Did Romans Have an Ethnic Identity?

ABSTRACT

This paper begins with a stark contrast. Whereas the Athenians took great pride in claiming autochthony, a bloodline unsullied by admixture with barbarians or even other Hellenes, Rome's legendary genealogy unhesitatingly encompassed a host of divergent blends and multiple minglings. Greek forbears from Arcadia, Trojan immigrants who merged with Latins, Sabine and Etruscan kings, the fabled intermarriage of Romans and Sabine women – all indicate a firm belief in ethnic mixture at the origins of the nation. This article asks a pointed question: if Romans were perfectly comfortable with multiple identities in their own makeup, how does one account for the numerous slurs, smears and nasty comments addressed by Roman writers against other races and peoples? It examines a variety of such calumnies and stereotypes and argues that they do not fall into the category of ethnic prejudice. Many of the more (ostensibly) hostile remarks have been taken out of context, misunderstood, more humorous than malicious, and outweighed by a host of admiring comments. The collection of quips, jibes and clichés does not amount to ethnic bigotry. Indeed ethnicity, in terms of genetic characteristics that render non-Romans inferior to Romans, plays little or no role in these assessments. A far better indicator of the Roman outlook is the remarkable practice of extending citizenship to manumitted slaves – almost all of whom (or their ancestors) came from abroad. The Romans' sense of themselves did not require the establishment of ethnic superiority.

The people of Athens notoriously claimed that they were indigenous to the land of Attica, virtually sprung from the soil. There was no admixture of foreigners or aliens who might compromise their purity, no prior population who might challenge their precedence. Their blood-line was unsullied by barbarians or even by other Hellenes. Athenians were autochthonous – a proud, probably pompous, declaration.[1]

Romans, by contrast, had no comparable fantasies. Quite the contrary. Their legends assured them, indeed were concocted to convince them, that their origins rested in a complex of divergent blends and multiple minglings. The amalgam began at the beginning. Livy provides a celebrated account of the arrival of Aeneas and the Trojans in Italy. The historian spins a tale of the violent clash between natives under Latinus and the interlopers under Aeneas.

[1] See e.g. Hdt. 7.161.3; Eur. *Ion* 589-592; Aristoph. *Wasps* 1075-1080; Thuc. 1.2.5, 2.36.1; Plato, *Men.* 245 C-D; Isoc. *Pan.* 24. Additional references and discussion in E. Montanari, *Il mito dell'autoctonia: linee di una dinamica mitico-politico ateniense* (Rome 1981); N. Loraux, *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City* (Cambridge MA 1986) 13-27; B. Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton 2004) 114-24.

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But the outcome brought concord, a treaty and a marriage alliance. Aeneas wed the daughter of Latinus – the symbolic union of Latins and Trojans. Aeneas indeed generously applied the name 'Latins' to both peoples as token of the merger. A gradual coalescence took place between the two nations, a foundation for the future.[2] Sallust treats the origins quite briefly and differently, but with the same basic message: Aeneas and the Trojans reached Italy where they found the Aborigines, a rustic and uncivilized people, and the two nations, of different stock, language, and customs managed with remarkable speed and ease to merge into a single harmonious state.[3] For the great scholar Varro, Rome enjoyed a triple blend: a mixture of Trojans, Sabines and Aborigines.[4]

A fuller and far more tangled story of Rome's earliest history appears in Dionysius of Halicarnassus who took as his mission to demonstrate that the city derived from Greeks. Not a simple migration, however, but a complex combination of the indigenous and the immigrant, the Hellenic and the proto-Hellenic, the barbaric and the cultivated, overlapping legends that gave the land a layered legacy. The hodge-podge of myth and history in Dionysius had Sicels as original inhabitants of Italy, succeeded by Aborigines and Pelasgians, no mere barbarians but Greek migrants from Arcadia and Argos, settlers who gave various names to tribes and nations in the Italian peninsula in eras that long preceded the Trojan war.[5] That episode, of course, spurred a new and the most celebrated migration, that of Aeneas and his countrymen to the shores of Italy. The entrenchment of that tradition made it impossible for Dionysius to ignore or deny. So he did the next best thing. He turned Aeneas into a Greek. He retailed or remade a story that had Dardanus, mythical ancestor of Aeneas, come from Arcadia in Greece and settle in the Troad. So, Aeneas, the quintessential Trojan, possessed Hellenic roots – as did the whole of the Trojan race.[6] This was brilliant appropriation. Rome was the beneficiary, but also the benefactor. In Dionysius' construct, Romans subsequently welcomed innumerable immigrants from cities and communities not only from all over Italy but from other regions of the world whose cultures merged with theirs – while their fundamentally Hellenic character remained intact.[7]

The principle of inclusion and amalgamation became a source of pride. The emperor Claudius, on the bronze tablet that recorded his speech advocating the eligibility of Gallic nobles to hold Roman magistracies and thus gain access to the Roman senate, cited ancient precedents. He reminded

[2] Liv. 1.1.9. 1.2.4-5: *Latinos utramque gentem appellavit . . . coalescentium in dies magis duorum populorum.*

[3] Sall. *Cat.* 6.1-2.

[4] Varro, *De Vita p. R.* fr. 5, Rip.

[5] See, especially, Dion. Hal. 1.9-13, 1.31, 1.89.

[6] Dion. Hal. 1.61-62.

[7] Ibid. 1.9.4, 1.89.

