

# *Religions of Rome*

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VOLUME 1

A History

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#### 4. Religion and action

Much of the vocabulary used by the Romans in discussing their own religion seems to translate into words comfortably similar to those used in religious contexts today – ‘prayer’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘vows’, ‘sacred’; in fact some of our own religious words derive directly from Latin. But translation is always elusive; and this apparent familiarity may be deceptive. It is in considering the relationship between religion and the social organization of republican Rome that the differences become most obvious. The sharpest difference of all is that, at least until the middle Republic, there is no sign in Rome of any specifically religious groups: groups, that is, of men or women who had decided to join together principally on grounds of religious choice. Of course, there were all kinds of groups in which religion played a part: from an early republican date, for example, various associations (*collegia*), such as burial or dining clubs, associated themselves with a divine patron, and were even called after the deity.<sup>124</sup> So too individual citizens might act together with others in carrying out religious duties and ritual – their family, their *gens*, their fellow craftsmen or senators; but these were communities formed on the basis of birth, occupation, domicile or rank, not through any specifically religious conviction. In fact, to put it the other way round, it is hard to know what religious conviction might mean in a world where no religious affiliation resulted from it.

This difference has important implications for the character of religious life at both the social and the individual level. At the social level, it means that there were no autonomous religious groups, with their own special value-systems, ideas or beliefs to defend or advocate; hence there was little chance that religion in itself would ever represent a force for advocating change or reform. At the individual level, it means that men and women were not faced with the need to make (or even the opportunity of making) acts of religious commitment; that in turn implies that they had no religious biographies, no moments of profound new experience or revelation such as to determine the course of their future lives. That, of course, is a much stronger claim. We do not want to suggest that religion was not important to any individual in republican Rome: there must have been many who were profoundly grateful to the gods for recovery from illness, others who were deeply impressed by a divine vision; conversely, at every period in Rome’s history, there must have been some who professed themselves thoroughly sceptical about the gods and their supposed activities. In some ways, that is just like today. The crucial difference is that these experiences, beliefs and disbeliefs had no particularly privileged role in defining an individual’s actions, behaviour or sense of identity. We have the notion,

124 The inscribed regulations for a later burial club, the ‘society of Diana and Antinous’, *ILS* 7212 = 12.2 and below, 272; 287. In general, see Kloppenborg and Wilson (1996).

which they did not, of an individual having a ‘religious identity’ that distinguished him from his or her identity as a citizen or as a family member. We are asked what we *are*, we can say ‘a Catholic’, ‘a Moslem’, ‘an atheist’. It is in a religious context where beliefs determine choices, that belief itself becomes such a central element in the system. Religious ‘experiences’, ‘rituals’ or ‘beliefs’ must all have had quite different significances and nuances in early republican Rome.

When we look, therefore, at the way in which religion and society interacted, we do not find special institutions and activities, set aside from everyday life and designed to pursue religious objectives; but rather a situation in which religion and its associated rituals were embedded in all institutions and activities. As we have already seen, the whole of the political and constitutional system was conducted within an elaborate network of religious ceremonial and regulation which had the effect of bringing time, space and hence the validity of political action into the divine sphere. It may be true that this area of decision-taking, of elections and of legislation was the one in which (as our historical sources would have us believe) the gods were most interested; but in fact, all important areas of life, public or private, had some religious correlates. In this section we shall explore some of those other areas: notably warfare, agriculture and family life.

Warfare was already sanctified by the rituals of the old calendar of festivals. In March – which had originally been the first month of the year – there was an interconnected set of festivals, mostly directed towards the god Mars (after whom the month was, and still is, named); and there was a corresponding set in October, somewhat less elaborate.<sup>125</sup> On both occasions a central role was played by the priesthood of the Salii, founded according to Roman myth by Numa to guard the sacred shields – the *ancilia*. The priests were all patricians, formed into two groups, of Mars and Quirinus respectively; on their festival days they danced through the streets, dressed in the distinctive armour of archaic foot-soldiers.<sup>126</sup> Whatever these ceremonies originally meant (and on this there is considerable argument), there can be little doubt that, at least by the fifth century B.C., they represented a celebration of the annual rhythm of war-making: marking the preparation for a new season of war in March; and in October marking the end of the season and the putting aside of arms for the winter. In early Rome (when Roman enemies were still conveniently close at hand) warfare was the summer activity of a part-time citizen army, fighting under their annual magistr

The actual conduct of warfare was also set within a religious con

125 Warde Fowler (1911) 96–7; Wissowa (1912) 144–6; Degraffi (1963) 41; Scullard (1981) 85–7, 193–5.

126 Wissowa (1912) 555–9; Latte (1960a) 114–19; Ogilvie (1965) 98–9; Rüpke (1987) 23–7. The rituals and costume of the Salii: Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquities* II.70.1–5 = 5.4a. Their hymn: Quintilian, *Education of an Orator* I.6 = 5.4c; the *ancilia* are illustrated on a gemstone, 5.4b.

