

THE FOCUS CLASSICAL SOURCES

Roman Sports and Spectacles • Anne Mahoney 2001
Roman Religion • Valerie Warrior 2002

Roman Religion

A Sourcebook

Valerie M. Warrior

FOCUS PUBLISHING
R. PULLINS COMPANY
NEWBURYPORT MA

Roman Religion A Sourcebook

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Focus Publishing/R. Pullins Company

PO Box 369

Newburyport MA 01950

www.pullins.com

Cover: Altar of Scipio Orfitus. Rome, Musei Capitolini. Photo by Sansaini, neg. no. 57.373. Courtesy of the German Archeological Institute.

ISBN: 978-1-58510-030-9

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Printed in the United States of America.

13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4

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CONTROL OF NON-ROMAN CULTS

9.1 JUVENAL, *SATIRES* 3.60-63. Citizens, I cannot bear a Greekized Rome. And yet what portion of our dregs comes from Greece? The Syrian Orontes has long since flowed into the Tiber, bringing with it its language and its customs....

As the above passage from the early second century CE satirist Juvenal shows, not everyone was favorably disposed to the assimilation of other cultures. In this chapter we see two examples of control from two different periods that illustrate the authorities' aversion to non-Roman cultic practices, the worship of Bacchus, also known as Dionysus, and that of the Egyptian goddess Isis. Both these cults were 'mystery religions,' involving an initiation ceremony, a ritual that set the initiate apart from the rest of society, and offering an intense, often ecstatic, communion with the deity.¹ These cults, with their appeal to the individual as member of a cultic group rather than the civic community, were likely to incur the suspicions of the state authorities.

Less than twenty years after the importation of the Magna Mater to the Palatine hill, a senatorial decree imposed severe restrictions on Bacchic worship. This incident is attested in two sources: the historian Livy and an inscription giving the Senate's decree. The opposition to the cult of Isis in the first centuries BCE and CE is less fully documented. Nonetheless, many of the apprehensions apparent in the reactions of the Roman authorities to both cults re-emerge in later encounters with Judaism and Christianity: a fear that meetings and organizations outside the control of the traditional political elite were politically subversive.

¹ 'Every initiation means a change in status that is irreversible; whoever has himself initiated on the basis of his individual decision separates himself from others and integrates himself into a new group. In his own eyes the *mystes* (initiate) is distinguished by a special relation to the divine, by a form of piety.' Burkert (1985) 301.

The suppression of Bacchic worship

Evidence of social disruption in the aftermath of the Hannibalic War indicates an environment that would have offered ample scope for the spread of a cult that had a more personal appeal than that of the traditional gods of Roman state religion. An increase in the popularity of the worship of Bacchus is attested for the early second century BCE.² The cult had probably been present in Rome since the beginning of the republic when a temple was established to Ceres, Liber and Libera, Italic deities that were later assimilated with the Greek Demeter, Dionysus and Kore (the Maid, Persephone).³ Livy's account of the suppression of Bacchic worship in 186 BCE indicates that new manifestations of the cult had entered Rome from Etruria and Campania.⁴ In response to these developments the Senate passed a decree that imposed strict controls on Bacchic worship throughout Italy, while not banning it completely.⁵

A bronze tablet inscribed in archaic Latin includes a letter addressed by the Roman consuls to Rome's Italian allies incorporating the Senate's actual decree. The contemporary evidence of this inscription not only confirms the historicity of the episode but also offsets the dramatic embellishments of Livy's account. From these two sources it is evident that the Senate did not intend to eliminate the cult, but rather to impose stipulations that were designed to curb the excesses threatening traditional Roman religion and Roman mores (*mos maiorum*). Apparent in both sources is the Roman authorities' fear of political subversion: they dealt with the problem as a 'conspiracy'.⁶

Livy describes the outbreak of the problem.

9.2 Livy 39.8.1-9.2. The following year (186 BCE) diverted the consuls from the army and administration of wars and provinces to the suppression of an internal conspiracy (*intestina coniuratio*).... Both consuls were assigned the investigation (*quaestio*) of secret conspiracies. A low-born Greek came first to Etruria,...

² Bacchic worship may have been part of the foreign religion (*religio externa*) that invaded the state in 213; see 8.12.

³ Liber: an original Italic god of fertility, especially wine, later identified with Dionysus, see chapter 8 n. 5. The temple to Ceres, Liber and Libera was located on the Aventine hill, outside the *pomerium*, where the poorer classes lived.

⁴ *Campania*: a fertile plain in the hinterland of the Bay of Naples. During the Hannibalic War, several cities of Campania, including the principal city Capua, had defected to Hannibal. When the Romans recaptured Capua after a long siege, they executed the leaders and deprived the city of its civic status. The popularizing of the Bacchic cult in this particular area would thus have been a concern to the Roman authorities.

