

1 *Early Rome*

1. Finding the religion of the early Romans

The origins of Roman religion lay in the earliest days of the city of Rome itself. That, at least, was the view held by the Romans – who would have been very puzzled that we should now have any doubt about where, when or how most of their priesthoods, their festivals, their distinctive rituals were established. Roman writers, from poets to philosophers, gave detailed accounts of the founding of Rome by the first king Romulus (the date they came to agree was – on our system of reckoning – 753 B.C.): he consulted the gods for divine approval of the new foundation, carefully laying out the sacred boundary (the *pomerium*) around the city; he built the very first temple in the city (to Jupiter Feretrius, where he dedicated the spoils of his military victories); and he established some of the major festivals that were still being celebrated a thousand years later (it was at his new ritual of the Consualia, for example, with its characteristic horse races and other festivities, that the first Romans carried off the women of the neighbouring Sabine tribes who had come to watch – the so-called ‘Rape of the Sabines’).¹

But it was in the reign of the second king Numa that they found even more religious material. For it was Numa, they said, who established most of the priesthoods and the other familiar religious institutions of the city: he was credited with the invention of, among others, the priests of the gods Jupiter, Mars and Quirinus (the three *flamines*), of the *pontifices*, the Vestal Virgins and the *Salii* (the priests who danced through the city twice a year carrying their special sacred shields – one of which had fallen from the sky as a gift from Jupiter); and he instituted yet more new festivals, which he organized into the first systematic Roman ritual calendar. Henceforth some days of the year were marked down as religious, others as days for public business. Appropriately enough, this peaceable character founded the temple of Janus, whose doors were to be shut whenever the city was not at war. Numa was the first to close its doors; 700 years later

¹ Roman accounts of early Roman history: Miles (1995); Fox (1996). Among many ancient versions of the stories, note, for example, Plutarch, *Romulus* 11.1–4 = 4.8a (*pomerium*); Livy 1.9 (Sabines); 1.10. 5–7 (the first temple). Connections also between Jupiter Feretrius, Numa and the dedication of spoils: Festus p.204L = 1.3.

1. EARLY ROME



Fig. 1.1 Terracotta statuette of Aeneas carrying his father Anchises, one of several found in a votive deposit in Veii, fourth century B.C. Aeneas' escape from burning Troy symbolizes the birth of a new Troy in Italy, a myth widely known in archaic Latium and Etruria – and not at that time restricted to Rome. (Height 0.21m.)

the emperor Augustus proudly followed suit – but it was a rare event in Rome's history.²

Roman writers recognized that their religion was based on traditions that went back earlier than the foundation of the city itself. Long before Romulus came on the scene, the site of Rome had been occupied by an exile from Arcadia in Greece, King Evander, who had brought to Italy a variety of Greek religious customs: he had established, for example, rites in honour of Hercules at what was called the 'Greatest Altar' (Ara Maxima) and it was because of this, so Romans explained, that rites at the Ara Maxima were always carried out in a recognizably Greek style (*Graeco ritu*).³ Evander was also believed to have entertained the Trojan hero

2 Note, for example, Livy I.19.6–20.7 = 1.2 (Numa's reforms); Plutarch, *Numa* 10 = 8.4a (Vestal Virgins); Macrobius, *Saturnalia* I.16.2–6 = 3.1 (calendar). Augustus's closure of the temple of Janus: Augustus, *Achievements* 13.

3 Ara Maxima and Evander: below, pp. 173–4. Other religious foundations of Evander: Plutarch, *Romulus* 21.3–8 = 5.2a (Lupercalia). The Greek style of ritual was most clearly marked by the dress of the officiant at sacrifice: in Roman style the toga was drawn over the head; in Greek style the head was left bare. Scheid (1996) emphasizes the 'Roman-ness' of even this so-called 'Greek style'.