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The actual conduct of warfare was also set within a religious context.

<sup>125</sup> Warde Fowler (1911) 96–7; Wissowa (1912) 144–6; Degraasi (1963) 417–19; Scullard (1981) 85–7, 193–5.

<sup>126</sup> Wissowa (1912) 555–9; Latte (1960a) 114–19; Ogilvie (1965) 98–9; Rüpke (1990) 23–7. The rituals and costume of the Salii: Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* II.70.1–5 = 5.4a. Their hymn: Quintilian, *Education of an Orator* I.6.40–1 = 5.4c; the *ancilia* are illustrated on a gemstone, 5.4b.

Fighting was always preceded by consultation of the gods and by sacrifices, whose rejection by the gods would imply a warning not to join battle.<sup>127</sup> Essentially, the participants in the warfare would seek advantage by establishing a better relationship with the gods and greater claims to divine favour. Sacrifices were held, even in expectation of war, in order to obtain confirmation of the divine attitude; at the opening of the campaign, the ritual of the fetal priests was (as we have seen) intended to ensure that the war was acceptable to the gods as a 'just war'; even in the midst of battle, vows were taken to induce the gods to look favourably or to desert the enemy.<sup>128</sup> By the end of the third century, the religious part of the whole process had become sufficiently familiar to be parodied by the playwright Plautus:

The generals of both sides, ours and theirs,  
Take vows to Jupiter and exhort the troops.<sup>129</sup>

But if religion and religious ritual penetrated the area of warfare, warfare and its consequences could penetrate the religious sphere of the city. The vows taken by generals could lead to spectacular war-memorials in the form of temples in the city; and the spoils of war might either find their way into the temples by way of dedications, or finance the building of monuments commemorating the generals' achievements.<sup>130</sup> Less permanent, though perhaps even more spectacular, was the triumph, the ancient processional ritual, in which the victorious, returning war-leader paraded through the city's streets at the head of his troops presenting his spoils and his prisoners to the cheering Roman people.<sup>131</sup> He entered the city by a special gateway, the Triumphal Gate, splendidly dressed and riding in a chariot drawn by four horses; his procession made its way to the heart of the city by a special route leading eventually to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, where he laid wreaths of laurel in the statue's lap.<sup>132</sup> He himself was dressed in red and his face painted red, exactly like the statue of Jupiter (though in fact Jupiter's dress was itself believed to be that of the ancient Roman kings). The name of the *triumphator* was then added to the special triumphal *fasti*; the supreme ambition of a Roman noble was achieved. In some sense, the triumphing general had been deified for the day and hence (true or not) we have the story of the slave, who stood at his shoulder and whispered:

- 127 There was a special type of military auspices taken by the consuls as generals on campaign.
- 128 A vivid account of various religious proceedings taken in expectation of war (in 191 B.C.): Livy XXXVI.1–3.
- 129 *Amphitryo* 231–2.
- 130 Harris (1979) 20–1, 261–2; Pietilä-Castrén (1987).
- 131 The triumph in general, see Ehlers (1948); Versnel (1970); Weinstock (1971) 60–79; Scullard (1981) 213–18; Künzl (1988); Rüpke (1990) 225–34. A description of a lavish triumph: Plutarch, *Aemilius Paulus* 32–4 = 5.8a. Images of a triumphal procession on a silver cup: 5.8b.
- 132 The route: Coarelli (1983–5) I.11–118, (1988) 363–437.

'Remember you are a man.'<sup>133</sup> In any case, much of the ceremonial involved the temporary reversal of the usual forms; the general and his army were never otherwise allowed inside the city and the troops were licensed for this one day to shout abuse and obscenities at their general. Dressed as the god, no doubt in the symbolic terms of the ritual he was the god. But at the grand sacrifice of white oxen, with which the procession ended, it was the *triumphator* who sacrificed, Jupiter who received the victims.

Agriculture, unlike warfare, was not the direct responsibility of the state. Nonetheless, the religious institutions of Rome were much concerned with agricultural success – on which, inevitably, the security and prosperity of the city rested. The calendar of festivals contains rituals connected with grain-crops, with wine-production and with animal husbandry.<sup>134</sup> Some of these festivals have a clear focus. Thus, for instance, the central element of the Robigalia of 25 April was a sacrifice to protect the growing crops from blight.<sup>135</sup> Most of the other rituals connected with grain seem clear enough too: festivals marking the sowing of the seed (*Sementivae*) at the end of January – though sowing would have been taking place from autumn onwards; a cluster of festivals in April (in addition to the Robigalia) accompanying the period of the growing crops – the *Fordicidia*, which involved the sacrifice of a pregnant cow to Earth (*Tellus*), and a festival of *Ceres*, the goddess of corn;<sup>136</sup> festivals of high summer celebrating the harvesting, storing and protecting of the crops against various dangers.<sup>137</sup> Others are much less easy to explain; and in some cases their fixed timing in the calendar is hard to relate directly to agricultural activity. The two vine festivals (*Vinalia*), for example, held on 23 April and 19 August – originally, it was said, in honour of Jupiter<sup>138</sup> – do not coincide with any likely date for harvesting the grapes; the first was probably connected instead with the tasting of the previous year's vintage.<sup>139</sup> The *Parilia* (21 April), the feast of shepherds, the clearest occasion on which the care of animals was the objective, raises another issue: by the end of the Republic this same festival was also interpreted as the celebration

