

Introduction

The Hellenistic and Roman periods were characterized by a high degree of religious pluralism and innovation. Then as now, new religious phenomena tended in fact to not be completely original. Much of the mosaic of religious practices in the Hellenistic and Roman periods – the era of roughly seven centuries from the time of Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) to the imposition by law of Christianity as the sole religion of the Roman Empire at the end of the fourth century CE – retained the focus on life here and now that also typified many older forms of Greek and Roman religion. Ideas that had older roots but now gained particular prominence included the notion that the soul is held prisoner in the body, and that deities exist who can help people navigate the chaos of a capricious destiny and provide them with a better afterlife.

Many innovations were the result of encounters with the religious concepts and practices of peoples with whom the Greeks and Romans interacted in what we might call a regionally globalized world. When they were adopted by Greeks and Romans, such imports were reinterpreted to fit the preconceptions and interests of their recipients. Section 1 of our Element explores some of the ways in which religious concepts, myths, rituals, and objects could be borrowed and adapted.

Although such sources as objects and images also provide important insights into religious life in antiquity, much of our knowledge about religion and religious innovations in the period under consideration is due to the fact that writers produced a wealth of texts documenting myths about the gods, speculation about life after death, records of days when communal rituals should be performed, methods that could be used to influence others by magical means, polemics against other religions, and much else besides. One of the innovations of the period that would prove to have a particularly long-lasting influence was the emergence of a sacrosanct subset of religious writings – that is, canons by which members of a religious community defined their collective identity. Section 2 presents some of the textual genres of the period and introduces a number of key characteristics of canonical texts.

Most religious innovations are local, are short-lived, and have a very limited impact on society. This is true today, and it was true during the periods in focus here. When they did leave their mark on history, a charismatic leader, a holy man or woman, or some other kind of religious entrepreneur was often instrumental in the process. Like founders of innovative religions in our own time, such individuals are often portrayed as superhuman. Section 3 is devoted to presenting five such figures, highlighting both what is known of their historical role as religious innovators and the characteristic features of the textual genres that describe them.

The chronological end point of our Element is the late fourth century CE, a time marked by the imposition by law of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Although the attempt to enforce a single ideology profoundly changed what had previously been a heterogeneous religious landscape, boundaries in the preceding Hellenistic and Roman periods were also drawn between what people considered acceptable and unacceptable religion. Focusing on the Roman period, we will in Section 4 briefly present some of the ways in which such boundary work was carried out against undesirable religious phenomena.

1 A World of Regional Globalization

It may seem counterintuitive to begin a survey of religious innovation in Hellenistic and Roman times by introducing a concept that has become emblematic of our own age, namely globalization. This term, in short, denotes a process of integration where goods, money, ideas, languages, and people transcend geographical barriers, allowing new cultural structures to develop. The rate and scope of the phenomenon has increased with the introduction of improved or novel means of long-distance transportation and modern means of communication, not least the Internet. The current level of interconnectedness is unlike anything humankind has previously experienced, and it has for decades been commonplace to talk of the entire world as “a single place” (Robertson 1991: 283). In antiquity, the degree and scale of contact across ethnic, cultural, and geographical divides was, of course, more restricted. Nevertheless, material goods, people, and cultural elements did flow over considerable distances in what we will call regional globalization. Although we need to proceed cautiously when comparing two periods separated by such a vast span of time, the similarities between the religious landscapes then and now are striking, and there is no doubt that many religious innovations were due not least to the transmission of religious elements across ethnic and cultural borders. In the process, new meanings for concepts and practices were negotiated, innovative ideas and practices emerged, and new religions came into being.

The beginning of the Hellenistic period is often perceived as a time of intensified cultural exchange, but no group lives in isolation, and such elements of a religious tradition as myths can reveal far more ancient patterns of religious regional globalization. The striking parallels between Hesiod’s *Theogony* (composed around 700 BCE) and various creation myths of the ancient Near East, for instance, have been extensively examined (Kelly and Metcalfe 2021). The similarities between biblical myths and older Near Eastern narratives provide another example. The arguably best-known example is the ways in which Mesopotamian myths relating how the gods decided to eradicate humanity by

inundating the world and how a small group of people survived in a boat are echoed in the biblical flood narrative (Dalley 2000). Hence, the regional globalization of Hellenistic and Roman times was not a completely novel phenomenon but a striking escalation of already existing processes.

