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Excerpt
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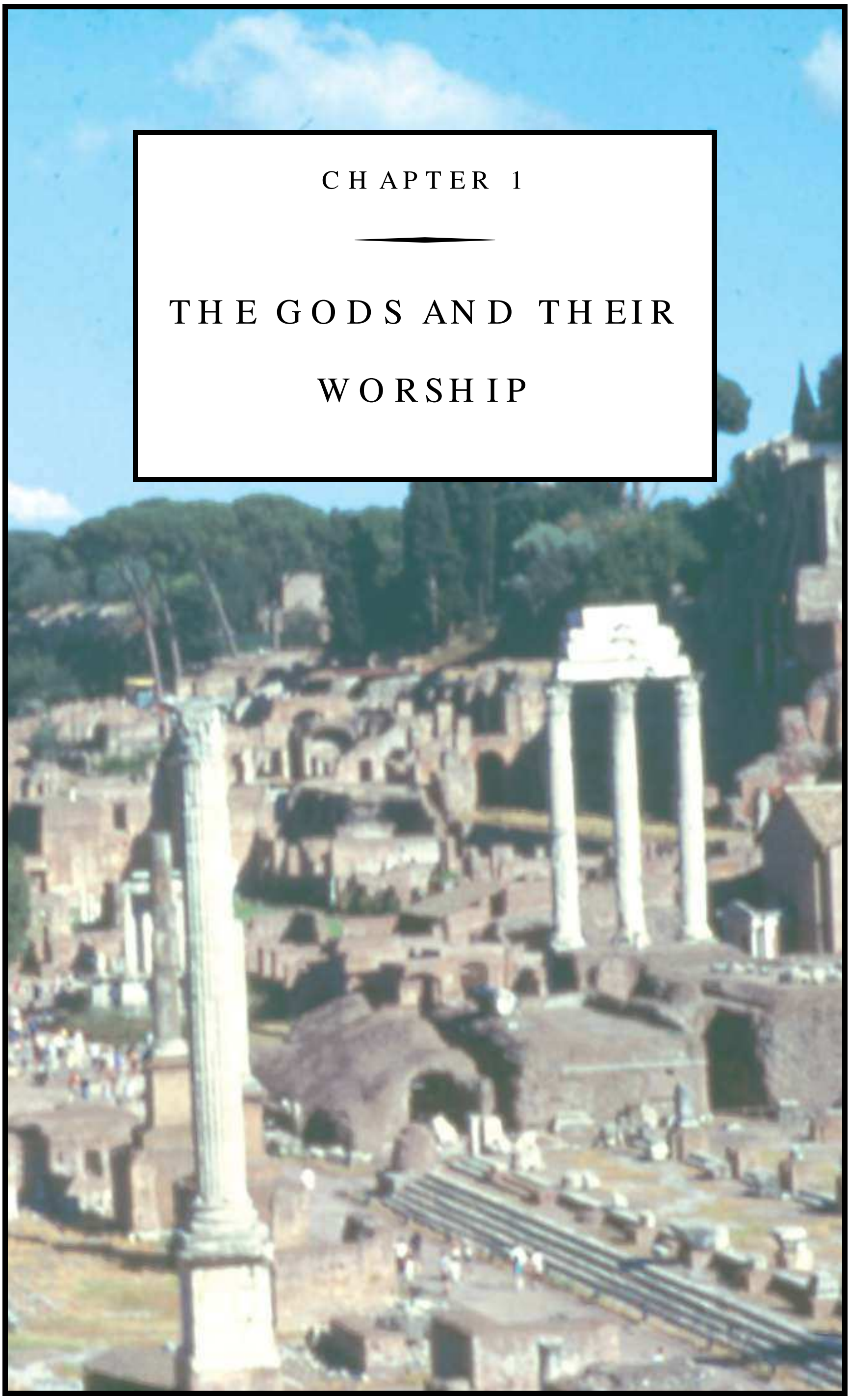
CHAPTER 1

