

INTRODUCTION

The value of studying ancient religions is not so often challenged today as it used to be: it has become a familiar idea that trying to understand religions requires a comparative approach, that we cannot understand, e.g., Christianity unless we compare it with other religious systems, at least with the other world religions, but also with situations that are quite different – in which religion is not a separate institution on its own, with its own personnel, its own control systems, buildings, ideas and membership, but simply part of the way the society in question works. The religion of the Greeks and Romans in the period before and after the invention of Christianity provides a special kind of foil to our understanding of modern world religions: first, it provides the religious background against which Judaism, Christianity, and eventually Islam first arose, and it deeply influenced their development; secondly, in the period before these religions developed, it provides us with a model of a sophisticated society that had no such autonomous religions at work in it at all. As we shall see the Romans had religious institutions, priesthoods, buildings, sanctuaries; but ‘pagan-ism’ as a religion in the modern sense simply did not exist until the emergence of Christianity and Judaism forced it to define itself by way of competition; even then the ‘-ism’ suits it very badly, since the pagans never achieved or even tried to achieve the degree of unity or the coherence of doctrine that we today associate with the idea of a religion.

For those who study Roman antiquity for itself, of course, there are other just as compelling reasons for needing to place religion in the life of ancient men and women. Again, there has at times been a comforting assumption that this was not a very necessary part of understanding ancient life. All too often books have been constructed on the assumption that religion was a marginal part of life, interesting perhaps in an antiquarian way, but scarcely needing to be placed at the centre of our understanding. But the fact is that religious activity formed part of every other activity in the ancient world; and so far from placing it in the margin of our accounts, it needs to be assessed at every point, in every transaction. This is more easily said than done: we are accustomed to certain kinds of relationships between religion and other areas of life, including private life; we have certain ideas about the boundaries between what concerns religious life and what is the concern of secular

life; and we have ideas about the extent to which politics should intrude or not into religious matters. None of this can be transferred to the ancient world before the establishment of Christianity. The place of religion in Roman society has to be discovered in its own terms.

The survey that follows is concerned to offer a picture of Roman religion and of some of the current debates about its character and development. That picture has changed significantly in the latter decades of the twentieth century, but the problems of interpreting a religion so different from those we today are used to are and will remain an area of profound controversy. The focus of this survey is the religious experience of the Roman people from about the third century BC to the second century AD, which is already sufficiently ambitious. It does not attempt to discuss the establishment of Christianity as the main religion of the Empire in the fourth century; nor to do more than survey older theories about the earliest period of Rome as a city. There is one other limitation on its scope: those who follow up the footnotes to this book will very soon find that the evidence behind it consists in part of texts, epigraphic or literary, but also of archaeological evidence in the broadest sense – coins, painting, relief sculpture, the remains of buildings, the topography of the city and many other kinds of physical remains. There is no scope or opportunity to do justice to this material without extensive use of illustrations, charts, and plans and I have not attempted to do that here. A selection will be found in the ‘Sources’ volume (Vol. II) of Beard, North, and Price, *Religions of Rome* (1998), which also contain many of the texts discussed in this survey. I have referred to them by the system used there, by chapter and item number, in **bold type** (e.g. **1.4a**). There is also now an excellent guide (Claridge (1998)) to the remains of Ancient Rome and a useful dictionary of sites in English (Richardson (1987)) as well as a far more ambitious one in various languages and in progress (Steinby (1993–)).

The bibliography consists for the most part of work in English cited in the footnotes and chosen as the first step towards exploring the subject further. Essential work, particularly recent work, in French and German has been included, and the bibliography also contains some items not cited in footnotes to make it more generally useful in itself. The great handbooks of the subject (in German) are still essential reference works (Wissowa (1912); Latte (1960)). There is now (in French) a very useful brief introduction to the working of the religion and cult by John Scheid (1998b). To check the details of festivals, Scullard (1981) is still useful, though his theories are often out-of-date. Hopkins (1999) is a very

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recent and entertaining, if idiosyncratic, introduction to pagan, Jewish, and Christian religion under the Empire, with much emphasis on the different varieties of early Christianity.

