ROMAN RELIGION

doi:10.1017/S0009840X25101704

It would be a truism to say that the subfield of Roman religion is not only vast but also multifaceted, complicated and more often than not problematic. The latter is primarily linked to certain questions – which will also undoubtedly hinder my attempt to delineate the latest trends and developments within this field: which historical period of 'Roman religion' does one refer to? What constituted 'religion' for the Romans but also for the different peoples who found themselves under the former's rule? Can one speak of 'Roman religion' as a unified, homogeneous and distinct phenomenon effortlessly traceable through the vast textual, archaeological and material corpus? And, moreover, who is the ad hoc specialist when it comes to the study of Roman religion? These are not simple questions, and addressing them would require far more space and a number of collaborating scholars.[1] Hence, in this survey I will succinctly delineate some of the most interesting and appealing trends in this subfield of Roman history and culture in the last few years, offering thereby a bird's-eye-view of where scholarship currently stands as well as its prospects and future developments.[2]

***

Contrary to early studies on Roman religion in the nineteenth and for the most part of the twentieth century, for many years supernatural or superhuman beings – gods, goddesses, heroes – were either downplayed or neglected in scholarly treatises, a choice linked to an interest in rituals, practices and orthopraxy vis-à-vis primarily belief and secondarily an alleged absence of orthodoxy. Recently, however, there seems to be a shift in this previous tendency and a return to the key agents of Roman religion, i.e. the divine beings. Both

[1]On these issues, see F. Prescendi Morresi, 'Religions de Rome et du monde romain', *Annuaire de l'École pratique des hautes études. Section des sciences religieuses* 128 (2021), online: http://journals.openedition.org/asr/3755; J. Rüpke, *Religion and its History: A Critical Inquiry* (2021); N.P. Roubekas, *The Study of Greek and Roman Religions: Insularity and Assimilation* (2022); N.P. Roubekas, 'Religious Studies and Greek and Roman Religions: A Work-in-Progress', *Religious Studies Review* 50.2 (2024), 285–9. These issues are partly addressed in a number of recent publications on Roman religion(s), treated both historically and as a category – the latter not without some occasional problems. For example, see J. Rüpke, *Pantheon: A New History of Roman Religion* (2018); J. Rüpke and G. Woolf (edd.), *Religion in the Roman Empire* (2021); F. Santangelo, *La religione dei Romani* (2022); J. Scheid, *Les Romains et leurs religions* (2023); Y. Clavé, *Les religions du monde romain: VIII^e siècle av. J.-C. – VIII^e siècle apr. J.-C.* (2023); D. Porte, *L'âme romaine et le divin* (2025).

[2]For a recent good overview of monographs published on Roman religion, see C. Szabo, 'Rewriting Roman Religion: Historiography of a Decade (2013–2023)', *Memoria Antiquitatis* 38 (2023), 381–90. Szabo also maintains a webpage that is constantly being updated: see https://religioacademici.wordpress.com/news/.

The Classical Review (2026) 76.1 16–22 © The Author(s), 2025. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of The Classical Association. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution and reproduction, provided the original article is properly cited.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X25101704 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dedicated monographs to a particular deity[3] and edited volumes that include discussions on a number of such agents[4] have appeared at a growing pace. Especially, more recently, C. Bonnet's ERC Advanced Grant 'MAP – Mapping Ancient Polytheisms: Cult Epithets as an Interface between Religious Systems and Human Agency' (2017–2022; see the project's webpage: https://map-polytheisms.huma-num.fr/?lang=en) further delved into issues related to ancient divinities. Onomastics has indeed gained traction, with a number of thought-provoking publications putting, as it were, the gods and goddesses on the stage again.[5] Such studies, one could claim, indicate a renewed interest in the supernatural and superhuman agents of Roman religion that – even implicitly in some instances – seems to slowly embrace a reinstatement of belief's power, importance and centrality in Roman religion. Belief is a notoriously difficult topic to touch upon and deal with – especially but not only in relation to ancient religions – and criticisms about past circumvention of this concept have recently emerged, while simultaneously offering ways to restore it within the study of Roman religion.[6] This is even more so evident in a series of works pertaining to

