

Religions of Rome

VOLUME 2

A Sourcebook

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6 Sacrifices

Animal sacrifice, the ritual killing of an animal and the offering to the gods of parts of its body, burnt on the altar, was a (perhaps *the*) central element of Roman ritual. But its forms were more complex and varied than that simple description suggests; and it carried a range of symbolic meanings that extended far beyond merely 'honouring the gods'. This chapter starts from a reconstruction of the 'ideal' form of Roman public sacrifice (6.1), and the record of sacrifices undertaken on one particular occasion by a group of official Roman priests (6.2); and it then considers various aspects of private sacrifice (6.3) and 'bloodless' offerings to the gods, not involving animal slaughter (6.4). The second half of the chapter turns to irregular, extraordinary or transgressive forms of the ritual: the so-called 'Sacred Spring' (6.5), human sacrifice (6.6) and the *taurobolium* in the cult of Magna Mater (6.7). The final section (6.8) focuses on the debates over sacrifice in the conflict between paganism and Christianity.

See further: for general theories of sacrifice (focused largely on Greek material), Burkert (1983); Price (1984) 227–31*; Hamerton-Kelly (1987)*; Detienne and Vernant (1989).

6.1 The stages of sacrifice

Traditional Roman animal sacrifice was a lengthy process, involving much more than the killing of the sacrificial victim. There were six main stages in the ritual: (a) the procession (*pompa*) of victims to the altar; (b) the prayer of the main officiant at the sacrifice, and the offering of wine, incense etc. (as a 'libation') at the altar; (c) the pouring of wine and meal (*mola salsa*) over the animal's head by the main sacrificant; (d) the killing of the animal by slaves; (e) the examination of the entrails for omens; (f) the burning of parts of the animal on the altar, followed normally (except in some cases where the whole animal was burnt) by a banquet taken by the participants from the rest of the meat. The following illustrations, drawn from various Roman monuments, offer a composite view of these different stages.

See further: on the stages of sacrifice, Warde Fowler (1911) 179–91; Ogilvie (1969) 41–52*; Scullard (1981) 22–5*; Scheid (1988); on the visual images and their interpretation, Ryberg (1955); R. L. Gordon (1990b) 202–19*.



- (a) Small frieze from inner altar of the Augustan Ara Pacis (see 4.3) (height, 0.30 m.; width, 2.15 m.). Note the distinction in dress here, and throughout these images, between the major officiants of the sacrifice, fully clad in togas, and the bare-chested slave attendants (*victimarii* and *popae*) whose job it was to introduce and eventually kill the animals. See Vol. 1, fig. 7.1 'Outside a military camp', for an illustration (from Trajan's column) of a sacrificial procession in a military camp.
- (b) Panel from triumphal arch of Marcus Aurelius, Rome, A.D. 176 (height, 3.14 m.; width, 2.10 m.). Beside the emperor offering a libation at the altar stand an attendant (*camillus*) with incense box and a musician (see 4.3b, n.1).
- (c) Panel from the 'Altar of Scipio Orfitus', Rome, A.D. 295 (height, 0.77 m.; width, 0.59 m.). The technical term for this part of the ritual (*immolare*) was also used for the act of animal sacrifice as a whole. But despite its importance as a stage in the process, this sculpture is almost unique in offering a visual representation of the scene.

(d)



(e)



(f)



(d) Frieze from the arch of Septimius Severus, Lepcis Magna (North Africa), A.D. 203 (height, 1.72 m.; width of whole panel, 7.50 m.). Note the distance between this act of killing and the main officiants – Julia Domna (wife of the emperor Septimius Severus, at the far left, stretching out her hand), and the emperor himself (now lost, standing opposite his wife to the left of this scene). See Vol. 1, 350–1.

(e) Part of a marble relief from Trajan's Forum, Rome, middle of the second century A.D. (reproduced on a larger scale at 7.4d). (Height of whole, originally c. 3 m.; of this section, 2.03 m.; width, 4.05 m.)

(f) Fragment of a first-century A.D. marble relief from Rome (height, 0.49 m.; width, 0.50 m.) – probably showing the Vestal Virgins at the post-sacrificial meal (our only surviving visual image of a part of the ritual commonly referred to in written documents – see, e.g., 4.5).

6.2 A record of sacrifice

The inscribed record of the rituals of the Arval Brothers includes numerous accounts of sacrifices, performed on a variety of occasions – not only those carried out at the annual festival of the Arvals' goddess, Dea Dia (see 4.5), but also regular sacrifices 'for the well-being' (*pro salute*) of the emperor and his family, as well as those commemorating particular events affecting the priesthood or the emperor (military victory, for example, or the birth of imperial children). Here they record a series of 'expiatory' sacrifices offered in A.D. 224, when repair work after lightning damage in the grove demanded that several trees of the sacred grove be uprooted and destroyed.

See further: Vol. 1, 194–6; Scheid (1990) 285–676. Compare also the record of sacrifices in the inscription of the Saecular Games (5.7b).