1.1 Finding the religion of the early Romans

Aeneas, who had fled the destruction of his own city and sought safety (and a new site to re-establish the Trojan race) in Italy. (Fig 1.1) This story found its definitive version in Virgil's great national epic, the *Aeneid* – which includes a memorable account of the guided tour that Evander gave Aeneas around the site of the city that was to become Rome. Aeneas himself had a major part to play in the foundation of the Roman race, bringing with him the household gods (Penates) of his native land to a new home and renewed worship among the Romans. But he did not found the city itself; he and his son established 'proto-Romes' at Lavinium and Alba Longa. Only later was the statue of the goddess Pallas Athena that Aeneas had rescued from Troy (the Palladium) moved to the temple of Vesta in the Roman Forum, to be tended by the Vestal Virgins throughout Roman time.⁴

The kings that followed Numa also contributed – though in a less dramatic way – to the religious traditions of Rome. The rituals of the fetial priests, for example, which accompanied the making of treaties and the declaration of war (part of these involved a priest going to the boundaries of enemy territory and hurling a sacred spear across) were devised under the third and fourth rulers, Tullus Hostilius and Ancus Marcius; the fifth king, Tarquin the Elder, an immigrant to Rome from the Etruscan city of Tarquinii, laid the foundations of the temple of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva on the Capitoline hill (a temple that became a symbol of Roman religion, and hundreds of years later was widely imitated across the whole of the Roman empire); the sixth, Servius Tullius, marked the new city's growing dominance over its Latin neighbours by establishing the great 'federal' sanctuary of Diana on the Aventine hill, for all the members of the 'Latin League'. By the time the last king, Tarquin the Proud, was deposed (traditionally in 510 B.C.), and the new republican regime with its succession of annually elected magistrates established, the structure of Roman religion was essentially in place. Of course, all kinds of particular changes were to follow – new rituals, new priesthoods, new temples, new gods; but (in the view of the Romans themselves) the basic religious framework was pretty well fixed by the end of the sixth century B.C.⁵

4 Guided tour of Rome: *Aeneid* VIII.306–58 (with pp. 171–4 below, for the religious importance of the site of Rome). Alba and Lavinium: 1.5; Map 5. Images of Aeneas' flight and arrival in Italy: 9.2b(i) (coin of 47/6 B.C., showing Aeneas with the Palladium); 4.3c (sculptured panel from Augustus' Ara Pacis, showing his landing in Italy). Palladium in the temple of Vesta: Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* II.66.5–6 (though Dionysius admits to some uncertainty about the precise contents of the temple).

5 The *fetiales*: Livy I.24 and I.32.6–14 = 1.4a. The Capitulum: Livy I.55.1 = 1.9b; for Capitolia outside Rome (from Cosa in Italy and Sufetula in N. Africa), see 10.2c. Servius Tullius and the sanctuary of Diana: Livy I.45 = 1.5d; Map 1 no. 19. Cornell (1995) 156–9 and 165–8 discusses how far ancient writers saw the Tarquins as a specifically *Etruscan* dynasty.

I. EARLY ROME

There is, then, no shortage of ‘evidence’ about the earliest phases of Roman religion; the Greek historian of Rome, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, for example, devotes four whole books of his history (much of it concerned with religious institutions) to the period before the Republic was established, the first two covering only to the end of Numa’s reign.⁶ The problem is not lack of written material, but how we should interpret and make sense of that material. For all the accounts we have of Rome’s earliest history are found in writers (Dionysius amongst them) who lived in the first century B.C. or later – more than 600 years after the dates usually given to the reigns of Romulus and Numa. None of our sources is contemporary with the events they describe. Nor could their authors have read any such contemporary accounts on which to base their own: so far as we know, there were no writers in earliest, regal Rome; there was no account left by Numa, say, of his religious foundations. Even for the earliest phases of the Republic (in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.), it is very hard to know what kind of information (or how reliable) was available to historians writing three or four centuries later.⁷

