2001

Introduction

Sulochana R. Asirvatham

Corinne Ondine Pache
Trinity University, corinne.pache@trinity.edu

John Watrous

Introduction

This book gathers essays that are all, in one way or another, connected with ancient Greek and Roman religions. The essays cover a wide range—both chronological and geographical—of religious discourse and practice from Classical Athens on to seventeenth-century America via medieval Europe. Thus, there is no attempt at comprehensiveness. Rather, we hope that these essays will serve to problematize some common distinctions that readers generally bring to the study of ancient Greek and Roman religion and its legacy—such as the distinctions between Greece and Rome, Greco-Romans and barbarians, pagans and Christians, religion and politics, and religion and magic, to name some that are more prominently addressed in this collection.

In the context of ancient Greece, it would be thoroughly meaningless even to attempt disentangling the sacred from the profane. Religion pervades ancient Greek culture to such a degree that the complex of myth and ritual that constitutes worship is not thought of as a distinct phenomenon by the Greeks themselves: since there are no aspects of life that are not penneated by religion, there exists, in fact—and as many before have noted—no word in the Greek language to describe the aggregate of beliefs and cult practices that we moderns would like to designate with the Latin-derived word "religion." To understand Greek culture means to understand Greek religion, and vice-versa.

This "embeddedness"[1] of Greek religion has many consequences. Myth and ritual are not only sources of poetry, but poetry in turn seeks to explain, promote, and influence Greek ritual practices. Similarly, iconography reflects this "embeddedness" and analyses of visual narratives, just like literary ones, need to take it into consideration.

Religion is very much "embedded" in Rome as well The Romans did have a term, *religio*, which, as its etymology suggests, denoted in its usual positive sense the obligatory bonds between humans and gods. But this term, and others

---

1. See Bremmer 1994:2-4, Price 1999:3.

like it such as *pietas*, were not stable, and Roman religion was, like Greek, non-theological and socially pervasive. As one scholar puts it, all the various media through which religion is represented constitute different types of "religious knowledge";[2] one is not more "real" to religion than any other. The problem of the reality of Roman religion has, in fact, come partially from the particular involvement political figures had always had in it, with chief magistrates occupying the most prominent priesthoods.[3] This continues to be the case even under Augustus, when it becomes the prerogative of the imperial family to accumulate priestly offices, something that exceeded the normal right of a magistrate.[4]

The "embeddedness" of religion after the fourth century A.D. takes on a new dimension as the Christian church, in all its doctrinal and ritual multiplicity, enters into an alliance with the imperial court. The relationship between rival forms of Christianity, Christianity and other religions, and Christian worship and other modes of social and political life become paramount subjects for reflection and debate. Christianity becomes not merely the cult sanctioned by the state, but a "totalizing" religion that claims authority over all aspects of life. The interpenetration of religion and social life, a social "fact" in earlier times, is at the center of an ambitious program for the transformation of late-antique society.

The division of this book into three parts reflects some of the major thematic correspondences of the papers. The first two parts deal with the problem of religious identity against an idea of "improper" worship, with respect to two different types of religious relationships—that between fellow-worshippers, and that between worshippers and human beings who have become recipients of cult. The third and last section deals with the iconography of the Late Roman/Byzantine periods, focusing on ways in which earlier pagan practices are subsumed or redefined by Christianity. This tripartite division, however, does not in any way imply that the themes themselves exist independently of each other: there are numerous overlaps between sections, and just as ancient religion itself is embedded in the fabric of ancient life, the religious practices discussed here do not exist in isolation, but are part of the complex of myths and practices

2. Feeney 1998. Feeney's specific concern is to challenge modern scholarship's habit of treating the literary manifestations of Roman religion as secondary to (rather than integrative with) ritual practice.

3. Wissowa 1912 and Latte 1960 saw the public nature of Roman religion as a mark of decline from the archaic period. Cf. Fowler 1911 and 1914.

4. Beard, North, and Price 1998:186-92.

that make up ancient religion.

Part I, "Ancient Religion, Self and Other," deals with communities of fellow-worshippers, and asks how individuals were able to define themselves with and against other human beings in the realm of religion, thus marking their own religious practices or beliefs as licit in contrast to the practices and beliefs of "others." As such, this question forms a part of the pervasive and dynamic discourse of identity in the ancient world, in which it was habitual to define oneself "oppositionally"—that is, against what one was not. We can chart some of these ideological oppositions with greater ease than we can others: for example, despite the variety of political systems among the *poleis*, that which was called "tyranny" became, by the classical period, by definition "un-Greek." But what is most important is that identity was, as it is today, subjective: while the main terms of opposition between one's own cultural practices and those of others, once established, tended to stay the same on a rhetorical level (Greeks continued to imply barbarians as their opposite, Romans barbarians, Christians pagans), these were all constructed categories, taking on different meanings from moment to moment and individual to individual.