133 Epictetus, *Discourses* III.24.85; Tertullian, *Apology* 33.4.

134 Olive growing (which was introduced from Greece to Italy in the sixth century B.C.) did not find any place in the calendar of festivals. This may be an indication that the central series of rituals was fixed before that time; but it still remains puzzling (given the general flexibility of the calendar) why nothing on this theme was added later.

135 Latte (1960a) 67–8; Degrassi (1963) 448–9; Scullard (1981) 108–9; for calendar entries, see 3.3a & b; with Ovid, *Fasti* IV.905–32 = 2.2b.

136 *Sementivae* (late January, but not fixed): Wissowa (1912) 193; Bayet (1950); Scullard (1981) 68. *Fordicidia* (15 April): Latte (1960a) 68–9; Degrassi (1963) 440–2; Dumézil (1970) 371–4; Scullard (1981) 102. *Cerealia* (19 April): Le Bonniec (1958) 108–40; Latte (1960a) 68; Dumézil (1970) 374–7; Scullard (1981) 102. Calendar entries referring to April festivals: 3.3a & b.

137 Dumézil (1975) 59–107.

138 Varro, *On the Latin Language* VI.16; above, p. 15.

139 Wissowa (1912) 115–16, 289–90; Schilling (1954) 98–155; Latte (1960a) 75–6, 184; Degrassi (1963) 446–7, 497–9; Scullard (1981) 106–8, 177; 3.3a & b.

of the birthday of the city of Rome.<sup>140</sup> Festivals did not have just a single meaning.

Much modern discussion of this cycle of festivals has been under-pinned by the assumption that by the third century B.C. at the latest all these festivals were well on their way to becoming antiquarian survivals having no significance for contemporary, urban-dwelling Romans. It is no doubt true that in Roman religious practice, as in many others, rituals were maintained from year to year out of a general sense of scrupulousness, even where their original significance was long forgotten; it is also true that by the last years of the Republic, antiquarian writers occasionally note elements in these festivals that they cannot explain. By their time, it might be argued, Rome had grown so much and its largely immigrant population become so urbanized and so attached to imported religions, that there would have been little meaning left in the old agricultural rituals. This would be a controversial claim even under the empire; for there was probably never a time when the city of Rome ceased to think of agricultural concerns as central to its way of life. For the third century B.C., however, it is clearly misleading. Rome then was still very much open to the countryside; many of its residents would have owned farms or at least worked on them intermittently, others would have had relations who did; and they would all have been totally dependent on the produce of the local agricultural economy for their food-supply.<sup>141</sup>

It is probably equally misleading to suggest that the simple fact that the festivals had fixed dates in a calendar made those festivals, or at least some of them, meaningless: for a festival intended to celebrate, say, the harvest would sometimes be late, sometimes early, only occasionally coincide exactly. This argument is often reinforced by reference to the Roman practice of intercalation. The insertion of a whole month every few years would have made the fit between the festival and the natural seasons fairly loose in any case. But when the *pontifices* neglected (as we know they sometimes did) the proper cycle of intercalation, the festival calendar would have been grotesquely out of step with the agricultural year; so grotesquely that the festival of the harvest could have been taking place before the seed had even sprouted. All this argument rests on misunderstandings. So far as we know, the early Roman calendar worked accurately enough; there is certainly no evidence that anything went seriously wrong with the cycle of intercalations before some mysterious aberrations at the end of the third century B.C. (presumably caused somehow by the troubles of the period of the

Hannibalic War).<sup>142</sup> Meanwhile, the whole case depends on the assumption that the Romans were very simple-minded in their conception of the relation between religious act and agricultural process; that, for example, a festival designed to ensure divine protection against mildew would be meaningless, unless *at that very moment* the crop was being damaged. In fact, it is partly the point of a communal, ritual calendar that it should transcend such particular, individual moments, offering a ritual structure that can represent and protect (say) the processes of the agricultural year without being constantly tied to the varied and unpredictable conditions of real-life farming. The Romans would have expected that the gods would stay favourable provided the ritual was properly performed at the time prescribed by the priests, following tradition and rule.

