

AS THE ROMANS DID

A Sourcebook in Roman Social History

Second Edition



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knowledge of the gods come, and come more correctly, than from the recollection and evidences of prosperity? If the long passage of time gives validity to religious rites, we must keep faith with so many centuries and we must follow our fathers, who followed their fathers and therefore prospered.²²²

Let us imagine that Rome herself is standing before us now and addressing these words to you: "Best of emperors, fathers of the fatherland,²²³ respect my age! The dutiful performance of religious rites has carried me through many years. Let me enjoy the ancient ceremonies, for I do not regret them. Let me live in my own way, for I am free. This is the religion which made the whole world obedient to my laws. These are the rites which drove back Hannibal from my walls and the Senones from my Capitol.²²⁴ Have I been preserved only for this—to be rebuked in my old age? I will consider the changes which people think must be instituted, but modification, in old age, is humiliating and too late."

And so we are asking for amnesty for the gods of our fathers, the gods of our homeland. It is reasonable to assume that whatever each of us worships can be considered one and the same. We look up at the same stars, the same sky is above us all, the same universe encompasses us. What difference does it make which system each of us uses to find the truth? It is not by just one route that man can arrive at so great a mystery.

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RELIGIONS FROM THE EAST

By the late republican period, the people of Rome had become acquainted with several religions that were quite unlike their own state religion. These religions had their origins in areas east of Rome and hence are called eastern or oriental religions.²²⁵ They shared certain characteristics; for example, they allowed, even encouraged, the emotional involvement of the worshipper, a novelty for the Romans whose state religion was impersonal and unemotional.²²⁶ More importantly, most of these eastern religions had a central myth that explored the death and resurrection of a deity or a figure closely associated with a deity. This victory over death served as a promise to the adherents that they, too, could achieve immortality and a blessed life after death. Assurance of an afterlife could be granted, however, only to people who had been initiated into the mysteries of the religion. Most of the eastern religions were therefore mystery religions, that is, religions that could illuminate the mystery of achieving immortality and that kept their teachings a mystery or secret to all but the initiates. Initiation, which often involved a cleansing rite such as baptism, was a joyous occasion; the initiate had been redeemed by a savior god from her or his former life; she or he had learned the mysteries of immortality and was assured of a

²²²When Rome fell victim to the barbarian invasions of the fifth century A.D., some people suggested that Rome was being punished for its neglect of the old religion. See note 31 of this chapter.

²²³*fathers of the fatherland: patres patriae*; see notes 122 and 170 of Chapter X. On paternalism in Roman society, see the introduction to the section on patronage in Chapter I.

²²⁴*Senones*: a tribe of Gauls.

Capitol: one of Rome's Seven Hills (the Capitoline).

For the assault on Rome by the Gauls in 390 B.C., see note 27 of Chapter XIV.

²²⁵*oriental*: from Latin *oriens* = "rising (sun)"; the orient was the place of the rising sun, the east. These religions originated in areas which we today consider the Near and Mideast, not the Far East.

²²⁶On personal experience as one of the dimensions of religion, see the introduction to this chapter.

blessed afterlife; and she or he was now welcomed into a supportive group of fellow initiates.²²⁷

Eastern religions gained many adherents in Rome and Italy during the late republican period and throughout the imperial period. One of these religions, Christianity, has survived to our own time.²²⁸ Most Romans did not renounce the state cult when they were initiated into another religion²²⁹; they felt no conflict between the demands of the state cult and those of an eastern religion. The former was public and impersonal, the latter private and personal. It was easy enough to stand silently at an occasional ceremony conducted for the welfare of the state,²³⁰ and thus to fulfil one's public obligations. Personal salvation, however, was a matter for the eastern religions. In other words, the eastern religions were not competing with the state cult; they satisfied needs that the state cult could not. The rigid formalism of the latter, with its remarkable emphasis on the ritual dimension, allowed no outlets for emotionalism, no communion with the deities, no ecstasy of faith. There was no promise of salvation and redemption and a blessed afterlife, no code of ethics to provide guidance for the conduct of one's life.²³¹ The popular appeal of the eastern religions must be seen in the context of the political, economic, and social expansion of Rome. The religion that had served the Romans well when their community was small, cohesive, and homogeneous did not provide sufficient comfort for the cosmopolitan population of imperial Rome.

The passages below contain accounts of some of the more popular eastern religions. An account of Mithraism, the soldiers' religion, unfortunately is lacking because we have very few literary references to this Persian religion, although an abundance of archeological evidence indicates that it won adherents among Roman soldiers throughout the Empire.