[3]On individual deities, see M. Bettini, *Il dio elegante: Vertumno e la religione romana* (2015); L. Dubosson-Sbriglione, *Le culte de la Mère des dieux dans l'Empire romain* (2018); E. Cruccas, Numina magna: *Roma e il culto dei Grandi Dei di Samotracia* (2019); L. Fabbri, Mater Florum: *Flora e il suo culto a Roma* (2019); J. Dyson Hejduk, *The God of Rome: Jupiter in Augustan Poetry* (2020); A. Gartrell, *The Cult of Castor and Pollux in Ancient Rome* (2021); D. Miano, *La dea Fortuna: una divinità e i suoi significati nella Roma repubblicana e nell'Italia antica* (2021); L.A. Mazurek, *Isis in a Global Empire: Greek Identity Through Egyptian Religion in Roman Greece* (2022); A. Fear, *Mithras* (2022); L. González Estrada, *El culto a Juno Sóspita en el Lacio antiguo: discursos e imágenes en torno a la diosa* (2024).

[4]For instance, see F. Chapot, J. Goeken and M. Pfaff-Reydellet (edd.), *Figures mythiques et discours religieux dans l'Empire gréco-romain* (2018); E. Bispham and D. Miano (edd.), *Gods and Goddesses in Ancient Italy* (2020); P. Kiernan, *Roman Cult Images: The Lives and Worship of Idols, from the Iron Age to Late Antiquity* (2020); F. Prescendi and F. Van Haeperen (edd.), *Petits dieux des Romains et leurs voisins: Enquête comparatiste sur les hiérarchies divines dans les cultures romaines, italiques et grecques* (2024).

[5]See T. Galoppin et al. (edd.), *Naming and Mapping the Gods in the Ancient Mediterranean: Spaces, Mobilities, Imaginaries* (2 vols, 2022); B. Buszard, *Greek Translations of Roman Gods* (2023); A. Palamidis and C. Bonnet (edd.), *What's in a Divine Name? Religious Systems and Human Agency in the Ancient Mediterranean* (2024); S. Lebreton, *Zeus d'Athènes: Polythéisme et paysages onomastiques* (2025); V. Gasparini, J. Alvar and C. Bonnet (edd.), *My Name is Your Name: Anthroponyms as Divine Attributes in the Greco-Roman World* (2025). R. Parker's influential *Greek Gods Abroad: Names, Natures, and Transformations* (2017) essentially laid the groundwork for such studies.

[6]For a good starting point, with a strong historical as well as a theoretical background, see J.L. Mackey, 'Das Erlöschen des Glaubens: The Fate of Belief in the Study of Roman Religion', *Phasis: Greek and Roman Studies* 20 (2017), 83–150; J.W. Carter, 'Plutarch's Epicurean Justification of Religious Belief', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 56.3 (2018), 385–412; C.W. King, *The Ancient Roman Afterlife:* Di Manes*, Belief, and the Cult of the Dead* (2020); L. Ambasciano, 'Zombies Roaming Around the Pantheon: Reconsidering Ancient Roman Belief', *Implicit Religion* 25.1/2 (2022), 53–75; J.L. Mackey, *Belief and Cult: Rethinking Roman Religion* (2022). One should also consult T. Morgan's seminal work *Roman Faith and Christian Faith:* Pistis *and* Fides *in the Early*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X25101704 Published online by Cambridge University Press

divination in ancient Rome, a practice that was not only widely disseminated throughout Roman history but deeply influenced Roman politics and state affairs.[7] Divination is often studied alongside the phenomenon of epiphany, which is yet another concept closely intertwined with the reintroduction of gods, goddesses and other superhuman figures in the study of Roman religion.[8]