Religion is perhaps among the more difficult areas to pin down when we talk about identity. Greek and Roman religions represent a spectrum of practices that varied locally, and were also importantly shaped throughout history by intercultural contacts. The use in recent years of the plural "religions" instead of the singular by some scholars (for example, Simon Price, in his recent book *Religions of the Ancient Greeks*) is an obvious allusion to the breadth of this spectrum. Greeks and Romans were certainly capable of understanding other polytheistic systems through syncretism. But this does not imply that they did not have a sense of religious propriety, nor does it imply that they were "tolerant" of other religions, what many scholars today see as a modern concept which posits polytheism against the "intolerant" monotheism of Christianity.[5] Rather, Greeks and Romans combined an acceptance of regional variation and of the reality of other people's religions, as well as (in periods of expansion) a realistic sense of how far religious authority could be extended to foreign subjects on the one hand, with a powerful impulse to protect their own religions from outside influences on the other.

Next to the historical facts of intercultural contact, however, must be placed Greek and Roman rhetorical habits of "othering," for by examining these we

5. E.g., Garnsey 1984.

receive the most profound insights into the subjective experiences of worshippers. Besides the explicit assignation of the label "barbarian" by both Greeks and Romans to the religious practices of others, one of the other primary modes of "othering" is the attribution of the label "magician" or "magic" to those who are perceived as different and to their religious practices. The very difficult problem of magic and how we can define it in relation to religion is addressed in very different contexts in two of the chapters in this section, as well as a number of others in this volume. Criticism of Frazer's and Malinowski's distinction between magic and religion has engendered deep suspicion of rigid cross-cultural definitions of magic.[6] Anthropologists have come to understand that our modern notions of magic and religion are not applicable to other cultural contexts;[7] this principle applies as well to Christian ones prior to the Reformation.[8] Graf suggests that we follow the lead of recent anthropological approaches in viewing ancient magic not through our own commonsensical notions but rather through the ancient rhetoric of magic itself.[9] This rhetoric reveals on a basic level that in the Greek and Roman worlds, "magic" (at least after its initial appearance as the practice of the Persian magi)[10] is the name given to a collection of practices that are in conflict with the rules of the larger society, whatever these practices may be. As a number of these papers will reflect, however, the nature and depth of this conflict is variable: it is at times difficult to distinguish "magical" aspects from what was considered acceptable religious practice. In the words of one scholar (comparing literary and documentary texts on magic), "Magic, among most serious writers, is something that Others do, but the lead tablets and papyri of antiquity clearly prove that the

---

6. See Tambiah 1990 for a discussion of the reaction to Frazer and Malinowski among contemporary anthropologists.

7. For the development of the modern distinction between magic and religion and its connection to the rise of modern science in seventeenth-century England, see Tambiah 1990:1-15; for the modern concept of religion, see Smith 1991:15-50. Frazer understood magic as a misunderstanding of the laws of causality and hence an irrational precursor of modern science; this leads to a hasty dismissal of other cultures as irrational. For the disturbing political implications of this view in the context of contemporary globalization, see Tambiah 1990:111-154.

8. See Thomas 1971, especially chapters 2, 3, and 9 (reference owed to Rebecca Lesses).

9. Graf 1997.

10. E.g., Plato *Alcibiades* 1.22.

Others were among the Greeks themselves."[11] What is especially interesting to note is the longevity of the conflict: Christianity continued to use magic as a marker of alterity, and, as such, magic could be explicitly connected to or conflated with the ancient pagan tradition. We will return to the intersection of magic and Christianity in greater detail in part III.

The four chapters in part I demonstrate ways in which perceptions of ethnic, cultural, and/or political differences among ancient communities are reflected in religion on both a mythical and ritual level. Part I is divided into two sections, the first on Greek practice (*Greeks and Others*), the second on Roman (*Roman Magic and Religion from Two Perspectives*). Within each section the first chapter focuses, loosely speaking, on the insider's point of view of proper Greek and Roman practice (chapter 1: the Athenians; chapter 3: Roman literary writers of the Augustan age), the second chapter on the outsider's point of view (chapter 2: recently Hellenized cities of Imperial Asia Minor; chapter 4: Christians invoking the "pagan" past). The first two chapters present two instances of syncretism in the Greek world, one between Greeks and the Thracians, a traditionally "barbarian" group, and the other between a Panhellenic oracle in Asia Minor and its foreign *clientelae*. Both speak to the limits of syncretization in the Greek world, and explore methods of differentiation. Of the two chapters that follow, the first studies the reification of Roman water as a divine substance by Livy, Propertius, and Ovid; the second, that of Iroquois practices that were labeled "pagan" and "magical" by seventeenth-century Jesuit missionaries who were influenced by the anti-Roman rhetoric of late antiquity. In both cases, the attitudes of the observers are shaped by an anachronistic projection of the Roman religious past onto the present.