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his audience that Rome's kings stemmed from foreign parts, Numa a Sabine, Tarquinius Priscus the son of an Etruscan mother and a Corinthian father, and Servius Tullius whose mother had been an enslaved captive.[8] Tacitus' version of that speech has Claudius boast that several of Rome's most distinguished families derived from towns and peoples all over Italy and that non-Italians as well had been welcomed into the citizen body and to positions of leadership.[9] The historian Florus, a contemporary of Tacitus, expressed similar sentiments. He asserted that the Roman people contained in its make-up Etruscans, Latins and Sabines, forming a single bloodline composed of them all.[10] The idea of autochthony evidently held no great attraction for the Romans. Indeed, they openly scorned it. As Cicero sneered, Athenians and Arcadians invented stories that they had sprung from the land – as if they were field-mice crawling out of the earth.[11] Romans saw themselves as a mongrel nation – and found nothing to apologise for in that.[12]

The conception of a people formed of foreigners and ancestors from abroad was a common one among Greeks. They ascribed to their own heroes and legendary figures the foundation of nations across the seas, no matter how far-flung or far-fetched. So, the Argive Perseus is credited with giving his name to the great realm of Persia itself; Armenus, an officer in the army of the Argonauts, became the eponymous founder of Armenia; Medus, son of Medea, brought Media into existence; Herakles' union with a creature, half-snake, half-woman, produced a son named Scythes from whom the savage Scythians derived. This form of Greek cultural imperialism was rampant.[13]

It makes perfectly good sense that Greeks would wish to set Rome itself into their orbit of inter-connected nations whose nourishment came from Hellenic roots. The stories of heroic meanderings after the Trojan war brought a host of Hellenic figures and peoples in various versions to the shores of Italy and eventually to Rome: Herakles, Odysseus, Oenotrus, Achaeans, Arcadians, and others. The tangle of tales eventually added Aeneas and the Trojans into the mix as well, woven in diverse ways into the web.[14] But those versions too were Hellenic in origin, spun by those who sought to fit the western power into the matrix of familiar Greek legends.

[8] *ILS* 212, col. I, lines 10-19. Livy has similar origins for the early Roman kings: 1.34.1-6.

[9] Tac. *Ann.* 11.24. On Tacitus' alterations of the Claudian speech, see M.T. Griffin, 'The Lyons Tablet and Tacitean Hindsight', *CQ* 32 (1982) 404-18. Claudius' liberality is parodied in [Seneca], *Apocolocyntosis*, 3.3.

[10] Flor. 2.6.1: *populus Romanus Etruscos, Latinos Sabinosque sibi miscuerit et unum ex omnibus sanguinem ducat.*

[11] Cic. *Rep.* 3.25; cf. Liv. 1.8.5.

[12] Cf. C. Moatti, *Raison de Rome* (Paris 1997) 263-73.

[13] See E. Bickerman, 'Origines Gentium', *CP* 47 (1952) 65-81. Cf. E.S. Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (Princeton 2011) 224-5.

[14] See the reconstruction, with extensive bibliography, in Gruen, *Culture and National Identity in Republican Rome* (Ithaca 1992) 6-51, and the more recent and fuller treatment by A. Erskine, *Troy between Greece and Rome* (Oxford 2001) 131-224, with different conclusions.

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The process, however, goes beyond mere Hellenic appropriation. More interesting is the fact that Roman intellectuals adopted and adapted those legends, finding that Greek or Trojan origins or a combination thereof served perfectly well to convey the sense of a checkered Roman identity. Nor did they shrink from manufacturing their own myths of composite character, blending Latins with Trojans, Romans with Sabines. Intermingling trumps autochthony throughout.

The celebrated tale of the Sabine women most strikingly exemplifies the mind-set. As is well known, Romans in the age of Romulus, their legendary founder and first monarch, suffered from a shortage of women. According to the narrative, their efforts to secure treaties with neighboring nations to allow for inter-marriage proved unsuccessful everywhere. As a consequence they resorted to a ruse, hosting a lavish celebration which included the Sabines together with their wives and children, and then bursting in upon the festivities and snatching the young women to make them their brides. A fierce contest ensued between Romans and Sabines under their ruler Titus Tatius, terminated only by the intervention of the Sabine women whose persistent pleas persuaded husbands and fathers to call a truce and end the quarrel. The conclusion not only brought peace between the nations but bound the two peoples in a single polity.[15] This is not the place to investigate the historicity of the tale or to enter into debate on whether any fusion between races can be discerned in the material data.[16] The story itself matters. Romans embraced it as a symbolic representation of the commingling of peoples that featured their city's history almost from its inception. Cicero cited it as exemplary of Rome's open-minded welcome even of enemies into its body-politic, the very foundation of its repute and of its empire.[17] That assimilation, to be sure, was not altogether benign and harmonious. Our sources give full weight to the treachery of the rape and the ferocity of the war. The legend can serve to emblematise Roman expansionism and incorporation.[18] But there was no shrinking from a conviction that the city's earliest history rested on a coalescence of cultures.

Sabine ethnicity, however, or the construction thereof, became more complicated. Sabines developed a reputation for austerity and hardiness, the qualities of tough mountaineers whose disciplined habits made them rugged warriors and men of severe moral virtue. Some traced the source of those

[15] Liv. 1.9-13; see 1.13.4: *nec pacem modo sed civitatem unam ex duabus faciunt.* Also Cic. *De Rep.* 2.13; Dion. Hal. 2.46.1-3; Plut. *Rom.* 19-21.

[16] Cf. T.J. Cornell, *The Beginnings of Rome: Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars (c. 1000-264 BC)* (London and New York 1995) 75-7, with further bibliography. See the treatment of the tale and its sources by G.B. Miles, *Livy: Reconstructing Early Rome* (Ithaca, 1995) 179-219, who focuses, however, upon its relevance for the conceptualisation of Roman marriage.

[17] Cic. *Balb.* 31.

[18] Cf. E. Dench, *From Barbarians to New Men: Greek, Roman, and Modern Perceptions of Peoples of the Central Apennines* (Oxford 1995) 22-24, 253, 343-4.

