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Religion in Roman Historiography and Epic

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A version of this paper is due to appear as a chapter in the forthcoming Blackwell Companion to Roman Religion (edited by Jörg Rüpke). The paper gives an overview of the religious dimensions to Roman epic and historiography, and argues for taking seriously the literary questions of representation, genre, and convention which are often elided by historians who wish to disinter hard evidence for 'real' religious attitudes and practice from these texts.

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1 Introduction

It is now impossible for us to know how—or even whether—the Romans represented divine action and religious practice in narrative or song before they began their project of adapting Greek literary forms into a national literature of their own in the second half of the third century BC. More and more contemporary scholars wish to believe the once discredited Roman traditions about ballads of the men of old supposedly sung in the pre-literary period. If such songs were sung (and that remains a big ‘if’), it is imaginable that they portrayed the help of the gods and the pious rituals of the Roman people and its generals. Again, if the Romans told stories about their past on occasions such as festivals, funerals, triumphs and anniversaries of temples or victories, then it is likewise imaginable that these stories included human ritual or divine manifestations. None of this can now be securely known. What can be known is that the new literary forms of historiography and epic which came into being in the late third century BC included religion as a vital component from the beginning. Already in the fragmentary remains of our very first texts, it is clear that the histories and epics of the Roman people are a venue for exploring the relationship between gods and men, and this crucial preoccupation continued to be central to both literary traditions for as long as they endured.

While sharing this common concern, each tradition had its own distinctive techniques and priorities, which were to a large degree the inheritance of the developed Greek literary forms which provided their starting point. The student who is reading these texts with an interest in their religious dimension must always be conscious of the fact that they are specific kinds of

literature, which are interacting with other religious discourses in their own distinctive ways. These texts have much to teach us about the possibilities of Roman religion, but we can never simply ‘read off’ information about Roman religion from them without allowing for the particular kinds of narratives that they are. For many years the histories and epics of the Romans were commonly regarded as only ‘literary’, with no relation to the ‘real’ religion of the society. That phase of scholarship is thankfully passing, and the deep importance of the religious dimension of these texts is now generally acknowledged; the challenge now is to try to recover that religious dimension without making it conform to the norms of other kinds of religious discourse—without, in other words, blurring over the specific and distinctive literary characteristics of the work in question.

2 The divine sanction of the first Roman epics

The earliest epics in the Latin language to be preserved and transmitted were written by men who were not native speakers of the language. A Greek from Tarentum called Andronikos became a Roman citizen with the name of Lucius Livius Andronicus; sometime in the second half of the third century BC he translated Homer’s Odyssey into Saturnians, a non-Greek metre of uncertain origin and nature. Towards the end of the century a Campanian named Gnaeus Naevius wrote the Bellum Punicum, an epic, likewise in Saturnians, about the first war between Rome and Carthage (264-241 BC). Some thirty years later a man from the Messapian area on the heel of Italy, Quintus Ennius, took the decisive step of using Homeric hexameters for the first time in his composition of the Annales, a huge poem which described the history of Rome all the way

from the fall of Troy down to his own day. The understanding these outsiders display of the Romans' language, culture and religion is phenomenally deep, yet they all knew Greek before they knew Latin, and their poems are a fascinating amalgam of Greek and Roman in every aspect, not least that of religion.

The fundamental divine scenes of Homer reproduce themselves in all of these poems, with divine councils and interventions, gods speaking to humans, and so forth. The poems show the gods and goddesses of the Homeric tradition in action, yet in a Latin and a Roman guise. As characters, they have Latin names (Jupiter for Zeus, Juno for Hera, and so on), and the work of creating parallelisms between the Greek and Roman gods is clearly one that had been going on in cult for centuries before Livius and Naevius. Although many of the Greek aspects of the gods overlap with Roman ones, the poets knew that their narratives had to accommodate Roman gods to new roles. The familiar Roman healing god Apollo appears in Naevius as the god of Delphi (Pythius, fr. 24 Morel 1927), discharging a role that had only just become important for the Roman state, which consulted the Delphic oracle during the war against Hannibal. The Roman Mercury shared many of his mercantile affinities with the Greek Hermes, but in Rome he was not a god associated with escorting the dead, as he was in Greece. When he appeared in this role in Livius' Odyssey it will certainly have been a new piece of casting, and Roman readers will have had to cross mental boundaries to accommodate their Mercury to this new persona.