This accelerated interchange was a consequence of military expansions in the late fourth century BCE. Macedonia, once a minor kingdom on the periphery of the Greek world, had during the reign of Philip II (382–336 BCE) extended its power and had come to dominate Greece and the southern Balkans. After these victories, the Macedonian armies turned eastward, but Philip was assassinated and further conquests were left to his son, Alexander. In 334 BCE, Alexander set in motion a military campaign that lasted for eleven years and turned out to be so successful that he would become known as “the Great.” After crossing the Dardanelles in the spring of that year, his army proceeded to conquer vast territories in Asia Minor, the eastern coastal Mediterranean region, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia, and Alexander led his troops as far as to present-day Pakistan and northern India. Upon his death in 323 BCE, this vast territory soon fell apart and was divided, after a series of wars, between his commanders. The resulting kingdoms attracted Greek colonists, Greek became the language of the elite, and Greek and local customs cross-fertilized (Worthington 2014). Trade and migration also led to the rise of major, multicultural cities such as Alexandria, Pergamon, Antioch, and, later, Rome, many of whose residents had roots elsewhere. As a consequence, religious traditions were often practiced in settings detached from their previous contexts, and in order to remain meaningful and functional, they had to be adapted or even radically refashioned (Podemann Sørensen 2011: 146). Although our focus is squarely on the dissemination of cultural elements and their innovative interpretations and uses, we should bear in mind that the Hellenistic and Roman period also saw its share of attempts to preserve religious traditions under conditions of massive social change and of religious innovations taking place within a community for other reasons than as a response to regional globalization.¹

Religious Interaction and Syncretism

The Hellenistic and Roman religious landscape did not consist of bounded entities, separate religions, that were practiced according to officially sanctioned and set ways. Rather, what we for ease of reference can call religion or religions was a mosaic of flexible ideas about the deities and how one can interact with them. In the Roman period, a pantheon of gods known to many people throughout the empire (Jupiter, Mars, etc.) coexisted with a vast array of

¹ See Podemann Sørensen 1989 and Weinholt 1989 for discussions of such processes.

other superhuman beings – for instance, local deities or lesser divinities that were assumed to intervene in human life. Since the superhuman realm was fluid and the range of ritual activities directed at these beings was open-ended, religious practices and concepts could also be borrowed from people outside the Greek and Roman cultural spheres.

Then as now, foreign imports need to make sense within their new cultural context. Contemporary examples abound. Yoga can be pursued for reasons such as health and well-being that have no connection with the soteriological aims of yoga in a classical Indian context. Modern religious practices loosely modeled on indigenous shamanic traditions, and hence often referred to as neoshamanism, are widespread in New Age milieus among people who have no intention of adopting the specific practices of shamans in a particular ethnic setting. The introduction of foreign religious elements into a Greek or Roman context involved similar processes of sometimes quite radical reinterpretation. A key feature of Greek and Roman religions that facilitated such processes of religious interaction was *interpretatio graeca* and its later counterpart, *interpretatio romana* – the ready identification of foreign deities with one’s own gods based on the assumption that if they served similar functions, they could be considered in some sense “the same gods” albeit with different names. Being “the same,” gods that had foreign roots could be worshipped in ways familiar to Greeks or Romans.