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commendable characteristics to none other than the Spartans, those Greeks most conspicuous for their rigidity and robustness. Roman writers conveyed and perhaps contrived the connection. It appears first in Cato the Elder, of all people, that champion of antique Roman virtue. He assigns the origin of the Sabines to a Spartan founder whose name conveniently happened to be Sabus. In this he was followed in the next generation by the later second century Roman historian Cn. Gellius who also identified the Lacedaemonian Sabus as progenitor of the Sabines in Italy. Cato asserts definitively that the *populus Romanus* derived these qualities of toughness and virtue from the Sabines.[19] Genealogy and influence overlap here. Romans owed their hardiness to Sabines who had commingled with their ancestors and who in turn could boast of Spartan lineage. One will hardly imagine that Greeks invented such a link. They had no reason to associate themselves with Sabines. Once again Roman conceptualisation framed the inter-mix. And the still more imaginative did not stop there. Hyginus, the learned freedman of Augustus, who headed the Palatine library, turned Sabus into a peripatetic Persian who managed to make his way to Italy via Sparta where he picked up a number of Spartans who then settled the territory that eventually became Sabine![20]

Comparable complexities featured the legendary inter-connections of Romans and Etruscans. The latter provided two kings of Rome in the regal period according to tradition. And their roots stemmed from the Hellenic world. The first of the kings, Tarquinius Priscus, originally named Lucumo, was son of none other than Demaratus of Corinth, head of that city's leading family but driven from his homeland in a political upheaval. Demaratus married a woman of Tarquinii, becoming father of Lucumo who went on to rule Rome.[21] The story doubtless derives from a Greek source, injecting a Hellenic forebear into the lineage of Rome via Etruria.[22] But the Romans took up the tale at a relatively early stage, unembarrassed by it, perhaps proud

[19] Cato F2.22 (Beck and Walter): *Cato autem et Gellius a Sabo Lacedaemonio trahere eos originem referunt. Porro Lacedaemonios durissimos fuisse omnis lectio docet. Sabinorum etiam mores populum Romanum secutum idem Cato dicit* = Serv. on *Aen.* 8.638. A variant version of Cato's remark appears in Dion. Hal. 2.49.2. See J. Poucet, 'Les origins mythiques des Sabins', in *Études Étrusco-Italiques* (Louvain 1963) 157-69; C. Letta, 'I *mores* dei Romani e l'origine dei sabini in Catone', in B. Riposati, *Preistoria, storia e civiltà dei Sabini* (Rieti 1985), 29-34; D. Musti, *Strabone e la Magna Grecia* (Padua 1988) 253-7; Dench, *From Barbarians to New Men* (n. 18) 86-7; G. Farney, *Ethnic Identity and Aristocratic Competition in Republican* Rome (Cambridge 2007) 101.

[20] Serv. on *Aen.* 8.638; cf. Sil. Ital. 8.414-415; Poucet, 'Origins mythiques des Sabins' (n. 19) 203-13.

[21] The genealogical connection appears in a wide assemblage of sources: e.g. Polyb. 6.11a.7; Cic. *Rep.* 2.34-35; Strabo, 5.2.2; Liv. 1.34; Dion. Hal. 3.46-47.

[22] The appearance of Etruscans in Greek myth goes back at least as far as Hesiod, who has the offspring of Odysseus and Circe become rulers over the Tyrrhenians: Hes. *Theog.* 1011-1016. Cf. M.L. West, *Hesiod's Theogony* (Oxford 1966) 435-6. And Etruscan interest in Hellenic mythology was no mere passive receptivity of Greek vases: cf. N. Spivey and S. Stoddart, *Etruscan Italy* (London, 1990) 97-106.

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of it. Fabius Pictor had it in the later third century whence it evidently reached Polybius, and subsequent Latin authors transmitted it freely to the point where the emperor Claudius could enunciate it as a boast.[23] Etruscans figured in versions of the Trojan legend also. As one strand had it, Dardanus, ancestor of the Trojan royal line that extended to Aeneas, came originally from Etruria. Hence, Aeneas' migration to Italy constituted a return to the homeland, and the origins of Rome thus acquired an Etruscan ingredient.[24] The jumble of diverse narratives defies reconciliation. But they underscore Roman readiness to multiply ethnicities.

The Trojan connection, of course, gained precedence and became canonical. Greek mythmakers had Aeneas escape the flames of Troy and head west. Some brought him to Italy, others all the way to Rome, occasionally in conjunction with Greeks, and even, in certain versions, as a direct ancestor of Romulus. A bewildering bundle of tales emerged from Hellenic speculation and inventiveness.[25] But it is the Roman part in transmitting the tradition that merits emphasis here.

Just when the story came to Roman consciousness defies decision. A range of Greek and Sicilian writers had associated Aeneas' western adventures with Latium, particularly the cities of Lavinium and Alba Longa, as well as Rome, adventures enmeshed with local legends, from the late fourth century BCE on. Furthermore, Rome's new and more intimate relations with Latin communities after the dissolution of the Latin League in 338 provide a logical setting for combining myths of origins.[26] The connection with Troy had certainly taken firm hold when Roman writers first came to the fore in the third century. Fabius Pictor, Rome's earliest historian, in the later part of the century already transmits the lineage that has Aeneas' son Ascanius found Alba Longa, which was to be the mother city of Rome. Indeed, he goes even further, embracing the Hellenic myths that have Herakles arrive in Italy and then Evander plant a colony on the Palatine Hill.[27] The poet Naevius, a contemporary of Pictor, and Ennius in the early second century telescoped the tale by making Aeneas' daughter the mother of Romulus, thus reducing the long centuries to two generations.[28] But they took the Trojan tie to Rome as a given. Even crusty old Cato the Elder, allegedly the quintessential nativist, had no qualms about tracing Rome's roots to alien immigrants and foreign founders. He identified the Italian aborigines from whom the Romans sprang as Greeks, and the surviving fragments of his

[23] *ILS*, 212, col. I, lines 10-19.

[24] Serv. on *Aen.* 1.380, 3.170, 7.205-248. Cf. Farney, *Ethnic Identity* (n. 19) 141-4.

[25] Cf. Gruen, *Culture and National Identity* (n. 14) 6-51; Erskine, *Troy between Greece and Rome* (n. 14) 131-56.

[26] Gruen, *Culture and National Identity* (n. 14) 26-9; Erskine, *Troy between Greece and Rome* (n. 14) 143-148.

[27] Pictor, F1-2 (Beck and Walter); Diod. Sic. 7.5.4-5; Dion. Hal. 1.74.1; Plut. *Rom.* 3.1-3.

[28] Serv. on *Aen.* 1.273.