This turn towards the divine agents of Roman religion, their influence in daily as well as political life, and belief within the religious world of the Romans has not taken place without also further discussion of the reaction to such topics, primarily in the form of unbelief, atheism, or scepticism and doubt more broadly. There are at least three key publications that have recently appeared on these issues that warrant our attention: *Sceptic and Believer in Ancient Mediterranean Religions*, edited by B. Edelmann-Singer, T. Nicklas, J. Spittler and L. Walt (2020); the special issue of *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* (23.1 [2021]) 'The Benefit of Doubt: Between Skepticism and Godlessness, Critique or Indifference in Ancient Mediterranean Religious Traditions', edited by N. Hartmann and F. Naether, which was based on the similarly titled workshop organised by the editors at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin in 2019; and *Belief and Unbelief in the Ancient World*, edited by T.O. Gray, E.R. Johnson and M. Vercesi (2025). Although not restricted to Roman religion, all three contain invaluable essays on atheism in ancient Rome, probing us to further consider belief's centrality and how the ancient Romans and other groups within the Roman world addressed the issue of traditional religion and religiosity.

There are a number of academic projects that focus on Roman religion by and large. Apart from the aforementioned 'Mapping Ancient Polytheisms' that was run by C. Bonnet or J. Rüpke's influential 'LAR–Lived Ancient Religion' ERC project (2013–2017; for details, see https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/295555), it is worth mentioning the following: (1) 'LARNA – Lived Ancient Religion in North Africa', run by V. Gasparini at the University Carlos III of Madrid and funded by the Autonomous Community of Madrid (2018–2022; https://www.facebook.com/LARNA.Lived.Ancient.Religion.in.North.Africa/), with very interesting outcomes, including the SIRAR (*Sylloge Inscriptionum Religionis Africae Romanae*) database (available at https://ancientworldonline.blogspot.com/2023/06/sirar-sylloge-inscriptionum-religionis.html);[9] (2) 'MARE – Mortuary Archaeology

Roman Empire and Early Churches (2015). For a reply from a Classics standpoint see L.G. Driediger-Murphy, '"Do not examine, but believe?": A Classicist's Perspective on Teresa Morgan's *Roman Faith and Christian Faith*', *Religious Studies* 54.4 (2018), 569–76.

[7]For example, see L.G. Driediger-Murphy, *Roman Republican Augury: Freedom and Control* (2018); L.G. Driediger-Murphy and E. Eidinow (edd.), *Ancient Divination and Experience* (2019); C. Beltrão da Rosa and F. Santangelo (edd.), *Cicero and Roman Religion: Eight Studies* (2020); J.F. Sørensen and A. Klostergaard Petersen (edd.), *Theoretical and Empirical Investigations of Divination and Magic: Manipulating the Divine* (2021); C. Addey (ed.), *Divination and Knowledge in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (2022); E.G. Simonetti and C. Hall (edd.), *Divination and Revelation in Later Antiquity* (2023).

[8]See, for instance, G.H. Renberg, *Where Dreams May Come: Incubation Sanctuaries in the Greco-Roman World* (2 vols, 2017); M. Arnhold, J. Rüpke and H.O. Maier (edd.), *Seeing the God: Image, Space, Performance, and Vision in the Religion of the Roman Empire* (2018); C. Schliephake and G. Weber (edd.), *Deutungskämpfe um die antike Divination im Spiegel spätrepublikanischer und kaiserzeitlicher Texte* (2024).

[9]Also see M.M. McCarty, *Religion and the Making of Roman Africa: Votive Stelae, Traditions, and Empire* (2024).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X25101704 Published online by Cambridge University Press