I am very grateful to Ian McAuslan, the editor of the *Survey for Greece & Rome*, for much advice and assistance from the first conception to the final delivery of this work, also for his endless tolerance, courtesy, and flexibility in dealing with the delays of production. The photograph of a coin is reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum. It will be obvious to readers how much the line of thought in this survey owes to *Religions of Rome* and I happily acknowledge my indebtedness to that seamless collaboration with Mary Beard and Simon Price.

I. THE STORIES OF EARLY ROME

In many ways Roman religion emerges from the standard modern accounts of it as a dry and highly ritualized religion with few if any concessions either to religious self-expression or imagination about the role of gods in the life of men.¹ Historians have tended to associate this character with the success of the Romans in practical aspects of life – warfare, engineering, town-planning – and to suggest that they organized their religious lives with the same kind of brutal efficiency, striking crude bargains with the narrow-minded gods and goddesses that they had themselves created. It will be clear later on that there are some reasons for taking this view, but there are also reasons to think it only a part of the truth, and profoundly misleading if it is mistaken for the whole truth.

One reason for mistrusting the image of the practical Roman is the existence of Roman myths and legends, attributed to the early history of Rome, in which we find traces of some forms of religious behaviour that the Romans later seem to have denied themselves; these also carry with them morals about proper religious behaviour that do not emerge from the type of evidence we have for the later Republican period, or even contradict the evidence about this period. It has sometimes been said that the Romans simply had no mythology of their own and that it was for that reason that they later borrowed the mythology of the Greeks.² This is quite true in the sense that they do indeed have no great body of stories on the Greek model about the adventures of their gods and goddesses. In so far as they tell such stories they always seem to reflect Greek myths in Roman guise. If the word myth were restricted to that sense, then we would have to admit that there can have been little trace of an independent creative tradition in early Rome. All the same there are characteristically Roman stories, though mostly disguised as history and placed in historic time.³

One clear example of such a story is that of Attus Navius, an early augur who is recorded as having resisted the will of King Tarquinius Priscus (traditional dates: 616–579 BC) when he wanted to carry out a

¹ See for instance Warde Fowler (1911).

² Latte (1960); Dumézil (1970), 32–59.

³ For Roman myths in general, Dumézil (1941–5); (1970), 1–78; Grant (1973); Bremmer and Horsfall (1987); Wiseman (1995).

reform in the organization of the cavalry units.⁴ Tarquin tested the augur's skills by asking him to say whether he could perform the act of which he (Tarquin) was thinking. Navius said he could perform it and Tarquin announced that he had been thinking of Navius' cutting a whetstone in two with a razor; Navius duly performed the miracle that Tarquin said he was thinking of and the severed whetstone was kept on the site to prove it. Such miracles were remembered, but no longer really happened in the late Republic. The story must, however, reflect an awareness that such potential actions were part of a priest's role, even if not that of a Roman priest in their own day.

Various of the early kings also have miraculous elements in the stories told about them. Miraculous births and babyhoods are reported in the tradition: Romulus and Remus, most famously, were exposed as babies, but protected and rescued from death by the she-wolf who suckled them.⁵ In another version of Romulus' birth,⁶ and also in one version of that of Servius Tullius,⁷ the sixth king of Rome, a virgin became pregnant miraculously when either a spark or a miraculous phallus penetrated her while she was tending the hearth. Once again this is a miraculous event of a kind, to say the least, outside later Roman parameters. But this particular story seems to have a much closer relationship than the others to the actual practice of religious ritual, because the Vestal Virgins seem in their ritual duties to echo this myth. They had of course to guard their virginity on pain of death; their main responsibility was to look after the hearth and to maintain the sacred fire that symbolized the continuity of Rome; in the secret centre of their cult-place they kept a phallus away from the sight of men. It sounds as though there must have been a close connection between the myth of the king's origins and the symbolic rituals of the Vestals, and that the safety and continuity of the Roman community depended on the ritual maintenance of this founding act of fertilization.⁸

