

ANCIENT ROME - Religion

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Roman religious experience. There are many areas of cultural production in which the Romans appear to lack some of the inner creativity of the Greeks—for that cultural comparison is hard to avoid, given especially the Roman penchant for incorporating elements of Greek culture, especially after the gradual Roman conquest of Greece, which is complete by the end of the second century B.C. One of those incorporative areas is the religious experience of the Romans, which by our time cultural opinion has agreed to consider ‘less creative’ than the Greek religious/mythical experience. That ‘agreed to’ carries a tweak, for the view of Roman culture as ritualized and plain—compared to the Greek—is one which has prevailed since the Romantic Movement of the 19th century and Romanticism, but which was not at all the view of the highly Latinate Renaissance. But let’s jump in. Let’s begin by considering what the Romans do with ‘Greek myths,’ as they absorb and transform them.

Native Italic mythology. Gradually, for different reasons at different times, the Romans grafted Greek mythical figures onto the stock of ancient Italic-Etruscan myth figures. Those myth figures are especially to be found in several major Roman texts: the archaic books (6th or 7th cent. B.C.) of commentary and ritual legislation, concerning the Sibyl and the earliest transfer of royal power in Rome; the first books of Livy’s *Histories*, which narrate most of the founding tales of the Roman people, going back to 800 B.C.; Virgil’s epic poem, *The Aeneid* (29-19 B.C.), which relates the founding actions of the city of Rome, and the mating between Rome’s heroic founder and the daughter of the local Etruscan kingdom, Lavinia; the fourth book of elegies of the Roman poet, Propertius. In those varied texts, and in a book like Ovid’s *Fasts* (8 A.D.), which records the sacred feast and ritual days of earlier Rome, we come in touch with traditional myth tales of ancient Italic vintage: tales such as that of the Sabine women, which consecrates a stage in earlier Roman appropriation of new territory; the marriage of a ‘mythical’ king, Numa Pompilius, to a nymph, Egiria, from which any number of descendants and tales follow; the story of the courage of Horatius at the Bridge; the legend of Marcus Scaevola, whose fidelity to the Roman Republic was so great that he would plunge his hand into boiling water to affirm his loyalty. Onto all such early Italic accounts, and there are many, the Romans found themselves, as we have said, grafting Roman tales and religiously tuned hero cults.

Development of the Roman pantheon. Those tales amounted, with the passage of time, to traditional lore in which was embedded material of Hellenic background but of relevance to the efforts of the Romans themselves to create their own cultural state. Thus, adopting the procedures by which the Greek mythological universe was generated, the Romans early promoted a godly trinity of Mars/Quirinus/Vesta which was effectually worshipped by the person on the street in Rome, say in the third century B.C., but which was simply a way of paying homage to the military and at the same time home-protective (hence Vesta) qualities of the Roman experience. God-trios like this ultimately merged into Roman trinities like Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, which were honored with official worship in great public centers of Roman cult.

Tales of the gods. While the tales of the Greek gods, on which the Romans also drew, were characteristically devoted to the complex social interrelations of the gods, the corresponding Roman god-tales were characteristically devoted to tracking, and abetting, the course of historical actions. Thus each of the actions going into the process of planting involves a prayer to the deity presiding over that particular action: Saturn, the ‘god of sowing,’ is adulated while the act of sowing the field takes place; Pales, the ‘god of the fields,’ is addressed in ritual prayer as the fields are ploughed; Pomona, ‘goddess of the fruit,’ is similarly adored and prayed to while the fruit is being invited to full development; and Ops, the ‘god of the harvest,’ is adored as harvest takes place. “Adored,” as these examples suggest, is a feeble attempt to characterize the type of piety in question here. The above examples are aimed at a single point: that ancient Roman religious worship intersected, at points, with the polytheism of the Greeks, but is notably different in being tied to ritual, prayer, and practical purpose far more tightly than were the Greeks’ tales of the gods.

The meaning of Roman mythography. In a sense, then, our overworked notion of the Romans’ public cultural stance is carried out in their religious practice, much of which deploys itself in performative practice, abetting a desired end by inducing it in practice. For this reason we fall appropriately into the locution that the gods of the Romans ‘stand for’ this or that condition, like the action of the thunder, lightning, the power of eros, or the dynamism of the sea.

Reading

A Companion to Roman Religion, Joerg Rüpke (New York, 2007)

Discussion questions

How did the Romans combine native Italic religion with that of the Greek myths they inherited? Did the Romans make a conscious effort at synthesis. Did any one leader exercise particular influence in a religious synthesis? In a wider sense, how do different religions or elements of those religions blend? (Take a look at the religious practices of the Roman Emperor Helagabalus—reigned 218-222 A.D.—who forced exotic Eastern religious ideals down the throats of the Romans. How does religious synthesis operate in his reign?)

In what sense is the prayer that accompanies planting what we might call ‘performative,’ carrying out the action it describes? In many cultures, including the Roman, agricultural harvest, in which the grains and fruits were collected, was a time when ritual dances, chants, and prayers rose from the ordinary men and women who were the life blood of the society. Does the official Olympian religion of Rome pay homage or relate to the nativist agricultural beliefs? To help grasp this complex issue review a great novel like Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean* (1885).

Could you call an epic poem like the *Aeneid*, which ‘re enacts’ the founding of Rome, performative? In other words, could this entire epic creation, which culturally founded the new Empire of Augustus, be considered a religious text? If you see anything in this idea, can you think of other ‘founding’ texts which serve the same kind of ‘religious performative’ action? Does Homer, Milton, or Dante work create in this way?