A more fundamental question, however, concerns those festivals whose meaning appears to have been disputed even by the Romans themselves. We have already seen, in relation to Ovid's *Fasti*, how interpretations of individual festivals inevitably changed over time. Nevertheless it has remained a convenient modern assumption that, at least at any one moment, each festival had an unambiguous meaning and a single point of reference; or that (to use the categories we have so far used in the section) a festival can be classified as 'agricultural' or 'military'. The Robigalia provides the model here, for our sources connect it with mildew on the corn and with nothing else. In fact, even this case is questionable: it may well be that the Robigalia appears a simple ritual with a unitary meaning largely because we have so few sources that discuss it, and those we have happen to agree. But in many other festivals we are confronted with a profusion of different interpretations, or clearly perceived ambiguities in the ritual and its meaning. In the case of the Lupercalia, for example, at which a group of near naked youths ran round the city, striking those they met with a goat thong, some sources imply that it was a fertility ritual, others that it was a ritual of purification;<sup>143</sup> for the ritual of the October Horse (*equus October*), which involved the sacrifice of a horse to Mars, we read in one ancient writer that it was intended to make the crops prosper, in another that it was a war-ritual, connected with other October ceremonies concerned with the return of the army from its year's campaigning.<sup>144</sup> How are we to deal with these discrepancies?

140 Wissowa (1912) 199; Latte (1960a) 87–8; Degrassi (1963) 443–5; Dumézil (1975) 188–203; Scullard (1981) 103–5; Beard (1987); below, pp. 174–6. Different ancient interpretations: Ovid, *Fasti* IV.721–806 = 5.1a; Plutarch, *Romulus* 12.1 = 5.1b; Athenaeus, *Table-talk* VIII.361 e–f = 5.1c; note also Propertius IV.4.73–80; Tibullus II.5.87–90.

141 North (1995).

142 Michels (1967) 145–72; on the state calendar in the middle republican period, Briscoe (1981) 17–26.

143 Modern interpretations of the Lupercalia: Harmon (1978) 1441–6; Scholz (1981); Ulf (1982) (with survey of earlier views, 83–9); Hopkins (1991); Wiseman (1995) 77–88. Ancient interpretations: Plutarch, *Romulus* 21.3–8 = 5.2a; Varro, *On the Latin Language* VI.34 = 5.2c; Augustine, *The City of God* XVIII.12 = 5.2d; for Julius Caesar and his supporters, it could evidently be re-perceived as a coronation ritual, Plutarch, *Julius Caesar* 61.3–4 = 5.2b (with Dumézil (1970) 349–50).

144 The problem of the October Horse: Warde Fowler (1899) 241–50; Latte (1960a) 119–20; Degrassi (1963) 521; Bayet (1969) 82–3; Scholz (1970); Dumézil (1975)

One answer would stress that it is characteristic of rituals not only that their meanings change over time, but also that they are always liable to be interpreted in different ways by different people, or, for that matter, by the same people on different occasions. Rituals gather significance; though there will always be dominant interpretations, there is no such thing as a single ritual meaning. If only we knew more about the simple Robigalia, we would be bound to find a whole range of different, perhaps idiosyncratic, interpretations clustering around the idea of divine protection for the corn. We should, in fact, expect – rather than be surprised – that different writers explain the same festival in slightly (or significantly) different ways. This plurality of ritual meaning is a feature of almost any ritual system.

There are, however, other specifically Roman issues at stake – as we can see clearly in the (contested) division between military and agricultural festivals. Our own system of classification rigidly separates those two areas of activity. But, as we have seen, in early Rome agriculture and military activity were closely bound up, in the sense that the Roman farmer was also a soldier (and a voter as well); and many of the most important Roman gods and goddesses reflected the life of the human community, with functions that cross these simple categories. It would then seem particularly unlikely that the festivals and their significance should have remained fixed within categories that applied neither to the gods nor to the worshippers. In the case of the October Horse, for example, we should not be trying to decide whether it is either a military, or an agricultural festival; but see it rather as one of the ways in which the convergence of farming and warfare (or more accurately of farmers and fighters) might be expressed.

Our final topic in this section concerns the role of the individual citizen in these rituals, and the relationship of public, state religion to private and domestic life. For the most part, the festivals were conducted on their city's behalf by dignitaries – priests, occasionally priestesses, and magistrates. The only obligation which was generally supposed to fall on the individual citizen was simply to abstain from work while the ceremonies were going on. How far this was obeyed in practice, we do not know. There was certainly some debate, reminiscent of rabbinical debate about the Sabbath, as to what exactly would count as work and what not for this purpose.<sup>145</sup> But on no interpretation does the extent of the citizen's necessary involvement in public ritual go any further. This might in turn imply that these public performances were something quite apart from the individual's life, offering no personal involvement or satisfaction, only the remote awareness that somebody somewhere was protecting the city's relationship with the gods. And from that argument it would be a short next step to say that the religion of individuals did not lie in the state cults at all, but in the cults of the