In the case of the deaths of kings there is far less ritual connection in Republican times, though there does seem to have been an early characteristic Latin tradition. The founder kings of Rome (Romulus, the real founder; his ancestor the Trojan hero, Aeneas, whose son Ascanius founded the neighbouring city of Alba Longa; and the King

⁴ Livy 1.36.2–6 = *RoR* ii.7.1a. See Beard (1989).

⁵ For the story and its sources, Wiseman (1995), ch. 1.

⁶ Plutarch, *Life of Romulus* 2.3–5.

⁷ Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 4.2; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 26.204.

⁸ See *RoR* i.53–4. For the Vestals, below pp. 19, 24, and Table 1

of the Latins, Latinus), all seem to share a common characteristic. They disappear from the earth in mysterious circumstances and are recognized as gods with a new name. They are not heroes or minor divinities, but high gods of the Romans or the Latins. This is especially clear of Latinus, who becomes Jupiter, under the name Latiaris, and who was the recipient of the special games annually celebrated by the Latin peoples.⁹ Romulus becomes Quirinus, one of the three major gods who have their own priests (his was called the *flamen Quirinalis*, similarly to those of Jupiter and Mars, the *Dialis* and the *Martialis*).¹⁰ Aeneas becomes Pater Indiges and although this is for us an obscure figure, there is reason to see him too as a major Roman god, perhaps the sun-god.¹¹

The figure in early Rome, however, who most obviously defies the normal principles of Roman behaviour is King Numa, who seems to play the role of the religious founder, and about whom there is a cluster of stories of a miraculous nature. It is as though he was designed to parade all that a model of Roman religious behaviour should *not* be. Yet Numa was the legislator who set up the rules by which the cults of Rome were established; he wrote the books on which all rituals were supposedly based and handed them over to the first ever *pontifex*; he also told the *pontifices* that it was their special job to advise the individual Romans about their religious obligations.¹² In his own life, however, as told by our sources, he was inspired by a nymph, Egeria, with whom he slept and by whom he was given religious advice. On her advice he found a way of luring Jupiter down to the earth from heaven and first enquiring about a ritual procedure and then actually tricking Jupiter into changing the ritual into the form Numa wanted it to take.¹³ When Numa's successor King Tullus attempted to repeat this divine experiment, he went wrong and was struck down by Jupiter's own lightning-bolt.¹⁴

In the Rome we know rather better, the Rome of the late Republican period, such stories as these express religious attitudes that seem never to be found in practice. The life of Cicero is not marked by the sudden irruption of divine forces. Men do not yet become gods – though they

⁹ Liou-Gille (1980), 176–7.

¹⁰ For the *flamines*, see *RoR* i.28–9; ii.1.3.

¹¹ Pater Indiges: Liou-Gille (1980), 85–134.

¹² Livy 1.20.5–7 = *RoR* ii.1.2.

¹³ For the story: Ovid, *Fasti* 285–392; Arnobius, *Against the Gentiles* 5.1 (taking the story from a first-century BC historian).

¹⁴ Livy 1.31.5–8; Pliny, *Nat.Hist.* 2.140; 28.14. On the significance of the lightning: Capdeville (1995), 84–95.

are beginning to make extraordinary claims to power and honour. Miracles are not reported. Nobody is said to be struck down by the gods for misbehaviour. Nor are the gods said to have intervened directly in the birth processes even of the most distinguished human beings. Yet we can be reasonably certain that the Romans were aware of stories from early Rome that advertised the possibility of all these things happening. And some of them at least do start to happen in Rome once again in the course of the following century.¹⁵

There are many different ways of looking at the contrast between the mythical possibilities we have been finding and the living practice of the centuries that followed. One explanation would be to say that the Romans saw the remote past as controlled by different rules from their own time, so that there were possibilities once that no longer existed at later dates. Cicero in the *Republic* hints at a different and more rationalizing view, when he implies that the deification of Romulus was characteristic of an ignorant period.