of the Roman East', a project directed by L. de Jong, hosted at the University of Groningen and funded by the Dutch Research Council (2021–2026), focusing on 'how local communities envisioned and reformulated their relationships with the dead' via archaeological and material remains (for an overview see https://www.rug.nl/research/groningen-institute-of-archaeology/research/mare/);[10] (3) the promising and wide-ranging 'Anchoring Innovation' project at Radboud University, financially supported by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (2017–2027; see https://anchoringinnovation.nl), whose domains include topics touching upon a wide array of themes relative to Roman religion; (4) the 'Deep Mapping Sanctuaries' sub-project of the larger 'Connecting the Greeks: Multi-scalar Festival Networks in the Greek and Roman World', run at the University of Groningen and funded by NWO and the OIKOS Anchoring Innovation Research Initiative (https://connectingthegreeks.com); and (5) the ERC Advanced Grant project '*Locus Ludi*: The Cultural Fabric of Play and Games in Classical Antiquity', directed by V. Dasen and hosted at Université de Fribourg (2017–2022/2023; see https://locusludi.ch).[11] In all these projects there is an evident material aspect as well, which has become rather popular in recent years in the study of religion in general, and Roman and Greek religion in particular.[12]

One area that scholars of Roman religion have not yet fully taken advantage of includes the findings, theories and methodological proposals of the cognitive study of religion. With the exception of the AHRC-funded 'CAARE: Cognitive Approaches to Ancient Religious Experience' project, run by E. Eidinow and A.W. Geertz between 2014 and 2016, which resulted in a new book series with Cambridge University Press under the title *Ancient Religion and Cognition*, the cognitive study of religion has not yet fully penetrated research related to the Roman religious world.[13] The only volume in this series – which currently contains two published and one forthcoming title – exclusively engaging with Roman religion is *Senses, Cognition, and Ritual Experience in the Roman World*, edited by B. Misic

[10]The dead and the afterlife have never lost their significance within scholarship on Roman religion. For more recent publications, see K. Waldner, R. Gordon and W. Spickermann (edd.), *Burial Rituals, Ideas of Afterlife, and the Individual in the Hellenistic World and the Roman Empire* (2016); C.W. King, *The Ancient Roman Afterlife: Di Manes, Belief, and the Cult of the Dead* (2020); E. Gee, *Mapping the Afterlife: From Homer to Dante* (2020); the relevant essays in H. Marlow, K. Pollmann and H. Van Noorden (edd.), *Eschatology in Antiquity: Forms and Functions* (2021).

[11]A publication related to this project is the special volume of *Kernos: Revue internationale et pluridisciplinaire de religion grecque antique* (vol. 35; 2022), entitled 'Actes du XVI^{e} colloque international du CIERGA: Des dieux, des jeux – et du hasard?' and edited by V. Dasen and V. Pirenne-Delforge.

[12]See, for example, S. Blakely (ed.), *Gods, Objects, and Ritual Practice* (2017); E.-J. Graham, *Reassembling Religion in Roman Italy* (2021); G. Woolf, I. Bultrighini and C. Norman (edd.), *Sanctuaries and Experience: Knowledge, Practice and Space in the Ancient World* (2024); F. Fabbri and A. Sebastiani (edd.), *Sacred Landscapes in Central Italy: Votive Deposits and Sanctuaries (400 BC – AD 400)* (2025); as well as the hefty and diverse *A Companion to the Archaeology of Religion in the Ancient World*, edited by R. Raja and J. Rüpke (2015), which contains a large number of contributions on the topic. Cf. the detailed discussion in E.-J. Graham, 'Material and Experiential Religion', *The Classical Review* 75 (2025), 303–13.

[13]For a brief description of the project see https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/en/projects/cognitive-approaches-to-ancient-religious-experience.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X25101704 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and A. Graham (2024), which includes excellent essays tackling a number of different aspects of Roman religion and cognition.[14] J.L. Mackey's *Belief and Cult: Rethinking Roman Religion* (2022) is undeniably the most important publication on the topic to date, along with some older publications, such as L.H. Martin's *The Mind of Mithraists: Historical and Cognitive Studies in the Roman Cult of Mithras* (2015) and O. Panagiotidou and R. Beck's *The Roman Mithras Cult: A Cognitive Approach* (2017).[15] Finally, the *Journal of Cognitive Historiography* (published by Equinox and currently in its ninth volume) has put into print a number of articles related to Roman religion and the cognitive study of religion, although it is not dedicated to ancient Rome but to cognitive historiography both diachronically and synchronically.[16]

