INTRODUCTION

Studying Elite Religion in the Middle Roman Republic

The world holds two classes of men—intelligent men without religion, and religious men without intelligence.

Abu’l Ala Al Ma’arri (Syrian poet, 973–1057 C.E.)

_Pax Deorum_: “the peace of the gods.” One would be hard pressed to come up with a conception more central to the ancient Roman commonwealth. All activities of the state religion were directed to this end. This peace with the gods had something of the contractual and the reciprocal about it: Romans provided the desired worship, veneration, and cultic observances; the gods in turn, it was hoped, safeguarded Rome’s public well-being.¹ But there was never any guarantee that deities would indeed reciprocate, and it was the job of the magistrates and public priests to maximize the chances that they would do so. The _pax deorum_ was a fragile affair. It could be broken by any number of errors in the performance of ritual or by contraventions of religious law, and all public religious actions to restore it were carried out according to the most exacting specifications.² Constant vigilance was required, as divine signs frequently indicated that the gods’ peace must be created in order to avoid impending disaster.³ This book is about the elites, the magistrates and public priests, who shouldered the burden of maintaining the _pax deorum_, and what their religious behavior may have meant to them.

¹ _Salus publica_; cf. Cic. _Rab. Perd._ 2.5.
² See Wissowa, _RK_ ² 380–409, esp. 390–94.
³ See Santangelo 2011, esp. 162–70; cf. Satterfield 2015; Rüpke 2007: 12, “Traditional orally-transmitted knowledge is a form of knowledge that can rapidly assimilate and process new items, is flexible and adaptable, because it can only be kept vital by means of rehearsal, re-performance, in constantly-changing immediate situations.”
Did the Romans believe in their gods? The question seems simple and straightforward enough, but it is not. In order to begin thinking about the many difficulties it raises, we can start with an event in a time and place at a far remove from ancient Rome. In 1799 C.E., Hongli, the Qianlong emperor of China (the fourth emperor of the Qing Dynasty), was buried in the Yuling mausoleum in the Eastern Qing Tombs, about eighty miles northeast of Beijing. The construction of his final resting place had commenced more than fifty years earlier, and it was completed a decade after that, resulting in a structure of magnificence and monumentality. From the first marble gate onwards, Buddhist images decorated gates, walls, and ceilings: Four Heavenly Kings, Eight Bodhisattvas, Twenty-Four Buddhas, the Eight Treasures, and, along with ritual implements, more than 30,000 words of scriptural texts, in Sanskrit and in Tibetan. Astonishingly, the walls in the antechamber of the tomb were completely inscribed with Sanskrit characters. The wheel of the cakravartin (“enlightened ruler”) was engraved in the ceiling above the emperor and empress’s funeral platform—in a direct line of sight from the emperor’s coffin. Riches and sacred writings were sealed off for eternity. Indeed, the tomb robbers who ransacked the mausoleum in 1928 needed explosives to gain access to its concealed treasures.4 The Qianlong emperor’s preparations for his final resting place are striking in their painstaking elaboration and excruciatingly precise details, but they are by no means without historical parallel. We need only think of the sealed funeral chambers of the Great Pyramids at Giza in the Egyptian Old Kingdom, or the later hidden, richly appointed Egyptian royal burials in the Valley of the Kings, or—closer to the concerns of this study and of more modest dimensions—the tomb of the Scipios on the old Appian Way, remote and of difficult access for the present-day traveler.

Why did the Qianlong emperor go to such extraordinary lengths in outfitting his tomb, and for whom were the 30,000 Sanskrit and Tibetan words intended? Perhaps we should pause before tackling such a question, and begin with a more fundamental one. Why are we likely to see Hongli’s behavior as in any way problematic and in need of explanation, in the first place? I think the answer to that question may lie in unspoken and perhaps largely unconscious assumptions we are likely to harbor. After all, we are living more than one hundred and twenty-five years after Nietzsche’s famous declaration that “God is dead.” Many readers of this book will live in western societies with a strong commitment to the separation of church and state. As far as organized religious institutions go, some of those readers may live in predominantly Christian countries where the Protestant religions gained a strong foothold, and a subterranean current in their religious lives (if they have religious lives)