The period after the fifth-century Persian wars was the moment during which Greeks began to define themselves ideologically against a "barbarian" other,[12]

---

11. Braarvig 1997:51.

12. The interest in the ideological implications of the Greek/barbarian dichotomy can be traced back to two major literary studies from the 1980s, those of François Hartog (1988, on Herodotus) and Edith Hall (1989, on Athenian tragedy); the latter is responsible for attaching the emergence of self-definition to the Persian threat and its defeat. For the work that combines historical, linguistic, and archaeological analysis with the anthropological insight that ethnic identities are subjectively constructed, see Jonathan M. Hall's 1996 book *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity*. Hall emphasizes the primacy of mythical genealogies in the construction of Greek identity prior to the Persian wars period. For an excellent overall treatment of identity and alterity among the Greeks,

establishing a pattern that would last throughout Greek antiquity and would be imitated by the Romans as well.[13] The inseparability of religion from the social and political life of the *polis*[14] is reflected in the ways in which Greekness was defined in the classical period. In a famous passage, Herodotus includes religious criteria among those that, to him, define Greekness: to be Greek is to be bound by "kinship . . . in blood and speech, and the shrines of gods and the sacrifices that we [Greeks] have in common, and the likeness of our way of life..." (*Histories*, Book 8.144). Myths and rituals were closely attached to the individual polis, and thus showed very considerable local variation,[15] but nevertheless reflected a mythology (e.g., the pantheon of twelve gods) and heeded a set of rules (e.g., those concerning sacred spaces) that were common to all Greek city-states.[16] This Panhellenic base of Greek religion was reflected ritually as well, for example, in the popular competitions at Olympia, Delphi, Nemea, and Isthmia.

It is within the context of this belief in an essential biological, cultural, and political Greekness and its dependence on a barbarian opposite that we must understand polis religion. In chapter 1, "Barbarian Bond: Thracian Bendis among the Athenians," Corinne Ondine Pache examines classical Athenian attitudes toward the establishment and existence of a foreign cult in their midst. The Thracians are particularly interesting because their status between Greek and barbarian is ambiguous in a way that sets them apart from other typically barbarian groups.[17] Pache's survey of the Greek view of the Thracians from Homer to Thucydides suggests that they were seen as politically and economically important to Greece but also culturally alien. Their in-between status is reflected at Athens in their unusual position in the cult of the Thracian goddess Bendis, whom the Athenians clearly wished to appropriate as their own. In the last half of the fifth century, the Athenians made the unusual move of

---

see Paul Cartledge's 1993 book (see note 13 below). For "Romanitas" in the empire see G. Woolf 1994 (on Greece) and 1998 (on Gaul).

13. This dichotomy has earned a privileged position in studies on the Greek world: note, for example, the title given by Cartledge to his wide-ranging study of Greek thought—*The Greeks: A Portrait of Self and Others*.

14. Sourvinou-Inwood 1990.

15. Cole 1990.

16. Price 1999:3-6.

17. The closest analogy is perhaps the Macedonians, who were also from "up north," and who would eventually conquer Thrace under Philip II.

allowing Bendis into their pantheon. Interestingly, however, the Athenians and the Thracian noncitizens never worshipped together but maintained separate cults of Bendis, demonstrating how the ideology of otherness was able to maintain the boundary between Greek and barbarian religion without denying itself the right to appropriate a foreign deity.

In the expanded world of the Hellenistic and Roman periods, the definition of Greekness, which naturally shifted according to context even in the classical period, could expand as well to include those who, although they may have not been of Hellenic blood, were culturally Hellenized. Panhellenism was thus still ideologically efficacious, especially in the period of Greek cultural flourishing in the empire. This is as true of religion as of anything else, even with respect to Roman state cult (as we will see in the second section). On the other hand, the level of intercultural interaction at the time among Greek, Roman, indigenous, and Jewish and Christian traditions, combined with the Greek penchant for syncretistic behavior, complicates the notion of a rigid differentiation between Greek and barbarian practices.

Chapter 2, "Magic, Religion, and Syncretism at the Oracle of Claros" by Zsuzsanna Várhelyi, studies the relationship between the oracle of Apollo at Claros and a number of its client states in the second and third centuries A.D. While the client states were not quite traditionally "barbaric" in the way that Thrace had been, they tended to be non-Ionian or only recently Hellenized, and they did not traditionally consult Apollonic oracles. Similarly to Pache's study, this chapter describes a syncretistic practice in which the symbols of Panhellenic religion coexist harmoniously with symbols of "otherness," in what Várhelyi calls a "soft politics of difference." So while the inscriptions found on Claros of the client states' visits to the oracle demonstrate language peculiar to the cult of Apollo, the oracular responses, which were set up in the client states and not at the Clarian site itself, often use language normally associated with magic and with chthonian religion, and appear to reflect the local concerns of each state. An analysis of the language of the responses, all of which provide countermeasures to a plague, suggests that the client cities, in fact, had more significant roles in interpreting the plague's causes than the oracle.

On the other hand, acceptable and nonacceptable religious practices needed to be distinguished. Not all practices could be syncretized, among them those that involved practices regularly considered magical. While magic was not necessarily associated with barbarism per se (that is, with classically barbarian peoples and places), as a phenomenon that is not attached to the polis it is marked as being "outside" normal religious practice. But the picture of magic is complex here: hymns that were prescribed by the oracles do not show outright rejection of magic, which in the empire, Graf has suggested, was moving toward

divination.[18] While the Stoic overtones of the hymns allowed them to overtly avoid magical reference, at the same time their very performance could represent a traditionally magical function. Thus, Várhelyi suggests, the dominant opposition at Claros cannot have been simply that between magic and religion per se, but between nonphilosophical and philosophical understandings of the divine.