His achievements were so great that when he failed to reappear after an eclipse of the sun, he was believed to have been admitted to the number of the gods; a belief that no man has ever been able to attain without an outstanding reputation for virtue. The case of Romulus is the more astounding because other men who were said to have become gods lived in periods of inferior education, when minds were more prone to make inventions and simple folk easily induced to believe in them, whereas Romulus lived less than six hundred years ago . . . (Cicero, *de rep.* 2.17)

He goes on to describe the culture of Greece in Romulus' time, all on the assumption that deification of men becomes an outdated belief once education has reached a certain point. Today, many find this a sympathetic attitude on the part of Cicero, but we have to recognize that he was not speaking for all his contemporaries. The deification of kings and leaders had become established in the Greek world from the time of Alexander's successors onwards and was on the point of reaching Rome soon after Cicero wrote these words – all too soon, as he would certainly have felt.

There could, however, also be other ways of seeing this relationship between reality and the mythical past. It is easy enough to say that these provide religious elements absent from contemporary life, but do we know that it is true? After all, we do not have to believe and perhaps we should not believe that the sources of information we possess give us a fair or balanced picture of Roman religion even in Cicero's own time, let

¹⁵ See below pp. 59–62.

alone for the centuries of Republican history between 500 and 100 BC. Our main sources of information about the earlier centuries are historians such as Livy¹⁶ and Dionysius of Halicarnassus¹⁷ who lived in the age of Augustus (in power from 31 BC–AD 14) and so had no personal knowledge even of the late Republic, let alone of the early years. Their reconstruction of the earlier centuries depended heavily on earlier historians, now lost, who themselves wrote in the second century BC or later still.¹⁸ These are the main sources that provide the outlines of our picture; many others contribute, sometimes crucially – coins that carry religious imagery, the archaeological and topographical record of Rome and its vicinity, inscriptions and especially the Augustan copies of the Roman Calendar. However, it remains true that the overwhelming weight of what texts survive come to us from priestly records or from official sources of one kind or another. The extant evidence generally reflects not the experience of the mass of individual Romans, but the religious activity that affects the state and its activities, above all the doings of magistrates and priests.

The Roman religion we know is based on this limited body of material. It shows a lack of direct divine intervention; a lack of the miraculous; a lack of myths of divine activity; even a lack of individual prophets.¹⁹ Not that we do not have a great deal of divinatory material of one kind or another; but this does not take the form of individuals inspired to tell the truth or predict the future. What we find instead are groups of priests – either *haruspices* (diviners supposedly imported from Etruria) or the priests who guarded the Sibylline Books (called successively the two, the ten, or the fifteen men for sacrifices) – who delivered oracles from their respective knowledge or archives to guide the ritual life of Rome.²⁰ They essentially reported which of the gods and goddesses needed to receive sacrifices or other forms of ritual appeasement. The *haruspices* brought wisdom from abroad, from Etruria; the *quindecimviri* were the guardians of Greek oracles derived from an ancient prophethess.

There are different ways of understanding this position too. One of these is to accept the sources' picture as a more or less true reflection of

¹⁶ On whom see: Miles (1995).

¹⁷ On whom see: Gabba (1991).

¹⁸ Rawson (1976).

¹⁹ North (1990).

²⁰ On the *haruspices*: MacBain (1982); *RoR* i.19–20; 101–2; ii.7.4; on the Sibylline Books: Parke (1988); *RoR* i.27; 62–3; ii.7.5.