Judged by our own standards of historical ‘accuracy’, these ancient accounts of early Rome and its religion are inadequate and misleading; they construct an image of a relatively sophisticated society, more like the city of the first century B.C. than the hamlet of the eighth century. Projections of the contemporary world back into the distant past, they are more myth than history. It is certain that primitive Rome was under the control of men the Romans called *reges* (which we translate as ‘kings’, though ‘chieftains’ might be a better term). But many modern historians would now be very doubtful whether at least the two earliest of them – Romulus and Numa – existed at all, let alone whether they carried out the reforms ascribed to them. That, of course, is precisely the point. The writers we are referring to (historians such as Dionysius or Livy; poets such as Virgil or Ovid) set little store by ‘accuracy’ in our narrow sense. For them, the stories of early Rome, which they told, retold and (sometimes no doubt) invented, were ‘true’ in quite a different way or, better, were doing a different kind of job: they were using the theme of the city’s origins as a way of discussing Roman culture and religion much more generally, of defining and classifying it, of debating its problems and peculiarities. These stories were a way in which the Romans (or, in the case of Dionysius and others, the Greek inhabitants of the Roman empire) explained their own religious system to themselves; and as such they were inevitably embedded in the religious concerns and debates of their writers’ own times. As we shall see, for example, stories of the apotheosis of Romulus (into the god Quirinus) were told with particular emphasis, elaborated (some might say *invented*), around the time of Julius Caesar’s deification in the 40s B.C. Romulus’ ascent to heaven

6 Gabba (1991).

7 Cornell (1995) 1–30.

1.1 *Finding the religion of the early Romans*

offered, in other words, a way of understanding, justifying or attacking the recent (and contested) elevation of the dead dictator.⁸

These images of early Rome are central to the way the Romans made sense of their own religion; and so too they are central to our understanding and discussion of Roman religion. It would be nonsense to ignore the figure of 'Numa', the father of the Roman priesthood and founder of the calendar, just because we decided that King Numa (715–672 B.C.) was a figment of the Roman mythic imagination. We shall return to this early history at many points through this book – using (for example) Ovid's explanations of the origins of particular festivals as a way of rethinking their significance in the Rome of Ovid's own day, or exploring the way the myths of Aeneas and Romulus were used to define the position of the first emperor Augustus (and were themselves re-told in the process). But this earliest period will not bulk particularly large in this first chapter on the religion of early Rome.⁹

This chapter is concerned with what we can know about the religion of Rome before the second century B.C., when for the first time contemporary writing survives in some quantity. This was the period in which the distinctive institutions of later periods must have taken shape. But how can we construct an (in our terms) 'historical' account of that religious world, when there are no contemporary written records beyond a few brief, and often enigmatic, inscriptions on stone, metal or pot? This first section concentrates on that question of method: reviewing particular documents and literary traditions which have been claimed to give a privileged access to accurate information on the earliest phases of Rome's religion; exploring some of the recent archaeological discoveries from Rome and elsewhere which have changed the way we can talk of particular aspects of that religion; and discussing various theories that have been used to reconstruct its fundamental character.

One group of documents that has often been given a special place in reconstructions of early Roman religion is a group known (collectively) as 'the calendar'. More than 40 copies (some of them, admittedly, very fragmentary) of a ritual calendar of Roman festivals, inscribed or painted on walls, survive from Rome and the surrounding areas of Italy, mostly dating to the age of Augustus (31 B.C. to A.D. 14) or soon after.¹⁰ No two of these calendars are exactly the same: the lists of festivals are slightly different in each

8 One version of the story is given in Livy I.16 = 2.8a. Earlier roots of the cult of Romulus and other 'founders': Liou-Gille (1980); Capdeville (1995).

9 Below, pp. 171–6 and ch. 4 *passim*.

10 The inscriptions are collected in Degraffi (1963), who also gives (388–546) a selection of other important sources for each festival, with bibliography and notes. Discussion and additional fragments in Rüpke (1995) 39–188. The most accessible account in English is Scullard (1981). The calendar itself is discussed, with a selection of extracts at 3.1–3.

