give advice, though in this case as in others, it was the magistrates not the priests who carried out many of the rituals on the state's behalf. At least so far as our records go, the most prominent feature of this activity was not so much foretelling the future as communicating warnings and advice as to which deities needed to be offered sacrifices or piacular offerings. Even if, as is quite possible, our sources deliberately play down the prophetic elements and play up the pious fulfilling of ritual obligations, it was undoubtedly a major part of the diviner's job to identify the deities and the ceremonies needed (MacBain 1982; *RoR* II: ch. 7).

The Romans distinguished between signs for which the diviner asked (*impe-trativa*) and those that the gods sent on their own initiative (*oblativa*), warning of dangers to the state. The most distinctive form of warning was the prodigy (*prodigium*), whole lists of which are recorded, particularly by Livy for the middle to late Republic. To judge by these lists, a prodigy could be any event that the Romans judged to be outside the normal course of nature. Some of them we should classify as miraculous (for example the raining from the sky of blood, milk or stones), but many were natural or at least believable events: the birth of deformed animals, the intrusion of wild animals into urban space, lightning striking buildings and even natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods. They do all tend to involve the transgressing of some boundary, seen by the Romans as natural and they all imply the need for placatory action.

The senate was the authority that dealt initially with all prodigies; they sought the advice of the specialists in the particular field and followed their advice. Measures taken to deal with prodigies generally consisted of rituals, but all the priests sometimes produced at least generalized warnings. There was nothing unacceptable about prediction as such, and on formal occasions such as the declaration of a war the diviners (*haruspices*) did predict victory and expansion of the frontiers. The augurs were responsible for consultations either before action in the city or before campaigns and battles. They sought the answer to straightforward questions of consent or denial; without consent the action could not or should

not proceed. There was, however, no question of the gods guaranteeing victory or success in advance. It seems a more useful approach to say that the gods and goddesses were seen as a part of the community, sharing in the activities and at least normally supporting the Romans in whatever they did. But their support could not be taken for granted: it was earned by the care and skill of the priests and magistrates. The Romans succeeded because they were so scrupulous in the execution of the *religio* the gods required (Liebeschuetz 1967; Scheid 2001).

In the republican period, there was no question that contemporary human beings could ever cross the dividing line between the human and the divine. Only in the mythical past were they aware of Romans who had become gods. In the very late Republic, this line started to be blurred, as increasingly superhuman honours began to be conceded to the great generals who were conquering the known world – Pompey and, most of all, Caesar. All the same, in Rome itself, living men did not receive divine honours even in the imperial period; but this was not true of the provinces, where the living Emperor could be and was the object of a full cult.

In Rome itself, there was a quite elaborate ceremony that developed in the course of the first century CE, in which, after orations in praise of the dead Emperor and a parade involving the members of the elite of Rome, his body was ritually burned on an elaborate pyre and his soul, symbolized by the flight of an eagle, ascended to the heavens. This ceremony only took place after the senate had recognized that he had become a god; some emperors were never so recognized at all, apparently because the senate disapproved of their rule. In their life-times, a careful ritual distinction was maintained between the dead divine emperors (the *divi*), to whom sacrifice was offered directly, and the living ruler, who received no sacrifices for himself, only for his *genius* (inherited spirit?). The *divi* themselves were very prominent in the space of the city as much of the new temple building was in their honour, including some of the grandest temples ever built in Rome (Price 1984, 1987; *RoR* I: 253).

These careful distinctions applied apparently only inside Rome. Everywhere else, sacrifice took place, though sometimes it is recorded as *for* rather than *to* the Emperor. There was no direction from the centre, so the cult was organized and devised in the various regions and cities of the Empire. But temples to the Emperor, or to him together with the goddess Roma, games in his honour, priests of his cult and so on, all were to be found throughout the provinces. Cities competed in devising festivals in his honour more spectacular than those of their rivals. Statues and images of him abounded in the cities (*RoR* I: 348–63).