145–56; Scullard (1981) 193–4. Ancient discussions: Polybius, *History* XII.41.1; Festus p.190L; Plutarch, *Roman Questions* 97.  
145 Scullard (1981) 39–40.

family, house or farm to which they did attend personally. The *paterfamilias* was responsible for maintaining the traditional rites of his family, the worship of the Lares and Penates and the other *sacra* inherited from his ancestors and destined to be passed on to his descendants (the *sacra familiae*);<sup>146</sup> while on the country estate, as we learn from the agricultural handbook of Cato the Elder, the whole household (*familia*) including the slaves, would gather together for ceremonies to purify the fields and to pray to the gods for protection and for the fertility of crops and herds.<sup>147</sup> Within the family also the stages of life were marked by religious rituals (*rites de passage*): the acceptance of the baby into the family, the admission of the child into adulthood, marriage, death and burial all fell within the sphere of family religious responsibility, even if (as we have seen) the *pontifices* were responsible for some legal aspects of family life and relationships.<sup>148</sup>

It is possible that for some Romans these private cults would have afforded a separate religious world within which they might have found the personal experience of superhuman beings, the sense of community and of their place in it, which the remoteness of the official cult denied them. Certainly a good deal of poetry of the first centuries B.C. and A.D. celebrates the depth of commitment that must sometimes have been felt towards the religion of the home.<sup>149</sup> And, as we saw earlier, the terracotta votives dedicated in healing cults may give us cause to doubt whether the individual's religious experience was in fact as narrowly bounded as some literary sources have been thought to imply.<sup>150</sup> On the other hand, it is clear that historians have tended to project into this area, about which we really know so little, the elements that they postulate as essential to any religion – personal prayer and contact with the divine, deep feelings and beliefs about man's relation to universal forces – that seem to be missing from the religious life of the Romans. The argument in its simplest terms goes something like this: Roman religion must have involved some forms of deep personal commitment; there is little or no sign of that in public cult; therefore it must have been found in the 'private' religion of home and family. Of course, that is possible. But the argument as it stands rests on the assumption that we challenged at the very beginning of this section: that Roman religion is a relatively familiar set of institutions, obeying roughly the same rules and fulfilling the same human needs as our own. If we accept that the Romans' religious experience might be profoundly different from our own, then we do not necessarily have to search out a context for the personal expression of individual piety; we do not, in other words, have to

146 Statuettes of the Lares, see 2.2a; a household shrine from Pompeii is illustrated at 4.12.

147 *On Agriculture* 141 = 6.3a.

148 Above, pp. 24–6. For a general discussion of the role of private religion, Dorcey (1992) esp. 2–6.

149 For example, Horace, *Odes* III.8; IV.11; Tibullus II.2.

150 Above, pp. 12–13.

find a context in which to imagine the Romans being 'religious' according to our own preconceptions of religiosity. But there are other reasons too for questioning the centrality of private as against public cults.

The separation between city cult and family or farm cult should not be exaggerated. In some festivals, a central ceremony performed in the city was accompanied by rites conducted in families or in the countryside; in others, the only acts reported took place in the family, though it is likely that there was also some corresponding public ritual; other festivals again were celebrated by particular groups of the Roman people – such as the *curiae*, the 30 divisions of Roman citizens that probably stretched back well into regal times.<sup>151</sup> The festivals for the dead (the Parentalia in February and the Lemuria in May) were, for example, essentially domestic festivals focussed on family ancestors, though there was also a public element when, on the first day of the Parentalia, a Vestal Virgin performed the rituals for the dead;<sup>152</sup> at the Parilia in April, our descriptions of what took place clearly refer to individual farms, with the shepherd and even the sheep leaping over bonfires;<sup>153</sup> at the Saturnalia in December, there were sacrifices at the temple of Saturn to open the festivities, but the feasting, exchanging of roles between masters and slaves, merrymaking and present-giving evidently all took place in the households.<sup>154</sup> There were also quite specifically rural festivals, outside the civic structure of the city – the Ambarvalia (lustration of the fields), the Sementivae (festival of sowing) and the Compitalia (celebration at the crossroads both in Rome and in the countryside); these do not have fixed dates in the calendars, though they were a regular part of the ritual year.<sup>155</sup> On still other occasions, a public festival provided the context and occasion for a family event: so at the Liberalia (17 March) boys who had reached the age of puberty took their *toga virilis*, the mark of their admission to the adult community.<sup>156</sup> Sometimes the relationship of public and private elements is particularly complicated: at the Matralia (11 June) the public ceremonial took place at the temple of Mater Matuta in the Forum Boarium; at this festival, we are told, the matrons

prayed for their nephews and nieces first, not their own children – a prayer, it seems likely, that was repeated by women throughout the city, not just those present at the temple.<sup>157</sup> This range of festivals that bring together ritual in the public and private sphere, shows more than the simple fact that a good deal of private ritual accompanied public events; it suggests that one of the functions of the festival calendar was precisely to link public ritual with private domestic worship – to calibrate the concerns of the community as a whole onto those of the family, and vice versa.