By far the most significant rewriting of Greek and Roman categories may be seen in the case of the supreme god, Jupiter Optimus Maximus, 'Best and Greatest'. Naevius and Ennius are careful to blend together Greek, Homeric

epithets with these special cult titles of the god. In Naevius Jupiter is addressed as ‘highest’ of the gods, just like Zeus in Homer, and also as ‘Best’, optimum (fr.14); in Ennius he is addressed not only as ‘our father, son of Saturn’, to correspond to the Homeric ‘our father, son of Cronus’, but also as ‘Greatest’, maxime (fr. 444). These deft transcultural interstitchings are just one token of the way in which Jupiter becomes in these poems not only the supreme god of the Roman state but also the counterpart of the Greek Zeus, not just in his cultic dimension but with all the mass of interpretation which had accrued to his personality over centuries of Homeric scholarship. In this Greek tradition of exegesis Zeus is the god who stands above all gods and humans, guaranteeing a cosmic order and embodying a providential wisdom. In accordance with this kind of view, in the Greek world Zeus was not a partisan of any one city or state, but stood above them all, as for example at Olympia, where his temple was the focus for the whole Hellenic world in its celebration of the Olympic games. To identify this supranational and potentially cosmic figure with the supreme god of the Roman republic was a strategy of enormous symbolic power, beyond the capacity of any Greek state: the supreme god of the universe now has a partisan affinity with the new empire, and the destiny of the world is now the destiny of Rome. The Greek god has taken on Roman attributes and the Roman god has taken on Greek ones; neither Zeus nor Jupiter will ever look quite the same again.

Zeus is intimately associated in Greek epic with an ability to foresee and fortell the future, and in Roman epic these capacities are also present, in even more potent form. Prophecies in extant Greek epic do not extend more than one human generation into the future, yet already in Naevius we see Jupiter prophesying the future greatness of the Roman people in the immediate

aftermath of the Trojan war, looking hundreds of years ahead as he consoles Venus during a storm which threatens her son, Aeneas (fr.13). In general, the epics of Naevius and Ennius show a determination to anchor the history of the Roman people in a divine plan and a deep mythic past, as if to show that their rise to hegemony was inevitably destined (Barchiesi 1962: 224-68). Naevius narrated the voyage of the Trojans to Italy in the first third of his poem, presenting the Roman triumph over the Carthaginians as part of a divine plan that had been in place for centuries. Ennius began his epic with the fall of Troy, although he narrated continuously from there to the contemporary present, to show the new Troy rising triumphantly from the ashes as the Romans achieved victory over the old enemy, the Greeks: the culmination of his original 15-book plan was the foundation of the temple of Hercules Musarum, built to house the statues of the Muses looted from Ambracia, home of the ancestral enemy Pyrrhus, and dedicated possibly in 184 BC, one thousand years after the sack of Troy (Gratwick 1982: 65). These perspectives resonated with a Roman readership accustomed to thinking of their success in war as depending on their strenuous maintenance of good relations with the gods, yet the panoramas of the epics are not just a mirror of what everyone was thinking at the time anyway. Rather, they are a unique vision of Roman destiny, capitalising on Greek epic strategies and Greek literary and philosophical scholarship in addition to Roman practices of commemoration. The new Roman epic, with its distinctive religious vision, has its own contribution to make to the way the Romans were reconceiving their role on the world stage in these days of unparalleled expansion. And we should never forget that the Roman epic led the way in exploring these questions: Naevius was the first person to write a history of Rome in an integrated narrative with literary aspirations (Barchiesi 1962: 242-

3), and Ennius was the first person to write a history of Rome in Latin in an annalistic format (Rüpke 1995: 200-1).

The first epics were also full of descriptions of religious practice of all kinds. In the first part of his Bellum Punicum, Naevius engagingly presents Aeneas' father Anchises behaving like a Roman priest—in fact, like three kinds of Roman priest. Greek epics contained many descriptions of prophets and seers in action, yet Anchises predicts the future on the basis of sacred books he received from his former lover, Venus (fr. 13a): in this way he behaves not like a Greek seer but like one of the decemviri, who consulted the Sibylline books in the temple of Jupiter. Anchises also knows how to ‘watch for his bird in the right area of the sky’ like a Roman augur (avem conspexit in templo Anchisa, fr. 3.1), and how to lay the banquet for the gods like a Roman triumvir epulo (fr. 3.2). Ennius likewise describes many cult actions, and the institution of many Roman religious practices and institutions, especially with Numa's monarchy at the beginning of Book 2. One of the finest surviving fragments is the unforgettable scene in Book 1 where Romulus and Remus take the auspices to see which one of them will found the city of Rome (fr. 1.xlvii Skutsch 1985). Here the language of Roman augury is carefully staged at the crucial inaugural moment of Rome, with all its religious and political future ready to be bodied forth. The Roman nobility's sense of their place in a succession of religiously sanctioned predecessors underpins the entire poem, and their religious piety was scrupulously commemorated throughout (Gildenhard 2003: 95-7).