Similarly to the Greeks, the religious identity of the Romans was inseparable from their identity as Romans: "We have the notion, which [the Romans] did not, of an individual having a 'religious identity' that can be distinguished from his or her identity as a citizen or as a family member. If asked what we are, we can say a 'Catholic,' a 'Moslem,' 'an atheist.'"[19] The conceptual borders of religion were policed like the conceptual borders of the state. Even though the Romans were engaged, from as far back as the sixth century, in a continual dialogue with Greek culture (which naturally included religion), religious innovation at Rome was confined to the early and middle republic,[20] and only under Caracalla in the third century was a new cult, that of Isis and Serapis, given a place in the official religion.[21] On the other hand, as with the Greeks, while we can always see the rhetoric of otherness on the surface, it can be difficult to distinguish purely "Roman" practices from those of "others." To take one important example, anyone who believes (as we think that one must) that the process by which Romans incorporated the religion of *Graeca capta* was creative rather than derivative in nature will understand how difficult it is to posit an authentic "Roman" against "Greek" religious experience.

In chapter 3, "Saving Water: Early Floods in the Forum," Prudence J. Jones studies the mythological use of water as a sacred buffer against threats to the Roman state in the literature of Augustan Rome.[22] At a time when the alteration of the Tiber was seen as both necessary and potentially offensive to the gods, Roman writers circulated stories of the Tiber's past that reflected a cooperative relationship between Romans and the numinous landscape. This is seen particularly in stories concerning the ancient struggle between the Romans and the Sabines. Jones argues that the Tiber is seen as a supernatural force that protects Rome against anti-Roman forces, but is itself resistant to being used for

---

18. Graf 1999.

19. Beard, North, and Price 1998:43.

20. North 1976 and 1979.

21. Garnsey and Saller 1987:170.

22. On the relationship between Roman literature and religion, see Feeney 1999.

supernatural ends by someone who tries to harm Rome. The distinction between good and bad religion involves "ethnic" difference in an interesting way, one that reflects imperial Rome's efforts to civilize foreigners to become Roman, as well as touches on the issue of magical practice. The two central figures here, Tarpeia and Mettius Curtius, were both originally Sabines, but while the former represents the threat of the barbaric, the latter positively represents the incorporation of the Sabines into Rome. This is reflected by the fact that Tarpeia is unsuccessful in her attempt to use witchcraft to betray Rome, and, conversely, in the water's supernatural aid to Mettius. Jones also makes an important connection here between the invocation of these early myths and the necessity that Roman citizens may have felt to compensate for the potentially impious alteration of the Roman landscape in Augustus' great engineering projects.

In chapter 4, "Magic, Dreams, and Ritual in the Iroquois Conversion," Kate Blair-Dixon presents a case study in the transmission of late Mediterranean thought, in which Roman magic serves as a model of the "other" from a Christian viewpoint. Blair-Dixon demonstrates the way in which seventeenth-century Jesuits appropriated early Christian attitudes toward the Romans in dealing with the "pagan" Iroquois of North America. Predisposed to Augustine's dualistic view of Christianity and paganism as, respectively, "good" and "evil," but also influenced by Gregory the Great's syncretistic view, which held that pagans could be converted, Jesuits at first expected the Iroquois to convert. As their mission continued, however, the difficulties of conversion caused the Jesuits to create a more powerful rhetoric of difference, one in which the religious practices of the Iroquois were branded "magic," in opposition to the Jesuits' own "religion," using Roman paganism as their map of understanding. Again, magic serves as a category of explaining the other, in reference to variable practices. It is powerful testimony to the general applicability of the category of "magic" that among the benefits of attributing magic to the Iroquois was the Jesuits' self-affirmation as "rational" against Protestant accusations in the Reformation debates that they themselves were "magicians."

Part II, "Man, Hero or God?" shifts focus away from relationships among communities of worshippers to the relationships between worshippers and those individuals who cross the line between the human and the divine, heroes and deified rulers. Heroes are human beings who undergo immortalization after their death and become recipients of heroic sacrifice. Starting in the Hellenistic period with Alexander the Great, some human beings are granted divine status while they are still living and they receive cult similar to those conferred to gods.

All three chapters explore the constitutive function of literary narratives and the link between literature and cult. Chapters 5 and 6 focus on the role of

literature as creator and promoter of the divine status of two different rulers: Alexander the Great and Augustus. With Alexander the Great, the practice of assimilating ruler with god was born. After his reign, the custom of granting divine status to rulers continued with his successors. Ruler cults varied greatly in different areas of Greece, and although the cults were popular, there was always a great deal of controversy surrounding the practice. Although Greek hero cult comes first chronologically, part II starts with two chapters devoted to ruler cult in the imperial period, and concludes with a chapter focusing on one late interpretation of Greek hero cult.

Traditionally, heroes and heroines are studied in terms of the roles they performed as living beings (whether they are construed as purely mythic or historical characters), and their status as objects of worship after their death is explained in terms of these functions: city founders, warriors, prophets, healers, lawgivers, discoverers, inventors, ancestors. Heroes provide a focal point for ritual, and furnish an explanation for the existence and cohesion of particular sociopolitical groups: polis, *genê*, phratries, or orgeones.[23] These are themes that have engaged historians and sociologists alike for a long time, and hero cult—as is made clear again and again by archaeological and epigraphical evidence— is central to any explanation of these ancient institutions.