⁵ See Warrior (1998) 100-105.

⁶ *conspiracy*: the Latin *coniuratio* literally means a swearing-together or oath-taking for a common purpose. The noun or a cognate occurs nine times in Livy's account. The verb, *coniurare*, is part of a key phrase in the decree: 'No one shall participate in an oath, a vow, a pledge, or promises, or exchange a pledge of loyalty...' This series of legalistic terms underscores the Senate's perception of a political threat.

a phony priest and fortune-teller.⁷ Nor was he one who taints men's minds with error by publicizing his *religio* and proclaiming his profession and his teaching. He was a practitioner of secret rites held at night.⁸

There were initiation rites that at first were entrusted to a few, then they began to be spread among men and women.⁹ To the religious element (*religio*) were added the delights of wine and feasting so that the minds of a larger number might be enticed. When wine had inflamed their minds, and night together with the mingling of males with females, youth with age, had extinguished every distinction of modesty, all kinds of corruption first began to be practised, since each individual had ready access to the pleasure to which his lustful nature was more inclined.¹⁰ There was not one type of vice alone: promiscuous debauchery of freeborn males and women, false witnesses, forged seals and wills, manufactured evidence, all originated from the same workshop.¹¹ Likewise there were poisonings and domestic murders of such a kind that often bodies were not even found for burial. Many deeds were ventured by guile, more by violence. The violence was concealed because amidst the debauchery and murders no cries of protest could be heard above the howling and the din of drums and cymbals.

This destructive evil spread from Etruria to Rome like the contagion of a plague. At first the size of the city, which was quite large and thus able to tolerate such evils, kept it hidden. Finally information reached the consul Postumius in the following way....

There follows a complicated story in which Hispala, a freedwoman who herself had been initiated into the Bacchic rituals, revealed to the consul details of recent religious innovations, the initiation of men, night rituals and a sharp increase in the number of days for initiations.

9.3 Livy 39.13.8-14. Hispala explained the origin of the rites. At first, she said, it was a ritual for women; it was not customary to admit any man. Three days

⁷ *phony priest and fortune-teller*: the same derogatory terms were used in context of the outbreak of foreign *religio* in 213, see 8.12.

⁸ *secret rites held at night*: nocturnal rituals were contrary to Roman practice. Cicero (*Laws* 2.36) proposed for his ideal state that initiation into the rites of Ceres be held not by night but by day. Night was thought to offer cover for all kinds of licentious behavior. Any unauthorised assembly constituted a threat to the state, hence the charge of *coniuratio*. Assemblies had to be convened by magistrates, as was the assembly (*contio*) that was addressed by the consul Postumius, see 9.4. Similar accusations were later made against the Christians because of their secret meetings which were often held at night.

⁹ *initiation rites*: several mystery religions in the ancient Mediterranean world required novices to undergo secret rituals which often re-enacted myths connected with a particular deity.

¹⁰ Drunkenness, promiscuous sex, poisoning and murders are typical allegations in cases of religious and political persecution.

¹¹ *false witnesses* ...: these allegations are peculiarly Roman, as opposed to the charges of intoxication and promiscuity that are also made by Pentheus in Euripides' *Bacchae* 220-225.

a year had been appointed on which initiations in the Bacchic rites were held by day. Married women were usually appointed in turn as priests. Paculla Annia, a Campanian priestess, had changed all this, supposedly on the advice of the gods. For she had been the first to initiate men, her sons Minius and Herennius Cerrinius.¹² She had conducted the rites by night rather than by day, and established five days of initiation per month instead of three per year.

From the time that the rites involved the promiscuous mingling of men with women and the liberation of the darkness, no kind of crime, no kind of wickedness had been left untried. There was more debauchery among men with each other than with women. Anyone who was less tolerant of disgrace and rather slow to commit crime was sacrificed as a victim. To regard nothing as wrong (*nefas*) was the acme of *religio* among them. Men prophesied with fanatical convulsions of their bodies, as if their minds were possessed. Married women, wearing Bacchic dress, their hair loose, and carrying blazing torches, rushed to the Tiber.¹³ They plunged the torches into the water, bringing them out again with the flame still burning because they contained live sulphur mixed with calcium. Men were said to have been carried off by the gods; they were bound to a machine and whisked out of sight into hidden caves. These were the ones who had either refused to join in conspiracy (*coniurare*) or participate in crimes or endure debauchery. It was, she said, a huge crowd, almost a second citizenry.¹⁴ Among them were certain nobles, both men and women. Within the last two years it had been ordained that no one over the age of twenty should be initiated.¹⁵ People of under this age were sought because they were susceptible to vice and debauchery....