In Ennius' poem such self-consciously ‘Roman’ moments are jostling with other discourses—not just the Homeric one, but philosophical and religious schemes with which Ennius will have been familiar from his upbringing in the orbit of Greek culture in southern Italy: Pythagoreanism,

euhemerism, and the natural philosophical rationalising of the Sicilian Epicharmus, to name only the most prominent (Jocelyn 1972: 1010-11). The temptation, for students of Roman religion even more than for students of Roman literature, is to seize on the ritualistic moments in the poem and identify them as what really counts as religiously significant, so that the other religious discourses can be demoted or discarded. This would be a mistake, however, and not only because it is poor literary criticism. Such a procedure is also poor intellectual and cultural history. It would make it impossible to see how the poems of Naevius and Ennius are welding together disparate traditions in order to create novel visions of the destiny of Rome in a world undergoing bewilderingly rapid change. The omnivorous reach of Roman epic's religious power reflects the society's involvement with the religious and cultural systems of many neighbouring and distant states: the Romans are now heir to Greek concerns in the East, in ways that make their mythical Trojan status newly powerful; they are turning themselves into the heirs of Greek culture in more general terms, with an ambitious programme of competition in the field of what we now call 'literature'; their rivalry with Carthage enforces a new vision of their imperial destiny in competition with that of Carthage, framed in epic as a struggle between two divine systems centering on Carthage's Juno and Rome's Jupiter. The new Roman epic has many religious and philosophical discourses to deploy in pursuit of these ambitious goals, and the new genre cannot be reduced to a template which maps on to any identifiable correlative in the rest of the society.

3 The religious order of Virgil's Aeneid

While capitalising on the determinative patterns of the epics of Naevius and Ennius, Virgil's Aeneid takes their concerns with fated dominion much further. By Virgil's day the Roman empire had grown to engulf the entire Mediterranean, and had fallen under the sway of a single man, the emperor Augustus. Through his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, Augustus was able to claim descent from Iulus, the son of Aeneas: by a gigantic historical fluke, the careful prophetic programmes of Naevius and Ennius, guaranteeing rule to the descendants of Aeneas in general, have now acquired a new end-point, for the whole of Roman history now appears to be heading towards its culmination in the personal rule of Aeneas' direct familial descendant. The ambition of the Aeneid also includes the project of showing how Rome has taken over the role of guarantor of civilised order from Greece, as the new heir to the cultural patrimony of the older and more distinguished culture. Ennius was already feeling his way towards this theme, but Virgil strongly foregrounds the translatio imperii, the process by which the Romans have taken over from the Greeks as the latest in the series of empires. Rome's religion has in the process become a global religion, with Rome's gods taking on a definitive role as the gods of an empire, not just a city. Virgil's Jupiter is now unquestionably the supreme cosmocrat of Greek philosophy and Homeric scholarship as well as Jupiter Optimus Maximus; Apollo is now the favourite god of Augustus as well as the god of prophecy, music and healing; Juno is now starting to outlive her old persona as the inveterate enemy of Troy and Rome, as she used to be in her partisan roles as the Homeric Hera, the Carthaginian Tanit, and the Italian Juno/Uni of the resistance to Roman expansion in Italy.

As part of this larger objective of outlining a new imperial reach to Roman religion, it is striking how Virgil's interest in evoking Roman ritual is

less strong than Naevius' and Ennius'. In taking over Homer into the centre of Roman self-awareness in his new poem, Virgil interestingly downplays the distinctively Roman elements of his characters' prayers, for example, in contrast to Ennius, whose prayers had been more closely modelled on pontifical ritual (Hickson 1993: 27-31, 141-4): the 'half-Greeks' at the beginning of the tradition seem more intent on adapting the form of Homer to accommodate the novel language of the culture they had learnt to know in their childhood or teens. Once again we see that the undeniable cultural power of this deeply engaged poetry does not straightforwardly derive from the directness of its ties to other forms of religious discourse, even those which modern scholars might envisage as more 'real' or 'practical'.