THE GODS AND THEIR WORSHIP

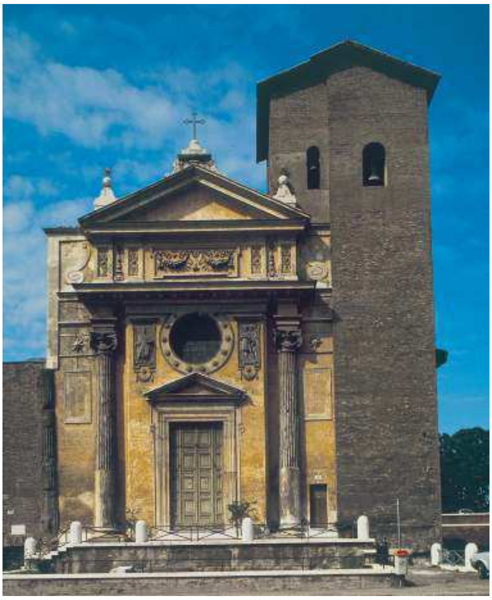


We Romans are far superior in *religio,* by which I mean the worship of the gods (*cultus deorum*). (Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.8)

There is no place in our city that is not filled with a sense of religion (*religiones*) and the gods. There are as many days fixed for annual sacrifices as there are places in which they can be performed. (Livy 5.52)

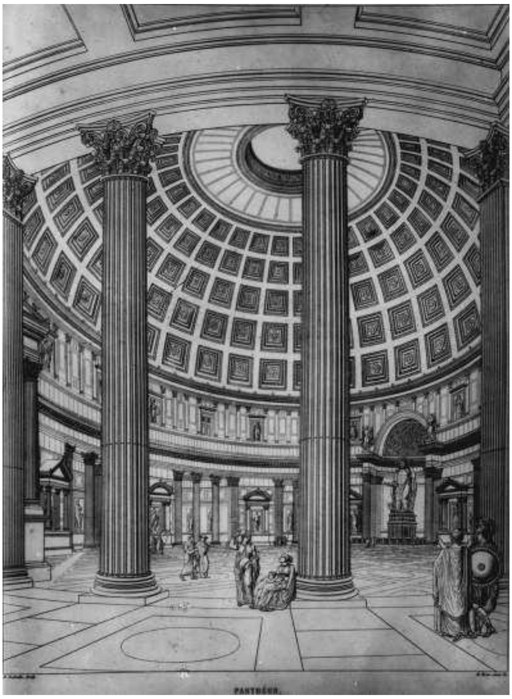
Ruins of ancient temples, interspersed among the excavated remains of the ancient city, still bear witness that Rome was indeed a city filled with gods and a sense of religion. Prominent among the remains in the Roman Forum are the temples of Castor, Saturn, Vesta, and the deified emperor Antoninus Pius and his wife Faustina. Overlooking the Roman Forum is the Capitoline Hill, the site of the temple of Jupiter the Best and Greatest. In the area of the Forum Holitorium near the river Tiber, the modern tourist can see ancient columns incorporated into a side wall of the church of San Nicola in Carcere. In the Campus Martius area, the emperor Hadrian's reconstruction of the Pantheon stands in all its grandeur amid the hustle and bustle of contemporary Rome, still bearing the inscription commemorating its original builder, Marcus Agrippa, who was a close associate of the emperor Augustus. The building was consecrated as a Christian church in the seventh century CE, another example of continuity and change within religious traditions. These and many other temples and shrines, dedicated to a multiplicity of different deities, were located in the busiest areas where the civic, commercial, and legal business of the city was conducted.

1. Roman Forum and Palatine Hill from the Tabularium, with the Arch of Septimius Severus at the lower left, the Arch of Titus in the distance, and three columns of the Temple of Castor on the right. (The very late Column of Phocas, early seventh century CE, is in the foreground.)



2. The church of S. Nicola in Carcere, Rome, which incorporates elements of three Roman temples that were originally on this site in the ancient Forum Holitorium (vegetable market): (a) facade (b) ancient columns in the sidewall.

3. The Pantheon, Rome: exterior, showing the facade, dome and, above the columns of the facade, the inscription naming Marcus Agrippa, who built the original Pantheon in his third consulship, 27 BCE.



4. The Pantheon, Rome: interior as depicted in a nineteenth-century engraving, showing the coffered interior of the dome and skylight oculus, originally the sole source of lighting. The interior is circular, with the diameter equaling the height of the dome, 43 m.

In contrast to the visible remains of the sacred areas of the city is the sense of the divine (*numen*) inspired by nature and the feeling of religious awe (*religio*), as described by Seneca the Younger (c. 4 BCE–65 CE).