The consul brings the matter before the Senate which orders a special investigation (*quaestio extra ordinem*) throughout Italy.¹⁶

9.4 Livy 39.14.3-10. When both witnesses [Hisपाला and her lover Aebutius] were in his charge, Postumius brought the matter before the Senate, setting forth everything in detail, first what had been reported and then what he himself had discovered. Great panic seized the senators, both on the public account for fear that these conspiracies (*coniurationes*) and nocturnal meetings might produce

some hidden treachery or danger, and each privately on his own account, for fear that a relative might be involved in the crime.

The Senate decreed that the consul be thanked because he had pursued the matter with extreme diligence and without causing a public disturbance. Then they assigned to the consuls a special investigation of the Bacchanals and their nocturnal rites The priests of these rites were to be sought out, be they men or women, not only in Rome but throughout all the villages and communities so that they come under the charge of the consuls.¹⁷ Proclamation was to be made in Rome and edicts sent to all of Italy that no one who had been initiated into the Bacchic rites was to consent to gather or assemble for these rites or perform any such ritual.¹⁸ Above all, it was decreed that an investigation (*quaestio*) should be conducted into those people who had come together or conspired to commit debauchery or crime. Such was the decree of the Senate.

The consuls ordered the curule aediles to seek out the priests of this rite, arrest them and keep them in open custody until the investigation.¹⁹ The aediles were to see that the rites were not celebrated in secret. The three city commissioners were entrusted with the task of posting guards throughout the city, ensuring that no meetings took place by night and guarding against arson.²⁰

Livy reports that the consuls summoned an open meeting of the people (*contio*). In a dramatic speech the consul Postumius contrasts the ancestral Roman gods with those deities who, 'by means of goads implanted by the Furies, spur minds enslaved by debased and alien rites to perform every kind of crime and lustful deed' (39.15.2-3). The threat to the state becomes explicit as the consul declares: 'Daily the evil swells and creeps in. It is already too great to be purely a private matter. Its objective involves the state' (39.16.3). The consul then addresses the crux of the problem: the threat to traditional Roman religion and the *mos maiorum*.

9.5 Livy 39.16.6-12. Nothing is more deceptive in appearance than depraved religion (*prava religio*). When the authority of the gods is offered as a cloak for crime, a fear steals into the mind that in punishing human misdeeds we may violate something of divine law that is involved in them. Countless edicts of the pontifices, decrees of the Senate, and finally responses of the *haruspices* free you from this religious scruple (*religio*).

How often in the time of our fathers and grandfathers has the task been assigned to the magistrates of forbidding the celebration of foreign rituals (*sacra externa*), of excluding phony priests and fortune-tellers from the Forum, the Circus and

¹² The names Paculla, Cerrinius and Minius are attested in Campania; see Walsh (1994) 122. Minius is later named as one of the leaders of the *coniuratio* (Livy 39.17.7) and, with his brother, was imprisoned under strict guard in Ardea, some twenty-five miles from Rome (Livy 39.19.2).

¹³ Such behavior and dress would have been highly inappropriate for Roman matrons.

¹⁴ *a second citizenry*: this and the subsequent sentences encapsulate the threat to the state. Since the center of Bacchic worship was on the Aventine, the reference to *alter populus* was probably intended to recall the secessions of the plebs in the fifth century BCE.

¹⁵ Reference to initiates under the age of twenty implies doubts about the suitability of such initiates for military service.

¹⁶ *special investigation*: the consuls had summary power in this investigation, as the death penalty and power to imprison indicate.

¹⁷ *charge of the consuls*: at this time, inhabitants of such communities in Italy came under the jurisdiction of their local magistrates. This empowering of the consuls represents the Senate's attempt to reassert political control over the Italian communities.

¹⁸ *no one should consent to gather...*: Livy's language corresponds closely with that of the inscription, see 9.7.

¹⁹ *curule aediles*: minor magistrates.

²⁰ *the three city commissioners*: minor officials charged with protecting the city from crime. They had also been involved in the outbreak of foreign *religio* in 213; see 8.12.

the City, of seeking out and burning books of prophecies, and of abolishing every form of sacrifice except the Roman. Men most learned in all law, divine and human, used to judge that there was nothing so prone to the destruction of religion (*religio*) as sacrifices offered with foreign rather than our ancestral ritual.

I have thought that these warnings should be given to you so that no superstitious fears (*superstitio*) disturb your minds when you see us destroying the Bacchic shrines and breaking up wicked assemblies. This we will do if the gods are favorable and willing. They, because they were indignant that their own divinity was being polluted by crime and lust, brought these actions from darkness into light. Nor did they wish these deeds to be revealed that they go unpunished but that they might be avenged and suppressed. The Senate has entrusted the special investigation (*quaestio*) of this matter to me and my colleague.