It is very hard to know what kind of impact the early epics of Naevius and Ennius might have had on the Romans' thinking about their religion or their empire's place in the Mediterranean scheme of things. In the case of the Aeneid, however, it is plain that the poem rapidly became indispensably part of the way educated Romans conceived of their mythic past and religious present. Within ten years of the poet's death, Augustus' Ara Pacis shows an iconic scene of sacrifice taken from Aeneid 7, with Aeneas sacrificing in the Roman garb as if to ground the sacrificial actions to be performed there by his descendant in contemporary time; some years later, the Forum of Augustus exhibits a statue group of Aeneas and his father and son, fleeing from Troy to their new destiny in the West. The myths of the Aeneid have become central to the emperor's self-representation. The power of this form of art derives not so much from its successful tracking of existing patterns of thought or behaviour as from its creation of systems of meaning with their own distinctive—though not autonomous—power. The myth of Troy and the narrative of a divine sanction

grounded in more than a millennium of history are not frameworks of Roman religious practice outside the Aeneid or its epic ancestors, but the poems have their own unique ways of working with the Roman state's techniques for guaranteeing the gods' support in all of its operations.

4 Order denied: Lucan and Statius

In many ways, the most striking proof of the Aeneid's power to encapsulate vital elements of Roman religious thought is to be found in the massive efforts taken by the Neronian poet Lucan to demolish the religious sanction which the Aeneid had given to the new Roman order. In the De Bello Civili, his narrative of the civil war between Caesar and Pompey in 49-48 BC, Lucan is determined to show that Virgil was wrong to think that a beneficent world order emerged from the destruction of the Republic. As part of this goal, Lucan systematically undermines the Aeneid's representations of both Roman history and religion. He shows the organs of religion in a state of collapse, with the state's rites failing to shore up the Republic. He also deliberately writes the gods out of the narrative, making it impossible for the reader to find in his poem the kind of divine oversight that the Aeneid embodies in the figure of Jupiter, above all. The gods do not act as characters in the poem, and are unavailable as a point of reference for the reader trying to make sense of the catastrophes described in the narrative. When Lucan refers to the gods' perspective on the action of the poem, it is with irony and disgust. Early in the first book he tells us that the gods may have backed the winning side but Cato backed the losing side (1.128); here the gods' perspective on the direction of Roman history is emphatically the inferior one, while the human character Cato has the 'right'

view. The gods back Caesar because he is going to become one of them, as the new deity 'Divus Julius'; Lucan exposes the ruler cult as a sham rather than a vindication, and exposes the new imperial religion as a process of corporate raiding by the ruling family rather than an evolution of old forms into new meanings.

The fall of the Republic and the emergence of the Principate are unmitigated catastrophes for Lucan, and he represents Virgil as complicit in papering over the disaster with his creation of divine sanction for the new order. Lucan's refusal to endorse the new religious dispensation is shocking enough in itself, but he goes even further, entertaining the possibility that the gods simply do not care about what is happening to the Roman state. In the climactic moment of the battle of Pharsalus, as Pompey is defeated by Caesar, Lucan accuses the gods of total unconcern and irrelevance: the world is whirled along by blind chance and the fate of the empire means nothing within any cosmic framework (7.445-55).

Even though the gods do not act as characters, then, the religious dimension of the poem is still extremely important and powerful. Its nihilism is intimately bound up with its passionate disavowal of the expected patterns of Roman epic, especially of the Aeneid's attempts to use the inherited religious forms of epic to validate the new regime. Both Virgil and Lucan understand how profoundly the sanction of the empire is bound up with its religion, even if one of them is trying to support the nexus and the other to undo it.

Lucan's vision of the relations between gods and humans had a deep influence on Statius, whose Thebaid narrates the legendary story of the Seven against Thebes. The story may be set in the time before Troy, without the clear reference to Roman history which its predecessors had, but the contemporary

resonances of Statius' religious vision are nonetheless very strong. In Statius' poem, the gods certainly participate actively and involve themselves in human affairs through epiphany and prophecy, and in this respect his poem differs very much from Lucan's. As the Thebaid continues, however, the gods withdraw more and more from the human action, leaving the field to furies from the underworld and to allegorical figures without the gods' cultic associations: by the end of the poem, even these replacement figures have gone, and the last book of the epic is one in which the only agents are human beings. The supreme god, Jupiter, appears early in the poem as a vindictive and authoritarian figure, and then he removes himself from the action and washes his hands of the humans. The sum effect is a very disturbing one, with a religious vision of humans attempting to carry on their lives within inherited forms which no longer have the meaning they once had. By Statius' time the dynamics of the Roman national epic tradition have become so strong that they have become available for a vision of human experience which is related only obliquely to the experience of empire.