Articles, review essays and book reviews on Roman religion are published in a plethora of academic journals, mostly however appearing in periodicals that have a specific disciplinary mandate. I would like here thus to point towards two key venues that bring together not only Classicists but also historians, religious studies scholars as well as other academics from diverse disciplines to further discuss the religious world and realities of the ancient Romans. First and foremost, one should consult *Religion in the Roman Empire* (*RRE*), published now open-access by Mohr Siebeck and edited by J. Rüpke, which is already in its eleventh volume. Next is *ARYS. Antigüedad: Religiones y Sociedades*, also published open-access by the University Carlos III of Madrid and edited by J. Alvar Ezquerra, with materials published in various languages. Finally, a special issue of the *Journal of Religious History* on 'The Role of Historians in the Study of Religions' (46.4, 2022), edited by M. Brandt, which contains nine contributions that bring together ancient historians, Classicists and religious studies scholars on how ancient religions, including Roman religion, can be studied and analysed from an inter- and transdisciplinary perspective is a helping starting point for those interested in more theoretical and methodological aspects.[17]

[14]In the other published volume, i.e. E. Eidinow, A.W. Geertz and J. North (edd.), *Cognitive Approaches to Ancient Religious Experience* (2022), only three contributions deal with Roman religion explicitly, namely: M. Patzelt's 'Chanting and Dancing into Dissociation: The Case of the Salian Priests at Rome' (pp. 118–41); L. Ambasciano's 'Who Is the *Damiatrix*? Roman Women, the Political Negotiation of Psychotropic Experiences, and the Cults of Bona Dea' (pp. 167–90); and L.H. Martin's 'Identifying Symptoms of Religious Experience from Ancient Material Culture: The Example of Cults of the Roman Mithras' (pp. 218–42).

[15]Although not dedicated to religion, some of the contents on the 'Cognitive Classics' platform relate to Roman religion: see https://cognitiveclassics.blogs.sas.ac.uk. Classicists have been interested in cognition and cognitive studies, but Roman religion has remained a secondary or marginal topic up to now. See, for example, P. Meineck, W.M. Short and J. Devereaux (edd.), *The Routledge Handbook of Classics and Cognitive Theory* (2019).

[16]Examples include L. Ambasciano, 'The Gendered Deep History of the Bona Dea Cult' (vol. 3.1/2 [2016], pp. 134–56); P. Pachis, 'The Rites of the Day of Blood (*dies sanguinis*) in the Graeco-Roman Cult of Cybele and Attis: A Cognitive Historiographical Approach' (vol. 5.1/2 [2018–2019], pp. 37–55); O. Panagiotidou, 'Aelius Aristides' Sacred Tales: Reading, Simulation, and Priming of Readers' Oneiric Experiences' (vol. 6.1/2 [2020–2021], pp. 22–40); A. Alvar Nuño, 'Embodied Theories of Knowledge and the Evil Eye in the Roman World' (vol. 8.1/2 [2023], pp. 69–93).

[17]On method and theory in the study of ancient religions, and Roman religion in particular, see M. Bettini and W.M. Short (edd.), *The World Through Roman Eyes:*

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X25101704 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The Society for Ancient Mediterranean Religions (SAMR; see https://www.samreligions.org) is perhaps the most diverse scholarly association dealing with the religions of the ancient Mediterranean world, with Roman religion occupying a central place within its activities. Since its inception, SAMR has organised a number of interesting conferences, with 'Sailing with the Gods: Religion and Maritime Mobility in the Ancient World' (Malta, 2022), 'Remodeling the Motel of the Mysteries' (Denver, CO, annual SBL/AAR conference 2022), 'Godscapes: Ritual, Belief and the Natural World in the Ancient Mediterranean and Beyond' (University of St Andrews, Scotland, 2023) and 'The Connected Past: Religious Networks in Antiquity' (University of British Columbia, Canada, 2024) bringing together a diverse group of scholars from various disciplines. Similar work is done within the section 'Greco-Roman Religions' of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL; see https://greco-roman-religions.org), with panels dedicated to Roman religion (e.g. 'Goddess Worship in Antiquity' and 'New Work in Greco-Roman Religions' at the 2024 San Diego AAR/SBL meeting, as well as 'New Developments in Greco-Roman Religions' at the 2025 Boston AAR/SBL meeting). These sessions, conferences and meetings often result in important publications. More importantly, they bring together scholars from disciplines that typically do not work alongside each other when it comes to the study of Roman religion, thereby opening up the interdisciplinary window that is so much needed within this diverse field.