There is no doubt that all this is important, but it is also important not to get the new cult out of proportion. The new gods in no sense replaced the old ones: they did not become the recipients of prayers or vows, or play any role in the private lives of the citizens. They did not offer cures or help with childbirth. Their place was in the public arena. It is also a mistake to think that this was in any sense a new religion different from traditional paganism: it fitted neatly into the pattern of the multiplicity of gods and goddesses worshipped in the vast areas of the Empire, offering no challenge to the belief in the old gods. Modern interpreters have often found the whole phenomenon deeply problematic; ancient commentators sometimes found it a suitable subject for wit, but few ancients seem to have protested or refused to participate apart from the Christians, for whom it was used as a test of their commitment.

The Romans had a clear sense that the dead needed to be remembered and honoured and there were annual festivals to achieve this. At the festival of the Parentalia, which occupied nine days in February, offerings were brought by families to the tombs or graves of their families outside the walls of the city. The next day after the end of this period was a time of reunion and reconciliation amongst the living members of the family. It was an obligation of those who inherited an estate to maintain the *sacra* of the family, that is to ensure that the rituals for the ancestors were properly carried out. All this implied that there was a sense of the continuing existence and power of the dead, at least in the mass if not as individual personalities. Families – at least elite families – also kept a memorial of their ancestors in the form of wax masks, likenesses that lived in the atrium of the house; at noble funerals these masks were worn by actors dressed in the triumphal or magisterial robes of the dead man as part of the procession that followed the corpse. Imperial funerals were later modelled on this ritual. This implies that the family as a unit was conceived as developing its glory over time. It does not imply any concern with the individual's survival of death.

In the second festival, in the middle of May, the dead were conceived in a different way and called *lemures* (hostile spirits); the ritual was intended to placate them and keep them away from the living. Ovid in his *Fasti* connects this ritual with the violent death of the founder Remus, killed by his own brother Romulus; this may not be entirely reliable, but it does suggest that the idea underlying the festival concerned the restless ghosts of those who had been abused. At least, the evidence suggests that the two festivals expressed opposite visions of the dead, at peace or not at peace. (For the calendar, Table 7.2; Scullard 1981: 74–6, 118–19.)

It is usually argued that a concern with the individual's survival of death originated in the period of the Empire, partly under the influence of Greek philosophy, partly in the so-called mystery cults and in the context of Christianity. This is all highly questionable in the case of the mysteries. At least in the case of pagans, however, it seems certain that there was a widespread debate of which people were aware; tombstones quite regularly assert the dead person's rejection of the idea of survival, worked so as to imply that others do believe in it. The dead must in this case have been carrying on an argument familiar among the living. Here as elsewhere we must never forget the limits of the subject under discussion: 'paganism' as such had no explicit beliefs or doctrines that were codified, debated or challenged as such; individuals of course had their thoughts and doubts, but in earlier Rome such ideas would have had no consequences, good or bad, because the question of leaving the religion and joining a different one did not arise. It was only with the emergence of religious alternatives that the nature of such religious issues became transformed.

### **Religious change in the Roman Empire**

In some respects the pagan religion of the Romans can be described, as in parts of the [previous section](#), as if it was a timeless unchanging system. This is to some extent misleading: as we saw above (pp. 342–4), the introduction of new cults was a regular event. More significantly still, the city's whole religious life was in fact adjusted quite dramatically to the realities of power in the state: we know enough, for example, to be certain that the religion of early Rome was built around the position of the king; that in the religion of the late Republic, the location of authority within the system had become fragmented so that power was shared between the senate, the popular assemblies, the many priests of different kinds and the magistrates of the particular year; and that by the end of Augustus' reign (14 CE), there had been such radical restructuring that the Emperor can be said not only to be the head of the state religion but to be reorganizing the whole cult around his house, his family. All religious decisions seem to come to him; he has become almost the only human to be depicted in the act of sacrificing to the gods; and his own status has risen almost to that of a god himself. The Emperor in many ways plays the role of guaranteeing Rome's relationship with the gods that once had been shared between the whole ruling elite. In some ways, this religious transformation is the most important change of all in the period of the establishment of the new monarchy.



These were of course radical changes, and they would have horrified Cicero's contemporaries had they lived to see them; but a far deeper transformation of religious life was in progress that affected not just the public life of the Empire, but the experience of all its inhabitants. The religion of Rome before 1 BCE, like that of many cities of the ancient world, was an inherent part of the city's life and activity. The individual assumed a certain religious place derived from his or her family, trade or dwelling and participated more or less actively in the festivals and ceremonies of the state, many of which had both central and domestic rituals associated with them. It is an oversimplification to say that this was a religion of ritual alone; but the specific nature of the individual's ideas or beliefs was not an issue, as long as he or she conformed to a normal pattern of behaviour. That does not mean that some were not sceptical and others pious; but such variations had no consequences in terms of provoking persecution or of converting from one religion to another. There were no alternative religions to which one could convert at the time.