4See Crossley 1999: 242. I wish to thank my colleague Norman Kutcher for discussing the Yuling mausoleum with me. Unless otherwise noted, all dates are henceforth B.C.E.
carries the struggles of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation at their historical substratum. At the time of the religious wars in Europe in the early modern period, opponents of Roman Catholicism charged that the papal hierarchy insisted on blocking pure, direct, and immediate personal contact with God, and that part of the popes’ agenda as self-appointed divine intermediaries was to maintain their congregations’ religious ignorance, even to the point of keeping them illiterate and making Scripture inaccessible. The charge, in its simplest terms, was that Roman Catholic institutions aimed to control the masses through their religious authority. Elaborate rituals, pompous ceremonies, and stunning regalia were all set up for that purpose.\(^5\) The point is that, living in the wake of those historical religious currents, we may be likely to take a jaded, cynical view of any official, public expression of religiosity and piety, assuming that there is almost always some hidden agenda and self-interested motivation lying just below the surface.

Another way to put it is to think of an elite minority controlling nonelite masses through religious spectacles, much like what the Greek historian Polybius famously said about Roman religious institutions.\(^6\) Such an interpretation of religion’s function in society is what I shall call “elite-instrumentalism” throughout this book. It is a commonplace, contemptuous way to look at religion, and it has been reinforced in powerful ways in our history, as for example by hyper-critical, skeptical Enlightenment thinkers, such as Voltaire, or later in some interpretations of Marx’s famous maxim that religion is “the opiate of the masses.” After Marx, thinkers from Sigmund Freud to Christopher Hitchens have seen religion as a kind of collective psychopathology, responsible for much of what is wrong with the world. On such a view, it is often only an educated elite that can hope to escape its insidious clutches, and perhaps use it to its own advantage. But the notion is an old one, as the one-thousand-year-old sentiment of Abu’l Ala Al Ma’arri, which serves as the Introduction’s epigraph, attests. I shall have more to say about this analytical orientation to religion in chapter 1, but for now I’ll restrict myself to suggesting that we may find the Qianlong emperor’s funeral preparations to be puzzling because of such underlying assumptions about the way religion works. I shall argue that while we should give elite-instrumentalism its due measure in studying Roman religion, we must guard against its dictates as a presumption in our historical narratives of the Roman Republic. Some of our leading scholars in the study of Roman religion have begun to show the way in the last decade-and-a-half or so, but since ancient historians and classicists continue to adhere to elite-instrumentalist presuppositions, as I shall try to show in chapter 1, the model still demands our attention (though I shall primarily engage with it as a powerful interpretative tool, rather than as

\(^{5}\) Cf. Trautmann 1997: 104–105 on “the priestcraft theme, a distinctly Protestant motif.”

\(^{6}\) Polyb. 6.56.6–13.
a position in need of refutation). Elite-instrumentalism can at best provide a partial understanding of Roman elites’ religious behaviors, and new approaches to those behaviors are required to yield more nuanced, and satisfying, historical reconstructions.

The elite-instrumentalist perspective would hold that Hongli, as a highly educated, elite ruler, could not have actually believed that his Herculean efforts at tomb-building were for any other purpose than to uphold and legitimate his rule and that of his successors; that is to say, his enterprise was for living human consumption and was driven by ulterior motives. I have chosen the Qianlong emperor’s inner funerary chamber as our starting point because I think it splendidly reveals the sterility of an elite-instrumentalist understanding of such religious phenomena. If we were to insist on this approach, it seems as if Hongli’s labors would have long since reached the point of diminishing returns—especially the inscription of 30,000 Sanskrit and Tibetan words that no one was ever intended to read—even to the point of absurdity. It is one of the aims of this book to show that elite-instrumentalist aspects were of secondary importance to more vital religious motivations on the part of elites.