The ritual activities of the Vestal Virgins, the only major female priesthood at Rome, illustrate another aspect of the connections between public and private religion. The Vestals were clearly set apart from the other priestly groups.<sup>158</sup> Six priestesses, chosen in childhood, they lived in a special house next to the temple of Vesta. They had all kinds of privileges, including (unlike other women) the right of making a will without the compliance of a guardian (*tutor*). They also had unique religious responsibilities and were subject to unique penalties if they failed, either by letting the sacred fire go out or by losing their virginity: unchaste Vestals were buried alive.<sup>159</sup> We know a good deal more about their ritual programme than about that of any other priestly group in Rome; and that is probably not a mere accident in the transmission of information, but reflects the high importance of (and ancient interest in) what they did for Rome. There is also good reason for thinking that they were one of the most ancient religious organizations of the city, embedded in the religious structure of the earliest Latin communities of central Italy; certainly, similar priesthoods under the same name were found in the ancient towns nearby, suggesting that they go back to the very earliest history of this whole group of communities.<sup>160</sup>

The Vestals' activities included a good deal of what might be called household work: they were responsible for tending the sacred fire, on the sacred hearth of their temple; they guarded their storehouse (*penus*) and they ritually cleaned it out and expelled the dirt; they gathered the first ears

151 The role of the *curiae* at (for example) the Fornacalia: Ovid, *Fasti* II.527–32; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* II.23; with Latte (1960a) 143; Scullard (1981) 73.

152 Parentalia (13–21 February): Latte (1960a) 98; Degrassi (1963) 408–9; Scullard (1981) 74–5. Lemuria (9, 11 and 13 May): Latte (1960a) 99; Degrassi (1963) 454–5; Scullard (1981) 118–19.

153 Above, pp. 45–6 with pp. 174–6, below.

154 Latte (1960a) 255; Degrassi (1963) 539; Scullard (1981) 205–7; Versnel (1993) 136–227. Private aspects of the festival: Macrobius, *Saturnalia* I.24.22–3 = 5.3a; Pliny, *Letters* II.17.23–4 = 5.3c; and the illustration from a fourth-century A.D. calendar, 5.3b. For the public rituals, see Livy XXII.1.20 = 7.3a.

155 Sementivae: above, p. 45. Compitalia (December/January): Latte (1960a) 90–3; Scullard (1981) 58–60; see also below, pp. 184–6. Ambarvalia (May): Latte (1960a) 41–2; Scullard (1981) 124–5.

156 Ovid, *Fasti* III.771–90.

157 Warde Fowler (1899) 154–7; Latte (1960a) 97; Degrassi (1963) 468–9; Dumézil (1970) 50–5 (introducing parallels from Vedic India). The sixth-century B.C. temples of Mater Matuta and Fortuna: Castagnoli (1979); Cornell (1995) 147–8; Steinby (1993-) II.281–5; Map 1 no. 23 (with statues surviving from the temple of Fortuna, 1.7a(ii)). The temple of Mater Matuta at Satricum: 1.6b.

158 In general, Wissowa (1912) 507–12; Koch (1958) 1732–53; (1960) 1–16; Latte (1960a) 108–11; Ampolo (1971); Pomeroy (1976) 210–14; Radke (1981b); Scheid (1992b) 381–4. The myth of the origin of the Vestals: Plutarch, *Numa* 10 = 8.4a. Inscriptions in honour of leading Vestals: 8.4b.

159 Plutarch, *Numa* 10 = 8.4a emphasizes the punishment of Vestals; see also Plutarch, *Roman Questions* 96; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* II.67.4; with Koch (1960) 1–16; Guizzi (1968) 141–58; Cornell (1981).

160 Vestal priestesses at Alba Longa and Lavinium: Wissowa (1912) 520–1; Weinstock (1937b) 428–40; Alföldi (1965) 250–65; Dury-Moyaers (1981) 220–6; Radke (1981b); below, pp. 57–9, 323.



of corn from the harvest, ground and baked them to provide the sacred salted meal (*mola salsa*) that was used to sanctify the victim at sacrifices.<sup>161</sup> There is an obvious parallel between Vesta, the hearth of the city, and the hearths of the houses of individual families – the priestesses of the state apparently representing the women of the household. But which women exactly?