Four hundred years later, the social location and significance of religion had changed radically. By this time, a range of religions (Judaism, Christianity, paganism), cults (Mithraism, the Isis cult) and sects within religions (Arianism, Donatism, Orthodoxy) were competing for members. The notion of competition should not be exaggerated here: there was a great deal of peaceful co-existence and mutual tolerance as well as conflict. We know of families in which some members were Christian, some pagan; and we know of cities where there seems to have been no real violence for long periods. What is beyond all doubt, however, is that individual members by birth of one religion often converted to a different religion as a result of a change of conviction. The option to do so now existed and individuals – as well as whole families – made use of it. This is logically implied by the fact that Christianity started as a tiny group (in the 30s CE) and grew, very slowly at first, over the course of three centuries. In this period, in each generation the Christian groups must have contained a high percentage of converted pagans. The mixing of paganism and Christianity will have happened both externally between the rival groups and internally in the minds and hearts of the converts (Lane Fox 1986; North 1992; Hopkins 1998; *RoR* I: ch. 6).

One approach to the question, and a traditional one, is implied by concentrating more on events internal to pagan life and less on the competition with new religions. Two trends have been very much emphasized in the past: the first was the rise to major importance of mystery cults; the second was a supposed trend towards monotheism, which allegedly predisposed pagans to accept a

Judaeo-Christian outlook. Both these ideas have formed part of a coherent scheme of staged development starting from polytheism, passing through mystery cults and belief in the afterlife, then through monotheism to the final culmination in Christianity. The scheme was essentially a (brilliant) nineteenth-century construction and is no longer defended or defensible, though its assumptions may still be powerful.

One problem with the scheme is that the elements that are supposed to represent 'progress' were in fact already present in religious life long before the Roman Empire in both Greece and Italy. The mystery cults, for instance, clearly went back in their basic structure at least to the early Greek society of the sixth century BCE and the idea of monotheism was discussed and highly influential also in early Greek thought. The Stoics believed in worshipping the gods and goddesses, but they saw them only as aspects of the single divine principle, the *logos* – the rationality inherent in the nature of the universe. In some sense, both mystery cult and philosophical ideas about a single deity may be seen as anticipations of what happened in later history, but it is also entirely clear that both could co-exist for very long periods in a pagan and polytheist environment. Neither the existence of the mysteries nor the possibility that all the gods should be seen as a unity proved fatal to pagan practice over hundreds of years. What is needed is a demonstration that some quite new factor arose in the imperial period and that its emergence caused the collapse of polytheistic ideas (Burkert 1987; Turcan 1996; *RoR* II: ch. 12).

The particular mysteries that were most prominent in these years were those of Isis, claiming to have originated in Egypt; of Attis and Cybele from Asia Minor; of Bacchus, immediately from Greece, but originally from further afield; and of Mithras from Persia. In every case, there is some substance in the claimed origin, but also a substratum of the older Greek mysteries. Perhaps, the eastern connections resulted from real contacts with the east or easterners; perhaps, it was no more than a veneer of easternness, derived from reading or learning. Mysterious wisdom was known to be a possession of the ancient eastern civilizations and the cults must have derived prestige from the association as well as natural supporters among the descendants of easterners living in the west. The cults did have some elements in common: they all had a mystery only revealed to the initiate at a ceremony; they all seem to have offered a personal experience of the divine and some contact with an experience of symbolic death and rebirth. But, beyond these basic points, they had very different ideas and systems (Burkert 1987).