I answer the question with which I began—Did Roman elites believe in their gods?—affirmatively. But what is “belief”? As anthropologists have warned, “belief” is not an unproblematic, transferable, immutable, and tranhistorical activity of all peoples. If we are to use the term at all, we must concede that “belief” is rather culturally specific and within individual cultures rooted in particular personal and social contexts. As the social anthropologist Rodney Needham observed of “belief,” there is simply no basis for “the received idea that this verbal concept corresponds to a distinct and natural capacity that is shared by all human beings.” Moreover, the word “belief” is frequently used with unspoken presuppositions specific to European and Anglo-American Christian cultures. In the study of Roman religion, these presuppositions can lead to nothing but misunderstanding. For example, in contradistinction to Christianity, and aside from the fact that Roman religion was polytheistic and not monotheistic, it was not characterized by a charismatic founder, it was not eschatological, it did not know missionaries or proselytizers, it possessed no single and authoritative sacred scripture, and it did not claim a monopoly on religious truth.

We need to be clear, therefore, when we talk about “belief.” In this work, I delimit the term and understand it to be “a genuine, collective conviction on the part of governing elites that Roman success, and indeed the city’s very existence, depended on maintaining correct relations with the gods through orthopraxy, or exactlying accurate performances of religious ceremony, ritual,

8See the excellent section on “belief” in Roman culture in Feeney 1998: 12–46.
and sacrifice.” According to that definition of belief, I maintain that we can generally say that elites of the Middle Roman Republic believed in their gods. An astonishing parallel for this sort of belief at Rome is to be found in a Christian context more than half a millennium later than the period studied here. In 496 C.E., Pope Gelasius I issued a letter to Christians who supported the continuing celebration of the ancient pagan ritual of the Lupercalia. It seems that their conviction was that observance of this festival was crucially important for the well-being of the Roman community. And Pope Gelasius amazingly seems to have hedged his bets by allowing the continued practice of this pagan festival among his Christian congregation. My argument will be that such a conviction among the elite was correspondingly stronger in our period, when accumulative civic polytheism was a living religion supported by the state authorities, who were also its priests.9

Religious concerns at Rome were all-pervasive, saturating nearly every aspect of public life, in both the civilian and military spheres. Romans believed that their major priesthoods and rituals were coeval with, or in some cases even prior to, the founding of their city. Valerius Maximus stated that in the Roman state all else was secondary to religion, and Aulus Gellius, summarizing the handbook Varro wrote for the politically inexperienced Cn. Pompeius Magnus, tells us that every meeting of the Senate addressed divine matters before turning to human affairs. Cicero proclaimed that the Romans excelled all other peoples in piety and devotion to the gods. Already in the mid-second century the Greek historian Polybius remarked with some astonishment on the extraordinary attention the Romans gave to religion.10 As Livy has the early republican hero, M. Furius Camillus, say, “We have a city founded upon auspices and augury; there is no place in it which is not filled with cultic practices and the gods; the days devoted to solemn sacrifices are as fixed as the specific places where they may be performed.”11 From the earliest Republic, no official business was ever conducted at home or abroad without due religious observances. At Rome itself, public officials were responsible for the celebration of festivals and performance of rituals, carried out at state expense, and meetings of the Senate, which we think of as a political body, were preceded by sacrifice and the taking of auspices. Senators mediated religion by recognizing divine signs, accepting new state-cults, and proscribing what they perceived to be dangerous foreign religious practices and writings.12

9For elaboration of my idea of “accumulative civic polytheism,” see chapter 4, passim.

10Val. Max. 1.1.8–9; Gell. NA 14.7.9; Cic. Har. Resp. 9.19; Polyb. 6.56.6–13; cf. Posidonius ap. Ath. 6.274a; Dion. Hal. Rom. Ant. 2.19.2–3, 21.1–2, 63.1–3; Sall. BC 12.3; Sall. Jug. 14.19; Cic. NatD. 2.3.8; Cic. Div. 1.28 (constant consultation of auspices in ancient times), with references to modern scholarship assembled at Champion 2004a: 95n.80.

11Liv. 5.52.2–3.