One result of this process of interpretation and translation are references to deities identified by a string of several names, Greek as well as foreign. Jenny Wallensten (2014) has examined a number of such composite gods. Greek votive inscriptions from the island of Delos refer to “Astarte Palaistine Aphrodite Ourania” and “Isis Soteira Astarte Aphrodite Euploia Epekoos,” the latter apparently worshipped in conjunction with “Eros Harpokrates Apollon,” while the doubly named Isis Aphrodite is attested from a wider area. Deities such as these, often referred to in the scholarly literature as being syncretistic, are, according to Wallensten, better seen as the products of individuals who lived in a multicultural reality and who deliberately drew upon (in this particular case) their Phoenician and Greek cultural competence in order to translate between religious traditions and convey to human and divine audiences precisely to whom their inscription was dedicated. Taking this specific work of inter-cultural translation as symptomatic of its times, Hellenistic globalization (and, later, its Roman counterpart) comes across first and foremost as a way of perceiving the world, perhaps not as a single place, but as a place where boundaries were porous, familiarity with religious Others was common, and the exchange between cultures was normal.

Deities of foreign origin were imported across such porous boundaries and assimilated to what was already familiar by a remarkable variety of historically contingent processes. The veneration of some of these imported and adapted gods became major elements of the religious landscape. A few examples can illustrate the diversity of pathways of amalgamation. Our first case is the development in Hellenistic and Roman worlds of the cult of Isis. In her original Egyptian setting, she played numerous roles.² An elaborate myth presented her as the consort of Osiris, whom she brought back to life after the evil Seth had killed him. With her revived husband, she then conceived a son, Horus. This drama of the triumph of good over evil became a mythological charter for the pharaoh's role as guarantor of order, and by the middle of the last millennium BCE, Isis had become one of the most important deities of the Egyptian pantheon. Shortly before 300 BCE, the cult of Isis reached Greece, and soon she became a popular deity there also.

In Egyptian religion, Isis had by then become associated with the goddess of grain, which in the new context led her to be assimilated to the corresponding Greek goddess, Demeter. One of the social settings of Greek and, later, Roman religion were mystery cults – that is, voluntary associations of people who had been initiated into a community dedicated to the worship of a specific deity. The prototypical example of a mystery cult was the Eleusinian mysteries, devoted to Demeter. Through association, Isis also became the central character of an initiatory cult that probably had no counterpart in the goddess's Egyptian homeland. Isis had now become the ally of the initiate, the protector and savior of the individual who would ask for her blessings. From Greece, the Isis mysteries came to the Italian peninsula, reaching Rome in the first century BCE. Over the centuries, Isis accumulated an ever-broader variety of divine functions and attributes, ultimately transforming her into a deity of universal scope who could confer good fortune upon her devotees. Her universality comes across in a passage in a novel by the Roman author Apuleius (ca. 120–ca. 170 CE), *Metamorphoses* (11, 5; also known as *The Golden Ass*), in which Isis is presented as identical to a range of other deities, a list Luther Martin (1983) argues is based upon a perception of systematic resemblances between these figures. Isis proclaims how she is revered under countless names throughout “the entire world” – that is, the globalized region that the author was aware of:

[T]he entire world worships my single godhead in a thousand shapes, with diverse rites, and under many a different name. The Phrygians, first-born of mankind, call me the Pessinuntian Mother of the gods; the native Athenians

² On the role of Isis in Egypt, see Münster 1968. Our description of the cult's Hellenization is a summary of Bøgh 2013.

the Cecropian Minerva; the island-dwelling Cypriots Paphian Venus; the archer Cretans Dictynnan Diana; the triple-tongued Sicilians Stygian Proserpine; the ancient Eleusinians Actaeon Ceres; some call me Juno, some Bellona, others Hecate, others Rhamnusia; but both races of Ethiopians, those on whom the rising and those on whom the setting sun shines, and the Egyptians who excel in ancient learning, honour me with the worship which is truly mine and call me by my true name: Queen Isis. (Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* XI, 5)³