5 The religion of the first Roman histories

If we return now to the late third century BC, when the first epics in Latin were being written in response to the dramatic transformation of Rome into an international empire, we also find a new historiography emerging, composed by Roman senators who were attempting to explain and justify the rise of Rome. For the first two generations, these new histories were written in Greek, and not until the Origins of Cato in the middle of the second century BC do we find a Roman writing the history of his city in Latin prose. Part of these first Roman

historians' motivation for writing in Greek may well have been their wish to reach a wide audience not only in Rome but elsewhere in Italy and in Magna Graecia, where knowledge of Latin was rare. Still, they probably had little choice in the matter: writing a full-blown history in Latin may strike us as a natural thing to be able to do, but in the late third century BC it is far more likely that anyone wishing to write a history of Rome was more or less obliged to use not just the only system of historiography available but also the language in which that historiography was couched, namely, Greek (Dillery 2002).

The first histories, then, were not only written in the Greek language; in certain basic and inescapable ways, they were written in conformity with the norms of historiography current in Greece at the time, norms which had for the most part been laid down over two centuries earlier by Herodotus, the founder of the genre. Herodotus had shown a great interest in matters of religion, and his history contains many reports of ritual, prophecy, miraculous events and divine actions. As part of his new genre, however, Herodotus established a vital departure from the techniques of Homeric epic, for he never allows the gods to be part of the action of his narrative, and he never stakes his own authority on the veracity of the reports he transcribes of divine prophecy or intervention. The first works of Roman historiography have been lost, so that it is impossible to know for certain how closely they followed the mainstream of Greek historiography in this regard. But on the basis of the surviving fragments and testimonia, there is no reason to believe that the first Roman historians did depart from the ground rules of their tradition so as to represent the gods in characterful action in the manner of Homer—certainly the surviving histories of Livy, Sallust, and Tacitus never do so. Here, then, we see immediately a major difference between the histories of Rome and the epics we have been discussing

so far. While epic can have gods in the action as characters in addition to the human actors, history cannot. The Roman historians had a powerful interest in the religion of the state and in questions of the relation between the state and its gods, but their interest had to find different expression from that of epic. They described prodigies and ritual actions, and had explicit discussion of the meaning of portents, yet the basic ground rules were different from those of Homer and his epic successors. Both in Greece and Rome, an inspired poet might claim access to divine knowledge which he could represent through reporting divine prophecy or describing particular deities in action; but other authors did not use such language, and referred to 'the gods' as a generalised collective, without claiming privileged insight into their actions or motivations. In many ways the Roman historian is in the same position as any senior figure in Roman life, making decisions about which signs to interpret and how to interpret them; in addition, as we shall see, the historian is crafting a narrative in which the manifestations of religion are an element of narrative art along with all the others. Religious events in Roman histories are therefore part of a complex series of interpretative acts: interpreting the divine signs was a long-standing art with its own complex and sophisticated hermeneutics; debating the interpretation of signs was a long-standing feature of Roman public life; and incorporating such exegesis in a narrative introduces another layer of interpretative problems for the reader to decipher.

The first Roman historian, Fabius Pictor, writing sometime around 210 BC, was not working in a vacuum. Plutarch tells us that Fabius' source for the Romulus and Remus story was a Greek historian called Diocles of Peparethus (Life of Romulus, 3.1), and the great historian of Western Greece and Sicily, Timaeus of Tauromenium, had incorporated a good deal of material about

Rome's mythical past in his Histories of c. 280 BC. We know that Timaeus had a keen interest in the Trojan origins of the Romans. He explained the Roman ritual of the Equus October, in which they killed a horse on the Campus Martius, by referring to the Trojan horse and a resulting inherited hostility to horses (Polybius 12.4b-c1); more cogently, he said that he had heard from people at Lavinium that their holy objects included iron and bronze heralds' wands and a Trojan earthenware vessel (Dion. Hal. Ant.Rom. 1.67.4). As we now know from a painted inscription on a wall in Tauromenium, discovered in 1969, Fabius Pictor certainly referred to the arrival in Italy of Aeneas and his son Ascanius, to the birth 'much later' of Romulus and Remus, and to the foundation of Rome by Romulus, who became the first king (Chassignet 1996: fr. 1). Whether or not Timaeus was trying to dignify the Romans' pedigree by incorporating their origins into the mainstream of Greek mythology, it seems reasonably certain that Fabius meant to achieve this end, and he was very probably, in addition, aiming at the same objective as Naevius, of showing how the gods had been watching over the Roman enterprise from the beginning.

