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978-1-107-03790-8 - Pollution and Religion in Ancient Rome

Jack J. Lennon

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POLLUTION AND RELIGION IN ANCIENT ROME

Pollution could come from any number of sources in the Roman world. Bodily functions, sexual activity, bloodshed, death – any of these could cause disaster if brought into contact with religion. Its presence could invalidate sacrifices, taint religious officials, and threaten to bring down the anger of the gods upon the city. Orators could use pollution as a means of denigrating opponents and obstructing religious procedures, and writers could emphasise the ‘otherness’ of barbarians by drawing attention to their different ideas about what was or was not ‘dirty’. Yet despite all this, religious pollution remained a vague concept within the Latin language, and what constituted pollution could change depending on the context in which it appeared. Calling upon a range of research disciplines, this book highlights the significant role that pollution played across Roman religion, and the role it played in the construction of religious identity.

JACK J. LENNON received his PhD from the University of Nottingham and has since taught at various academic institutions, most recently as Teaching Fellow in the Department of History, University College London. His interest is in ancient history, particularly pre-Christian Roman religion and magic, and especially the phenomenon of pollution and ritual impurity. His research frequently aims to integrate the theories of modern anthropology alongside those of ancient history and philology in order to explore beyond the traditional limits of classical scholarship. In addition to studying the nature of pollution within religion, he is also interested in the wider cultural perceptions of dirt and cleanliness across ancient Roman society.

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Preface

This book explores the presence and perception of pollution in pre-Christian Roman religion, and the ways in which Roman authors imagined, expressed and ultimately reacted to, things they thought were impure. It had its origins in a PhD thesis at the University of Nottingham, which was initially supposed to be about purification rituals in Roman religion. I abandoned this idea relatively early on, as I came to believe more and more that the issue of pollution was in far greater need of detailed examination. Looking back, I am relieved to say that I am as convinced of this now as I was when I began. While the death of Mary Douglas in 2007, just weeks before she was due to speak at a conference on pollution at the British School at Rome, dealt a great blow to the subject, it also renewed the discussion of her life's work and theories. I was fortunate enough to attend the conference, and the wide range of topics under discussion made the need for a comprehensive study of Roman pollution all the more apparent.

I owe a great debt of gratitude to a number of people who have helped to bring this work to fruition, but none more so than Mark Bradley, who has been involved with this project from its conception and provided extensive support and advice. Special thanks must also go to Ken Dowden, John Drinkwater and Doug Lee, and to the anonymous readers of Cambridge University Press, whose helpful comments have augmented this study significantly. A number of others have greatly improved this book, whether by discussing specific issues (sometimes at length), offering advice, listening to papers, or providing me with drafts of their own ongoing research. In particular I wish to thank: Carl Buckland, Debbie Felton, Hamish Forbes, Ellie Glendinning, Wolf Liebeschuetz, Dunstan Lowe, Judith Mossman, Agnès Nagy, John North, Robert Parker, John Rich, Rebecca Usherwood and Nick Wilshere. Finally, I must thank my family for their constant support throughout this lengthy process.