Our next case concerns a goddess from Asia Minor who was brought to Greece and Rome, where she was adapted to local religious conceptions: Cybele.⁴ The veneration of a mother deity associated with mountains had a long local history in Phrygia, in what is today a region in western Turkey. By the sixth century BCE, the goddess had been adopted in Greece and numerous shrines to her were erected. Her popularity increased in the Hellenistic period, and in 205 BCE, the cult took the leap from the Hellenized coast of Asia Minor to Rome. In his *History of Rome* (29, 10–14), the Roman historian Livy (59 BCE–17 CE) relates how, during the Second Punic War (218–201 BCE), a shower of stones was interpreted as an omen that foretold the doom of the Republic. The Sibylline oracle was consulted, and a prophecy revealed that Rome would prevail if the Mother Goddess was brought to the city. Whatever the historical facts behind the traditional account may have been, the new deity from faraway Phrygia was in 191 BCE installed in a temple on the Palatine, in the shape of a black meteoric rock.⁵ The cult of Cybele was overseen by castrated Phrygian priests, *galli*, whose flamboyant dress and ecstatic rituals were deeply foreign to Roman customs. The trust of the Romans in the oracle, however, was deeply rooted, and it was so imperative to follow its injunctions that the presence of the goddess in Rome was accepted and festivals were held in her honor. By imperial times, the cult had spread over large parts of the Roman Empire, and Cybele had somewhat paradoxically morphed from a local Phrygian deity to both a deity of the state and hence a major fixture of the Roman religious landscape and a cult that continued to be associated with the detested *galli*.

We know far less about another amalgamated deity, Jupiter Dolichenus, since material evidence such as archaeological findings needs to be interpreted with the aid of few and rather uninformative written sources.⁶ This was a god from

³ All primary sources quoted in the text are listed separately in the references, before the secondary literature.

⁴ The information given here is based on Roller 1999. We will return to the cult of Cybele in greater detail in Section 4.

⁵ See Gruen 1992 and Burton 1996 for varying opinions.

⁶ On Jupiter Dolichenus, see Beard, North, and Price 1998: 275, Blömer and Winter 2012, and Vitas 2021: 92–113.

the city of Doliche in northern Syria – an area that, due to shifting borders, is today southeastern Turkey. When imported into Rome, he was transformed into the god of a mystery religion. The globalizing process involved in the creation of the deity and his cult is revealed already in the name of the divinity, since this was originally the Syrian god Ba'al. The characteristic iconography of Jupiter Dolichenus also speaks of a thorough Romanization of the god: he is represented as a bearded man wearing a Phrygian cap but otherwise dressed in Roman attire, who stands on the back of a bull holding a double-headed axe and a thunderbolt. His followers, many of whom were soldiers and traders, were organized according to the same basic principles as devotees of other mystery cults – that is, as a hierarchy distinguished by various levels of initiation. Furthermore, the cult of Jupiter Dolichenus was also very popular among people without Syrian roots. The rapid spread of the cult even to such peripheries of the Roman Empire as Britain and the Rhine area, presumably by following military networks of communication, is an indication of how efficient regional globalization could be, and of the wandering cult's ability to find a home in new places. Exchange across boundaries is also apparent from the array of deities present in his sanctuary on the Aventine in Rome – besides Jupiter Dolichenus himself, there were effigies of the Greco-Roman gods Diana, Hercules, and Apollo and of foreign imports such as Mithras and various Egyptian deities (Beard, North, and Price 1998: 281).

A major attraction of participating in such elective cults would have been the benefits, in this life and in the next, that ensued from dedication to a powerful and caring deity.⁷ The sheer fact that these gods and their rituals had exotic origins may have contributed to their authority and appeal, although we will see in Section 4 that the foreignness of the deities could also cause conflicts and controversies. Texts that describe these cults reflect the perspective of a literate elite, but there is evidence that exoticism could have a wider appeal. After the incorporation of Egypt into the Roman Empire in 31 BCE, interest in all things Egyptian exploded, and Isis was increasingly celebrated in Egyptian – or at least imagined Egyptian – style.

In some cases, the exotic – that is, references to foreign religious conceptions and imports of foreign deities – could serve a deliberate political aim. An oracle in a temple in the oasis of Siwa in the borderland between Egypt and Libya was connected with the god Amon-Re, and the Greeks had a well-established tradition, documented already in Herodotus's *Histories* written in the fifth century BCE, of seeing this deity as identical to their own Zeus. The concept of the ruler's divine parentage had deep roots in Egyptian religion but was seen

⁷ For a discussion of the appeal of these cults, see Beard, North, and Price 1998: 278–91.