How Fabius' narrative about Rome's mythic origins worked in practice is unknowable, since all we have remaining is later authors' summaries and references. He told the story of the rape of the mother of Romulus and Remus by the god Mars, for example, but we cannot tell whether this was part of his narrative like any other part, recounted as part of tradition, or given as the maiden's report. In the properly historical portion of his narrative he recounted prodigies and significant dreams, and gave accounts of the origins of temples (Frier 1979: 266). Once again, the actual technique is irrecoverable for the most part, but the overall strategy may be reasonably surmised—the meticulous acting out of the piety of the Roman people, scrupulous in their maintenance of

relations with the divine, correcting religious error and appeasing divine anger when necessary, and guaranteeing the success of their enterprises from the time of Aeneas down to the war against Hannibal, their worst threat since Achilles and Odysseus (Frier 1979: 283-4). Other early Roman historians, now fragmentary, show a similar array of religious material, reporting prodigies and so forth (Frier 1979: 271); to assess how their narratives really worked is no longer possible, and we have to wait for Livy to have a body of real evidence.

6 Religion in Livy: creating and preserving a system

With Livy's history of Rome from Aeneas to his own day, we finally meet a substantially surviving text (even if we have lost 107 of the original 142 books), in which we may analyse religious discourses in the historian's own words without having to rely on the testimony of other authors. In the case of Livy, together with his successor Tacitus, modern discussion of the issues has tended to revolve, even more than in the case of the epic poets, around the question of scepticism and belief. Scholars have regularly read Livy and Tacitus in order to find out what they really thought about religion, and especially whether they really believed in the apparatus of omens, prodigy and expiation which takes up so much of their description of religious matters. Quite apart from the theoretical objections which many literary critics would level at the project of making an author's personal beliefs the focus of reading a narrative, we need to remind ourselves that framing the question in terms of belief and scepticism misses the point that 'these men were writing for a society that was not, for the most part, concerned with whether the gods existed but rather with how they would impact on the human world, how they should be understood to act and,

more importantly, the effects and means of placation—and the consequences of failing to do so’ (Davies 2004: 2). The Roman state had a system for dealing with such matters, and any history of the Roman state will inevitably have to engage with that system.

In other words, the proper focus of enquiry is not whether Livy or Tacitus really believed in this or that, but rather how representation of religion actually works in the historians’ narratives. It is the great merit of two major recent studies of religion in Livy (Levene 1993) and in Livy, Tacitus and Ammianus (Davies 2004) that we have been brought back to the task of reading these histories as sophisticated examples of a subtle genre of narrative in which various religious discourses have a distinctive part to play. As a result of this realignment of priorities, the theme of religious meaning is now available for wider interpretation: what kind of picture of Roman religion and of the Roman past emerges if we take the historians’ representations of religion seriously as part of a narrative with powerful didactic intent?

As we have already seen, history’s way of engaging with manifestations of the divine is not going to be the same as epic’s, for historians do not claim inspiration, and the intervention of the gods ‘is represented from the point of view of the City’s interest rather than any individual’s, and by deduction rather than explicit identification. These are matters of literary genre, not personal belief, or philosophical speculation’ (Davies 2004: 141). Accordingly, throughout Livy’s narrative, reports are made of prodigious events (talking cows, monstrous births of animals or humans), and then it is up to the responsible authorities in Rome to decide what to make of them. It is also up to the reader to decide what to make of them, for Livy involves the reader directly in the act of interpreting, and hardly ever analyses these phenomena on his own

account or gives his own explicit view on their meaning. This strategy is in accordance with the generally self-effacing narrative technique of ancient historiography, where larger thematic meaning is conveyed through narrative as in a novel, rather than through explicit editorialising as in modern histories.