I. EARLY ROME

case; and the additional information on the festivals that is regularly included ranges from terse notes on the god or temple involved to more extended entries of several lines, apparently drawn from antiquarian commentators, describing or explaining the rituals. None the less the calendars are all recognizably variations on the same theme, selecting from the same broad group of festivals. We shall be referring to these calendars in many contexts through the chapters that follow. For the moment, we want to stress one small but significant feature in their layout that they all have in common: some of the festival entries are inscribed in capital letters while others are in small letters. The capital-letter festivals are essentially the same group from calendar to calendar, roughly 40 in all – and including, for example, the Lupercalia, the Parilia, the Consualia, the Saturnalia. It seems virtually certain that they form an ancient list of festivals, preserved within the later documents.¹¹

But how ancient? We do not know when the characteristic form of time-keeping that underlies these calendars was introduced at Rome – maybe in the course of the republican period, maybe earlier; nor do we know whether its introduction coincided with the fixing of this particular group of capital-letter festivals, or not. It is hard to forget completely the mythic ‘Calendar of Numa’: certainly some of these festivals contain strange-seeming rituals and have often been interpreted as reflecting archaic social conditions; besides, though some of these festivals (such as those we mentioned above) were still very prominent in the first century B.C., some were totally obscure at the time the calendars were being inscribed; and in no case can it be proved that a capital-letter festival was introduced later than the regal period.¹² On the other hand the idea of the ‘Calendar of Numa’ (that is, of a very early canonical group of festivals) could be misleading. Even accepting, as is likely, that the capital-letter festivals do represent some ancient list, the purpose of that list remains quite uncertain: not necessarily the oldest festivals of all; perhaps, the most important at some specific date; perhaps even the most important to some individual on some specific occasion, that has somehow become embedded in the tradition.¹³ We certainly cannot assume that any festival not in capitals must be a ‘later’ introduction into the calendar.

A list of the names of early festivals on its own, however, tells us little – without some idea of their content and significance. Here we must turn to a variety of later sources which offer details of the rituals of these festivals and of the stories, traditions and explanations associated with them. By far the richest source of all is Ovid’s *Fasti*, a witty verse account of the first six months of the Roman calendar and its rituals.¹⁴ Ovid, however, was writing

11 Mommsen in *CIL* I.1, 2nd edn. (1893), 283–304.

12 Michels (1967) 93–144.

13 Michels (1967) 13–44; radical scepticism in Rüpke (1995) 245–88, esp. 283–6.

14 Below, pp. 174–6; 207–8.

1.1 *Finding the religion of the early Romans*

in the reign of Augustus and much of what he has to offer does not consist of traditional Roman stories at all, but of imported Greek ones. So, for example, explaining the odd rituals of the festival of the goddess Vesta (one of our capital-letter group), which involved hanging loaves of bread around asses' necks, he brings in a farcical tale of the Greek god Priapus: once upon a time, he says, at a picnic of the gods, this grotesque and crude rapist crept up on Vesta as she sprawled, unsuspecting, on the grass; but an ass's bray alerted her to his approach – and ever after, on her festal day, asses take a holiday and wear 'necklaces of loaves in memory of his services'.¹⁵ Some of these stories were no doubt introduced by Ovid himself, in the interests of variety or for fun; some may already have been, before his day, incorporated into educated Roman speculation (or joking) about the rituals. But either way it is certain that Ovid's stories do not all date back into the early history of Rome, even if some elements may do. As a source of the religious ideas of his own time Ovid is invaluable; as a source for the remote past, he is hard to trust.

It is not just a question, though, of Ovid being peculiarly unreliable; and the answer does not lie simply in looking for other ancient commentators on the calendar who have not 'polluted' their accounts with anachronistic explanations. The fact is that the rituals prescribed by the calendar of festivals were not handed down with their own original 'official' myth or explanation permanently attached to them. They were constantly re-interpreted and re-explained by their participants. This process of re-interpretation, found in almost every culture, including our own (the annual British ritual of 'Bonfire Night' means something quite different today from three hundred years ago),¹⁶ is precisely the strength of any ritual system: it enables rituals that claim to be unchanging to adopt different social meanings as society evolves new needs and new ideas over the course of time; and it means, for example, that a festival originating within a small community whose main interests were farming can still be relevant maybe 600 years later to a cosmopolitan urban culture, as it is gradually (and often imperceptibly to its participants) refocused onto new concerns and circumstances.¹⁷ But at the same time it means that the interpretation of the 'original' significance of a festival, especially in a society that has left no written documents, is not just difficult, but close to impossible. The fact that we can trace the same names (Lupercalia, Vinalia etc.) over hundreds of years, or even the fact that the ceremonies may have been carried out in

15 *Fasti* VI.319–48 = 2.5 (cf. I.337–53 = 6.4a).