CIL VI.2107, lines 2–13; *ILS* 5048

Seven days before the Ides of November <7 November>, the Arval Brothers assembled in the grove of Dea Dia on the Campanian Road <*via Campana*>, at the fifth milestone, on the instructions of Caius Porcius Priscus, the master.¹ And there they made sacrifice because in a violent storm some trees in the sacred grove of Dea Dia were struck by lightning and burnt; and in expiation for uprooting those trees, striking them with iron² and consuming them in fire, for grinding down their remains and then for replacing them with others, and for initiating the work and rebuilding altars for the occasion, sacred to Dea Dia – in expiation for these things a purificatory sacrifice was carried out with the offering of a full-grown pig, ram and bull <*suovetaurilia*>.³ Then in front of the temple cows,⁴ their horns bound with gold, were sacrificed to Dea Dia – total 2; then at the altars built for the occasion sacrifices were made to the gods as listed below: to Janus Pater, rams – 2; to Jupiter, wethers⁵ – 2; to Mars Pater Ultor, rams – total 2; to deity, male or female,⁶ wethers – 2; to the spirit of Dea Dia, sheep – total 2; to the virgin deities, sheep – total 2; to the attendant deities, wethers – total 2; to the Lares, wethers – total 2; to the mother of the Lares, sheep – total 2; to Fons <the god of springs>, wethers – total 2; to Flora, sheep – total 2; to Summanus Pater, black wethers – 2; to Vesta Mater, sheep – 2; to Vesta⁷ of the gods and goddesses, sheep – 2; likewise to Adolenda and Coinquenda,⁸ sheep – 2; and, before the shrine of the Caesars,⁹ to the spirit of our lord, the emperor Severus Alexander, a bull with gilded horns; likewise to the *divi*, totalling 20¹⁰, wethers – 20.

1. The master was the head of the college; see 4.5 n.1.

2. Iron was a material normally strictly forbidden in the sacred area.

3. See 6.3a.

4. Female deities regularly received female victims; male deities received male victims.

5. That is, castrated rams.

6. This formula ensured that any deity who might have been forgotten, or whose identity was uncertain, was included in the sacrifice.

7. The surviving text of the inscription appears meaningless here. 'Vesta' is an attempt to make some sense of what is on the stone.

8. Adolenda was the deity who presided over the burning of trees; Coinquenda over the felling of trees. For deities of this type, see further 2.2c.
9. The Caesareum (see 4.5).
10. This includes most of the deified emperors (and members of their family), stretching back to the deified Julius Caesar. It probably excludes such minor figures as the infant daughter of Nero (deified A.D. 63). See 2.8; 9.2; 9.3b.

6.3 Private sacrifice

Sacrifice was also a ritual performed privately, with or without the aid of a priest. These extracts illustrate the wide range of contexts in which the private ritual played a part, and the wide range of attitudes which it could evoke – from humble piety to despair at its expense.

See further: on the contexts for, and ritual of, private sacrifice, Orr (1978)*.

6.3a 'Suovetaurilia' on the farm

In this passage of his handbook *On Agriculture* Cato describes the formula of prayer to be used when purifying farmland with a *suovetaurilia* – the sacrifice together of a pig (*sus*), ram (*ovis*) and bull (*taurus*). The *suovetaurilia* was commonly associated with both private and public rituals of purification – including the purification of an army before battle, or of the city itself after a prodigy.

See further: Vol. 1, 49; Dumézil (1970) 237–40 (on Indian parallels for the *suovetaurilia*); Scullard (1981) 84, 124–5*.

Cato, *On Agriculture* 141

This is the procedure prescribed for purifying the land. Order the *suovetaurilia* to be driven round the land, using these words: 'With the good will of the gods, and so that the result may be favourable, I bid you, Manius,¹ to take care to purify my farm, my land, my ground with this *suovetaurilia*, over whatever area you judge that they should be driven or carried around.' Pray first to Janus and Jupiter with an offering of wine, then speak as follows: 'Mars Pater,² I pray and beseech you to be favorable and kind to me, my house and our household; for this reason I have bidden a *suovetaurilia* to be driven around my land, ground and farm, that you may prevent, ward off and avert diseases, visible and invisible, dearth and destruction, ruin and storm, and that you permit the crops, corn, vineyards and plantations to grow and flourish, and that you keep safe the shepherds and their sheep, and grant good health and strength to me, my house and our household. In respect of these things, in respect of purifying my farm, ground and land, and performing the purification, as I have said, be honoured³ by the sacrifice of the suckling victims of this *suovetaurilia*;⁴ Mars Pater, in respect of the same things, be honoured by the suckling victims of this *suovetaurilia*. So also pile up the offerings with the knife and see that the cake is close at hand;⁵ then bring up the victims. When you sacrifice the pig, the lamb and the calf, the words prescribed are as follows: 'In respect of

these things, be honoured by the sacrifice of a *suovetaurilia*.' It is forbidden to call Mars, or the lamb, or the calf by name.⁶ If no favourable omens come out at all, make this prayer: 'Mars Pater, if nothing in the sacrifice of the suckling victims of this *suovetaurilia* has pleased you, I offer you this *suovetaurilia* in expiation.' If there is doubt about one or two of the animals, make this prayer: 'Mars Pater, insofar as you were not pleased with that pig, I offer you this pig in expiation.'⁷

1. Manius may refer to a specific slave or servant – or may simply be a common name ('John Smith') intended to stand for anyone. In any case, Cato envisages here (as in the public ritual) that the officiant at the sacrifice recites the prayer, while a man of lower status actually conducts (and kills) the animals.
2. The *suovetaurilia* was regularly offered to Mars.
3. The Latin word translated 'be honoured' is '*macte*', a word commonly used in prayers. It is related to the word *magnus* ('great'), but its exact meaning is uncertain.
4. Cato here prescribes that it is the young of each species that is to be sacrificed – in contrast to the full-grown (and no doubt more expensive) animals specified in 6.2.
5. The precise instructions here are: (a) to make a *strues*, a pile of small offering cakes; and (b) to have at hand a *fertum*, a different type of offering cake.
6. The Latin text here is uncertain. An alternative version reads: 'It is forbidden to call *the* pig, or the lamb, or the calf by name.'
7. Cato allows for the possibility that *all* the victims will give unfavourable omens, or only one or two.