The cult of Mithras, for instance, excluded women from its groups, whereas the other cults did not. It also had its own special appeal to two groups of people: soldiers in the frontier zones and freedmen in Rome and in Ostia (the port of Rome). On the other hand, there is little evidence that it had any importance among the elite groups of Rome, even though leading Romans played their parts in the cult when on the frontiers. The main evidence about the cult's character has to be inferred from the decoration and imagery of Mithraic shrines or caves, which were the characteristic meeting-places of the cult, where cult-meals were probably held in honour of the god. There is also a plentiful and varied tradition of sculpture, including the scene of bull-slaying by Mithras himself. There is hardly any written evidence about the ideas of the cult's adherents from their own point of view; and even Christian writers, so loquacious about paganism in other contexts, tell us little in this case. We know that there was an elaborately structured system of grades, so that the individual group member would have undergone a series of initiations starting out under the grade of 'raven' and moving up through five grades ('male bride', 'soldier', 'lion', 'Persian', 'sun-runner') to become finally a 'father'. Each of these grades was under the protection of a planet, including the sun and moon, starting from Mercury and finishing with Saturn. These grades, and the movements of individuals through them, must have been controlled by theories about the universe and about the connections between stars and human experience on the earth. The individual ascent through the seven grades must have reflected the soul's progress through the stars. It seems clear that they were combining in a very original way the old idea of the mystery cult and up-to-date ideas about the stars and the universe. The details are all very controversial and it is far from certain that the same theory was being applied in all the parts of the Empire (Beck 1988; Gordon 1996).

The Isis cult is in marked contrast in many respects. Women played a major role, though perhaps not so dominant a role as has sometimes been suggested. The goddess and her rituals were widely disseminated throughout the Empire and she had many public temples, festivals and processions in her honour, often as part of the official religion of the cities. Isis herself claimed that she was the queen above all and that she incorporated all the other deities of the Roman world. The evidence of the cult is plentiful, including a whole temple and its ritual equipment preserved at Pompeii. In the case of Isis, the mysteries cannot have been such a central element of the cult as they were in Mithraism; it is hard to judge even whether they were the highest aspiration of the goddess' most devoted worshippers. We have many inscriptions recording individual devotion

to the cult, but only one sustained text giving an account of an initiation; that text is the last section (Book xi) of Apuleius' famous novel *The Golden Ass*. The hero Lucius, who has spent most of the novel bewitched into being an ass, is finally saved by the goddess and in his gratitude seeks initiation into her mysteries. Apuleius does no more than hint at the rewards on offer to the initiate: Lucius' everyday life is certainly transformed – he moves to Rome, becomes a successful lawyer and joins an Isiac group in their devotions. The novel is discreet, witty and even teasing, but it presupposes a rich religious life based on the group of initiates and a priest who offers spiritual guidance. For Lucius at least, his gratitude to the goddess, guided by her own appearance in his dreams, demands his passionate devotion to her worship (Burkert 1987; *RoR* II: 12.4).

In many ways, the most paradoxical cult of all was that of Attis, the shepherdboy-god from Asia Minor. He was part of the circle of Cybele, the Great Mother Goddess, who loved him and mourned his loss. She was identified with the Magna Mater, to whom the Romans built a temple after the Hannibalic War (218–201 BCE); we know from a cache of statuettes under the platform of the temple that Attis came to Rome at the same time as the Magna Mater. The mystery cult of Attis seems, therefore, to have developed under the protection of the Roman state itself, at the very moment when the Bacchic cult was being destroyed by the same authorities. Attis in myth was the beloved of the goddess, and died as a result of his love. He was, at one stage of the modern debate, thought to be a clear example of the god whose death and rebirth symbolically foreshadowed the death and rebirth of his mortal followers. The evidence for this seductive interpretation is all too flimsy: in one version of the myth, the goddess in grief at Attis' death begs Jupiter to save him for her; Jupiter does what he can, but the result of his efforts is that Attis remains incorruptible but incapable of movement – except that he can wiggle his little finger. The myth is not a guarantee of afterlife, but a parable about the limitation even of the gods' control over fate (Sfameni Gasparro 1985; *OCD*<sup>3</sup> 213).

In all these cases, it is far from clear whether the initiate received benefits in this world or the next or both; also, whether the afterlife was an important issue for the cults' adherents. If these cults did provide a bridge from civic religion to new forms of religion, as has often been thought, they do so not so much in their doctrines, or in the quality of religious experience, as in their structure. They consisted of people who had chosen membership of this particular group and undergone a ritual that provided a link between the members of the group. But the commitment seems less than total and there is no real sign that the initiates

cut themselves off from the worship of other gods. To judge by the evidence of archaeology, the Mithraists at least allowed other gods within their sanctuaries. The people of the mysteries had some quality of experience in common, but they were far from being a people apart.