Nineteenth-century classicists explained hero worship in two ways. Some understood it as a form of ancestor worship, others as a ritual performed for downgraded deities.[24] The debate on hero cult, then, long centered on this

---

23. Parker 1996:37-39.

24. Two famous names associated with this debate come to mind: Rohde 1894 saw the origins of hero cult in ancestor cults, while Usener 1896, by contrast, argued that heroes derived from ancient *Sondergötter* whose particular function is often reflected in their names (Iatros, Strategos, etc.). Rohde and Usener approached the question of hero worship from very different perspectives, and although it was a central focus for neither of them, they later came to be perceived as the spokesmen for these two opposite points-of-view. Friedrich Pfister's 1912 landmark study *Der Reliquienkult im Altertum*—siding with Usener on the question of the divine origin of hero cult—showed the importance of the hero's physical remains and grave, thereby linking hero worship with Christian relic cult, and establishing a close parallel between pagan heroes and Christian saints. Foucart 1922:67 maintained—following in the tracks of Rohde—that "the Greeks never doubted their Heroes had been men." Meanwhile Farnell 1921 adopted a combination of these two views and developed a compromise approach to the problem: he argued that all heroes were not necessarily to be explained by one single origin, and he divided them

dichotomy between understanding heroes as powerful dead human beings or local, demoted gods until Brelich offered a radically new approach in his 1958 study, *Gli eroi greci*. By examining ritual and myth together in their historical context, Brelich undertook the study of hero cult as a whole and sought to understand heroes in terms of wider cultural patterns rather than by focusing on the differences between them. Brelich's "morphological" approach brought forth a new openness and new rigor to the study of the phenomenon that have greatly enriched our understanding of hero cult.

While hero cult and ancestor worship were practiced in both Greece and Rome, the worship of living beings represents a revolutionary development. A crucial distinction needs to be made between the heroic and the divine: while some important Panhellenic heroes occasionally received divine sacrifice,[25] heroes are never deified. Heroes' bodies are—notionally or actually—buried at the place of worship and at the center of the hero cult. Thus, hero cult is by definition a local cult. Ruler cult, by contrast, ascribes divinity to human beings during their lifetime. Starting with Alexander the Great, powerful leaders began to receive divine honors while they were still alive on account of their great political or military prowess. While Roman ruler cult is ultimately influenced by Greek practices, ruler cults of Alexander and Augustus differ in many essential ways.

The Romans, like the Greeks, offered sacrifices to their dead, but until the Hellenistic period had no tradition of granting divine status to living human beings. Some Roman administrators in Greek cities began to receive divine cult at the end of the third century B.C. The practice gradually reached Rome itself, and the second century B.C. saw certain Roman citizens receiving divine honors. While the practice originated with Alexander the Great, ruler cult takes a different shape in Rome, and by the time Julius Caesar was granted divine honors in 45 B.C., the ritual had become a Roman one. On the other hand, outside of Rome, public cult took different forms in the east and west (although we should be careful not to emphasize the divide between the Romanization of the east and that of the west, in general, too greatly).[26] Whereas Greeks tended to maintain a Greek identity and were thus generally able to interpret the cult of the emperor in Greek terms, western worshippers seem to have acquired a Roman

---

into seven categories.

25. See for example, the double cult of Herakles as described in Pausanias.

26. See, e.g., Woolf 1994.

identity.[27] What they had in common was the fact that all subjects were required to recognize Roman gods alongside their own.

Ruler cult and issues surrounding the worship of living beings were problematic from the outset with the cult of Alexander, and would present their own problems for the Romans. In chapter 5, Spencer Cole focuses on Caesar's adoptive son, Octavian, and his acquiring divine status during his lifetime. Cole explores the process by which Rome appropriates and transforms aspects of Greek cult, and more particularly he examines the fundamental role played by contemporary poets in formulating and securing immortality for Augustus. Cole sees the deification of Augustus as an ongoing process that is articulated in part through poetry. Vergil's and Horace's poetry play an essential role in helping create and define Augustus' divine status, yet both authors also express great ambivalence toward this divine status. They shift Augustus' position along the continuum human-hero-god, and, ultimately, both poets resist providing a definitive answer to the question of deification. Cole, like Asirvatham in chapter 6, concludes that literature is used both to shape and to allow reflection on ideologically problematic religious practices.