6.3b The pimp's sacrifice

Here Plautus presents the comic picture of a pimp who has sacrificed six times to Venus, but failed to get good omens. The pimp plays on the idea that the sacrificial meat is the food of the gods – and he abuses the diviner who discovered the bad omens.

See further: on the comic role of the failed sacrifice, Henderson (1994); for other aspects of private divination, see 11.7.

Plautus, *Little Carthaginian* 449–66

May the gods, one and all, damn the pimp who from this day forth ever sacrifices a single victim to Venus, or offers her a single grain of incense. For damn me – here I am, my gods in a dreadful rage, six times today I've sacrificed a lamb, but I haven't been able to do one sacrifice that suits Venus. So, seeing I can't get good omens, I've gone straight off in a rage myself – telling them not to cut off the gods' share of the meat.¹ That's the neat way I've caught her out, that greedy Venus. She wouldn't let enough be enough – so I called it a day myself. That's my way of doing things. That's the kind of guy I am. And it's bound to make the rest of those gods and goddesses a lot more easy to please, a lot less greedy – when they learn how the pimp caught Venus out. And that entrail man (*haruspex*) – not worth a penny – he really was worthy of the goddess, when he said that all the innards foretold disaster for me, bankruptcy and . . . the gods out to get me. How could you believe what *he* told you, about gods or men?

1. That is, once ill omens were declared, he did not proceed to burn the meat for the gods.

6.3c *The expense of sacrifice*

Sacrificial animals cost money. Here in a third-century A.D. inscription from the Roman province of Asia (in the region of Lydia, in modern Turkey), a woman records on an inscribed stone (a 'stele') that she could not afford the bull she had promised to sacrifice to the god.

See further: Lane (1970) 51–2.

E. N. Lane, *Corpus monumentorum religionis Dei Menis* I (EPRO 19, Leiden, 1971) no. 50

To Men Axiotennos.¹ Tatiane, daughter of Herpos, vowing a bull on behalf of her brothers <and/or sisters> and being heard,² but not being able to pay for the bull, asked the god, and he consented³ to accept the stele. In the year 320 <A.D. 235/6>, the tenth of the month Panemos.⁴

1. Men was, in origin, a Phrygian lunar god – here given the epithet Axiotennos (probably referring to his connection with a place called Axiotte).
2. That is, whatever she had requested in her prayer had been granted.
3. It is not clear how the god gave his consent – perhaps in a dream. The stele is decorated with an image of the god, a pair of lions and a large bull (illustrated in *Corpus monumentorum religionis Dei Menis* and Lane (1970) pl. VIb).
4. Dates are given according to the local calendar; the year is dated from Sulla's settlement of the region in the first century B.C.

6.4 *Sacrifice without animals*

Sacrifice did not always involve the shedding of blood. Sometimes wine, incense, cakes or fruits alone were offered to the gods.

See further: Williams (1969) 119–22*.

6.4a *Before animal sacrifice*

The simple libation of grain and salt was commonly regarded by the Romans as the earliest form of offering to the gods, before the 'invention' of animal sacrifice. Here Ovid evokes the primitive rustic world of earliest Rome, when the gods were satisfied with just vegetable offerings; and he gives a mythical account of the origin of animal sacrifice.

Ovid, *Fasti* 1.337–53.

Long ago it was grain and the sparkling pinch of pure salt that served to win for humans the favour of the gods. Not yet had any foreign ship, speeding over the ocean waves, brought us myrrh distilled from the bark; nor yet had the Euphrates sent us its incense, nor India its spice; nor then were the threads of red saffron known to man.¹ The altar would smoke, content with just the scent of juniper; and the laurel would burn up, crackling loud. If there was anyone who could add violets to the garlands woven of

meadow flowers – that man was surely rich. And the knife that now lays bare the innards of the bull, slain in sacrifice, had then no work to do in sacred rites. The first to take pleasure in the blood of the greedy sow was Ceres, avenging with rightful slaughter of the guilty animal the harm that had been done to her crops; for she discovered that in early spring a bristly sow with its snout had uprooted the milky seedlings from their soft furrows. The sow paid the penalty.²

1. All features of later Roman 'luxury'.
2. That is, was killed in sacrifice.

6.4b *Sacrificial cakes*

Cato's handbook on agriculture includes a recipe for making sacrificial cake (*libum*).

Cato, *On Agriculture* 75

How to make sacrificial cake. Crush two pounds of cheese in a mixing bowl; when that is thoroughly done, add a pound of wheat flour or, if you want the cake to be lighter, just half a pound of fine flour and mix well with the cheese. Add an egg and mix together well. Make it into a loaf, put it on leaves and bake slowly on a warm hearth under a crock.