The beginning point and the end point of the slow process of religious change are both clear. The journey between them is too badly documented for there to be much confidence in any detailed account of what was happening. The easy story would be to see the arrival of Christianity as the sole cause of the change; but in fact there are many other factors to be assessed. First, in many cities of the diaspora there was a Jewish community before the time of Christianity, which would already have offered an alternative religion; it is true that there is no evidence that these Jewish groups sought to make full converts, but all the same Gentiles sometimes attached themselves voluntarily to Jewish synagogues. Secondly, amongst pagans as well there were developments towards at least an elective element in their religious lives. Again long before the emergence of Christianity, the Bacchic cult in Italy was condemned by the senate and persecuted: the surviving decree shows that it was the articulated structure of the Bacchic cells that the senate was set to destroy. The Bacchic cult did not apparently involve such a complete rupture from pagan practice as did Christianity two or three centuries later. But it is sobering to reflect that the treatment of the Bacchists had in fact been more not less violent and methodical than the later persecution of Christians (Goodman 1994; *RoR* I: 91–8).

Christianity emerged into the awareness of pagans as a variant version of Judaism, not as a new religion at all, and it is probable that in its very early days there was much confusion as a result. What is more, the earliest followers of Christ did not form a single coherent group; it took many decades, even centuries, to create a unified orthodoxy, with a single church organization and doctrine, and orthodoxy at all dates had variant views to contend with. Already in the Acts of the Apostles, a central theme is the potential split between those (apparently based in Jerusalem) who wished to keep the new movement within Judaism and those who wished it to expand to include Gentile converts. There were, of course, fundamental differences between Christians and traditional Jews, but it is hardly surprising if pagans took time to understand these (Meeks 1983; Kyrtatas 1987).

One fundamental difference was that, unlike the Christians, the Jews living in the cities of the Roman Empire maintained their own traditions very much as did other ethnic groups, Egyptians, Syrians in the west or Italians in the east. Their religious activities may have attracted others to join with their practices, but the

Jews seem not to have sought converts, while joining Egyptians or Syrians did not involve abandoning the traditions of your own city or community. Another difference that developed quite quickly was that those who joined the Christians acquired a special name: Jews were Jews because their ancestors were Jews; most Christians were Christians because they had decided to be. It is important to see that this was a critical moment of change. However, there were similarities as well: both Jews and Christians rejected the gods – all the gods. For this reason, Christians in the east were for a time called simply ‘atheists’. For different reasons, neither group would participate in pagan sacrifices. On the other hand, Gentile Christians did not maintain the dietary rules or the practice of ritual circumcision that made Jewish customs such a talking-point among hostile pagans.

From a pagan point of view these developments have quite dramatic implications. For the first time pagans as such found themselves under serious challenge. Traditionally, the pagans have been seen as very ill-equipped to face such a challenge, because they were supposedly facing a crisis caused by their religion’s long slow decline into inanition. Modern views have on the contrary detected major areas of vigorous pagan activity: partly, these are in the area of the mystery cults and the development of Mithraism; partly, it is in the life of the great oracles in the east, where records of them survive long into the imperial centuries, implying a commitment nobody would have expected; partly, it is the reformation of pagan thoughts and pagan philosophy in the third and fourth centuries. What we can see clearly is that the opposition between pagans and new forms of religion slowly forced the pagans to redefine their own position. They became by force of circumstances a single religion and an alternative to Christianity; this must be the process by which ‘pagan-ism’ was finally invented.

Part of that process of redefinition was the persecution of the Christians, the parading of those who chose to deviate from the pagan version of civic life. Our information about this comes mostly from later Christian sources, especially martyr-acts, which had a specific role in the memorializing of its saintly heroes and heroines by the later church. These are not the best sources for establishing what really happened. But we have enough information to see that there were persecutions and that an apparatus of suppression did exist; but it is also clear that this was employed only very erratically and that it was no part either of the imperial authorities’ purpose or of the real activity of governors to conduct a methodical suppression by searching out the Christian groups and eliminating their activities. The Emperor Trajan declared precisely that they should *not* be sought out, but should be brought to trial only if denounced by persons who



declared their names and hence took responsibility for the denunciation. This policy will have meant that persecution took place only when Christians came into conflict with the civic authorities. Only in the third century CE did persecutions begin to take on a more imperial aspect and even then it is not clear how far this was a considered decision (*RoR* I: 236–44).