After the consul's speech, the Senate's decrees were read and a reward announced for informers. Those named by informers were to respond by a certain date and were forbidden to sell or buy anything for the purpose of flight. Failure to appear meant condemnation; aiding of fugitives was forbidden. News of the Senate's decree spread panic throughout Rome and Italy. Many were caught trying to escape. The involvement of both sexes is emphasized: more than seven thousand men and women were said to have been implicated in the conspiracy. Livy records the names of the leaders of the conspiracy, including Minius Cerrinius. Only those who had committed debauchery or murder, or who had given false testimony, forged seals, substituted wills, or committed other frauds were put to death. Those who had merely been initiated were imprisoned. Executions exceeded imprisonments.²¹

Bacchic shrines in Rome and Italy were destroyed, except those that antedated this new form of Bacchism, and official permission had to be sought for establishing new shrines. The number of participants was limited to five, a restriction that would not only have eliminated the danger of public hysteria but also destroyed one of the basic appeals of the ritual, that of mass participation in a ceremony that involved exotic music and dancing.

9.6 Livy 39.18.7-9. Then the consuls were given the task of destroying all the Bacchic shrines, first in Rome and then throughout Italy, except where an ancient altar or image had been consecrated.²² For the future it was decreed that there should be no Bacchic shrines in Rome or in Italy. If any person considered such worship to be traditional or necessary and that it could not be abandoned without incurring a religious obligation (*religio*) and expiation, he had to make a declaration before the urban praetor who would consult the Senate.²³ If he were granted permission at a meeting of the Senate at which no

²¹ Livy 39.17.1-18.6. Prescription of the death penalty indicates treasonous activity and the gravity of the perceived threat.

²² This exemption would apply to such shrines as that of Liber on the Aventine; see n. 3.

²³ *urban praetor*: an elected official who frequently had charge of the city in the absence of the consuls. The stipulation of travel to Rome would have been prohibitive for the majority of people who lived more than a day's distance from Rome.



Bronze copy of Roman Senate's decree suppressing the worship of Bacchus in 186 BCE that was set up in Bruttium in southwest Italy. Courtesy Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

fewer than one hundred members were present, he should offer the sacrifice provided that no more than five people took part in the rites.²⁴ Also there was to be no common fund and no official in charge of the ceremonies or priest.²⁵

The senatorial decree was passed in 186 BCE. The copy that was set up in Bruttium in southwest Italy was later discovered by archaeologists. (see illustration above).

9.7 ILS 18; 511, CIL 1.2.581. The consuls Quintus Marcius, son of Lucius, and Spurius Postumius, son of Lucius, consulted the Senate on 7 October in the temple of Bellona. Present at the writing were Marcus Claudius, son of Marcius, and Lucius Valerius, son of Publius, and Quintus Minucius, son of Gaius.

Concerning the Bacchic shrines they have resolved that the following is to be

²⁴ Obtaining such a dispensation would have been difficult, since senators could easily refuse to complete the quorum of one hundred.

²⁵ The ban on having a fund and an official priest reflects the Senate's fear of any kind of organization that was outside their control.

announced to those who are allies:²⁶

None of them shall have a Bacchic shrine. If there are any persons who say that it is necessary for them to have a Bacchic shrine, they should come to the urban praetor in Rome. The Senate, when it has heard their case, will make a decision, provided that there are no less than one hundred senators present when the matter is under discussion. No man, be he a Roman citizen, of Latin status,²⁷ or an ally, shall be present among female Bacchic worshippers, unless he has appeared before the urban praetor, and he has ordered it in accordance with the will of the Senate, provided that there are no less than one hundred senators present when the matter is under discussion. Decided.

No man is to be a priest. No man or woman is to be an official. Nor is any of them to have a common fund. Nor shall anyone make a man or a woman an official or a pro-official.²⁸ Nor shall anyone hereafter participate in an oath, a vow, a pledge, or promises. Nor shall anyone exchange a pledge of loyalty.²⁹ No one shall conduct the rites in secret, either publicly or privately, or outside the city, unless he has appeared before the urban praetor, and he has ordered it in accordance with the will of the Senate, provided that there are no less than one hundred senators present when the matter is under discussion. Decided.

No one shall perform rites in the presence of more than five persons altogether, both male and female. Nor shall more than two men and three women be present, unless this is in accordance with the will of the urban praetor, as written above.