The simplest hypothesis that has been used to explain their activity takes us right back to regal Rome, with the suggestion that the life of the Vestals was the life of the ancient regal household and that they themselves originated from (and later symbolically represented) the women of the king's family. The problem is that they do not, in fact, fit the role of either the wives or the daughters of the early kings at all well. The insistence on their virginity makes them very unlikely candidates as wives; while daughters provide an equally unlikely model for a group of priestesses whose legal privileges were utterly different from those of a dependent child (and who in any case wore, as their priestly costume, some of the distinctive clothes of the bride or married woman).<sup>162</sup> Even the links with the king's household are doubtful: for in terms of ritual, their connections are with the *pontifex maximus*, not with the *rex sacrorum* (the priestly successor, as we shall see, of the early kings).<sup>163</sup>

It may be that the key to the Vestals' sacred status lies precisely in its ambiguity: they are paraded as sharing the characteristics of both matrons and virgins, with even some characteristics (such as specific legal rights in the making of wills) of men too.<sup>164</sup> It is a pattern observed in many societies that people and animals deemed 'interstitial', those who fall between the categories into which the world is usually divided, are often also regarded as sacred, powerful or holy.<sup>165</sup> Here it seems plausible that the intermediate sexual status assigned to the priestesses served to mark their separateness and their sacredness. But they were ambiguous or marginal in other ways too: they mediated the realms of public and private, by carrying on private duties in the public sphere; and their ritual programme involved them in all major aspects of Roman life, so linking parts of life often regarded as separate. The Vestals represented a peculiarly extreme version of the connection between the religious life of the home and of the community: if anything went wrong in their house, the threat was to the whole *salus* (safety) of the Roman people – not just of the city, but including the health and fertility of the whole community, its animals and its farms.<sup>166</sup> So too their

161 Latte (1960a) 108–10.

162 The Vestals' legal condition and privileges are the subject of Guizzi (1968).

163 The different suggestions and their problems are reviewed by Beard (1980). For the relations between Vestals and *pontifex maximus*, below, pp. 57–8.

164 Beard (1980) – with critique in Beard (1995).

165 See Douglas (1966); this is another aspect of the 'boundary crossing' we discussed in the context of prodigies, above, p. 37.

166 Koch (1960) 11–16.

unchastity was not just a domestic offence, it occasioned public prodigies requiring extraordinary measures of expiation.<sup>167</sup>

The rituals in which the Vestals were involved emphasize these links. At the Fordicidia, after the pregnant cow had been sacrificed to Tellus (Earth), the unborn calf was taken and burned by the senior Vestal: the calf too was an ambiguous being – living but not born, sacrificed but not capable of being a proper victim; its ashes were then preserved by the Vestals and used, mixed with the dried blood of the previous October's 'October horse', to sprinkle on the bonfires of the Parilia, for the purification of the shepherd and the sheep.<sup>168</sup> The precise implications of this cycle of symbolic acts may not be recoverable; but it does make clear the importance of the Vestals in connecting the fertility of the earth, the health and safety of the flocks, and the city's security in the military sense; it reminds us too of the links underlying the different rituals of the calendar, symbolized by the recycling, from one ritual to another, of the sacrificial ashes. Human fertility was also involved in the Vestals' sphere; and here, for once, we have the help of myths which fit with and clarify a set of rituals. The story is told of various founders or heroes of towns in the region of Latium, around Rome, that they were born of a virgin impregnated either by a spark from the hearth or by a phallus which sprang from the hearth.<sup>169</sup> The Roman Vestals were not only responsible for guarding the hearth, the undying flame, but also for keeping a phallus in their temple. The significance of the flame on their hearth must therefore, in at least one of its aspects, lie in its link with the foundation, generation and continuation of the race. The goddess Vesta herself encapsulated all the elements; she was the flame itself, she was the virgin, she was Vesta the Mother.<sup>170</sup>

The Vestal Virgins were themselves withdrawn from all the ordinary activities of life – living together as priestesses, separately from their families, in one of the most public spots of the whole city (at the east end of the forum); but at the same time they linked, at a ritual level, all the different areas of that life. That connection makes it easier to see why there was so powerful an association between them and the survival of Rome as a whole. And it is no coincidence that they provided the home for the various talismans of that survival – as ancient, it was said, as the sacred objects brought by Aeneas from Troy.<sup>171</sup> In a real crisis, it was these talismans in their care that had to be saved at any cost, even the cost of one's own family – a truth

167 Cornell (1981) 31–3.

168 For example, Ovid, *Fasti* IV.731–4 = 5.1a (for the purificatory material used at the Parilia).

169 Romulus: Plutarch, *Romulus* 2.3–5. Caeculus of Praeneste: Servius, *On Virgil's Aeneid* VII.678. Servius Tullius: Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* IV.2; Pliny, *Natural History* XXXVI. 204; Ovid, *Fasti* VI.627–36; Plutarch, *Fortune of the Roman*: 10; on all these traditions, Capdeville (1995) 1–154.