The key to understanding the progress of Christianity may well lie in events in the cities large and small throughout the Empire. It is clear that cities had come to contain groups both of Jews and of Christians who were at odds with the sacrificial cult that lay at the centre of pagan civic religion. We get glimpses of this plurality, but we have all too little information of how it worked in practice. Did the Jews and Christians attend the regular pagan festivals and thus reconcile themselves formally with pagan opinion? Or did they simply absent themselves and live their own separate lives? Both groups seem to have contained members who were socially and economically successful; at least, it is certain that not all their members were drawn from the excluded groups of society and some scholars have argued that from the beginning they included members of high status. It is very hard to maintain that they were secret and separate.

In the case of Jewish communities in particular, there is some evidence of visible separateness. In some cities, synagogues were built in central, even prominent, sites. Those who attended them must have been known to the community as a whole. These seem to have included pagans, who had not converted but were informally attached to the communities, and sometimes even Christians – to judge by the attacks on their backsliding by their bishops. An inscription from Aphrodisias, a notable city in Asia Minor near the west coast of Turkey, shows us a situation of a Jewish community which seems to be far more integrated into civic life than we would have predicted. It is evidently maintaining at least some parts of a Jewish tradition; but it has as patrons and supporters a number of local people, some of whom declare that they occupy prominent positions in the city itself, serving on the city's council. The implication seems to be that this community at least was thoroughly accepted and even supported at an almost official level (Lieu et al. 1992: 19–21).

It may be argued that the crucial change should be looked for not simply at the level of religion in the cities, but more generally in the life of the cities themselves and their relationship to the whole Empire. Pagan religion was a matter of large numbers of local traditions – rituals, festivals, myths, gods and goddesses – which overlapped with those of their neighbours but thrived on local enthusiasm and commitment. Like everything else in the Empire, this activity



depended heavily on the commitment of the local wealthy classes; innumerable inscriptions from the early imperial period show how they were responsible for funding and organizing the religious life of their co-citizens.

In the later period, particularly during and after the third-century troubles (235–84 CE, see pp. 335–6 above), the flow of information about such benefactions comes to an end. There are no more inscriptions from the cities of the Empire detailing the devotion of the civic elites to the cities in which they lived. At the same time, legal sources contain much material on the controversial issue of excuses for avoiding local duties. What this suggests is that local elites, whose members had once been committed to their own communities, were now avoiding these local obligations and devoting themselves instead to the service of the central government and its bureaucracy. This change of attitude was not at all the result of events in the religious sphere, but it would have had dramatic effects on the religious sphere. If the local backers of pagan activity were abandoning it and transferring their enthusiasms elsewhere, then it would not be surprising if the effect was to encourage Christian groups to become more active and to find it easier to make converts. This is no more than one possible theory, but it does have suggestive power and needs to be tested in terms of the surviving record in individual cities and communities (Rives 1995).

## Note

1. The term ‘pagan’ (*paganus*) originally meant country-dweller, rustic, and was apparently used by the early Christians as an unfriendly term for those who had persisted in the old pre-Christian religious ways. We do not know where or why this usage began, but it was adopted by modern writers and is today the established usage in the writing of ancient history. Some contemporary writers have preferred to use ‘polytheism’ and ‘polytheist’; but, at least when writing about earlier periods, this is definitely misleading, since it implies that the Romans thought that having many gods was what defined their religion. They did not. They believed that there were many different gods and goddesses and that all sensible people from all over the world recognized that simple fact. Only when in competition with Jews and Christians in late antiquity, were they forced to acknowledge that the number of gods had become a major issue of contention. In many other contexts today, the word ‘pagan’ either has become a pejorative term for religions of which the speaker disapproves, or else refers to religious movements of the current age which are distinct from, even if in some way similar to, the religions of the Graeco-Roman world. Perhaps a replacement of the term would be desirable

for these reasons, but none is available at the moment that would not be more misleading still.

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