6.5 The season of the 'Sacred Spring' (*Ver Sacrum*)

The practice of Roman sacrifice sometimes took other, much more elaborate, forms. The 'Sacred Spring' was believed by the Romans to have been an ancient Italian ritual undertaken in times of crisis: it vowed as a sacrifice to the gods all that was born during the following spring (including human offspring, who were not put to death, but forced to leave their native land when they reached adulthood). The idea of the 'Sacred Spring' may well have been largely a romantic, antiquarian construction by the later inhabitants of Italy, speculating on their earliest traditions and rituals. But whatever its primitive form, the Romans self-consciously 'revived' the ritual in the middle of the crisis of their war against Hannibal.

In this passage, Livy describes the procedure by which the 'Sacred Spring' was vowed in 217 B.C. The sacrifice of the animals took place in 195 B.C., twenty-one years after the vow (Livy, *History* XXXIII.44).

See further: Vol. 1, 80; Heurgon (1957); E. T. Salmon (1967) 35–6; Dumézil (1970) 208, 475–6*.

Livy, *History* XXII.10

After these resolutions by the senate, the *praetor* consulted the college <of *pontifices*>. Lucius Cornelius Lentulus, the *pontifex maximus*, gave his opinion that first of all the people's assembly should be consulted on the question of a 'Sacred Spring'; for it could

not be vowed against the wish of the people. The question was put to the assembly according to this formula: 'Do you wish and ordain it that this action be carried out as follows?' If the Roman state, its people, the *Quirites*, is preserved for the next five years¹ (as I would wish it kept safe) in these wars – that is, the war of the Roman people with the Carthaginian people and the wars with the Gauls on this side of the Alps² – let the Roman people, the *Quirites*, offer up to Jupiter, as an unalterable sacrifice, what the spring produces from the flocks of swine, sheep, goats, cattle, whatever is not already consecrated, starting from the day determined by the senate and people.³ Let him who will perform the sacrifice perform it at whatever time, by whatever form of ritual he wishes; however it is done, let it be deemed to have been done correctly. If an animal that ought to be sacrificed dies, let it count as outside the vow and let no guilt attach to the sacrificer; if anyone harms or kills an animal unawares, let it not be a crime; if anyone steals an animal, let no guilt attach to the people nor to him from whom it was stolen; if he sacrifices on a 'black day'⁴ unawares, let it be deemed to have been done correctly; whether by night or day, whether a slave or a free man performs the sacrifice, let it be deemed to have been done correctly; if it is performed before the senate and people have ordered it to be performed, by that action let the people be absolved and free of obligation.⁵

1. The original intention seems to have been to carry out the Sacred Spring five years hence.
2. Not only the war against the Carthaginian, Hannibal, but also against the Gauls of north Italy who had joined Hannibal.
3. Although the most primitive form of this vow is assumed to apply also to the human offspring, this vow includes only the animal offspring of the season.
4. 'Black days' were days of ill omen, on which it was normally forbidden to conduct public business. They partly overlapped with the category of *dies nefasti* (see 3.2); but 'black days' were also particularly associated with the anniversaries of major disasters suffered by the Roman state.
5. Note the legalistic precision of the formula, and its attempts to foresee and circumvent those circumstances in which fulfilment of the vow might be impossible. Despite these, the sacrifice of 195 B.C. was repeated in 194 B.C., because of some flaw in the performance of the ritual (Livy, *History* XXXIV.44).

6.6 Human sacrifice

Human sacrifice was one of the most powerful symbols of the Roman sacrificial system. On the one hand, it was a practice regarded by the Romans as utterly foreign – a distinctive marker of barbarian ritual and of all that was *not-Roman* (see 11.3). On the other hand, despite that, there were particular occasions on which various forms of ritual killing had a recognized place *within* Roman religion and tradition.

See further: Schwenn (1915); (for comparative Greek material) Henrichs (1981).

6.6a 'Devotio' – a general vows himself to the gods

The legendary tradition of early Roman history provided several examples of a general vowing his own life to the gods in return for Roman victory. Whether or not any of these incidents ever actually took place, this practice of self-sacrifice (*devotio*) came to be regarded as the ultimate example of a general's heroism and piety (both to his city and to the gods).

Livy here describes the *devotio* in 340 B.C. of Decius Mus, whose family was particularly associated with the ritual – both his son and grandson being said to have made the same vow. Livy's account shows how such *self*-sacrifice could be seen as a version of the 'standard' sacrificial ritual.

See further: Vol. 1, 35; Warde Fowler (1911) 206–9*; Dumézil (1970) 93–6; Versnel (1976); (1981b); Janssen (1981).