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Origines show that he endorsed the whole narrative of Aeneas' migration to Italy, his marriage to the daughter of the Latin king and the foundation of Alba Longa by his son Ascanius, heralding the future settling of Rome.[29]

The readiness, even eagerness, to ascribe origins to Hellenic heroes as well as Trojan refugees underscores Roman openness to multiple ethnicities. An association with Arcadia offers a prime illustration. The aborigines of Italy themselves, it was said, originated as migrants from Arcadia. That notice appears in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who cites fifth-century sources, whether disingenuously or not, for the story.[30] The link took a more elaborate form with the advent of Evander, son of Hermes by an Arcadian nymph, who brought a colony of Arcadians to Italy and planted a settlement on the Palatine hill.[31] He would eventually be joined, as an additional variant has it, by the hero Herakles who brought more Arcadians with him, this time to the Capitoline, married the daughter of Evander and produced offspring who would entrench the Arcadian character of Rome.[32] That legend, fanciful though it doubtless was, got some confirmation from a tough-minded historian, none other than Polybius. He added the detail that the colony on the Palatine took its name from Pallas, son of Herakles and grandson of Evander.[33] To be sure, Dionysius' sources for much or all of this may have been Greek.[34] And Polybius, tough-minded though he may have been, was, after all, an Arcadian. That legend would have appealed to his native instincts. But the fact remains that Roman writers too picked up the Arcadian affiliation and propagated it. Fabius Pictor records the arrival of both Herakles and Evander, adding even that Evander bestowed the Greek alphabet, originally a Phoenician invention, upon the Latin language, attaching it thereby both to Hellas and to the east.[35] Cato too subscribed to the idea that Italian aborigines, ancestors of the Romans, were Greek and that subsequent Arcadian settlers under Evander brought the Aeolic dialect to Italians, whence it was later adopted by Romulus![36] If Cato had no hesitation in authenticating Rome's Hellenic ancestry, it obviously had widespread

[29] Cato, F1.1.4-15; 2.26 (Beck and Walter); Dion. Hal. 1.11.1, 1.13.2.

[30] Dion. Hal. 1.10-13, 1.89.1-2. J.M. Hall, '*Arcades His Oris*: Greek Projections on the Italian Ethnoscape?', in Gruen (ed.), *Cultural Borrowings and Ethnic Appropriations in Antiquity* (Stuttgart 2005) 265-71, questions the ascription to fifth century writers.

[31] Dion. Hal. 1.31, 1.89.22; Strabo, 5.3.3.

[32] Dion. Hal. 1.34.1, 1.41-44.

[33] Polyb. in Dion. Hal. 1.32.1.

[34] He did, however, read Roman historians on the origins of Rome as well: Dion. Hal. 1.73.1-3.

[35] Pictor F2 (Beck and Walter).

[36] Cato F1.19 (Beck and Walter): ὥς φασιν ὅ τε Κάτων . . . Εὐάνδρου καὶ τῶν ἄλλων Ἀρκάδων εἰς Ἰταλίαν ἐλθόντων ποτὲ καὶ τὴν Αἰολίδα τοῖς βαρβάροις ἐνσπειράντων φωνήν; cf. F2.26 (Beck and Walter).

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appeal among his countrymen. A variant and slightly more elaborate version of the Evander story appears in Livy.[37] Romans happily embraced it.

Further ingenuity was required to blend the Trojan and Arcadian narratives. But Greek myth-makers were up to it. They fashioned the fiction that the Arcadian Dardanus, son of Zeus, was a distant ancestor of Aeneas, and some embellished the invention by having Aeneas move from Troy to his native land of Arcadia, and from there to Italy, where he sired Romulus.[38] A nice completion of the circle. Did Romans buy it? Without a doubt. Even the scrupulous researcher and polymath, Varro, took the tale of Aeneas as Arcadian to heart.[39] The affiliation reappears in diverse formulations in both Vergil and Ovid.[40] Roman self-conceptualisation encompassed a plurality of blood-lines.

If all this be so, a troubling question arises. Since Romans seemed perfectly comfortable with multiple ethnicities in their own make-up, how does one account for their numerous slurs, snide comments, sneers and smears directed against persons and peoples of other races, nations and cultures? One can readily turn up a host of such insults and abusive remarks, mischaracter-isations and stereotypes in a wide range of Roman authors from Cato to Juvenal – just to keep the subject within bounds. Modern scholars have been assiduous in collecting and categorising instances of vituperation – a veritable industry.[41]

A select number of examples will suffice, among those regularly cited as exemplary of Roman ethnic prejudice and antipathy toward the foreigner. Romans commonly expressed contempt for Greeks. Early Roman playwrights exhibit the prejudice. Plautus more than once employs the terms *pergraecari* and *congraecari*, 'to play the Greek', signifying intemperance or debauchery.[42] It had already become a cliché. Pacuvius rebuked Greek philosophers for verbal chicanery; Afranius contrasted Roman practical wisdom with Greek abstract theorizing;[43] Cato notoriously despised Greek doctors, and he warned his son off them – they were determined to poison all foreigners.[44] Further, he delivered the famous sneer: Greeks speak with their tongues, Romans from the heart.[45] Cicero pointedly contrasted Greek *levitas*

[37] Liv. 1.5.1-2, 1.7.3-15.

[38] Dion. Hal. 1.49.1-2; Strabo, 13.1.53; cf. Erskine, *Troy between Greece and Rome* (n. 14) 119-121.

[39] Serv. on *Aen.* 3.167, 7.207.

[40] See J. Fabre-Serris, *Rome, l'Arcadie et la mer des Argonautes* (Villeneuve d'Ascq 2008) 13-30.

[41] See especially J.P.V.D. Balsdon, *Romans and Aliens* (London 1979) 30-4, 59-70; Y.A. Dauge, *Le Barbare* (Brussels 1981) 57-280; Isaac, *The Invention of Racism* (n. 1) 381-491.

[42] Plaut. *Bach.* 742-743, 812-813; *Most.* 20-24, 64-65, 958-960; *Poen.* 600-603; *Truc.* 86-87. Cf. T.J. Moore, *The Theater of Plautus* (Austin 1998) 50-66.

[43] Gell. *NA* 13.8.1-5.

[44] Cato, in Plin. *NH* 29.7.14.

[45] Plut. *Cato* 12.5; cf. Liv. 8.22.8.

