Roman Religion: Identity and Empire

Course Organiser: Rebecca Flemming

Course Outline: Roman religion was intimately bound up with both Roman identity and Roman power, right from the foundation of the city itself. These relations become more complex as Rome established domination, first over Italy, and then across the whole Mediterranean world. This imperial expansion brought Rome into increasing contact with other peoples’ gods and cult; just as it brought those same people into increasing contact with Rome’s gods and cult. These encounters were unequal and uneven, within an empire building project, but impact and influences flowed both ways, as the religious landscape of the Roman Empire took shape, and continued to develop over the next centuries.

This course will explore some of the most important of these religious interactions, following a roughly chronological trajectory from the Republican period through to the early decades of the third century AD. The fundamental connections of religion, power and identity at Rome will be examined, Rome’s ‘openness’ to new gods and rituals scrutinised, and issues of the export or imposition of distinctly Roman forms of religious organisation and practice, not to mention the institution of imperial cult, will be explored; as well as the resilience and adaptability of local religious traditions, from Syria to Britain, North Africa to the Rhine frontier. It was not just emperors, and their families, who were worshipped across the Roman domains, part of the pattern of imperial rule, but unofficial, elective cults like those of Isis and Mithras also spread throughout the empire, and religion might play a role in resistance to Roman rule, as it did in the revolts in Judaea, as well as in imperial integration.

All these themes will be investigated, using a diverse set of textual and material evidence, with questions about the rise of Christianity, as a Roman imperial phenomenon, and about the ways that this development impacted on notions of identity, began to drive a wedge between religious and other facets of cultural identity in the Mediterranean world, also addressed.

Course structure: There will be a mixture of lectures and classes on key themes and topics. In the Michaelmas Term, there will be an hour-long lecture and a two-hour class each week. The classes will expand on and develop the topics of the lectures in more detail, examining the key sources concerned—a range of ancient literary texts, inscriptions, papyri, and archaeological evidence—and the ongoing debates in modern scholarship. These lectures and classes will be held in the Classics Faculty and will be shared with Classics Students. In the Lent Term, four more two-hour classes, organised fortnightly, will be dedicated to History Students taking the Paper, ensuring that all the set texts have been discussed, methodological and generic issues discussed, and allowing space for student presentations on chosen long essay topics. In the Easter Term there will be two more two-hour hour classes focusing on gobbets training and other aspects of preparation for the exam. All set texts will be studied in English translation.
Schedule

Michaelmas Term

1. Lecture: Founding Roman religion: Identity and power.
   Class: Key concepts and institutions in Roman religion

2. Lecture: Republican expansion: Religious expansion
   Class: Expropriating, incorporating, and assimilating others’ gods.

3. Lecture: Republican expansion: Increasing power and control
   Class: Colonisation and control in the imperial Republic

4. Lecture: Diaspora Religions in the Roman Empire
   Class: Augustus, religion, identity and power

5. Lecture: Imperial cult and imperial religions
   Class: Cults, communities and individuals across imperial space

6. Lecture: Local religions in an imperial frame
   Class: Sanctuaries, festivals and offerings across the Empire

7. Lecture: Religion and the imperial order: Tolerance, rebellion, and persecution
   Class: Christians and imperial rule

8. Lecture: Conclusions: Local and global perspectives
   Class: Religious identities in an imperial world
Lent Term

1. Literary Texts
2. Inscriptions, images, and artefacts
3. Student presentations
4. Student presentations

Easter Term

1. Revision and gobbet practice
2. Revision and gobbet practice

Primary Sources
(all items available on moodle)