12Cf. Scheid 1985: 51–56, for the idea of the gods themselves as citizens whose divine role was mediated through magisterial authority.
These brief remarks may already be enough to convince the reader that what should most impress us about Roman religion is not only its centrality, but also its utter strangeness; how dramatically different Roman republican religious conceptions and practices were from anything we (modern inhabitants of the secular west) might easily recognize. As Keith Hopkins once noted, “Romans were dangerously different.”\(^{13}\) The total interpenetration of religious and political authority is perhaps the most difficult aspect of Roman society for us to grasp. As the early third-century C.E. jurist Domitius Ulpianus wrote, *ius publicum* (public law) “covers religious affairs, the priesthood, and offices of state.”\(^{14}\) Livy provides striking illustrations of this intermingling. Recounting the horrors of drought and disease sometime after 430 B.C.E. and superstitions that arose at the time, he notes that the aediles—whom we regard primarily as state officials in charge of routine maintenance and the grain supply for the city of Rome itself—were commissioned to see to it that only Roman gods were worshipped in the ancestral manner. Conversely, he reports that in 449 the Pontifex Maximus, Q. Furius, held elections for plebeian tribunes in the parlous times of the deposition of the decemvirs.\(^{15}\) Passages such as these urge caution and circumspection. Accordingly, although I frequently discuss the political and religious spheres in this study, I do so bearing in mind that these are our analytical categories, not those of ancient Romans.

Though from a period later than our chronological focus (it dates to the second-century C.E.), an example from Ostia, Rome’s first harbor town (founded according to legend by Rome’s fourth king, Ancus Marcius), well illustrates the confluence of religious and political authority in Roman culture. For this later period, we can chart with great specificity the overlapping of religious and political responsibilities in the public careers of local Ostian grandees. In Rome’s port city, aspiring politicians coveted official priesthoods, with the cult of Vulcan holding pride of place in the public religious organization. The chief priest of Vulcan’s cult, the *pontifex Volcani*, possessed status and honor, albeit on a humbler stage, analogous to what the Pontifex Maximus enjoyed at Rome.\(^{16}\) Both the Ostian pontificate of Vulcan and the
chief priesthood at Rome, unlike the regular elective magistracies, were held for life, and at Ostia praetors and aediles attended upon the cult of the Italian god of fire. Two Ostian careers in the Julio-Claudian period are particularly noteworthy as examples of the conflation of religious authority and political power in Roman society: P. Lucilius Gamala was aedile in Vulcan’s cult, decurion by decree of his fellow decurions, pontifex Volcani, and duovir with consular authority; C. Fabius Agrippa was praetor of Vulcan’s cult, decurion co-opted by the decurions, aedile, and duovir.17

Although we can rarely trace through epigraphy the public careers of elites in the third and second centuries with the kind of detail that is possible for these second-century C.E. Ostian officials, it is clear that in earlier periods as well religious authority and political power were closely intertwined: priests and politicians were the same men.18 The replacement of the deceased pontiff C. Sempronius Tuditanus by the consul M. Claudius Marcellus in 196 B.C.E. provides an illustration of this fact, as does the career of M. Aemilius Lepidus, the Pontifex Maximus, who was elected censor in 180 and named princeps senatus in the following year, and again in 174.19 R. E. Mitchell even suggested that in the earliest Republic religious officials preceded and evolved into senators: “the first Senate contained priests . . . priests were the patres, those with automatic seats in the Senate by virtue of their priesthoods . . . initially their heirs automatically succeeded to their priesthoods and thereby to their Senate seats; and, since priests/patres held their positions for life and were caretakers of ancestral practices . . . they were the ones that gave their approval (patrum auctoritas) to those public measures found to be in keeping with traditional behavior (mos maiorum).”20 This claim is attractive, but ultimately it cannot rise above the level of conjecture, given the unreliable nature of our evidence for this early period.21 But the role of religion in the everyday public activities of senators is beyond dispute.

216 prefers “religious specialist,” but alternates between this designation and the conventional label “priest.” As I shall discuss in detail in chapter 2, religious authority was embedded in and diffused throughout political structures. On these issues, see Beard 1990: 34–48, esp. 41–47.