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with Roman *gravitas*.[46] He quoted his grandfather as saying that the better one learns Greek, the more evil one becomes.[47] And he represents the eminent orator L. Crassus as accusing Greeks of idleness and excessive loquaciousness, interested more in argument than in truth and displaying their learning with arrogance and pomposity.[48]

So, the Greeks were over-civilised. Everybody else, apart from the Romans of course, was decidedly under-civilised. Syrians and Jews, says Cicero, were born to be slaves.[49] Phoenicians and Carthaginians had a reputation for treachery (*Punica fides*) and an affinity for cruelty. If Cato be believed, the Carthaginians broke six different treaties with Rome.[50] [One wonders why the Romans kept concluding treaties with them.] Livy asserts that the Carthaginians were cruel and ferocious both in practice and by nature.[51] Then one gets to the real barbarians. Cicero lumps Gauls, Spaniards and Africans together as monstrous and barbaric nations.[52] He is particularly hard on Gauls: not only have they been Rome's fiercest enemy from the beginning, they attack shrines wherever they find them and hold nothing sacred.[53] The noblest of Gauls does not compare with even the lowliest of Romans.[54] Cicero can be caustic also about Sardinians: they were so bad that even the despicable Phoenicians from whose stock they came could not bear them and abandoned them on that disagreeable and uninhabitable island.[55] Germans were described by Strabo, Velleius Paterculus and Manilius as a wild and ferocious people – not to mention natural-born liars.[56] They may be brave but their ferocity makes them prone to unbridled fury and incapable of maintaining sustained warfare, so Seneca points out in *De Ira*.[57] Cicero excoriates Egyptians for their fanatic worship of animals that amounts to dementia.[58] Juvenal goes into an infamous rant about them: what monsters these demented Egyptians worship; dogs, cats, river fish, ibises, long-tailed monkeys, crocodiles; no one worships Diana any more.[59] Elsewhere he wonders, when he sees a low-born inhabitant of the Nile walking about with

[46] Cic. *Sest.* 141.

[47] Cic. *De Or.* 2.265.

[48] Ibid. 1.47, 1.102-103.

[49] Cic. *Prov. Cons.* 10: *tradidit in servitutem Iudaeis et Syris, nationibus natis servituti.*

[50] Cato, F4.9 (Beck and Walter).

[51] Liv. 23.5.12: *natura et moribus inmitem ferumque.*

[52] Cic. *Q. Fr.* 1.1.27.

[53] Cic. *Font.* 30, 43-44, 49.

[54] Ibid. 26-27.

[55] Cic. *Scaur.* 42.

[56] Strabo, 7.1.4; Manilius, 1.896-903; Vell. Pat. 2.118: *in summa feritate versutissimi natumque mendacio genus.*

[57] Sen. *De Ira*, 2.15.

[58] Cic. *Nat. Deor.* 1.43; *Rep.* 3.14; *Tusc. Disp.* 5.78.

[59] Juv. *Sat.* 15.1-7.

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a golden ring and a purple cloak, how can anyone *not* write satire?[60]

And then there are the Jews. Cicero brands them as a people given to a 'barbarian superstition'.[61] For Seneca, they are a 'most pernicious people'.[62] Tacitus blasts them mercilessly, so it seems. He reckons them a race of men hated by the gods, with base and wicked practices, sordid and ridiculous rites, xenophobic, despised, and the vilest of nations.[63] Jewish customs, particularly observance of the Sabbath, abstention from pork and circumcision were regularly derided by gentile writers. Seneca wondered why, by adhering to the Sabbath, Jews wasted one-seventh of their lives in idleness.[64] Petronius inferred that refraining from pork meant that Jews worshipped a pig-god.[65] Martial mocked a circumcised poet who was both a plagiarist and a pederast.[66] Juvenal claimed that Jews do not even give directions in the street to anyone who isn't circumcised.[67]

Many more comparable comments about non-Romans could be tabulated. How does one account for this barrage of bigotry? How can it be reconciled with the conviction, otherwise well documented, that Romans saw their own ethnic composition as a compound of ethnicities?

This is not the place for a detailed examination of each of the calumnies against aliens or foreigners in Roman writings. It needs to be observed, however, that the collection of testimonia paraded by modern scholars as demonstration of Roman ethnic bigotry rarely provides context or analyses motives. A string of slights and slanders, without scrutiny in depth, misleads rather than illuminates.

Take Cicero for instance. Juicy quotations from his corpus regularly get cited as examples of Roman prejudice. What is not so often noted, however, is that a substantial majority of such comments come from heated forensic contests. That deserves emphasis. Cicero's intensity in defending clients carried over to ferocity in blackening witnesses for the prosecution. Almost all of the hostile remarks about Gauls come in just one speech, *Pro Fonteio*, when Gallic witnesses, especially the Allobroges, testified against the defendant M. Fonteius, and Cicero spared nothing in discrediting their testimony, including references to the Gallic assault on Rome that occurred three centuries earlier.[68] On another occasion, when it behooved him to do so, Cicero presents a very different portrait of the Allobroges. Envoys of that

[60] Ibid. 1.26-29.

[61] Cic. *Flacc.* 67.

[62] Seneca, in Augustine, *CD* 6.11: *sceleratissima gens.*

[63] Tac. *Hist.* 5.3.1, 5.5.1-2, 5.5.5, 5.8.2.

[64] Seneca, in Augustine, *CD* 6.11.

[65] Petronius, fr. 37.

[66] Martial, 11.94.

[67] Juv. *Sat.* 14.104.

[68] Cic. *Font.* 30.