Livy, *History* VIII.9.1–10

Before leading their men into battle,¹ the Roman consuls offered sacrifice. It is said that the *haruspex* pointed out to Decius that the lobe of the liver was damaged where it referred to his own fortunes, but that in other respects the victim was acceptable to the gods; Manlius² sacrifice, though, had been perfectly successful.³ 'All is well,' replied Decius, 'if my colleague has obtained favourable omens.' The troops were drawn up in the formation already described and they advanced into battle, Manlius commanding the right wing, Decius the left. At first, the battle was fought with equal strength and equal spirit on each side. But after a while the first line of Roman soldiers on the left failed to withstand the Latin onslaught and fell back on the second line. In this confusion Decius, the consul, shouted out to Marcus Valerius⁴ 'The help of the gods, Marcus Valerius, is needed here. Come then, state *pontifex* of the Roman people, dictate the formula that I may devote myself to save the legions.' The *pontifex* instructed him to don the *toga praetexta*, to veil his head⁵ and, with one hand held out from under his toga touching his chin, to stand on a spear laid under his feet and speak as follows: 'Janus, Jupiter, Mars Pater, Quirinus,⁶ Bellona, Lares, divine Novensiles, divine Indigetes,⁷ gods whose power extends over us and our enemies, divine Manes,⁸ I pray to you, I revere you, I beg your favour and beseech you that you advance the strength and success of the Roman people, the *Quirites*, and afflict the enemies of the Roman people with terror, fear and death. As I have pronounced in these words, so on behalf of the state, the Roman people, the *Quirites*, on behalf of the army, the legions, and auxiliaries of the Roman people, the *Quirites*, I devote the legions and auxiliaries of the enemy along with myself, to the divine Manes and to Earth.'

(9.9) He recited this prayer, then instructed *lictors* to go to Titus Manlius and to tell his colleague straightaway that he had devoted himself on behalf of the army. He himself, tying his toga in the Gabine knot,⁹ leapt fully armed onto his horse and plunged into the midst of the enemy. He was clear to see from both sides of the battle, a sight more divine

than human, as if he had been sent from heaven to expiate all the anger of the gods and turn disaster away from his own people towards the enemy.

1. Against the Latins.
2. Titus Manlius Torquatus, Decius' colleague in the consulship.
3. For this procedure of the *haruspex*, see 7.4.
4. A *pontifex* – who probably accompanied the Roman army to offer religious advice or conduct rites.
5. Decius dresses as if conducting a sacrifice.
6. Note the grouping of Jupiter, Mars and Quirinus; see 1.3.
7. The functions of the Novensiles (elsewhere Novensides) and Indigetes are not known; Wissowa (1912) thought the Novensides were new, the Indigetes native gods, but this distinction is now abandoned.
8. Gods of the underworld.
9. A particular way of wearing the toga, common in religious ritual – a practice reputed to have derived from the Italian town of Gabii.

6.6b *Sacrifice of Gauls and Greeks*

On three occasions in the later Republic (in 228, 216 and 113 B.C.) two Gauls and two Greeks were buried alive in the Forum Boarium (Cattle Market) of the city of Rome – on the instructions of the Sibylline Books (see 1.8; 2.6c; 7.5). Later Romans were puzzled by this kind of 'sacrifice', which seemed to them so flagrantly at odds with 'normal' Roman practice; and modern scholars have also debated the significance of the ritual without reaching agreement. Interpretation is difficult because whereas invasions by Gauls occurred near the times of all three burial-rituals, there is no reason to connect Greeks with any of these incidents. On two occasions, however, in 216 and 113, the ritual burial followed shortly after (and seems to be related to) the discovery of unchastity among the Vestal Virgins (see 8.4a). In this passage the Greek writer Plutarch discusses the apparent inconsistencies of Roman attitudes to human sacrifice, as well as the events of 113 and their connection with the Vestal scandal.

See further: Vol. 1, 80–2; Dumézil (1970) 449–50*; Briquel (1981); Cornell (1981)*; Fraschetti (1981); Eckstein (1982); Porte (1984); Briquel (1986); on the religious-historical background to the incident of 113, Rawson (1974).

Plutarch, *Roman Questions* 83

Why was it that, when the Romans discovered that a barbarian tribe called the Bletonesii¹ had sacrificed a human being to the gods, they sent for the leaders of the tribe, intending to punish them, but when it became clear that the tribe had acted in accordance with some native custom, they set the leaders free, though forbade the practice for the future? Yet the Romans themselves, not many years before, had buried alive two men and two women in the place known as the 'Forum Boarium', two Greeks and two Gauls. It certainly seems odd that they should do this, while censuring the barbarians on the grounds that they were acting against divine law.

Did they think it impious to sacrifice human beings to the gods, but necessary to sacrifice them to the spirits?² Or did they think that men who did this by tradition and custom did wrong, while they themselves acted according to the instructions of the Sibylline Books? For it is said that a young woman, a virgin called Helvia, was struck by lightning as she rode a horse, and that the horse was found lying stripped of all its trappings, and the woman herself was found stripped too – her tunic pulled up above her private parts as if on purpose, her shoes, rings and headdress scattered in different directions, her tongue sticking right out from her mouth. The soothsayers³ declared that this was a dreadful disgrace for the virgin priestesses which would become notorious; and that some outrage would extend to the knights also. Then a barbarian slave of one of the knights laid information against three of the Vestal Virgins, Aemilia and Licinia and Marcia, saying that they had all been corrupted around the same time and for a long period had been sleeping with men; one of these men was Vetutius Barrus, the master of the informer. The women were convicted and punished;⁴ but as it was such an appalling business, it was decided that the priests should consult the Sibylline Books. They say that oracles were discovered, prophesying disaster and (in order to avert what impended) prescribing that two Greeks and two Gauls⁵ should be offered to strange foreign spirits, buried alive on the spot.