Roman life, to accept that their religion operated with a limited vocabulary of religious elements. Another is to argue that we are being given by our sources a very carefully edited picture of what their religious life was really like, largely chosen to reflect a careful, scrupulous piety. It was a strong element in the Romans' perception of themselves that they were the most religious of all men; this contrasts strangely with many modern perceptions of them as the least religious of all men. But a writer like Livy, who looks back at the Republican period from the period of Augustus, would hardly have been able to detach himself from the assumption that the triumphant success of the Republican Romans in conquering most of the rest of the world that they knew went together with a scrupulous care about the proper worship of the gods. He has been thought by some commentators to be himself a sceptic, though the evidence for this is in fact quite flimsy.²¹ But there is no room for doubt that, even if he did have private doubts, his basic narrative carries the message of religious success. On this view it is possible that the religion we find does not reflect reality at all; that Roman religious reality was dense with activities now lost to us.

There are in fact some moments, when we might detect the elements normally excluded from the historians' accounts. Occasionally the state adopts prophetic texts from outside the official collection.²² Once there was a deliberate policy of confiscating unofficial prophecies.²³ We hear from Cato in his book on agriculture, written in the middle of the second century BC, that a master had to take care to protect his bailiff from putting too much faith in the unofficial astrologers.²⁴ Magic, again, as in most contexts, is an interesting and challenging case: it is arguable that magical practices and especially charges of magic began to appear in our records only during the early Empire; it is also in that period that we find for the first time a definition and discussion of the origins of magic.²⁵ Yet it is evident from many incidental references that Italy of the Republican period contained a good deal of activity that we would classify as magical in its character: the enchanting of crops is mentioned in the ancient Roman law-code; human sacrifice, which must be connected with magical practices, was specifically banned in 97 BC by the senate of Rome; and we hear of practitioners of local Italian traditions such as the

²¹ See below, p. 78.

²² e.g. during the Hannibalic War, see: *RoR* ii.7.5c.
²³ in 213 BC, *MRR* i.263.

²⁴ Cato, *On Agriculture* 5.4.

²⁵ The discussion in Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 30.1–18.

Marsic snake-charmers.²⁶ By the late Republic, as we can tell from Cicero's attacks on some of his contemporaries and from the Roman poets of the Augustan age, who are fully aware of various, as they see it, horrific magical practices, the idea has been established that all these disreputable uses of ritual should be seen as part of a single system, that is eventually seen as a foreign import. But this whole evolution would have been impossible, unless there had been diviners and magical operators, however they were called, who were active in the Republican period when we hear so little about them.²⁷

In the other chapters of this survey, the main preoccupation will be with areas of religious life about which we have substantial quantities of information of one kind or another: rituals, religious personnel, festivals, religious activity in political life, religious buildings and sanctuaries. The source material for these is quite various – literary, artistic, and epigraphic sources, as well as coins and the remains of buildings. In bulk, however, they tell us predominantly about the activities of the social élites of the Roman world, not about the poorer and less prominent sections of Roman society; they tell us about public activity, more than private or individual activity; in short, they tell us what the authorities of Rome would have wanted us to know about, but are far weaker when it comes to the religion of other groups.

This sets up a fundamental problem about which there has not yet been as much discussion as there needs to be. How complete is the picture we get from these materials? One view is that the missing sectors are not too distorting for us: the emphasis lies on the public sector of activity because that was the area that mattered to the whole community. On this view there was no important arena of private religious expression, separate from the public arena, because unlike in a modern situation the individual citizen did not perceive himself as an isolated being who needed to consult his or her own conscience, to make his or her own peace with the gods, or to make life-determining decisions about his or her religious beliefs and identity. This all represents a backward projection into the ancient world of a modern consciousness; so that we would be inventing for the Romans a wholly anachronistic religious life, which they would not themselves have recognized at all. The alternative view is that all societies must have certain kinds of common religious elements, and that one of these must be the personal,

²⁶ For the early code, Crawford (1996), ii.682–4; the ban on human sacrifice is mentioned by Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 20.12; for Marsic magicians: Cicero, *On Divination* 1.132.

²⁷ For discussion, Graf (1997).