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people had brought damaging and decisive evidence about the Catilinarian conspirators to Cicero. This time he characterised the Allobroges as the most truthful of witnesses on matters of the highest importance.[69] Gallic untrustworthiness had miraculously and conveniently disappeared. That is just one example of Cicero tailoring his rhetoric to the occasion. It should not be confused with racial prejudice. For different reasons, the nasty comments that appear in his philosophical treatises are equally susceptible to misinterpretation as evidence for ethnic bias. For example, he stigmatises Egyptians in the *De Natura Deorum* and in the *Tusculan Disputations* as demented and suffering from perverse delusions, exemplified by their worship of animals.[70] When such statements are plucked out of a treatise, however, it is easy to forget that Cicero's philosophical tracts are usually couched in the form of dialogues. Not only may the views of a particular speaker bear no resemblance to Cicero's own opinions, but they are often inserted for purposes of philosophical byplay, rather than as expressions of heart-felt convictions. A slur on Egyptians in the *De Natura Dorum*, for example, is put in the mouth of an Epicurean – not a doctrine with which Cicero associated himself. Sweeping indictments by the speaker reflect more discredit upon Epicureans than upon Egyptians. In these, and in many other cases, close scrutiny of the context discloses something very different from ethnic bias.[71]

This holds for other sources as well. Cato's stringent strictures on Greeks have more to do with posturing than with deep-seated animosity. The Censor's knowledge of Greek language, literature, mythology and history is plain from his writings and his career. The ostensible scorn for philosophy sprang more from affectation than conviction. Cato presented the public presence of one who stressed Roman values and traditions and who insisted on their superiority over philosophical phrase-mongering and logic-chopping. But he was no inveterate foe of Hellenism. Cato belittled windy rhetoric and intellectual artifice in order to sharpen awareness of distinctive Roman characteristics. The rant against Greek doctors appears only in a tract composed for his son, transparently artificial and deliberately exaggerated to make a point and to argue that Roman home remedies outstripped Hellenic medicine. It hardly counts as evidence for animosity toward Greeks.[72]

Closer inspection dissolves many of the clichés about Roman contempt for the foreigner. The concept of *Punica fides* enters relatively late in Roman thinking, after the destruction of Carthage, when Rome needed to justify that dastardly deed, and even then it did not dominate. Respect for Phoenician cultural contributions and for Carthaginian writers and intellectuals remained high. The story of Carthage's conqueror, Scipio Aemilianus, weeping at the

[69] Cic. *Sull.* 17; cf. *Cat.* 4.5, 4.10.

[70] Cic. *Nat. Deor* 1.43; *Tusc. Disp.* 5.78.

[71] See Gruen, 'Cicero and the Alien' (forthcoming).

[72] For this interpretation of Cato and Hellenism, see Gruen, *Culture and National Identity* (n. 14) 52-83.

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sight of flames engulfing the city is no fiction, but the record of an eye-witness, Polybius. And Vergil's memorable portrait of Dido as emblematic of Carthage is a movingly positive one.[73] The Carthaginians were respected and worthy foes, not monstrous aliens.

The most authoritative Roman testimonia on the Gauls, of course, are not the individual comments out of context in Cicero's speeches, but the writings of someone who actually had direct engagement with Gauls over an extended period of time. Julius Caesar's invaluable portrait had its own agenda, but he did not slip simply into stereotypes. His presentation was nuanced and complex, even when contrived. Gauls appear partly as hardy warriors who have begun to go soft because of too close contact with Roman comforts. The construct obviously reflects more on Romans than on the Celts. But Caesar goes beyond conventional clichés. He repeats stereotypes about Gallic impetuousness and instability, but also records their commitment to *virtus*, as well as their adherence to *libertas* – more often, indeed, than he ascribes these qualities to Romans. Gauls can resemble Romans or vice-versa, and even religious conceptions overlap; Caesar notes not only distinctive Gallic practices but also Gallic deities equivalent to the Olympians. The picture is far from denigration or disparagement.[74] Even Cato the Elder, whose extant writings have little about Celts, declares that they pride themselves upon accomplishments in two major areas: the art of war and wit in speaking.[75] Who would have expected the latter? Gauls are no mere savage barbarians.

Nor indeed are the Germans. At least not in Tacitus' extended treatment of that people in his *Germania*, our one surviving monograph by a classical author on a foreign people. Like Caesar on the Gauls, Tacitus represents Germans in complex and shifting ways, not simply fictitious foils for Romans. He draws out traits which Romans could usefully emulate, and others which they share – for good or ill. Interweaving threads between the nations set off each of them all the more sharply, and Tacitean irony finds parallels or contrasts that skewer both of them. The cynical historian shows greater interest in double-edged representations than in demonstrating German native inferiority. German virtues are repeatedly undercut by their own failings, not by Roman advantage – and the reverse holds as well. The calculatingly ambivalent analysis supersedes any implications of barbaric shortcomings.[76]

Even those bizarre Egyptians emerge in a different light when one escapes the spell of fragmentary and truncated passages snatched from works that had other objectives in mind. A plethora of Greek and Roman writers composed works on Egypt. We have very few of them now, only the names of authors otherwise unknown. But the fact that Egypt stirred interest so

[73] On *Punica fides*, see Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (n. 13) 115-40.

[74] Ibid. 141-58.

[75] Cato, *Orig.* F2.3 (Beck and Walter).

[76] Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (n. 13) 159-78.

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consistently and over so long a period of time has special significance. Intellectuals did not turn to the subject again and again only to deride, discredit and smear the Egyptians. The extensive and serious treatments which we do possess, those of Herodotus, Diodorus and Plutarch, all of whom are deeply respectful, even forbearing of animal worship, demonstrate that clearly enough. They count for more than Cicero's few and occasional snipes at animal worship – and even those at times imply admiration rather than disdain, at least in terms of the tenacity with which Egyptians hold to their convictions.[77] As we have seen, Cicero alluded to Egyptian zoolatry in philosophic treatises to expose the flaws of Epicureans and Stoics, not to batter the alien. He could also, when he chose, resort to a form of cultural relativism in which all religions had a meaningful significance to their practitioners including Egyptians.[78] Once again we need to attend to the orator's specific objectives without drawing conclusions about deep-seated beliefs. And not just to Cicero's objectives. The selective Roman sneers about Egyptians that scholars have compiled consistently distort understanding. For one thing, a large number of those derogatory comments are directed against Alexandrians. Alexandrians are not Egyptians. Further, a notable number of the nasty excerpts belong to a single concentrated period of Roman history, namely that intense time when writers of the Augustan era outdid themselves in branding Antony and Cleopatra with every form of infamy and were eager to pit Roman divinities against 'barking Anubis' and the motley array of Egyptian animal gods. Outside that particular and highly unusual context, Roman authors generally found Egyptian practices weird and amusing, but not a target for ethnic animosity. The extensive popularity of the Isis cult in Rome provides more solid ground for Roman attitudes than isolated snippets from writers who had their own agendas.[79]