The ruler cult of Alexander, first chronologically, also remained a source of interest and inspiration for later writers, as witnessed in Sulochana R. Asirvatham's study of the negotiation of Alexander's divinity in Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*. In chapter 6, Asirvatham examines the process by which Plutarch, a Greek writer of the Second Sophistic, uses human foils and religious symbols—more specifically, the snake and *proskynesis* (obeisance)— to prop up Alexander's cultural and political "Greekness." Plutarch uses the motif of Alexander's divinity as a way of demarking the line between the "Greek" and "barbarian" elements in Alexander's character. The use of the Greek/barbarian dichotomy to characterize Alexander suggests that, for Plutarch, this man is to be judged with the same social criteria as are other human beings in their relationship to the divine. He presents deification as acceptable if it is based on the king's virtue, virtue which in turn is a manifestation of the divine element in the human soul. Finally Asirvatham also places Plutarch's use of Alexander's religiosity in its own historical context of imperial cult and analyzes it as a mechanism by which Greek communities understood Rome. That Greeks could understand not only Alexander's ruler cult but also Roman ruler cult in Panhellenic terms is reflected in such institutions as the well-known

---

Panhellenion, by which Greeks were able to worship Hadrian alongside Zeus Panhellenios.[28]

In chapter 7, Ellen Bradshaw Aitken turns to hero cult. While this practice chronologically precedes ruler cult, she focuses on one second-century A.D. interpretation of hero cult. The *Heroikos* is a unique work that gives a blueprint, as it were, of hero worship. Philostratus' dialogue first sets out to prove the existence of heroes, and the need to worship them. The conversation between the vinedresser and the Phoenician explores the problems of correct ritual practices, and Aitken analyzes the relationship between text and ritual practice. The *Heroikos* seeks to persuade its readers of the need for proper cult through the use of the hero "come back to life." Aitken argues that the *Heroikos* can be seen as a foil against which to interpret contemporary concerns with the formation of the Christian canon, correct ritual and ethical practices. While the *Heroikos* itself is not influenced by Christian practices, the text reveals concerns and questions that illuminate the ways in which religious identity is created and promoted in late antiquity.

With the exception of Kate Blair-Dixon's "Magic, Dreams, and Ritual in the Iroquois Conversion," the chapters of the preceding sections focus primarily on the Greek and Roman worlds of classical antiquity. Ellen Bradshaw Aitken's "The Cult of Achilles in Philostratus' *Heroikos*: A Study in the Relation of Canon and Ritual" takes us into the early third century A.D. with an analysis of a Greek text that appears to share certain central concerns with early Christianity. The essays in the third section bring us abruptly into the early Byzantine period and medieval France. Something needs to be said by way of transition.

Let us take as our point of departure Aitken's suggestion that Philostratus' dialogue about Greek hero cult offers important insights for students of early Christianity. Her call to bridge the traditional disciplinary boundaries between classics and New Testament studies draws attention to the value for scholarship of treating religious traditions that are contemporary with each other as communities in conversation rather than isolated entities living in their own hermetically sealed environments. We must acknowledge that we are anticipated in this enterprise by a series of ongoing conversations between Christians and their contemporaries that were an important moment in the formation of a Christian identity. The writings of Justin Martyr, Origen, and Tertullian, among

---

27. Beard, North, and Price 1998:314ff.

28. See Jones 1996, especially for the (often neglected) religious aspects of the cult; also Spawforth and Walker 1985 and 1986.

others, show that this conversation was well under way by the third century. The terms of the conversation change after the third century, and the emotional pitch intensifies, to be sure, but the conversation continues, a dialogue between past and present as well as between religious communities living side by side.

Christian polemicists in late antiquity have bequeathed to us their side of the conversation between Christianity and other religious traditions around the Mediterranean. Their perspective on the complex religious world of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. was of great importance for the creation of Christian identity in the early Byzantine east, to say nothing of its significance for later scholarship. They represented late antiquity as driven by a conflict between two mutually hostile and unequal antagonists, Christianity and paganism.[29] The climax of this conflict was the sudden, violent, and spectacular triumph of a united and aggressive Christian church in league with a centralized imperial authority over a homogeneous pagan religion in the turbulent years at the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth centuries. The litany of Christian victories over their pagan enemies in this period is impressive: the ban on animal sacrifice, the abolition of nocturnal festivals, the destruction of the Serapaeum, and, to carry the list into the early fifth century, the murder of Hypatia in A.D. 415. According to this view, the "Christianization" of the Roman Empire was a debate between a dying paganism defending a doomed past and a vibrant Christianity pointing the way to the future. This narrative yielded some of the important referents by which Christian polemicists could orient and define their religion: a pagan religion against which they could define themselves, as well as a past which had been superceded and to which the pagan other could be safely banished.

The problem of the "Christianization" of the Roman Empire must be approached with great caution. The very terms "Christian" and "pagan" are ideologically charged. The unity of late-antique Christianity, fragmented by doctrinal disagreement and political rivalry, is questionable, and there never was a single "pagan" church: the term "paganism" itself has been foisted on a wide variety of religious traditions, many of which had nothing more in common with each other than they did with Christianity. It is helpful in this regard to recall Pierre Chuvin's explanation of "paganism" as a blanket term for a wide variety of religious practices that were seen as local and traditional;[30] pagans were people attached to the traditional practices that were constitutive of their local

---

29. Brown 1995.

30. Chuvin 1990:9.

identities. Chuvin's survey of the religious world of late antiquity shows that these practices flourished in many parts of the empire well into the seventh century.[31] In rural districts, where imperial regulation was weak, traditional local cult thrived openly; in urban centers, where imperial authority was strong, traditional religion survived too, though it had to accommodate itself to the realities of imperial regulation.

