

ROMAN RELIGION

This book provides an introduction to the religion and religious practices of ancient Rome. Examining sites that are familiar to many modern tourists, Valerie Warrior avoids imposing a modern perspective on the topic by using the testimony of the ancient Romans to describe traditional Roman religion. The ancient testimony re-creates the social and historical contexts in which Roman religion was practiced. It shows, for example, how, when confronted with a foreign cult, official traditional religion accepted the new cult with suitable modifications. Basic difficulties, however, arose with regard to the monotheism of the Jews and Christianity. Carefully integrated with the text are visual representations of divination, prayer, and sacrifice as depicted on monuments, coins, and inscriptions from public buildings and homes throughout the Roman world. Also included are epitaphs and humble votive offerings that illustrate the piety of individuals and that reveal the prevalence of magic and the occult in the lives of the ancient Romans.

Valerie M. Warrior is a scholar of Greco-Roman history and religion. She has taught at a number of North American colleges and universities and is the author of *The Initiation of the Second Macedonian War* and *Roman Religion: A Sourcebook*.

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VALERIE M. WARRIOR



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PREFACE

This book offers an introduction to the religion of ancient Rome through the early second century CE, using a selection of different kinds of ancient testimony to portray Roman action and opinion in areas that they or we would call “religion” – literary texts, epigraphic and numismatic evidence, together with visual representations of surviving artifacts. No background in Roman history is assumed, but readers are urged to consult the revised third edition of the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, ed. Simon Hornblower and Antony Spawforth (2003), which contains articles by the foremost scholars of Roman religion and history.

The commentary on the ancient testimony is organized thematically and more or less chronologically within each theme. Putting these various sources together, however, does not produce a picture of Roman religion at any specific time but rather a patchwork of disparate sources of different dates. “Consider the source” is a maxim that must be constantly kept in mind. The traditional date of the foundation of Rome is 753 BCE, but the Roman literary sources date no earlier than the late third century BCE. Many of the stories concerning early Roman religion derive from authors writing several centuries after the events they purport to describe. First we must ask: who is the author, in what genre is he writing, when did he live, and how far removed in time is he from the events he is describing?

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Inscriptions and coins offer evidence that is more or less contemporaneous with the event described or commemorated. Epitaphs from tombs yield valuable information about the lives of ordinary people who would not otherwise have found their way into the history books. The physical remains of temples, shrines, and altars frequently bear representations of religious ceremonies with details of various rituals that supplement the information given in the literary sources. Votive offerings, such as mass-produced figurines or models of various parts of the human body, give insight into the religious practices of the poorer classes of society.

Roman religion is very different from most of the contemporary religions with which we are familiar. Thus there is a risk of being influenced by our own preconceptions about the components of a religion. For instance, an ethical element is generally absent. As Cicero (106–43 BCE) remarks, 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 for answers, not to diviners, whose task was to interpret the will of the gods (*On Divination* 2.10–11).

Divination, seeking the gods' will through the interpretation of signs believed to have been sent by them, reflects a natural human desire to ascertain the future, especially in times of crisis and uncertainty. The Romans were no exception to this generalization. Numerous literary references attest to the presence of seers, soothsayers, and prophets, all eager to serve both the state and private individuals. The gods' will was sought before initiating any public business either in Rome itself or abroad. The different signs by which the gods were thought to reveal their will included thunder, lightning, the behavior of birds, the observation of the entrails of sacrificial victims, unusual phenomena such as monstrous births, the interpretation of dreams, prophecies, oracles, and the drawing of lots (Cicero, *On Divination* 1.3 and 12).

A contemporary non-Roman perspective on Roman religion is given by Polybius (c. 200 BCE–c. 118 BCE), a Greek politician who became a historian when he was a hostage in Rome. He observed that *deisidaimonia* – fear and respect for the supernatural – held the Roman state together (Polybius 6.56). The approximate Latin equivalent of the

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Greek *deisidaimonia* is *religio*, defined by Cicero as the *cultus deorum*, tending the worship of the gods (*On the Nature of the Gods* 2.8). For the Romans, *religio* was not a matter of faith or belief, of doctrine or creed, but rather of worship – of divination, prayer, and sacrifice. The aim was pragmatic: to avoid the anger of the gods, and to secure their favor.

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The book is dedicated to my husband Thomas Stone.