If so, however, one might ask, what about the venomous fifteenth Satire of Juvenal? The poet there excoriates Egyptians who revere monstrous creatures and put their trust in a bewildering menagerie of outlandish beasts. Further, he presents a gruesome scene in which a fierce quarrel between two Egyptian towns ended in a vicious chopping up of a hapless casualty who became the victim of cannibalism. The satire is often cited as representative of Roman thinking – a hasty inference. One should emphasise first that a good part of the poem constitutes flippant mockery rather than malicious malevolence, like many satires. The loathsome scene of cannibalism, to be sure, is sobering and not easily ignored. Yet here too Juvenal's aim needs to be seen in its broader compass. The satirist employs that grisly episode to draw some larger lessons about the decline of morals in his own day, a severe indictment of his contemporaries and a pointed contrast with an earlier era.

[77] Cic. *Nat. Deor.* 1.81-82.

[78] Ibid.

[79] See R.E. Witt, *Isis in the Greco-Roman World* (London 1971); M. Malaise, *Les conditions de pénétration et de diffusion des cultes égyptiens découverts en Italie* (Leiden 1972); S. Takácz, *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World* (Leiden 1995).

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Whether serious or ironic, Juvenal employs Egypt as an illustration of the wider phenomenon. Indeed, he even contrasts present-day Egyptians with a revered Egypt of antiquity.[80] Nostalgia rather than bigotry prevails. This puts a very different slant on the poem. Egyptians as such are not targets of Juvenal's venom. They serve as a representative example of what ails society as a whole and of its steep decline from a better age. On any reckoning, this satire stands as quite exceptional. Almost no other reference to Egypt in Juvenal's corpus carries any hostile overtones. And Latin writers in general, even when they scoff at Egyptian zoolatry, treat that venerable people with respect.

Jews did not usually receive the same level of regard. Jokes about their peculiar practices abound in Roman writers. They judged observance of the Sabbath as irrational, dietary restrictions as ludicrous, and circumcision as mutilation of the genitals. Even worse, in Roman representation, Jews were separatists – they kept to themselves, would not mix in polite society, shunned gentiles and clung to their own customs. Their religious convictions were characterised as *superstitio*. How seriously to take all this? Romans, of course, regularly mocked alien ways. But jokes and gibes fall in a very different category from denunciation of ethnic inferiority. Epictetus, for instance, derided Jews, Syrians, Egyptians, and even Romans, because they quarrelled not over whether holiness should be preferred to all else but over whether pork is holy or unholy.[81] There is a form of wry detachment here. Nor did Jewish monotheism bother the Romans. Why should it? The greatest student of Roman religion, Varro, reckoned the god of the Jews as the equivalent of Jupiter; only the names differed.[82] Indeed, Varro had no problem with Jewish aniconism, and even found it admirable, claiming that Romans in their most distant past rejected all divine imagery, and he wishes that they still did![83] A single troubling comment comes from the pen of Seneca who called Jews 'a most wicked race' (*sceleratissima gens*).[84] But it is worth noting that this is a fragment quoted by a much later author, and we do not know the context. What we do know is that in the vast extant corpus of Seneca, there is not another mention of Jews anywhere. They barely impinged on his consciousness. If they were the most criminal of people, there is no trace of their crimes.

The only extended diatribe against the Jews by a Roman author that we possess is Tacitus' infamous excursus in the *Histories*, just prior to his treatment of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.[85] We need not pause

[80] Juv. *Sat.* 15.4-6; Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (n. 13) 110-11.

[81] Epictetus, in Arr. *Epict. diss.* 1.22.4.

[82] Varro, in August. *De Consensu Evangelistarum*, 1.30.

[83] Varro, in August. *CD*, 4.31.

[84] Seneca, in August. *CD*, 6.11.

[85] Tac. *Hist.* 5.2-13.

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here for a detailed dissection of that text.[86] But close attention to the techniques of that master ironist shows that he plays throughout with paradox in that text, that his barbs pierce Romans as much as Jews, that he turns statements on their heads and that in retailing criticisms of Jews he aims more at Roman credulousness than at Jewish failings. One need cite only Tacitus' juxtaposition of the tale that Jews dedicated an image of an ass in the Temple with his assertion that Jews condemn graven images and conceive their deity as a purely mental construct.[87] It is not easy to hold both those propositions simultaneously. In a comparable paradox, Tacitus rails against converts to Judaism who scorn their families, their traditions and their nations, an outburst that has been seen as a crusade against Jewish proselytising. Yet in the conjoining passage, the historian sardonically called attention to Jewish xenophobia and resistance to congress with gentiles.[88] It is hard to reconcile active proselytising among gentiles with avoidance of their company. The irony and cynical wit of this excursus on the Jews are characteristically Tacitean. He both conveys and undercuts stereotypes, he punctures simplistic conceptions, and he calculatingly dangles opinions before his readers only to snatch them away. However else one might wish to characterise him, Tacitus fails to qualify as an arch anti-semite.

Where does this leave us? A fundamental point needs to be made and emphasised. In this whole array of slurs, smears, quips, jibes, aspersions, sardonic hits and parodic put-downs, there is hardly a whiff of ethnic bias. Reflections on Greeks, Egyptians, Gauls, Germans, Phoenicians, Syrians and Jews by Roman writers from Plautus and Cato to Tacitus and Juvenal provide caustic comment upon customs, habits, behaviour and modes of worship. They point to pretentiousness among Greeks, untrustworthiness among Phoenicians, impulsiveness among Gauls, bizarre beliefs among Egyptians, indolence and alcoholism among Germans, and misanthropy among Jews. What they do not do is ascribe any of this to innate and irreversible traits, to genetic deficiencies which render non-Romans inherently inferior. Ethnic make-up has little impact upon character, behaviour or achievement – or the absence thereof. In assessing others and passing judgment on their actions – which Romans regularly did – they simply did not think in ethnic terms or employ the categories that we too readily adopt. Phrases like racism or 'proto-racism' miss the mark. Countless differences exist, of course, among nations – cultural, linguistic, religious, historical. But they need not doom a people to subordination, ignorance or inadequacy.[89]

[86] See Gruen, *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity* (n. 13) 187-96.