You are to announce these measures at a public meeting on three successive market days. And, so that you may know the decision of the Senate, that decision is as follows: If there are any persons who have acted contrary to what is written above, the Senate has resolved that they must be tried for a capital offense.³⁰ The Senate has also resolved that it is just that you inscribe this on a bronze plaque and order it to be set up where it can most easily be read. Within ten days of receiving this letter, you shall also ensure the destruction of any existing shrines of Bacchus, other than what is sacred,³¹ as prescribed above.

Social disruption continued in southern Italy for a few years after the Senate's action. In 185 there was a serious slave uprising in Apulia in southeastern Italy.

²⁶ *those who are allies*: Italian communities who were in alliance with Rome but retained their local autonomy.

²⁷ *Latin status*: a status originally granted to allies within Latium, the area close to Rome, that gave greater privileges than the status as ally granted to communities at a greater distance from Rome.

²⁸ The term 'official' (*magistratus*) has political connotations that underscores the Senate's perception of 'conspiracy.' Note also the anticipation implicit in the measure against those who have the intent of appointing an official.

²⁹ The legal precision of these various terms covers all aspects of 'conspiracy.'

³⁰ In imposing the death penalty, the Senate was infringing upon the autonomy of the local magistrates.

³¹ *other than what is sacred*: an allusion to the exception made for the ancient altars or consecrated statues mentioned in Livy 39.18.7 in 9.6.

A praetor conducted an investigation into a conspiracy of shepherds whose brigandage was menacing roads and public pastures (Livy 39.29.8-9). This praetor also completed the Bacchic investigation (Livy 39.41.6 and 40.19.9). In 184 and 181 investigations of alleged poisonings were ordered (Livy 39.38.3 and 40.37.4-9). Also in 181, the praetor Lucius Duronius was ordered to investigate Bacchanalia in Apulia where there was an apparent resurgence of the earlier troubles (Livy 40.19.9-10).

All these events had profound religious, political, social and cultural implications. In treating these outbreaks as a political *coniuratio* and instituting a *quaestio extra ordinem*, the Senate was infringing upon the jurisdiction of the local magistrates in the Italian communities and, in effect, declaring a state of emergency throughout Italy. Outbreaks of new forms of Bacchic worship had thus offered an opportunity for the Senate to reassert the political control it had exercised over Italy during the war against Hannibal. Since we hear no more of social disorder in this area until the slave revolt of Spartacus (73-71 BCE), these repressive measures were apparently successful in controlling, if not suppressing, the more extreme forms of Bacchic worship.

The cult of Isis

In the popular religion of the Hellenistic period, the Egyptian goddess Isis was a multi-faceted deity, being worshipped as the 'mistress of the house of life,' the protector of women and marriage, goddess of maternity and the new-born, guarantor of the fertility of fields and the abundance of harvest, and protector of people both by land and sea. Her mysteries date back to the early third century BCE when the Ptolemies adopted the Egyptian practice of brother-sister marriage, identifying themselves with Isis and Osiris.³² The Ptolemies also introduced the worship of Serapis who was frequently worshipped along with Isis.³³ These two cults became widespread throughout the eastern Mediterranean, particularly in trading areas, and were apparently brought to Campania by Italian merchants in the early first century.

As with the cults of Cybele and of Bacchus, that of Isis seems to have entered Rome during a period of social and political upheaval. Inevitably there was official opposition to a cult that had its own priests, offering through initiation a more personal appeal than the official state cults. Opposition to the cult manifested itself during the politically turbulent years of the so-called First Triumvirate. Orders were given to demolish shrines of Isis in Rome in 59, 58, 53, 50 and 48 BCE, a period when restrictions were also imposed upon political clubs (*collegia*).

Valerius Maximus, writing in the early first century CE, tells of the destruction of shrines in 50 BCE.

9.8 VALERIUS MAXIMUS, FAMOUS WORDS AND DEEDS 1.3.4. When the Senate had decreed that the shrines of Isis and Serapis should be destroyed and none of the

³² *Osiris*: Egyptian consort of Isis, whose Greek counterpart was Dionysus.

³³ *Serapis*: his cult was connected with the dead and thus the underworld.

workmen dared touch them, the consul Aemilius Paullus took off his official robe. Picking up an axe, he struck the doors of the temple.