> If you have ever come upon a grove that is thick with ancient trees rising far above their usual height and blocking the view of the sky with their cover of intertwining branches, the loftiness of the forest, the seclusion of the spot, and your wonder at the unbroken shade in the midst of open space will create in you a sense of the divine (*numen*). Or, if a cave made by the deep erosion of rocks supports a mountain with its arch, a place not made by hands but hollowed out by natural causes into spaciousness, then your mind will be aroused by a feeling of religious awe (*religio*). We venerate the sources of mighty rivers, we build an altar where a great stream suddenly bursts forth from a hidden source, we worship hot springs, and we deem lakes sacred because of their darkness or immeasurable depth. (Seneca the Younger, *Letters* 41.3)

The gods, however, could be benevolent or malevolent toward mankind; their existence and omnipresence were no guarantee of divine

5. View of Lake Nemi in the Alban Hills near Rome, from an original drawn by J. D. Harding and engraved by J. C. Vernall, c. 1830. Nemi was the site of an ancient shrine in a grove that was sacred to Diana, a goddess whose cult was adopted in Rome in the sixth century BCE.

goodwill. Characters in plays of Plautus (c. 254–184 BCE) comment upon the gods' capriciousness, remarks that surely reflect a commonly held view of their power. One Plautine character says that every outcome is in the hands of the gods (*Two Bacchises* 144). Another prays, "Jupiter, through whom we live the span of our lives, in whose control are all men's hopes of life, grant that this day may be free from harm" (*Little Carthaginian* 1187–1188).

In order to avert their anger, the gods' favor (*pax deorum*) had to be secured by regular prayer and sacrifice, the offering of an object that was of value to the donor. Cicero (106–43 BCE) defines *religio* as the *cultus deorum,* the worship of the gods (*On the Nature of the Gods* 2.8). The noun *cultus* is connected with the verb *colere,* which has a variety of meanings: to till, cultivate, tend, care for, honor, revere, and thus to worship. The assumption was that the gods would protect an individual or the state if their worship was properly maintained. Thus, traditional Roman religion was essentially pragmatic, a contractual relationship based on the so-called principle of *do ut des* (I give so that you *may* give). The gods were asked, and the hope was that they would respond favorably.

The gods' will was sought by divination, the observation and interpretation of signs believed to have been sent by the gods. In his treatise *On Divination* (1.3), Cicero notes that no public business was ever transacted at home or abroad without first taking the auspices – a term that originally meant the observation of the behavior of birds, but came to be more widely applied to a variety of signs thought to indicate divine favor or disfavor. One method of taking the auspices was by observing the feeding of caged chickens. If these sacred birds ate greedily when offered food, the gods were thought to favor the proposed business; otherwise, the business ought to be postponed.

Clearly divination was open to manipulation. Nonetheless, the several kinds of divination employed by the Romans, and its political importance, are reflected in Cicero's question "What people or state is not influenced by the pronouncements of interpreters of sacrificial entrails, prodigies [occurrences or phenomena that were strange or unusual and thus considered to have been sent by the gods], and lightning, those of augurs or astrologers, or of lots . . . , or the forewarning of dreams or of prophecy?" (*On Divination* 1.12).

For the Romans there was no clear distinction between religion and politics. State rituals were celebrated for the people at the state's expense by state officials (Festus 284 L). Many religious ceremonies, especially state festivals, were made conspicuous by the accompanying procession or parade, *pompa,* the Latin word from which our "pomp" derives. One of the most spectacular processions occurred at a military triumph, when the victorious general, dressed as the god Jupiter, entered the city accompanied by his soldiers, war captives, and a display of the booty he had seized. This victory parade made its way through the Forum Romanum to the temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill.

Being a priest was not a full-time occupation, though most priesthoods were held for life. Pontiffs and augurs, two of the most prestigious male priesthoods, could and frequently did hold political office. For example, Julius Caesar (100–44 BCE) had been elected *pontifex maximus* (chief pontiff) before he held a major civic magistracy; only later did he have a distinguished political and military career. Many priests, as ex-magistrates, were members of the Senate, a body that was regularly consulted on religious matters. At a time when Rome governed an empire that extended throughout the Mediterranean world and was expanding northwards into Gaul, Cicero asked how anyone who acknowledged the existence of the gods could fail to realize that the Romans owed the creation, increase and, retention of their empire (*imperium*) to the will of the gods, as he declared, "We have excelled every race and nation in piety (*pietas*), in respect for religious matters (*religio*), and in that singular wisdom which recognizes that everything is ruled and controlled by the will of the gods" (*On the Reply of the Haruspices* 19).

A generation later, after Gaul and Egypt had been added to the Roman empire, the poet Virgil (70–19 BCE) asserted that Roman rule was god-given, having Jupiter declare, "I have given them [the Romans] empire without end" (*Aeneid* 1. 279).