1. A Spanish tribe. The incident may be associated with Publius Licinius Crassus, governor of Further Spain 96–93 B.C. In his consulship (97 B.C.), a senatorial decree was issued forbidding human sacrifice.
2. He suggests a distinction between the gods, in the strictest sense, and other, lesser divinities or 'semi-divinities'.
3. The incident is treated as a prodigy. See 7.3.
4. For the punishment of Vestals, see 8.4a.
5. The reasons for this particular combination of nationalities have been much disputed. In the most general terms it is clear that Rome's good relations with the gods are being restored by the sacrifice of two pairs of (potential) enemies – but it is far less clear why precisely it should be Gauls and Greeks.

6.6c *Accusations of human sacrifice*

Whatever the Roman traditions of human sacrifice, to accuse someone at Rome of having sacrificed a person rather than an animal was to accuse them of having broken all norms of proper civilized *Roman* behaviour. So, for example, Romans accused the Christians of the sacrifice of babies (see 11.11d); Druids and magicians were assumed to have practised human sacrifice (11.3; 11.4) and here the third-century emperor Elagabalus (see 8.5c) is characterized as a human sacrificer – a symbol of his (supposed) life of depravity.

See further: Optendrenk (1969) 65–70; Frey (1989) 34–42 (both assuming that there is a basis of fact in the accusations – for the fictional character of this biography, see Browning (1982), 724–7). Further bibliography is given at 8.5c.

Augustan History, *Life of Elagabalus* 8

He also slaughtered human victims, choosing for this purpose boys of noble birth and fine appearance from the whole of Italy – only those who had both their parents still alive, so that (I suppose) the sorrow (as it was suffered by both father and mother) should be the greater.¹ In fact, all kinds of magicians attended him and performed sacrifice every day. He would urge them on and give thanks to the gods for the goodwill they showed – so he thought – to these men; while at the same time he would inspect the children's entrails and torture his victims according to his own native rites.²

1. Perhaps rather to be understood as a parody of the demands made in some Roman religious rituals that the child attendants should have both mother and father still alive. See, e.g., 5.7b lines 147ff.
2. Elagabalus originated in Syria – and was a devotee of the Syrian god Elagabal.

6.7 *The taurobolium* in the rituals of Magna Mater

The rules of traditional Roman sacrifice can in some respects be seen as a 'code' – which might be altered or subverted to give different 'messages'. So, in contrast to the complete transgression represented by human sacrifice, some cults marked out their difference from the Roman norm by parading a slightly different form of animal sacrifice. This was the case with the bloody rite of the *taurobolium* (bull-slaying) in the cult of Magna Mater.

See further: Vol. 1, 384; Rutter (1968); Duthoy (1969); Vermaseren (1977a) 101–7*; Thomas (1984) 1522–5*; Sfameni Gasparro (1985) 107–18; Turcan (1989) 55–8, 65–8.

6.7a *The blood-drenched sacrificant*

The main contrast between traditional civic sacrifice and the ritual of *taurobolium* lay in the role of the principal sacrificant himself: in the traditional sacrifice he remained 'clean', separated from the act of killing which was in the hands of slave attendants (see 6.1); in the *taurobolium* the sacrificant was drenched with the blood of the bull as it was slain. This passage is the only detailed surviving account of a *taurobolium* – though it is written from an explicitly Christian propagandist perspective, using details of the pagan ritual as a pointed contrast with Christian ritual and doctrine: the words are supposedly spoken by a Christian martyr, Romanus, whose account of the *taurobolium* contrasts his own martyr's blood, the holy blood of Christ and the pure ritual of Christian baptism with the polluted blood of pagan sacrifice.

See further: on Christianity and paganism in Prudentius, Malamud (1989) 79–180; A.-M. Palmer (1989) 1–97; another passage from this work is given at 13.8.

Prudentius, *Crowns of Martyrdom* 10.1001–50

With these words Aristo tried to clear himself,¹ but they had no effect at all on the impious scourge of the Christians. Instead he was carried further and further down the path of insanity, and asked whether it was the blood of someone else that was spattered over the martyr, or whether it poured from his own wound.

(1006) Romanus replied in these words: 'Look – I stand before you. This is truly *my* blood, not that of an ox. Do you recognize, you poor pagan, the blood I speak of, the sacred blood of your ox, which drenches you in the slaughter of sacrifice?'² The high priest goes down into the depths to be consecrated,³ in a trench dug in the ground, with strange bands round his head, his temples solemnly entwined with ribbons of office, his hair held by a golden crown, his silken toga tied in the Gabine knot.⁴ Above him they construct a platform, by laying planks, in a loose arrangement, with gaps in between the timber. Then they cut or drill through the surface, making many holes in the wood with a sharp instrument, so that it has a large number of tiny openings. Here they bring up a huge bull, with shaggy, savage brow, bound with garlands of flowers around his shoulders or entwining his horns. The victim's brow shimmers with gold, and the radiant sheen tinges its rough hair. When the beast for sacrifice has been brought into position here, they pierce his breast with a hunting spear consecrated to the gods; the vast wound pours forth a stream of steaming blood, and over the bridge of planks below a reeking river gushes out and seethes all around. Then through the many ways made open by the thousand chinks, like falling rain, it showers down its revolting spray. The priest, hidden in the trench below, catches the shower, holding his filthy head under all the drops, fouling his clothes and his whole body. He even throws back his head, and offers his cheeks to the downpour, puts his ears under it, exposes his lips, his nostrils and washes his eyes themselves in the streams. And he does not now even spare his mouth, but wets his tongue until his whole body imbibes the dark blood. After the corpse has become stiff, its blood all lost, and the *flamines*⁵ have dragged it off that platform, the *pontifex*⁵ comes out of the trench, a ghastly sight, and he shows off his soaking head, his foul beard, his dripping ribbons and sodden clothes. Stained with this pollution, filthy from the putrid blood of the victim, just slaughtered, everyone hails him and from a distance offers him reverence – because the worthless blood of a dead ox bathed him, while he hid away in that foul hole.