The construction of a temple to Isis and Serapis was authorised by the Second Triumvirate: Antony, Lepidus, and Octavian. The temple, however, was not built because of Antony's departure for Egypt and his alliance with Cleopatra. After the suicides of Antony and Cleopatra, who had identified themselves as Osiris and Isis, Augustus' opposition to the cult of Isis was only to be expected. Private Isiac worship, however, evidently continued, as is indicated by references to female devotees of Isis in the poems of Ovid, Propertius and Tibullus. In 19 CE the emperor Tiberius banned Egyptian cults in Rome, razing a shrine of Isis and forcing the priests to burn their holy vestments and religious paraphernalia. But in 43 CE the emperor Claudius, a grandson of Antony, officially established the temple of Isis on the Campus Martius.³⁴

Though at first the cult appealed primarily to non-Romans, during the empire it came to have a more universal appeal to men and women of all social classes. As Takacs has noted: 'Since the worship of the Egyptian goddess had neither the frenzied character of the Great Mother cult... nor the emotional outbursts of the Bacchanalia, Isiac worship did not promote behavior that could be considered asocial by Roman standards.... This highly structured cult could attract some of those who questioned the success of Roman cults and, by extension, that of the state. By providing them 'cultic' stability, it kept them from falling outside state accepted norms.'³⁵

In Apuleius' novel *Metamorphoses*, more generally known as *The Golden Ass*, the protagonist Lucius was turned into an ass and later restored to human form. He was then initiated as a priest of Isis, whereupon he invoked Isis in her various aspects.

9.9 APULEIUS, *METAMORPHOSES* 11.25. Holy and eternal protector³⁶ of the human race, you who are ever beneficent in nourishing mortals, offering the sweet affection of a mother to the afflictions of the distressed. Neither day nor the restful night nor even the smallest moment passes without your beneficence: you protect people by land and sea and, scattering the storms of life, you stretch out your saving right hand. With this hand you unravel the threads of the Fates even when they are inextricably entangled. You calm the storms of Fortune and restrain the dangerous movements of the stars. The gods above respect you, those below respect you. You rotate the earth, light the sun, rule the universe and tread Tartarus beneath your heel.³⁷

For you the stars move, the seasons return, the divine powers rejoice, and the elements are your slaves. At your command, the winds blow, the clouds give nourishment, seeds sprout, and seedlings grow. The birds travelling the sky

³⁴ This became the major temple and was within the *pomerium* after its extension by Claudius.

³⁵ Takacs (1995) 30-31.

³⁶ The Latin title *sospitatrix* means protector and thus 'savior.'

³⁷ *Tartarus*: the underworld, abode of the dead.

are in awe of your majesty, so too the wild beasts wandering the mountains, the snakes that glide on the ground, and the monsters that swim in the deep.

Earlier in the work, Apuleius describes a procession of Isis.

9.10 APULEIUS, *METAMORPHOSES* 11.9-11. And now the special procession of the Savior goddess was moving forward. Women radiant in white garments, rejoicing in their varied finery and garlanded with spring flowers, scattered the flowers held in their arms on the ground along the path where the sacred procession was passing....

Then came a large throng of both men and women with lamps, torches, candles, and other kinds of artificial light, propitiating the goddess who is the source of the heavenly stars. Then came charming music, pipes and flutes creating the sweetest melodies. There followed a beautiful choir of the most select boys, in special snow-white vestments, repeating a lovely song that a skillful poet, inspired by the Muses, had set to music....

A large number of people were shouting out, 'Keep the way clear for the sacred procession.' Then the throngs of those initiated into the divine mysteries flowed by, both men and women, of every age and social class, dazzling in their linen vestments of pure white. The women's hair was anointed and covered with a transparent veil. The men's heads were completely shaven and their bald pates shone brightly, earthly stars of the great religion. In unison, with their *sistra* of bronze and silver and even gold, they made a shrill tinkling noise.³⁸

Next came the foremost high priests of the sacred rites, clad in white linen garments wrapped tightly around the chest and reaching down to their feet, as they carried the distinguished emblems of the mightiest gods. The first priest held forth a lamp shining with a bright light The second priest wore a similar vestment but in both hands he carried an altar, that is, 'a source of help,' an appropriate name derived from the helping providence of the supreme goddess.³⁹ A third priest came, holding up a palm-branch with leaves of fine gold and a *caduceus* like that of Mercury.⁴⁰ A fourth displayed an emblem of justice, a deformed left hand, its palm outstretched.⁴¹ ... He also carried a small gold vessel rounded like a breast from which he poured libations of milk. A fifth carried a gold winnowing basket woven from golden twigs, and a sixth carried a two-handled wine jug.⁴²

Immediately after these came gods who deigned to walk with human feet.⁴³ Here was Anubis, awesome messenger of the gods, both those above the earth and those below, his face now black, now gold, raising high his dog's neck. In his left hand he held a *caduceus*, and in his right he brandished a green palm-

³⁸ *sistra* (sing. *sistrum*): rattles that were a peculiar feature of the worship of Isis.

³⁹ For Isis as helper, protector, see n.36.