17 CIL xiv.375 (P. Lucilius Gamala); CIL xiv.349 (C. Fabius Agrippa), with Meiggs 1960: 177–79.

18 Explicit at Cic. Dom. 1.1, with Linke 2000; cf. Scheid 2011: 128–29, pithily stating, “le magistrat est toujours un peu prêtre, et le prêtre un peu magistrat” (“the magistrate is always a bit of a priest, and the priest a bit of a magistrate”). Julius Caesar as Pontifex Maximus is the most famous example from the Late Republic; cf. Augustus’ seven priesthoods at RG 7.3; the lists in Szemler 1972; Hahm 1963. For the earlier period, conspicuous examples are L. Caecilius Metellus, consul in 251 and 247, dictator in 224, and Pontifex Maximus until his death (MRR 1.213, 216, 231), and P. Licinius Crassus Dives, Pontifex Maximus, censor in 210 (Liv. 27.6.17), praetor-elect in 209 (Liv. 27.21.5), and consul-elect in 206 (Liv. 28.38.6–7). In 183 the flamen Dialis, C. Valerius, was elected praetor (Liv. 39.45.2). Not all coopted religious authorities, however, were senators; see, e.g., Cic. Att. 4.2.4.

19 Liv. 33.42.5 (replacement in 196); 40.45.6, 51.1; 41.27.1–3 (M. Aemilius Lepidus).


The pervasiveness of religion throughout all aspects of public life and the political elite’s monopoly of all major priesthoods and religious authority are well-established facts. No serious scholar would think to contest them. But there is a corollary idea about Roman religion according to which elites consciously manipulated traditional civic polytheism as a tool for political and social control of nonelites (who seem to have no agency of their own), while the elites themselves remained skeptical nonbelievers. This was an important aspect of earlier elite-instrumentalist interpretations of Roman religion, although these days the idea of conscious manipulation is often only assumed, implied, or of little interest. However, what Denis Feeney noted about elite-instrumentalism more than fifteen years ago is still true today, “Though this model is rapidly passing out of favor, it has a powerful inertia.”

Elite-instrumentalist presuppositions continue in subtle guises to inform work in Roman history and civilization, and even recent work of experts in the field of Roman religion, which has led us away from this model, does not approach the question of elite belief in the manner undertaken here. This is a book by a historian of Greek and Roman antiquity looking not only at religious structures, institutions, and conceptions at Rome, but also at discrete individuals and events involving elite religious practices. In attempting to understand these individuals and events, and trying to cut through the residual mists of elite-instrumentalism, it seems that we must battle against an entrenched, and perhaps mostly unconscious, intellectual conditioning, eloquently stated by Peter Brown in his study, *The Cult of the Saints*. “Such models [of a sharp division between elite and popular religion] have entered the cultural bloodstream. . . . Plainly, some solid and seemingly unmovable cultural furniture has piled up somewhere in that capacious lumber room, the back of our mind.” This book is the result of an effort to shift some of that “unmovable cultural furniture” regarding the study of Roman republican religion. With a focus primarily on the period from the second quarter of the third century to the late-second century, it seeks to understand elites’ religious experiences based on their actual religious behaviors, offering a reconstruction that is more consistent with our historical evidence and far more nuanced than what any form of the elite-instrumentalist interpretation can provide.

Scholars have had a difficult time shaking off the spell of elite-instrumentalism. Sometimes their adherence to the model results in contradictory statements. For example, in a recent history of ancient Carthage, we read that religion at Carthage was “a vital tool for elite political control.”

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22Feeney 1998: 3.
23Scholars today tend to focus on system and structure rather than on individual historical agents, thus side-stepping to some degree the question as to whether elites consciously manipulated religion as a means for political and social control.
but several pages later we encounter the statement that “children who were offered up for sacrifice were mostly the offspring of the elite.” 25 Something has gone awry here. How are we to explain adherence to a model that flies in the face of historical evidence? We have already mentioned a few possible historical influences on this state of affairs. A corollary assumption of elite-instrumentalism posits that elites do not themselves seriously subscribe to the religious rules and prescriptions they promulgate for nonelites’ consumption. On this view, Greek and Roman elites, à la Polybius, must have been cool-headed, incredulous rationalists who consciously created and manipulated religious symbols and rituals to control the impulsive and irrational desires of the multitude for the good of the commonwealth. With such an underlying presumption, the defenders of the “ancients” in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century “Battle of the Books,” or querelle des Anciens et des Modernes, and the so-called Founding Fathers of the American republic, steeped in classical learning and using Greek and Latin texts as models for emulation, could see ancient Greek and Roman elites as kindred spirits. 26 In turn this presumption would have been founded on the idea that ancients were of the same mentality as themselves. There were certainly some objections to that notion, going back at least as far as Giambattista Vico and Friedrich A. Wolf, but on the long view they did little to shake the idea for European and American intellectuals in the early modern period that ancient Greek and Roman elites were like themselves. 27