1. Aristo, the doctor attending the execution, had been forced to speak in his own defence to the Roman authorities – for although, under instructions from the Roman magistrate, he had cut out the tongue of the martyr, the martyr had (miraculously) continued to speak.
2. That is the blood of the *taurobolium* – which Romanus treats as 'standard' pagan sacrifice.
3. Romanus treats the *taurobolium* as a ritual of consecration, so suggesting the idea (ridiculous from a Christian point of view) that the sacrificant is made holy by the foul blood of the dying animal.
4. See 6.6a n.9.
5. The titles of the priests are those of traditional state cult. Although there was some over-

lap in personnel between traditional cult and the cult of Magna Mater (see 6.7b and 8.9), and more so in the fourth century A.D., the *taurobolium* was not part of the regular official duties of the *pontifex* and *flamen*, even at this period. The author here is probably conflating all types of pagan ritual.

6.7b *Inscribed record of a taurobolium*

The performance of a *taurobolium* was commonly commemorated by an inscription. Some of these inscriptions suggest that *taurobolia* were connected with ideas of salvation and rebirth within the cult of Magna Mater. But others, like this inscribed altar from Lugdunum (Lyons) show how the performance of a *taurobolium* (like traditional civic sacrifice) could also be focused on the prosperity of the Roman state, the emperor and the local community.

See further: Vol. 1, 384; Turcan (1972) 83–8, 124–7.

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In the *taurobolium* of The Great Idaean Mother of the Gods, which was performed on the instruction of the Mother of the Gods, for the well-being of the emperor Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus Augustus Pius <i.e. Antoninus Pius>, father of his country, and of his children, and <for the well being> of the condition of the *colonia* of Lugdunum, Lucius Aemilius Carpus, *sevir Augustalis* and at the same time *dendrophorus*¹ received the ‘powers’² and transferred them from the Vaticanum,³ and consecrated an altar adorned with an ox-head at his own expense. The priest, Quintus Sammius Secundus, was honoured with an armlet and garland by the *quindecimviri*, and the most holy town-council of Lugdunum decreed him a lifelong priesthood.⁴ In the consulship of Appius Annius Atilius Bradua and Titus Clodius Vibius Varus <A.D. 160>. Ground was given for this monument by decree of the town-council.

<On the right side of monument> The midnight ceremony⁵ was performed on the fifth day before the Ides of December <9 December>.

1. Lucius Aemilius Carpus was both an officer of the imperial cult (*sevir Augustalis* – see 8.6) and of the cult of Magna Mater (*dendrophorus*).
2. The term ‘powers’ (Latin *vires*) probably refers to the genitals of the sacrificed bull.
3. It is not certain whether this refers to the major sanctuary of Magna Mater on the Vatican hill in Rome, or to a local sanctuary of Magna Mater, named after that sanctuary. If the former is correct, then the *taurobolium* recorded here was performed in Rome, not Lyons.
4. The sacrifice seems also to have commemorated the appointment of a new priest of the cult. Cf. 10.4b, where the *quindecimviri* likewise grant the honours, but do not control the appointment.
5. This midnight ritual, apparently performed in association with the *taurobolium*, is not otherwise known.

6.8 Conflict and opposition

The central position of animal sacrifice throughout Roman paganism made it a highly charged marker of the conflict between paganism and Christianity. The Christians’ complete rejection of sacrifice set them apart from other religions of the Roman empire, all of whom accepted sacrifice in some form or other.

See further: Vol 1, 226, 239–41, 374–5; Young (1979) 79–96; R. P. C. Hanson (1980) 913–18*; R. L. Gordon (1990c).

6.8a *The folly of animal sacrifice*

In this passage Arnobius pillories the cruelty, illogicality and unfairness (what after all had the animal done to deserve it?) of killing animals to honour the gods or expiate human crimes. Although writing from an explicitly Christian standpoint, Arnobius draws on long-standing debates within Greek and Roman philosophy: how far, for example, did the lack of ‘rationality’ in the animal justify its killing?

See further: on the character of Arnobius’ attack on paganism, Liebeschuetz (1979) 254–60*; on pagan philosophical discussion of sacrifice, Attridge (1978).