⁴⁰ *Mercury*: a Roman god, who acted as messenger and so carried a special staff, the *caduceus*.

⁴¹ The precise significance of this is obscure.

⁴² *winnowing basket*: a basket or sieve used for separating grain from chaff.

⁴³ *human feet*: people dressed as gods, representing the various deities.

branch.⁴⁴ Closely on his footsteps followed a cow lifted in an upright posture, representing the fecundity of the goddess who is the parent of us all. One of the priesthood carried it on his shoulders with proud and rhythmic steps. Another carried a box holding the secret things that concealed within it the mysteries of the glorious religion. Still another held in his blessed arms the revered image of the highest deity. It was not shaped like a farm animal, or a bird, or a wild animal, or even a human, inspiring reverence by a clever discovery and its very strangeness, an ineffable symbol of a deeper sanctity that must be cloaked in silence....

At this point in the narrative Lucius eats a rose carried by one of the priests and is miraculously restored to his human form. The priest proclaims that the transformation was the work of Isis, the kindly and compassionate goddess. Lucius joins the procession, and is later initiated into her rites.

9.11 APULEIUS, *METAMORPHOSES* 11.22-24. The courteous aged priest took my right hand and led me to the very doors of the spacious temple. After the ritual of the opening of the temple had been celebrated and the morning sacrifice performed, he brought out from the hidden part of the temple certain books written in unknown characters. Some of them conveyed, through the shapes of all kinds of animals, abridged expressions of liturgical language; others were protected from being read by curious profane readers since the tops of the letters were knotted and curled into the shape of a wheel and intertwined like the tendrils of a vine. From these writings, the priest indicated to me the preparations necessary for my initiation....

Since the occasion now demanded it, as the priest said, he led me with an escort of initiates to the nearby baths and submitted me to the customary ablution. Then, praying for the forgiveness of the gods, he cleansed me with a sprinkling of the purest water. When he had taken me back to the temple in the afternoon, he placed me right in front of the feet of the goddess, giving me certain secret instructions which are too sacred to be revealed. One command, however, he pronounced clearly for all to serve as a witness, ordering me to curb my desire for food for ten consecutive days, abstaining from animal flesh and wine.

I duly maintained this fast with reverent restraint. Finally that day arrived which had been set for my pledge to the goddess. The setting sun brought on the evening star when, behold, throngs of initiates poured in from all directions, honoring me with various gifts, in accordance with their ancient rite. Then, when all the uninitiated had been removed afar, the priest dressed me in a new linen garment, took my hand, and led me into the inmost part of the sanctuary.

Zealous reader, perhaps you are anxious to ask what was said and what was done there. I would tell if it were lawful to say, and you would learn all, if it were lawful for you to hear. But both ears and tongue would then incur equal guilt, the latter from their impious chatter, the former from their rash curiosity.

⁴⁴ *Anubis*: an Egyptian god who was portrayed with the head of a dog or jackal. He, like Mercury, was a messenger; hence the *caduceus*, see n. 40.

I will not torture you with further anguish since your suspense is probably of a religious nature. Listen then, but believe, for what I say is true.

I approached the boundary of death and, after treading on the threshold of Proserpina,⁴⁵ I was carried through all the elements and then returned. In the middle of the night, I saw the sun flashing with brilliant light. I came face to face with the gods who dwell above the earth and those who dwell below, and I worshipped them being close at hand. See, I have told you things which, though you have heard them, you must fail to understand. Therefore, I shall recount only what can be communicated to the understanding of the uninitiated without incurring guilt.

When morning came and the solemn rites had been completed, I came forth wearing twelve shawls as a sign of my consecration, a garb that was indeed most sacred. I'm under no obligation not to mention it because many people who were present on that occasion saw it. I was ordered to stand on a wooden dais that stood in the middle of the temple, in front of the goddess' statue. I attracted attention because of my tunic which, although it was only of linen, was elaborately embroidered.... In my right hand I carried a torch blazing with flames and my head was garlanded with a lovely crown of shining palm with leaves jutting out like rays. When I had been adorned like the sun and set up in the guise of a statue, suddenly the curtains were opened and people wandered in to gaze at me.

Then I celebrated the festal day of my birth and initiation, a delicious feast and a merry party. And the third day, too, was celebrated with a similar ceremonial ritual. There was a sacred meal and my initiation was duly consummated.⁴⁶

Minucius Felix, a Christian writer of the third century CE, comments on various aspects of the cult of Isis.