Despite the advantage that imperial patronage gave to Christianity, there were a number of factors that encouraged Christians and pagans to find a *modus vivendi* in late antiquity. We have already mentioned the attachment to local traditions that exerted an influence on both pagans and Christians. Peter Brown has rightly called attention to the importance of *paideia* as a constitutive element of the identity of the urban elites in late antiquity.[32] *Paideia* is the education in Hellenic culture, focused mainly on rhetoric, that provided the urban elites with a common language and a sense of participation in a shared trans-Mediterranean culture. The connection between Hellenism and Greek religion is discussed in several chapters in parts I and II of this collection, e.g., Várhelyi, Asirvatham, and Aitken. Hellenism in late antiquity was an internationalizing factor that linked distant cities and, of equal importance, was a medium of cultural continuity that linked late antiquity to a long pre-Christian tradition. Glen Bowersock's observation that *hellenismos* means both "Hellenism" and "pagan" (and is in fact the *only* word for "pagan" in Greek at this period)[33] shows the close involvement of *paideia* with "pagan" religion. The fact that *paideia* was shared by the upper echelons of the Christian clergy and the imperial bureaucracy, as well as the urban elites, complicates our notion of Christian identity in late antiquity.

Chapters 8 and 9 explore the ways in which Christians in late-antique Byzantium confronted, reproduced, and adapted forms of religious life inherited from the pagan past. The particular focus of these essays is on powerful objects and images--amulets and rings--that protect their users against the dangerous forces from the unseen world that wreak havoc on the lives of mortals in this world. These apotropaic objects are devices for coping with misfortunes that are common to everyday life but nonetheless disasters from the point of view of the afflicted: sickness, miscarriage, and marital discord. Seen from the perspective of religious orthodoxy, such practices appear marginal rather than mainstream,

---

31. Chuvin 1990.

32. Brown 1992:chapter 2.

33. Bowersock 1996:9-12.

but it is important to note that their involvement with the concerns of everyday life make them central to the daily experience of their users, and also help to illuminate the religious world of ordinary citizens, something that is much more difficult to recover, for example, in literary texts.

Mary Margaret (Molly) Fulghum's "Coins Used as Amulets in Late Antiquity" (chapter 8) is a study of the iconography of coins and *contorniates* that were pierced to be worn as amulets in the early Byzantine period up to the seventh century A.D. Her point of departure is a sixth-century coin with a portrait of Justinian on the obverse that bears evidence of having been used as an amulet but that deviates in puzzling ways from the standard iconography familiar from other Byzantine pierced-coin amulets. Her investigation sheds light on some of the strategies for adapting earlier religious practices to a Christian context. Old symbols are retained and invested with new Christian meaning. The old goddess Nike, famously expelled from the Roman Curia in A.D. 392, is recalled from exile with a new identity as a Christian angel. Holy rider images are ambiguous: they may represent the Christian saint Sisinnios, or the biblical Solomon, but they may also be the Macedonian conqueror, Alexander the Great. The power of imperial portraits, including the Christian emperors Constantine and Justinian, the second-century co-emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, as well as Alexander the Great, is of special interest in connection with the chapters on imperial and Hellenistic ruler cult in part II of this collection. As with Nike and the Holy Rider images, the traditional power of imperial symbols is mediated through a process of Christianization. The emperor is placed in a new relation to the divine order as God's representative on earth, whose power can be invoked and manipulated for private ends by the owner of an amulet.

The subject of Fulghum's chapter brings us once more to the complex relationship between magic and religion. Are the amulets Fulghum describes magical or religious artifacts? In the context of the early Byzantine period, the question is whether the Byzantines would have understood the use of amulets to be an acceptable Christian practice or an illicit magical practice. A consideration of the status of amulets in late antiquity brings to light no general agreement about their place in a Christian society. It should be emphasized first of all that there were no secular laws defining and regulating amulets as magical objects. This fact is not surprising: in general, the Roman legal system dealt with magic on an ad hoc basis as certain practices were perceived to threaten social and political stability. Imperial legislation on magic in the fourth and fifth centuries made various forms of divination a capital crime, but did not define other forms

of magic.[34] There is no evidence that secular authorities took any cognizance of amulets as a problem. In the absence of imperial interest in the subject, it fell to church leaders to address the question. The church was hampered in its attempts to distinguish magic from religion by the embarrassing silence of scripture on the subject: magic is rarely condemned in the Bible, and clear definitions are difficult to extract.[35] The diversity of amulets in material and function would have made them especially difficult to define and regulate.[36] The pronouncements of church fathers on amulets could be ambiguous. John Chrysostom, for example, condemned the use of coins of Alexander the Great as amulets, but elsewhere suggested that certain indubitably Christian symbols such as the cross could provide protection against the evil eye, leaving open the possibility that some amulets with Christian symbols might be permissible. Many of the amulets that Fulghum discusses bear signs that were frankly Christian or that could be given a Christian interpretation; one may surmise that their users were sensitive to criticisms of the sort found in Chrysostom and were attempting to "Christianize" their amulets. The Council in Trullo (A.D. 691-692) condemned "furnishers of amulets" in its sixty-first canon, but the text does not specify what kind of amulets were intended; the context of the passage is a condemnation of various forms of divination, so it is possible that the council was concerned with amulets used in divination, not apotropaic objects.[37] Archaeological evidence

---

34. The laws are collected in Mommsen and Meyer 1905:9.16.1-12. Astrologers (*mathematici*), diviners (*haruspices, harioli*), dream interpreters, Chaldaeans, and magi are banned. Note that a law of Constantine (9.16.3) exempts magical remedies for illness and magic for the protection of crops from rain and hail; subsequent legislation eliminates these exemptions.