Arnobius, *Against the Gentiles* VII.9

Imagine that some ox, or any other animal you like, that is being slaughtered to placate and assuage the fury of the gods, were to take on a human voice and speak in these words: ‘How is it Jupiter (or whatever other god you are) that it is right and proper, or to be reckoned at all fair, that when someone else has committed a sin, it is *me* that is put to death, and that it is from *my* blood that you accept reparation – when I never hurt you, when I never knowingly or unknowingly violated your divinity and majesty, a dumb animal as you know, just following my guileless nature, not a fickle trickster, full of deceit? Did *I* ever celebrate your games without proper care and scruple? Did *I* ever drive a dancer through the circus before they started, to dishonour your majesty? Did *I* ever swear falsely by you? Did *I* ever commit unholy theft, seizing your property or despoiling your treasure houses? Did *I* ever uproot your most sacred groves, or pollute and desecrate any holy sites with my own private buildings? So whatever is the reason that a crime that is not mine is to be paid for with my blood, that for someone else’s sin my innocent life is to be led to the altar? Or is it the fact that I am a worthless animal, with no rationality or reason, as those who call themselves ‘humans’ claim, those who surpass the beasts in their savagery? Surely the same nature, with the self same elements, brought me too into being, gave me my form? Surely there is a single life breath that rules both me and them? Is it not according to the same principles that I breathe and see and am endowed with the other senses? They have livers, lungs, hearts, intestines, bellies. And is not exactly the

same number of limbs assigned to me as to them? They love their offspring and they join in union to bring forth children. But do not I too have the desire to bear offspring to succeed me, and do not I too take pleasure in them when they have been born? But they are rational beings and utter articulate speech. Yet how do they know whether I too do what I do according to my own rationality, and whether that sound I make is the language of my species and is understood by us alone?’

1. A reference to a story told later in the book: how Jupiter was said to have been angered when a slave (ironically called a ‘dancer’) was dragged through the circus before the start of the games.

6.8b *Refusal to sacrifice*

Their willingness to perform sacrifice came to be used as a key test of Christians during the persecutions. In this passage Perpetua, a recently converted Christian woman from North Africa, describes her trial (A.D. 203) – and how she was urged by both her father and a Roman magistrate to sacrifice and so avoid the death penalty.

See further: Vol. 1, 237–8; on the martyrdom of Perpetua in particular, Barnes (1971) 71–80*; Lefkowitz (1981) 53–8; Kraemer (1992) 159–61*; Shaw (1993); for the dreams of Perpetua, see 7.9b; for the anniversary of the martyrdom, 3.6.

The Martyrdom of Sts Perpetua and Felicitas 6

One day when we were having breakfast¹ we were suddenly rushed off for a hearing. We came to the forum and straightaway the news travelled all round the parts of the town near the forum and a huge crowd assembled. We stepped up onto the platform. The others were questioned and confessed their faith. Then it came to my turn. And my father appeared straightaway with my son and dragged me from the steps, saying: ‘Perform the sacrifice. Have pity on your baby.’ And Hilarianus, the *procurator*, who had then taken over the right to try capital crimes in place of the late governor Minucius Timinianus,² said to me: ‘Have compassion for the white hairs of your father; have compassion for your baby boy. Perform the sacrifice for the well-being of the emperors.’³ And I replied: ‘I’m not doing it.’ ‘Are you a Christian?’ Hilarianus said. And I replied: ‘I am a Christian.’ And when my father went on trying to sway me from my resolve, Hilarianus gave orders for him to be thrown to the ground and beaten with a rod. And I grieved for my father as if it was me that had been beaten; I grieved for his miserable old age. Then Hilarianus proclaimed sentence on all of us and he condemned us to the beasts; and joyfully we went back down to our prison.⁴

1. That is, in the prison where they had been taken prior to trial.
2. Hilarianus, a junior official (*procurator*) in the province of Africa, had taken over the responsibilities of the governor who had died in office.
3. There is no question here of her being asked to perform sacrifice *to* the emperor (treat-

ing the emperor as a god); she is to perform the sacrifice to the gods *on behalf of* the emperor. See 10.6b n.4.

4. One of the standard themes of these Christian accounts is that martyrs were *happy* to die for their faith.

6.8c *Certificate of sacrifice*

A series of papyrus documents issued during the Christian persecution initiated by the emperor Decius (A.D. 249–51) were used to provide proof that the individual concerned had, in fact, performed sacrifice. A ‘Christian suspect’ who sacrificed in front of the government authorities received a witnessed certificate of the act – which could presumably be produced in the event of any future suspicion or arrest.

See further: Vol. 1, 238–41; Knipfing (1923); Frend (1965) 405–13; Lane Fox (1986) 450–62*.

L. Mitteis and U. Wilcken, *Grundzüge und Chrestomathie der Papyrskunde* 1, 2 (Leipzig, 1912) no. 124

<First hand> To those chosen to superintend the sacrifices in the village of Alexander’s Island;² from Aurelius Diogenes, son of Sabatus, of the village of Alexander’s Island, aged seventy-two, with a scar on his right eyebrow. I have always sacrificed to the gods; and now in your presence in accordance with the terms of the edict³ I have sacrificed and [poured a libation?] and have [tasted] the sacrificial victims. I request you to certify this. Farewell. I, Aurelius Diogenes, have presented this petition.

<Second hand> I, Aurelius Syrus, saw you and your son sacrificing.

<Third hand> [I . . . son of . . . certify it.]

<First hand> In the first year of emperor Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Trajanus Decius Pius Felix Augustus, on Epeiph 2 <26 June, A.D. 250>.

1. The document is written in different hands – representing the affidavit of Aurelius Diogenes, and the official certification of his sacrifice.
2. Local commissioners had been appointed to oversee the sacrifices demanded by the emperor’s edict. The village of Alexander’s Island is in the Fayum district of Egypt.
3. The edict of persecution probably demanded that all inhabitants of the empire should sacrifice – but it is unlikely (given the administrative burden) that certificates would have been issued to those not under suspicion of being Christian.