9.12 MINUCIUS FELIX, *OCTAVIUS* 23.1. Consider the sacred rites of the mystery religions. You will find sorrowful deaths, fates, funerals, grief, and lamentation for the pitiful gods. Isis, along with the Dog-headed Anubis and her bald priests, mourns for her dead son, grieving and searching for him. Her pitiful worshippers beat their breasts and share the sorrows of the unhappy mother. When the boy is found, Isis rejoices, the priests exult, and Anubis exults in his discovery. Year after year, without fail, they lose what they will find, and they find what they have lost. Isn't that ridiculous, either to mourn for the object you worship, or worship the object you mourn for? Yet these Egyptian rites are now Roman.

The cult of Mithras

Another mystery religion which gained currency throughout the Roman world from about 100 CE is the cult of Mithras, which apparently derives

⁴⁵ *Proserpina*: goddess of the underworld, wife of Pluto. The initiation probably represents a spiritual death and rebirth.

⁴⁶ Communal meals were a part of Isiac worship. He remains a few days longer but before departing makes a prayer to the goddess; see 9.9.

from Mithra, an Indo-Iranian divinity who was a god of compact (the literal meaning of his name), cattle-herding and the dawn light. Roman Mithras was a sun god, invoked as the invincible sun god Mithras, bull-killer and cattle-thief. The god is represented as a distinctive figure wearing a Phrygian cap and Persian trousers. The sanctuaries (Mithraea) were the antithesis of the typical temple, being of modest size and resembling caves that were decorated to represent the cosmos. Regularly depicted in these sanctuaries was Mithras slaying a bull.

The precise origins and diffusion of the cult are difficult to discern because of the paucity of evidence. There are very few literary references, the evidence being mostly archaeological: meeting places of the cultists, the largest number of which have been found in Rome itself, inscriptions and sculptural representations that are often difficult to interpret. The question is whether the cult developed from Zoroastrianism or whether it was a western creation with Persian elements. One suggestion is that the cult was acquired from the Hellenized near east and came to Rome as a result of Roman campaigns in Anatolia and Armenia during the reign of Nero. It was open only to men, was especially popular with the military, and does not seem to have appealed to the upper classes. Initiates met in small groups, meeting for a ritual meal. When the group expanded beyond a certain size, a new group would be organized to preserve the intimacy of the individual community. Comparison is often made with the organization and ritual of Masonic Lodges.

There were seven grades of initiation, each of which was under the protection of one of the planets: Raven (Mercury), Bridegroom (Venus), Soldier (Mars), Lion (Jupiter), Persian (Moon), Courier of the Sun (Sun), Father (Saturn). This hierarchy is illustrated in a mosaic on the floor of a sanctuary at Ostia, a dedication by one Felicissimus.⁴⁷

The Christian writer known as Pseudo-Augustine mocks the Mithraic initiation ceremonies.

9.13 PSEUDO-AUGUSTINE, *QUESTIONS ON THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS* 114.

Moreover, what about the ludicrous performance that they experience blindfold in the Cave? They are blindfolded in case their eyes shudder at being so disgustingly degraded. Some, like a bird, flap their wings, imitating the cry of a raven. Some roar like lions. Some have their hands bound by chicken-gut and are cast over pits full of water, while someone who calls himself the 'liberator' comes up with a sword and breaks this gut.

Tertullian describes the ritual for initiation into the grade of soldier.

9.14 TERTULLIAN, *THE CROWN OF MARTYRDOM* 15.3-4. The initiation takes place in a Cave, a veritable camp of darkness... a garland [*corona*, garland or crown] is offered to the novice on a sword, a kind of mockery of martyrdom. It is then fitted on his head, but he is instructed to put his hand in the way and cast it from his head, transferring it, if possible, to his shoulder, saying that Mithras

is his garland. And from then on he never wears a garland and this is the mark of his initiation, whenever he is put to the test at the oath-taking, and is immediately recognized as a soldier of Mithras, if he casts aside the garland, if he says that the garland lies in his god.

Several Mithraic texts have been found painted onto the walls of the Mithraeum below the church of Santa Prisca in Rome. Beneath a fresco depicting the seven grades of initiation is the following:

9.15 VERMASEREN AND VAN ESSEN (1965) 168-9. Hail to the Sun-runners under the protection of Sun. [Hail to the Persians under the protection of Moon]. [Hail to Lions] under the protection of Jupiter. Hail to the fierce? Soldiers [under the protection of Mars]. Hail to the Male brides under the protection of Venus.

The following couplet may be part of Mithraic liturgy and illustrates the connection of the Lions with fire, purification and mediation.

9.16 VERMASEREN AND VAN ESSEN (1965) 224. Accept, Father, accept in holiness the incense-burning Lions, through whom we offer incense, through whom we ourselves are consumed.

⁴⁷ For illustrations of the mosaic and Mithras the bull-slayer, see *BNP* 2. 88-91 and 306-7.