Such an interdisciplinary attempt was also taken up by the now quite extended and constantly being updated *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by J. Barton. A number of articles deal with Roman religion, although most of them primarily focus on introductory topics. Hence, one can find entries on 'The Religious History of the Roman Empire' (J. North), 'Greek and Roman Priests and Religious Personnel' (R. Garland), 'Religion and Gender in Ancient Rome' (M. DiLuzio), 'Gods in Ancient Greece and Rome' (M. Dillon), 'Sacred Space in Greece and Rome' (M. Scott), 'Art and Religion in Ancient Greece and Rome' (R. Osborne and C. Vout), 'Festivals in Ancient Greece and Rome' (F. Graf), 'Lived Ancient Religions' (J. Rüpke) and 'Approaches to Ancient Religions' (I. Czachesz).[18] With the exception of Czachesz's article, however, the *Encyclopedia* still needs to bring an interdisciplinary breeze to the study of Roman religion, and that would necessarily entail assigning topics to non-Classicists or historians of antiquity. Far more interesting and interdisciplinary, I would argue, as well as visually appealing, is the ongoing and constantly growing 'DRH–The Database of Religious History' (see https://religiondatabase.org/landing), in which scholars from numerous disciplines have collaborated to create and constantly update a database with remarkable visual, textual and statistical details. Therein, scholars can find entries on as well as connections to the ancient Roman world, the broader Mediterranean basin, North Africa and the Middle East, making it therefore an interesting venue and point of reference.[19]

***

Anthropological Approaches to Ancient Culture (2018); N.P. Roubekas (ed.), *Theorizing "Religion" in Antiquity* (2019); S. Blakely and M. Daniels (edd.), *Data Science, Human Science, and Ancient Gods: Conversations in Theory and Method* (2023).

[18]Some of the entries are open access, but most are behind Oxford University Press's paywall. The entries can be accessed via the *Encyclopedia*'s main webpage: https://oxfordre.com/religion/.

[19]For an assessment and the utility of DRH for ancient religions (with a focus on the ancient Mediterranean), see F.S. Tappenden, 'The Database of Religious History and the Study of Ancient Mediterranean Religiosity', *Journal of Cognitive Historiography* 3.1/2 (2018), 32–42.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X25101704 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Despite the common and often, in my view, one-sided (viz. Classics) take on Roman religion due to primarily disciplinary anxieties and a lingering disciplinary protectionism in many (if not most) publications on the topic,[20] one can increasingly encounter new projects, workshops, conferences as well as shorter or longer research outputs that either involve a more theoretical and methodological outlook or strive for interdisciplinary approaches that seek to advance the study of Roman religion beyond certain long-standing traditions. Without arguing or implying that traditional approaches and methods lack value or fail to provide important outcomes, I am personally intrigued by scholarly attempts that are willing to take risks and re-examine the religious ideas, beliefs, practices and peculiarities of Roman religion. A number of such new trends have been mentioned here. Precisely where the study of Roman religion is heading remains to be seen. But the blend of traditional and innovative proposals seems to be multiplying, thereby bringing about an exciting and enticing development from which scholars of Roman religion can only gain and, hopefully, to which they can contribute in the near future.

University of Vienna NICKOLAS P. ROUBEKAS
nickolas.roubekas@univie.ac.at

[20]A topic I discuss in N.P. Roubekas, *The Study of Greek and Roman Religions: Insularity and Assimilation* (2022).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009840X25101704 Published online by Cambridge University Press