Departures from this technique of not endorsing or vouching for divine motivation are extremely rare, just as they are in Herodotus. A striking example comes in Book 29, where the sacrilege of Pleminius and his Roman garrison at Locri draws Livy's angry contempt, and the tempo of the narrative escalates to the level of the tragic. Here Livy describes their despoiling of Proserpina's temple, whose treasure had never before been stripped, except by Pyrrhus; just as Pyrrhus' ships were wrecked, and only the treasure survived, so now the Romans were punished for their sacrilege when the pilfering of the money caused a madness amongst them (29.8.9-11). Even this extreme example has an element of authorial self-erasure, as Livy introduces the story of Pyrrhus' despoliation of the temple, leading into the miraculous survival of the money, by saying that the treasures 'were said' (*dicebantur*) to have been looted by him. Livy's usual technique is to hold back from vouching for the authority of such anecdotes on the same footing as the rest of his narrative. In Book 2, for example, the consul Valerius is unable to push an attack on the Aequi because of a violent storm; when he withdraws, the sky clears so completely 'there was a religious scruple against attacking for a second time a camp that was defended as if by some divine power' (*adeo tranquilla serentias reddita ut uelut numine aliquo defensa castra oppugnare iterum religio fuerit*, 2.62.2). Here the 'as if' (*uelut*) is not a sign that Livy is 'sceptical' about the interpretation that a divine power was actually defending the Aequi; rather, it is

his way of maintaining his authorial persona by refraining from vouching for this as a fact.

In general, the repeated prodigy notices and references to divine manifestations help to structure large-scale patterns of narrative, creating dynamic tension through their evocative foreshadowing technique, and inviting the reader to work at discovering the shapes into which the overall narrative may be falling. The rhythm in the narrative of the war against Hannibal (Books 21-30) is particularly distinctive, with its recurrent oscillations of religious dereliction followed by failure in the field, in turn followed by expiation, all underpinned by the fundamental assurance of eventual victory (Levene 1993: 77). One of the great strengths of the work of Levene is that it brings out how Livy's techniques can vary from one part of his work to another, in accordance with the varying demands of his ever-changing larger canvas. In particular, when Livy's focus turns from the war against Hannibal to the overwhelming scale of Roman expansion into Greece and Spain (Books 31-40) he finds it difficult to integrate his disparate narrative in the taut way he had managed so far. In this decade he downplays the religious dimension very much, and this is best seen as part of a larger artistic decision about how to structure the newly complex interrelations between Rome and Greece in particular: when the climactic Third Macedonian War arrives in Books 41-5 he returns to an integrated narrative with a newly organic interweaving of religious material, as if to highlight the new common destiny of times and places (Levene 1993: 124-5). This is not a matter of saying that Livy saw the gods' hand at work in Books 41-5 and not in Books 31-40; rather, his customary artistic use of religious material in Books 31-40 would have been at odds with the narrative effect he wished to achieve in that particular section of his work.

Levene's findings are the most economical illustration of the fact that it is never possible to pick the religious items out from the overall effect of the narrative and regard them as discrete pieces of data. In a way, this is just good formalist literary criticism, but Livy's accounts of religious matters are impossible to detach from his narrative in a deeper sense as well. In a famous passage in Book 43 he comments that thanks to neglegentia prodigies are currently no longer announced or recorded in the annals, but that his own spirit becomes antique as he writes of former times, so that he will include in his narrative what the learned men of the past thought worthy of note (43.13.1-2). This passage is a vivid illustration of how far the religious element of Livy's history is inextricable from its representation. For Livy's history is itself a monument: 'Like the city it describes and constitutes...the Ab Urbe Condita is a growing physical object through which the writer and the reader move together' (Kraus 1994: 270). As he progresses through his monstrous project, the religion of the Roman past comes to seem inextricable from Livy's narration of it, just as in general his text becomes more and more co-extensive with what it describes. Livy is constructing a meaning-making system which is passing away from use as he writes, and his history attempts to anchor and restore that meaning-making system, along with the set of Republican values which, according to him, made it and were made by it: 'for Livy AUC history is his own work, the Ab Urbe Condita, and...in reconstructing Roman history he is in a moral sense reconstructing contemporary Rome' (Moles 1993: 154; cf. Liebeschuetz 1979: 59-60). The religious elements of Livy's narrative are not reducible to being a transcription of Roman religion in action; they are part of an evocation of a world, targeted at a contemporary audience who will lose their contact with that world if Livy fails in his mission.

7 Religion in Tacitus: the system subverted

The contemporary neglegentia lamented by Livy, by which prodigies were increasingly no longer publicly announced, was part of a general movement in the late Republic which saw the manifestations of divine concern shift inexorably from the corporate focus of the ancien régime to a new interest in signs and omens associated with the charismatic individual (North 1990: 69-71; Levene 1993: 4; Linderski 1993). By the time we reach the works of Tacitus, this movement has reached its culmination: the Senate, formerly the communal centre for adjudicating the meaning of prodigies, has become a venue for elaborating the imperial cult, and the emperor is now the person around whom portents and their interpretation cluster, along with everything else. The Republican system of religion is in disrepair, just as all other aspects of the Republican system are in disrepair, and Tacitus' narrative of religious matters adapts in parallel. He uses the same techniques of syncopation here as in his treatment of the principate in general: the inherited Republican forms of behaviour and narrative are still present but have lost their real meaning, becoming a background rhythm against which the new realities play out their disturbing effects (on the general technique see Ginsburg 1981).