Turning to Other Religions

As early as the third century B.C., eastern cults were finding eager disciples among the people of Rome. The population of Rome included, of course, many people of non-Roman birth—slaves, freedmen, foreign businessmen—for whom the eastern cults were "native" religions; but Roman citizens, too, were attracted to these cults, especially in times of crisis and despair when the state religion seemed unable to provide hope and comfort. Such a time was the Second Punic War, when Hannibal's troops were ravishing Italy, and the traditional gods and ancestral rituals had not been able

²²⁷The feeling of belonging is an important element in human institutions. On this dimension of religion, see the introduction to this chapter.

²²⁸Unlike some of the other eastern religions, Christianity did not keep its teachings about immortality a mystery. Initiation, or baptism, was, however, a requirement for a blessed afterlife.

²²⁹Only Christianity demanded that its converts renounce all other beliefs. The other eastern religions were willing to coexist.

²³⁰On the requirement that the audience at a state ritual maintain absolute silence, see selection 412.

²³¹Not all eastern religions contained an ethical dimension, but the more popular ones (Christianity, Mithraism, Isis worship) apparently did. On the teaching of ethics in Roman society, see the introduction to the section on ritual in this chapter. Morality and ethical behavior were a function of family and civic responsibility (*pietas*) rather than of religion. In fact, religion, devotion to the gods, was but one aspect of *pietas*.

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to secure a military victory for the Romans.²³² The passage translated here describes the situation in Rome in 213 B.C.

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Livy, *A History of Rome* 25.1.6–8

The longer the war dragged on, and the alternation of success and defeat affected both the prosperity and the attitudes of men, an increasing number of religious cults, most of them foreign, invaded the city with the result that either the men or the gods seemed to have changed rather suddenly. No longer did people keep their disaffection with the state religion a secret, voiced only in private homes. In public places, in the Forum, on the Capitoline, was seen a crowd of women who did not pray or sacrifice to the gods in accordance with ancestral ritual. Priestlings and prophets had captured the minds of the men as well as the women.

BACCHUS

Most foreign religions entered Rome quite imperceptibly; introduced to the city by natives of the East who brought their religions with them, these cults gradually attracted the support of some Romans. One such religion was the worship of Bacchus.²³³ We do not know when this cult was first introduced to the city,²³⁴ but by the early second century B.C. it had acquired wide popularity. Bacchus was a savior god who offered his followers salvation and blessed afterlife. He was particularly interested in the growth of grapevines (their death each autumn and rebirth each spring provided for humankind a promise of immortality); and therefore wine, the product of the grapevine, was used in the celebration of Bacchic rites. Drinking wine was a form of communion with the god, and intoxication was apparently thought to provide ecstatic religious experiences.²³⁵ Undoubtedly some initiates were more excessive than others in their use of wine. In the Greek world, frightening tales were told about Bacchae, female worshippers of Bacchus, who drank large quantities of wine, became enthusiastic, and entered a frenzied state in which they lost all recognition of moral values.²³⁶ In Rome, by the early second century B.C., Bacchic rites had acquired a reputation of being drunken orgies that were breeding grounds for all forms of corruption and immorality. Before accepting this reputation as valid and truthful, we should remember that similar charges were later made against another eastern cult that used wine in its rituals: Christianity.

²³²In the end, of course, the Romans did defeat Hannibal and win the war. See Appendix III.

²³³*Bacchus*: also known as Dionysus.

²³⁴It was perhaps introduced by slaves brought from the Greek colonies of southern Italy. It appealed more to the lower classes than to the upper classes of Roman society.

²³⁵*apparently*: since the cult of Bacchus was a mystery religion, we know very little about the meaning of its rituals.

²³⁶*Bacchae*: also called Bacchantes or Maenads. In Euripides' play, *Bacchae*, Pentheus, king of Thebes, was torn to pieces by his mother and aunts who were in a Bacchic frenzy and thought he was a wild animal.

enthusiastic: from the Greek *entheos* = "to have the god within oneself" (*en* = "in," *theos* = "god").