35. Dickie in Maguire 1995:9-11.

36. Amulets could be made of metal, stone, leather, parchment, cloth, human or animal remains, etc. Christian and non-Christian symbols and pictures appear, as well as text. For examples of Christian amulets from Egypt that use Christian scripture, see Meyer and Smith 1994:33-35. David Frankfurter's survey of amulets in late antiquity gives an idea of their enormous variety: Bowersock, Brown, and Graber 1999, *s.v.* "amulets." Perforated coins are not mentioned in his article.

37. See Trombley 1978:1-19 for a discussion of the Council in Trullo; p. 6 for the Sixty-First Canon. Balsamon's twelfth-century commentary on the canon does not clarify the issue: he cites the case of a priest who used a baby's swaddling clothes as an amulet, as well as other instances where priests and monks used various objects for divination.

from the Byzantine settlement at Anemurium[38] coupled with the testimony of literary sources suggests that amulets of many kinds were commonly used in late antiquity. It is quite likely that many amulet wearers did not think of themselves as practicing magic, but rather as taking prudent countermeasures against hostile magic.[39]

The question of the relationship between magic and religion is not merely an abstract theoretical exercise: our understanding of these concepts continues to have important practical implications for scholarly research and affects our interpretation of ancient artifacts. Alicia Walker's "A Reconsideration of Early Byzantine Marriage Rings" (chapter 9) reviews a recent debate about the interpretation of the potent words and symbols that appear on marriage rings from the early Byzantine period. Scholars studying these rings have started from the premise that they functioned as magical objects; this premise has given rise to a theory that situates the rings in a wider context of Byzantine magical practices. The occasional appearance of the word *hygieia* ("health") on some marriage rings together with other formal similarities has led previous researchers to explain the rings in the light of contemporary Byzantine magico-medical practices as charms against miscarriage, but this explanation, as Walker shows, is not borne out by a rigorous examination of the evidence. We are fortunate in this case that the matter can be settled on methodological grounds, but Walker's findings raise larger questions about how scholars are to make sense of the disparate practices subsumed under the broad category of magic.

Walker's chapter, like Fulghum's, is concerned with the Christian adaptation of older traditions. Our knowledge of Roman prototypes for the rings discussed by Walker yields important insights into the ways in which Byzantine couples reproduced and adapted traditional strategies to cope with threats to the stability of marital life. Certain potent symbols inherited from pre-Christian traditions were retained when compatible with Christianity. Under this category are included phrases such as *homonoia* ("concord" or "harmony") and *kharis* ("grace," specifically "divine grace"), which could easily be interpreted in Christian terms. Other forms required a more drastic alteration. The *locus sanctus* scenes on Greco-Roman marriage rings, in which a divinity blesses the married couple, is transformed into a blessing received from an appropriate Christian source: Christ, the Virgin Mary, and sometimes the cross. The persistence of such forms from the Greco-Roman period through the seventh century shows both their resiliency and the flexibility of Christianity.

The problem of relating an iconographical interpretation to its wider cultural context is taken up by Amanda Luyster in "The *Femme-aux-Serpents* at Moissac: Luxuria (Lust) or a Bad Mother?" (chapter 10). Her chapter is a detailed study of the *femme-aux-serpents* ("woman with snakes") panel on the south porch of a twelfth-century church in Moissac. Previous scholarship has explained the *femme-aux-serpents* figure as an allegorical figure for the punishment of *luxuria*, an interpretation that works well for other representations of the figure, but that does not account for some of the puzzling features of the *femme-aux-serpents* at Moissac, in particular the presence of two toads, one issuing from the mouth of a demon, the other positioned near the pudenda of a nude woman. Luyster's project includes a study of the figure of the bad mother in medieval Christian literature and a survey of the significance of toads in medieval culture. Her aim is the recovery of the possible meanings, for a medieval viewer, of the individual elements of the Moissac *femme-aux-serpents*, and the result is a daring and original reading of the overall program of the Moissac south porch.

See Fögen 1995:99-115, esp. 102.

38. Russel 1995.

39. The same point is made in Meyer and Smith 1994:2 in regard to "magical" texts from Christian Egypt: "The texts themselves, as we point out in the notes, rarely use the word *mageia*, or other Greek and Coptic words we translate as 'magic' and 'sorcery.' Our texts are frequently invocations of the powers to protect the person from 'magic,' from sorcery, and against the evil eye. The users did not, therefore, consider themselves practitioners of 'magic,' which they regarded as a negative term. The terms of positive description they use, *phylakterion* and *apologia*, 'amulet' and 'spell,' really just mean 'protection' and 'defense.' Since the practices are a means of fighting back against magical attack, 'magic' does not seem a fitting description." Greenfield notes that in later Byzantine "magical" texts words like *mageia* and *goêteia* are avoided (1995:120-121).