Tacitus' Histories and Annals are accordingly full of portentous signs which derive much of their narrative effect from their conformity to and divergence from the kind of manifestations we know from Livy. Warning signs cluster around the doomed figures of Galba (Hist. 1.18) or Otho (Hist. 1.86), while the rise of Vespasian turns out in retrospect to have been foreseen by astrologers, soothsayers and priests in Italy, Cyprus, Judaea and Alexandria

(Hist. 2.4; 2.78; 4.8; Liebeschuetz 1979: 192-6). Again, in the Annals, hyperbolically portentous signs refer to the house of the emperor, ominously pointing to impending conspiracy (15.47). Or else, as if in sympathetic derangement after the murder of Nero's mother, 'frequent and unavailing' portents occur, most melodramatically in the form of a woman giving birth to a snake: as if to point up the failure of the system to generate sense in the way it should, Tacitus then remarks that all these 'occurred without any concern of the gods, to such an extent that for many years afterward Nero continued his command and his crimes' (14.12: trans. Woodman 2004). The meaning of the signs is obvious—glaringly so—yet no one can do anything and the evident derangement of the world continues.

Such episodes are not to be read as evidence of personal scepticism about the interaction of the divine realm with the human, or indeed of personal belief. They are part of a general technique which Tacitus uses to create an unrelieved sensation of high-pitched strain, with a continual dissonance between form and reality: the overall effect of his treatment of religious phenomena is to create a fearful and oppressive atmosphere which does not allow for the rituals of expiation and relief which punctuate the narrative of Livy. Once, Tacitus gives us a possible example of a restorative breathing-space in the form of ritual, when he provides a detailed description of how the Romans began the rebuilding of the burnt and desecrated temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on 21 June 70 AD (Histories 4.53). It is a stately passage, more meticulous in its evocation of the scene than anything of the kind in Livy, and unique in surviving Roman literature for the detail of its presentation of cult action (Davies 2004: 209). According to Davies, 'the refounding of the Capitoline is no less than the textual and religious reconstruction of Rome's proper relations

with the gods', signalling 'a reversal of the trend that had continued almost unabated and with increasing momentum since early in the reign of Tiberius' (Davies 2004: 209). This is certainly one possible reading, though it is also possible to pay attention to the fact that the real ritual and labouring work of clearing the site began later in the year, when Vespasian arrived in the city: what we have here is 'some preliminary ceremonial', involving 'some preliminary disposal' of the lapis Terminus 'before the restoration proper could be undertaken by the emperor on his return' (Chilver 1985: 65-6). Here too, in other words, we may be seeing mere displacement activity, an enactment of Republican form which does no more than anticipate the real religious work which will take place when the person who really matters arrives.

Contemporary readers of Tacitus will no doubt have been able to read this scene on the Capitol in either an ironic or an ameliorative mode. It is characteristic of Roman historiography that they should not be nudged too overtly by the author, but should be left to draw their own conclusions about what the scene means as part of the larger work. The scene has something to say about ritual, and about the society which generates the ritual, but readers both ancient and modern must work at teasing out these meanings within the context of the meaning-making system which is the literary work as a whole.

FURTHER READING

The role of religion and the gods is discussed for each of the Roman epics in Feeney 1991, with bibliography on each; Feeney 1998 is a more theoretical discussion of the issues of the interaction between literature and religion.

Liebeschuetz 1979 discusses Livy, Virgil, Lucan, and Tacitus. On Naevius, the large and difficult book (in Italian) by Barchiesi 1962 has great treasures. On Virgil, see Thornton 1976, Hardie 1986, Braund 1997; on the impact of Virgil's poem on contemporary myth-making and religious representations, see Hölscher 1993 and Scheid 1993. For Statius' Jupiter, see Schubert 1984.

There is less discussion of the issues in Roman historiography than in Greek: on Herodotus, for example, see now Harrison 2000 and Mikalson 2003. Levene 1993 opened up the question of religion in Livy, and Davies 2004 vigorously carries on the debate, continuing it to Tacitus and Ammianus. On Livy, see also Linderski 1993; Feldherr 1998: 64-78. Syme 1958: 521-7 is still worth reading on Tacitus' religion, even if the focus is the personal views of the historian.

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