[87] Tac. *Hist.* 5.4.2, 5.5.4.

[88] Ibid. 5.5.1-2.

[89] Cicero's claim that Syrians and Jews were 'born to be slaves' (*Prov. Cons.* 10) refers to their vulnerability in armed might and their proneness to conquest and enslavement. Livy, like Cicero, reckons Asians as fit to be slaves (35.49.8, 36.17.4-50). But the statements are set in the mouths of Roman generals exhorting troops against the enemy, and are not a reflection of Livian views or of considered opinion. The same holds for Livy's assertion that Cartha-

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The most telling indicator of the Roman disposition toward members of other ethnic groups, however, is something else altogether, a remarkable, indeed unique, institution: the award of citizenship to manumitted slaves. This practice astonished the Greeks. As far back as the later third century BCE, Philip V, ruler of Macedon, expressed admiration for Roman liberality on this score and held it up as a model for Greeks.[90] Dionysius of Halicarnassus in the age of Augustus ascribed the emergence of Rome from the most insignificant to the greatest nation in part to its humane bestowal of citizenship upon conquered peoples and emancipated slaves.[91] To be sure, the institution did not derive from altruism or benevolence. None will mistake the Romans for warm and fuzzy people. Skeptics properly question the frequency of manumission. It doubtless occurred more often in urban than in rural areas – and even there the numbers are uncertain. Generosity only occasionally motivated liberation. The reward of freedom was dangled as an incentive for loyalty and submission. And a range of obligations to the former master remained for the freedman after emancipation.[92] It was more a matter of practicality than philanthropy. All that may be acknowledged. Cynicism about motives, however, does not alter the fundamental fact. The vast majority of Roman slaves came from abroad as war captives, victims of the slave trade or the descendants of such persons. Their origins ranged anywhere from the Straits of Gibraltar to the Euphrates and beyond. Citizenship gave them a stake in the community, a legitimate part in civic life, participation in the political scene and, after a generation, the right to hold office. Some, like manumitted Jews, retained a sense of collective identity. They engaged as a defined group in public demonstrations in the Republic, and they received from Augustus a guarantee that the intervention of the Sabbath would not deprive them of access to the grain distributions.[93] It should be noted that eligibility for the state allocation of grain required citizenship, which the Jewish recipients obviously had. Other new citizens from abroad may not have been so keen to maintain group solidarity, preferring a more congenial assimilation. The critical point remains: Romans had no discomfort with infusing into their citizen body persons from a full range of ethnic backgrounds, languages and traditions.

ginians were cruel and ferocious, both by custom and by nature (23.5.2), also uttered by a Roman commander, this time after the battle of Cannae. Velleius' claim that Germans were liars by birth (2.118.1) comes in the context, unsurprisingly, of their ambush of Varus.

[90] *SIG* 543.

[91] Dion. Hal. 1.9.4.

[92] S. Treggiari, *Roman Freedmen during the Late Republic* (Oxford 1969) 11-20; K.R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (Brussels 1984) 81-112; J. Gardner, *Being a Roman Citizen* (London 1993) 7-51; Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome* (Cambridge 1994) 162-5; H. Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World* (Cambridge 2011) 66-119. For skepticism on the frequency of manumission, see T.E.J. Wiedemann, 'The Regularity of Manumission at Rome', *CQ* 35 (1985) 162-75.

[93] Demonstrations: Cic. *Flacc.* 67; grain distributions: Philo, *Legatio*, 158.

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Nor did this confine itself to token grants of citizenship to provincials who would remain abroad and at a distance. The city of Rome itself, so a Greek writer proclaimed, encapsulates the world, for denizens of all other cities, like Alexandria, Antioch, Nicomedia and Athens, have settled there.[94] Martial prides himself on the fact that his writings are spread among all the nations contained in Rome.[95] The city had a conspicuous multi-cultural character. To be sure, not all Romans welcomed the influx. Juvenal notoriously lamented that Greek immigrants were bad enough, but the Orontes river continually dumps its eastern sewage into the Tiber.[96] But the satirist's complaint, whether serious or parodic, obviously did not reflect public policy or even prevalent presumptions. The acceptance of ex-slaves, almost all of them from outside Italy or descendants of such persons, into the citizen community is far more eloquent testimony to behaviour and belief than a satirical quip. Romans did not employ ethnicity as a touchstone for the evaluation of character or quality.

That has important implications for the Romans' sense of themselves. Like modern scholars they did not agonise about problems of identity. They felt no urgency to distinguish their ethnic essence from the inferior make-up of lesser folk. They lived in a multi-cultural world and saw it as integral to their own heritage. They affirmed, even invented, a background that associated them with Latins, Sabines, Etruscans, Achaeans, Trojans, Arcadians, Oenotrians, even Aborigines and Pelasgians. And they opened their citizen body to a bewildering array of foreigners, including Gauls, Spaniards, Moors, Macedonians, Egyptians, Syrians and Jews. The occasional slights concerning persons with different customs, bizarre conventions or strange modes of behavior, a source of wit or a rhetorical ploy, carry little force in that broader context. The Romans did not have to underscore ethnic distinctiveness to establish their superiority. As Cicero put it in his *De Natura Deorum*, if we were to compare ourselves with foreign peoples, we would discover that we are either equal or even inferior in all other matters, but far superior in one feature, namely in *religio*, that is, devotion to the gods.[97] The Romans' embrace of ethnic diversity stemmed not from any depth of *humanitas* but from a supreme self-confidence generated by the power and authority guaranteed them by the favour of the gods.

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[94] Athenaeus, 1.20b-c.

[95] Martial, 8.61.5. On foreign groups in Rome generally, see the valuable study of D. Noy, *Foreigners at Rome: Citizens and Strangers* (London 2000) esp. 205-84.

[96] Juv. *Sat.* 3.58-60, 68-71.

[97] Cic. *Nat. Deor.* 2.8.

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