16 Of course, the conspiracy to blow up the Houses of Parliament, whose detection is celebrated on 5 November, construes in many ways: from a dastardly plot against the crown by Catholic traitors to a popular uprising against the ruling class. Compare the varied significances of Christmas, discussed in Miller (1993).

17 We examine the Roman festival of the Parilia in this light below, pp. 174–6; see also 5.1.

I. EARLY ROME

a similar fashion throughout that time, does not allow us to trace back the same significance from the first century B.C. to the seventh.

The calendar is a prime example of how tantalizing much of the evidence for the religion of early Rome is. Again, it is not that there is no evidence at all. Here we have a remarkable survival: fossilized within later traditions of calendar design, traces of a list of festivals whose origins lie centuries earlier; traces, in other words, of an early Roman document itself, not a first-century B.C. reconstruction of early Roman society. The problem is how to interpret such traces, fragmentary and entirely isolated from their original context.

Other documents and direct evidence from the early Republic, and even the regal period, are almost certainly preserved in the scholarly and antiquarian tradition of historical writing at Rome in the late Republic and early empire. For the Romans, the greatest of their antiquarians was the first-century Varro, who compiled a vast encyclopaedia of Roman religion with the express purpose, he said, of preserving the ancient religious traditions that were being forgotten or neglected by his contemporaries. This extraordinary polymath would certainly have been able to consult many documents (inscriptions recording temple foundations, for example, religious regulations, dedications) no longer available to us and he would no doubt have quoted many in his work. It is hard not to regret the loss of Varro and the fact that his religious encyclopaedia survives only in fragments, quoted as brief dictionary entries or in the accounts of later Christian writers who plundered his work and that of other antiquarians solely in order to show how absurd, valueless and obscene was the religion of the classical world that they were seeking to destroy and replace. On the other hand, some of these quotations are quite extensive, and the substance of Varro's work may also be preserved in many other authors who do not refer to him directly by name. The loss may not, after all, be as great as we imagine.¹⁸

Thirty-five books of Livy's *History* do, however, survive – out of the original 142, which covered the history of Rome from its origins to the reign of the emperor Augustus. Livy's *History* is in many respects preoccupied (as we have already seen) with the issues and concerns of first-century B.C. Rome; and more generally the picture we derive from his writing may be very much an artificial historiographic construction, expressing an 'official

18 The fragments of Varro's *Divine Antiquities* are collected (with a commentary) in Cardauns (1976); see also Cardauns (1978). Many are drawn from the Christian writers Augustine (particularly from *The City of God*) and Arnobius (*Against the Gentiles*). It is clear that both authors exploit Varro's material without any concern (or maybe capacity) to be fair to the pagan author – the last thing on their minds; for examples of Augustine's use of Varro, see *The City of God* IV.31 = 1.1a; VI.5 = 13.9. Other works of Varro do survive more fully: 6 books out of an original 25 *On the Latin Language*, a complete work *On Agriculture*, in 3 books. Among other antiquarian writers, the dictionary of Festus (ed. Lindsay, 1913) preserves some of the Augustan antiquarian Verrius Flaccus (on whom Dihle (1958); Frier (1979) 35–7), whose work underlies the notes in the calendar from Praeneste (Degrassi (1963) 107–45; extract = 3.3b).

1.1 Finding the religion of the early Romans

religion' which reflected little of the religious life of the community, or perhaps only that of the élite. On the other hand, Livy does claim to know many individual 'facts' about religious history going back at least to the early Republic, sometimes even quoting ancient documents or formulae. How accurate can this information have been?