Suppression of the Bacchanalia

In 186 B.C., the consuls, responding to complaints about moral and criminal offenses by Bacchic initiates, urged the Senate to take measures to restrict cult activities. The passage translated here is a description of these measures. It is important to notice that the matter was not a case of religious persecution of the type later practiced by Christian denominations, who tortured and killed anyone who disagreed with them on religious issues. The suppression of Bacchanalia²³⁷ was a political rather than a religious matter. The very aspect that made Bacchus worship appealing to some Romans—its emotionalism—made it frightening to others. The ruling class, in particular, was suspicious of any gathering that occurred without the official sanction of the magistrates, and a gathering whose activities were a mystery and which promoted emotional frenzy was especially alarming.²³⁸ When rumors spread about lewd behavior, kidnappings, forgeries, and murders by cult initiates, state officials felt that the activities of the cult, which appealed largely to the lower classes, posed a threat to the public safety of Rome and the rest of Italy. Because initiates would not reveal the mysteries of their religion to non-initiates, they were accused of conspiring to subvert Roman society and to overthrow the government. It was therefore state officials who took measures to restrict the cult. Punishment for assembling or conspiring to assemble was severe, and crippling restrictions were placed on future cult activities, but the state did not interfere with individual worship of Bacchus. An individual was free to worship the god of her or his choice, but forbidden to participate in disorderly assemblies. The measure of 186 B.C. restricted but by no means destroyed the worship of Bacchus. This religion remained popular in Italy for many centuries.²³⁹

The rumors about lewd behavior, kidnappings, forgeries, and murders were probably just that—rumors based on a misinterpretation of mysterious cult activities. Similar stories were later spread about the Christians. Livy, the author of the passage translated here, has, however, reported these rumors as historical fact; his exaggeration of the danger of the situation probably reflects the perceptions of the upper class.

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Livy, *A History of Rome* 39.8, 9, 14, 17, 18

The consuls, Spurius Postumius Albinus and Quintus Marcius Philippus, were diverted from the army and from the management of wars and provinces to the crushing of an internal conspiracy. . . . An obscure Greek had arrived in Etruria, a man with none of those many skills which the highly educated Greek race has introduced to us for the care of our minds and bodies. He was instead a fortune teller and a sacrifice maker. Nor was he the kind of evangelist who taints minds with fallacies by openly disclosing his religious system and announcing publicly both his intentions and his creed. No—he was a practitioner of occult and nocturnal rites. The secrets of the mystery religion were at first revealed to only a few people, but soon began to be taught widely to both men and women. The pleasures of wine and banquets were added to the religious ceremonies in order to

²³⁷ *Bacchanalia*: celebration in honor of Bacchus.

²³⁸ On the Roman aristocracy's fear of crowds or assemblies, see selections 254, 332, and 380 (especially note 186).

²³⁹ At Pompeii, for example, where grape growing and wine production were major industries, Bacchus had many worshippers. Excavations have revealed a villa (called by archaeologists "The Villa of the Mysteries") in which there are painted on the walls of one room scenes depicting central elements of the Bacchic mysteries.

attract the minds of a larger number of people at night and the intermingling of the sexes, modesty, depravities of every kind, and whatever perversion his mind could devise. . . . promiscuous and deviant sexual acts, seals, wills and documents, murders, too, murders so heinous that outrages were attempted throughout the city, ever, because the shrieks of their wails²⁴⁰ and the crash of drums.

This evil pollution spread throughout the city, which was quite finally information reached the Senate.

[*Postumius interviewed the initiates about the Bacchanalia. She described the kidnappings, and the sexual acts.*]

When Postumius had learned of this, disclosing everything in detail to the Senate, himself had discovered through the investigation both for the public safety, lest there be treachery or danger, and private for this malignity. The Senate pursued both with remarkable diligence and a special investigation of the Bacchanalia. The witnesses Aebutius and Fabius were witnesses by offers of reward and were searched for not only in Rome but in the custody of the consuls. Edicts were issued forbidding any initiates of the Bacchanalia, or to perform any such rites, or to perform any such acts, or to be conducted about those people who were guilty of such treachery or crime.

The consuls ordered the Bacchanalia to be held in secret, and to keep them under their eyes. Throughout the city and of many provinces. Assigned as assistants to the consuls to keep watch over the buildings.

[*The consuls then summoned the initiates. They tried to make the people present as moderators, threatening that Bacchus might be conspiring.*]

Then the consuls ordered that no reward would be paid to anyone who reported the Bacchanalia in his absence. They announced that

²⁴⁰ *wails*: the frenzied initiates making noise.

²⁴¹ Roman writers frequently merged the practices of eastern religions; see selection 23.

²⁴² *open meeting*: *contio*; see selection 23.