Literary Texts
Aelius Aristides, Address to Asclepius (Oration 42).
Apuleius, Metamorphosis, Book 11.
Athenagoras, Embassy 1-5.
Cicero, Laws 2.18-23; On Divination 1.3-4; On the Nature of the Gods 3.5.
Cassius Dio, Histories 51.20; 52.35-6; 57.18; 60.6, and 67.14.
Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Roman Antiquities 2.18-22; 4.62.
Festus, Lexicon: ‘sacra’.
Horace, Carmen Saeculare.
Juvenal, Satire 6 511-547; Satire 14.96-106.
Livy, Histories 1.4-21, 31-38, 44-45, 55-56; 5.21-23; 29.10-11 and 14; 39.8-14.
Lucian, On the Syrian Goddess.
Martyrdom of Polycarp; The Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs.
Minucius Felix, Octavius, 6-10, 25-34.
Ovid, Fasti 4.247-372 and 721-862; 5.129-144.
Philo, Embassy 119-161.
Suetonius, Life of Augustus 31; Life of Tiberius 36; Life of Nero 56.
Tacitus, Annals 4.36-8 and 15.41-7; Histories 5.1-13;
   Germania 3, 9-10, 39-40, 43 and 45.
Tertullian, Apology 24-5, 30-37 and 42-43.
Epigraphy (includes inscribed objects as far as possible)

AE 1977 816

Law of Urso (CIL 2.5439) 64-72; 125-128;
Sacred Law from Miletus (Sokolowski, LSAM no.49);
Senatus consultum on the Bacchanalia (CIL I² 581)

Inscription for the Secular Games under Augustus (CIL VI 32, 323) lines, 90-150;
Extracts from the Severan inscription for the games (Pighi, 4.4-13 and 5.49-56);
Extracts from the Acts of the Arval Brethren (CIL VI 2,041, lines 11-73)

Inscriptions from Gytheion on the imperial cult (SEG XI 922-3 = Sherk 31-32);
Altar from Narbo (CIL XII 4333 = Sherk 7C);
Neighbourhood altars from Rome (3 examples from Lott: reliefs and inscriptions)

Sacred Law from Pergamum (Wörrle); Iobacchoi Regulations (Harland)

Altars from Maryport (RIB 828; 831; 837; 841 and 842).

Selected honorific inscriptions for priests and priestesses of the imperial cult as well as local cults from across the empire, and for synagogue leaders (15 total)

Selection of curse tablets from Mainz, Bath and Uley (6 total)

Papyri

Military calendar from Dura Europos (P.Dura. 54);
Letter of Claudius to the Alexandrians (P.Lond. 1912)
Libellus (P. Mich. 3.158)

Other Images

Augustus’Ara Pacis: Key Reliefs
Reliefs from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias
Selected Anatomical Votives from Gaul
Selection of Coins including religious imagery (8 total)
Sample Essay Questions:

1. Were Roman colonies ‘mini-Romes’ in terms of religion?
2. How foreign were Rome’s peregrina sacra?
3. Why was the cult of Isis so successful across the Roman Empire?
4. To what extent did hostility to Jews and Judaism increase in the Roman world over the second century AD?
5. How far was imperial cult a ‘tool’ of Roman rule?
6. ‘Christianity was an imperial religion par excellence’. Discuss.
7. In what ways did the culture of religious festivals in the Greek East change under Roman rule?
8. Is ‘syncretism’ a useful term in discussing religious developments in the Roman Empire?
9. To what extent is it possible to talk about ‘religious identity’ in the Roman world?
10. Is there anything distinctly ‘British’ about the ‘curse tablets’ found in Roman Britain?

General Bibliography

G. Clark, Christianity and Roman Society (Cambridge, 2004)
A. Collar, Religious Networks in the Roman Empire: The Spread of New Ideas (Cambridge, 2013)
T. Derks, Gods, Temples and Ritual Practice: The Transformation of Religious Ideas in Roman Gaul (Amsterdam, 1998)
D. Feeney, Literature and Religion at Rome: Cultures, Contexts, and Beliefs (Cambridge, 1998)
D. Fishwick, The Imperial Cult in the West, 3 vols (Leiden, 1993-2005)
M. Goodman, Rome and Jerusalem (London, 2007)
F. Graf, *Roman Festivals in the Greek East: From the Early Empire to the Middle Byzantine Era* (Cambridge, 2015)

E. Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton, 2011)


J. Hughes, *Votive Body Parts in Greek and Roman Religion* (Cambridge, 2017)


S. Nagel, J. Quack and C. Witschel (eds.), *Entangled Worlds: Religious Confluences between East and West in the Roman Empire* (Tübingen, 2017)