Some of the documents (for example, his quotation of the particular religious formulae used in the declaration of war) are almost certainly fictional reconstructions or inventions, which may have little in common with the formulae actually used in early Rome.¹⁹ But many of the other brief records (of vows, special games, the introduction of new cults, innovations in religious procedure, the consultation of religious advisers and so on) are not likely to be inventions. The pieces of information they contain are not obviously part of an ideological story of early religion; and many of them appear (from the form in which they are recorded, or the precise details they record) to preserve material from the early Republic, if not earlier. Perhaps the clearest example of this comes not from Livy himself, but from the elder Pliny. In his *Natural History* (written in the middle of the first century A.D.), Pliny notes the precise year in which the standard procedure for examining the entrails of sacrificial animals ('extispicy') was amended to take account of the heart in addition to other vital organs.²⁰ This information almost certainly comes from some early source: not only does there seem to be no reason for such an odd piece of 'information' to have been invented, but it is also dated in a unique way – which it is very unlikely that Pliny would have made up. The date of the change is given by the year of the reign of the *rex sacrorum*, that is the 'king of rites' or the priest who carried on the king's religious duties when kingship itself was abolished; this makes no sense unless this system of dating continued in use in priestly records even though it was abandoned for every other purpose when the Republic was founded; if so Pliny (or his source) must have found this 'nugget' in some priestly context.

This gives us one hint on how information of this type might have been preserved and transmitted from the earliest period of Rome's history to the time when the literary tradition of history writing started. Priests in Rome had traditionally kept records to which they could refer to establish points of law; and (as we shall discuss later in this chapter) the *pontifices*, in particular, were said to have kept an annual record of events, including, but not confined to, the sphere of religion. Writing down and recording was a significant part of the function of priests.²¹ It is certainly possible that Livy,

19 The formula of the *fetiales* at the beginning of war: Livy I.32.6–14 = 1.4a; see Ogilvie (1965) 127–9, for strong suspicions that it is based on later antiquarian reconstructions.

20 *Natural History* XI.186.

21 Moatti (forthcoming). The various records of the *pontifices* in particular: Wissowa (1912) 513; Rohde (1936); Frier (1979); below, pp. 25–6.

1. EARLY ROME

Pliny and other writers (or the sources on which they drew; there was after all a two-hundred year tradition of history writing at Rome before Livy, mostly lost to us) had access to priestly records with information stretching back centuries. If so (and many modern historians have hoped or assumed that this was the case) then many of their points of fact about religious changes, decisions or developments in early Rome may be more authentic than we would otherwise imagine.

On the other hand, priestly record keeping had (for our purposes) its own limitations. Only changes, not continuities, would have been recorded; and then, presumably, only changes of a particular kind, the ones the priestly authorities noticed and chose to record in their collegiate books. Many other changes will have happened over the course of years without record – through mistakes, neglect, forgetfulness, unobserved social evolution, the unconscious re-building of outmoded conceptions; many of these would never even have been noticed, let alone written down. So even if we could gather together these occasional recorded facts (the foundation of a new temple, the introduction of a new god) and arrange them into some sort of chronological account, it would make a very strange sort of ‘history’. A history of religion is, after all, more than a series of religious decisions or changes. Once again, it is not a question of having no ‘authentic’ information stretching back to the early period; it is a question of having very little context and background against which to interpret the pieces of information that we have.²²

If evidence of this kind offers only glimpses of the earliest religious history of Rome, modern scholars have tried to construct a broader view by setting the evidence against different theories (or sometimes just different a priori assumptions) about the character of early religions in general and early Roman religion in particular, and about how such religions develop.²³ These theories vary considerably in detail, but they have over all a similar structure and deploy similar methods. First, the earliest Roman religion is uncovered by stripping away all the ‘foreign’, non-Roman elements that are clearly visible in the religion of (say) the late Republic. Even in that period, some characteristics of Roman religion must strike us as quite distinct from the traditions of the Greeks, Etruscans and even of other Italic peoples that we know of. The Roman gods, for example, even the greatest of them, seem

22 So, for example, without such a context we can make little sense of the change in the ritual of extispicy noted by Pliny: it could be an indication of a major shift in Roman conceptions of the internal organs of the body; equally a sign of some technical and long running priestly dispute; or both. For further discussion of early documents preserved by later writers, see below, pp. 32–4.

23 Among the most influential versions are Warde Fowler (1911); Rose (1926); Latte (1960a); for criticisms of various of these, Dumézil (1970); for their place in the history of the study of Roman religion, Scheid (1987); Durand and Scheid (1994). A quite different approach to the character of the religion and its history is taken by Scheid (1985a) 17–57.