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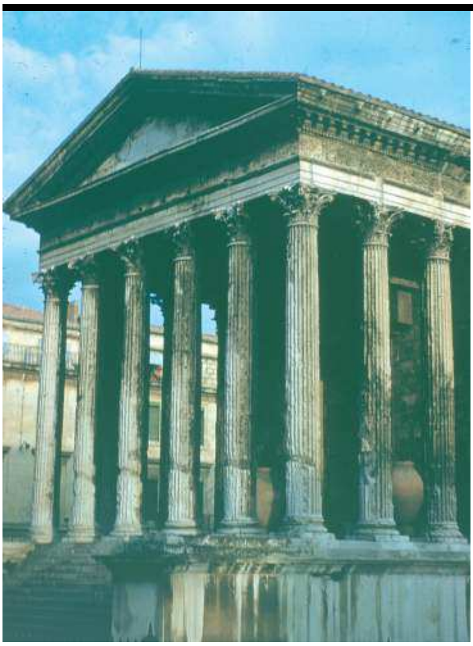

6. "Maison Carrée" at Nîmes in France: a classic Roman temple with a high podium and steps leading up to the portico beyond which lies a walled chamber, the *cella.* This temple was originally dedicated to the goddess Roma and the emperor Augustus.

The altar, not the temple, was the focal point of the gods' worship. Altars were in the open and freestanding, though frequently located in front of a temple. On the altar, sacrifice was made to a particular deity in the hope or expectation that the favor would at some time be returned. The offering could be a simple bloodless sacrifice of fruit, flowers, cakes, honey, or wine, or a more costly blood sacrifice when one or more domestic animals would be killed.

Sacrifice and prayer for success were often accompanied by the vow to make another more enduring gift, if and when the petition was granted. The later offering could be modest or elaborate – a gold or silver bowl, a commemorative plaque, a statuette, a representation of the body part that had been healed, or spoils from a successful war. Such votive offerings were presented and usually kept in a temple or shrine to commemorate the donor's gratitude. A temple could itself be a votive offering, funded by a general from his victory spoils to commemorate his success and express gratitude to the god for answering his prayer.

Cicero underscored the pragmatism of Roman religion when he asked, “Did anyone ever give thanks to the gods because he was a good man? No, he did so because he is rich, honored, and secure. Jupiter is called Best and Greatest not because he makes men just, moderate, and wise, but because he makes them healthy, secure, wealthy, and prosperous” (*On the Nature of the Gods* 3.87). When the Romans wanted to be informed about what was morally right, what was morally wrong, and what was neither one nor the other, they turned to philosophers, not to specialists in divination (Cicero, *On Divination* 2.10–11).

The Romans worshiped a wide range of gods. There were the greater anthropomorphized gods of Roman state religion such as Jupiter, Juno, and Mars; lesser divinities such as Castor, Hercules, and Flora (goddess of flowers); the Lar and Penates of the individual household; nonanthropomorphized divinities of the environment such as the spirits of streams, fountains, and woods; diseases affecting men, animals,

7. Third-century BCE coins depicting some of the earliest surviving representations of Roman deities: (a) Mars; (b) Minerva; (c) Jupiter, in a four-horse chariot driven by the winged goddess Victory; (d) Apollo; (e) Janus, the two-faced god.

and crops; abstractions such as Concord, Hope, and Mind; and also mortals who were deified after their death, for example, Julius Caesar, some emperors, and occasionally their wives.

Most of the greater anthropomorphized gods of Roman state religion resemble the Olympian gods of Greek mythology. Several deities were not originally Roman or even Italic, but had been assimilated or adopted from their neighbors, most notably the Greek colonists in southern Italy and Sicily, and the Etruscans to the north. Archaeology reveals the presence in the sixth century BCE of Greeks and Etruscans in the area of the Forum Boarium (Cattle Market) by the Tiber. The head of a terracotta statue of Minerva (Fig. 8) and a torso of Hercules, found near the church of S. Omobono, show the unmistakable characteristics of archaic Greek art of the late sixth century BCE. Well before the beginning of the fourth century BCE, Jupiter was assimilated with Zeus, Juno with Hera, Venus with Aphrodite, Diana with Artemis, Ceres with Demeter, Minerva with Athena, Mercury with Hermes, Vulcan with Hephaestus, Neptune with Poseidon, and Mars with Ares. But Janus, the god of beginnings who simultaneously faced in two directions,

8. Head of a statue of Minerva from the temple of Fortuna, found near S. Omobono in the Forum Boarium (Cattle Market), Rome.