170 Ovid's interpretation of the goddess: *Fasti* VI.249–348, part = 2.5.

171 Above, pp. 2–3.

vividly captured by Livy in his story of a plebeian who (when Rome was facing attack by the Gauls in 390 B.C.) made his own wife and children get out of the wagon that was taking them to safety so that he could rescue the Vestals and their sacred objects.<sup>172</sup> Throughout the history of pagan Rome, any suggestion of an irregularity involving the Vestals or their rituals implied a threat to the city itself<sup>173</sup> – even more profoundly than interruptions to any of the other rituals we have discussed in this section.

## 5. Adjusting to the new Republic

The three preceding sections of this chapter have given a synoptic analysis of the religion of the Romans as we believe it to have been under the developed republican system. We have already expressed our doubts about the value of narrative accounts which have traditionally been based on a combination of guesswork and a priori assumptions. We do, however, think that it is possible to identify some moments of change and to make some progress towards establishing the stages by which religion came to be as we have described it. The first of these stages is the replacement of the kingship by the republican regime, dated in our sources to the end of the sixth century B.C., after the expulsion of the last king, Tarquin the Proud. The story of the expulsion is complicated by the fact that Tarquin appears not just as a villain but as an alien villain, of a family originating in the Etruscan city of Tarquinii and later receiving from his Etruscan kinsmen support against the regime that had expelled him.

Our argument throughout this chapter has been that the religion of later republican Rome reflected closely the ideas and institutions characteristic of the whole republican order. That implies that, despite the Romans' own belief that the origin of most of their central religious institutions lay with the kings, and despite an undoubted continuity in many particular priest-hoods, rituals and sacred sites, there must have been a great deal of change to create the developed republican system after the fall of the monarchy. It is tempting to make the periods of religious history fit neatly with the conventional periods of political change; if so, there should have been radical changes when the kings were overthrown and the Republic began. It is, however, very controversial whether or not this was so. As we stressed earlier in this chapter, it is not at all clear whether the institutions of Rome in the fifth and fourth centuries were yet recognizably 'republican'; but even on the assumption that they were, there may have been a considerable delay before religion began to reflect the new political order.

The first problem the founders of the Republic must have had to face was the replacement of the kingship itself. Abolishing kings and replacing

172 Livy V.40.7–10; with Ogilvie (1965) 723–5.

173 For example, Cicero, *On Behalf of Fonteius* 46–8.

them by elected officials was a revolutionary step in its religious implications as well as its political ones, because kings must have taken a leading (if not the leading) role in the religion of the state. Who was to perform their duties, if there was no king any more? and how would the gods react to the new situation? Later Romans, and most modern writers as well, have seen the solution in simple terms. There had still to be one individual who was called the *rex* (king) and would carry out the religious role. But he would now be quite separate from anyone who held the king's other powers. So the new king was named the 'king of rites' (*rex sacrorum*); he had to be a patrician, he became a member of the college of *pontifices* and he was excluded from those who could be elected to positions of power.<sup>174</sup> Clearly it would have been a difficult and delicate task to define the position of the new 'king' in relation to the old priests, and especially within the college of which he would now be a member.

Here as so often, the only accounts of this situation come from the late republican period and later. By that time, the *rex* had become an obscure member of the college, with a largely forgotten range of ritual duties meanwhile the *pontifex maximus*, the elected leader of the *pontifices*, had become the most powerful of the great political priests. The implication in Livy's account of the foundation of the Republic in Book II of his *History* is that the subordination of the *rex* to the *pontifex maximus* dates back to a deliberate decision taken by the founders.<sup>175</sup> This, then, would be the solution to the problem: the king's potential threat was neutralized by making him a priest subordinate to the *pontifex*. But how anachronistic were such accounts? It has been argued that, like the founding myths of regal Rome itself, this story is another retrojection into the fifth century B.C. of reality as it was known to historians writing in the first century B.C. On this view the king would originally have kept his authority as head of religion and only slowly in the centuries that followed would the *pontifex maximus* have emerged as the more powerful figure.<sup>176</sup> There can be no certain answer to this question, and the issues take us into the technical details of the college organization. But the effort is worth making for two reasons: first, it takes us into the prehistory of the office of the *pontifex maximus*, who was to become, as we shall see in later chapters, more and more important over the centuries, until he was effectively the 'high priest' of Rome; second, the

174 Wissowa (1912) 504–8; De Sanctis (1907–64) IV.2.355–7; Latte (1960a) 195–202; Dumézil (1970) 576–93; Momigliano (1971); cf. Ampolo (1971) and, for a different view, Cornell (1995) 232–8. The known *reges* are listed by Szemler (1972) 68, 174–175. None of them is known to have achieved any political distinction; below, pp. 106–107.

175 II.2.1.

176 The argument is most fully developed by Latte (1960a) 195–212. The most interesting piece of evidence is a list of the order of priests preserved by Festus p.299L: first the *rex*, then – in second to fourth place – the three *flamines*, fifth the *pontifex maximus*. This order must reflect some archaic 'reality'; but what kind of reality and whether it is early republican rather than regal is quite obscure.