In the twentieth century, weighty scholarly authority also contributed to elite-instrumentalism and its corollary ideas. Several important thinkers in the first half of that century directed scholarly attention to elites and their ways and means of imposing controls in order to maintain and bolster their position atop political and social hierarchies. The American political scientist Harold Lasswell and the Italian theoretical sociologists Gaetano Mosca and Vilfredo Pareto provided blueprints for elitist interpretations of human history. 28 In this tradition, in his study of political parties in modern western democracies, Robert Michels coined the notorious phrase “The Iron Law of Oligarchy.” 29 Concerning the study of Roman history, perhaps the most famous book ever written in the field (at least among Anglophone scholars), Ronald Syme’s The Roman Revolution, is an outstanding example of nearly exclusive focus on elites and their maintenance of power. In that work, Syme issued the often quoted maxim, “In all ages, whatever the form and name

25 Miles 2011: 68, 73.
27 On Wolf, see Grafton, Most, and Zetzel 1985; on Vico, see Levine 1991b.
28 In conceptualizing elites and elite cultures, I have greatly benefited from Bottomore 1993.
29 Michels (1915) 1949.
of government, be it monarchy, republic, or democracy, an oligarchy lurks behind the façade; and Roman history, Republican or Imperial, is the history of the governing class.” Beyond the Anglophone scholarly universe, the German scholars Friedrich Münzer and Matthias Gelzer also subscribed to a type of history focusing almost exclusively on elites.

Part and parcel of this concentration on elites has been not only a subscription to elite-instrumentalism, but also implicit agreement with the putative presumptions of the elite-instrumentalists themselves: nonelites are incapable of historical agency, they are fit to be controlled by an elite minority (with religion being only one of the devices employed for this purpose), and their history is hardly worth writing. George Rudé’s well-known book, *The Crowd in History* (1964), helped to shift attention away from elites in historical analysis, and in recent generations historians and political theorists—such as E. P. Thompson, E. J. Hobsbawm, and Natalie Zemon Davis in the study of European history, and Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Partha Chatterjee in South Asian subaltern and postcolonial studies—have made mighty contributions to recovering the history of nonelites. In Roman studies, scholars have directed our gaze away from urban power elites, and shown just how much can be done to write the history of nonelites: women, children, slaves, freedmen, the family, disabled people, merchants, shopkeepers, brothel owners, and so on—and “plebeian culture” generally.

My focus on elites may therefore seem to some readers like a retrograde step, and perhaps it is in need of defense and justification. First of all, I think that we can take the Greek historian Polybius at his word when he says that, in the aftermath of the decisive military victory over Macedonia in 168 in the battle at Pydna, Roman power was absolute throughout the entire inhabited world (that is, the “entire inhabited world” known to him), or oikoumene, a fact that was underscored by the imperious behavior of the legate C. Popillius Laenas before the Seleucid monarch Antiochus IV Epiphanes on the outskirts of Alexandria shortly after Pydna. Members of the senatorial aristocracy, as legates and commanders, were hailed as common benefactors of humankind in the Greek east during our period, and Livy provides an apt image of the senators in the scene in which he recreates the early fourth-century Gallic capture of Rome. According to him, when the Gauls entered the largely abandoned city, they found plebeian houses shut up, but the halls of the nobility wide open. The Gauls found elites confidently and serenely

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30 Syme 1939: 7; cf. 15.
31 I discuss the work of Syme, Münzer, and Gelzer in another context at the beginning of chapter 2.
33 Polyb. 3.4.1–8; Polyb. 29.27.1–13, with Gruen 1984: 659n.226; Champion 2004a: 53.
34 Polyb. 2.12.6, with Erskine 1994; Liv. 5.41.7–9.
seated in vestibules. They were dumbstruck, almost as if captivated by religious awe (*simillimos dis*).

Livy’s image is of course one of literary embellishment bordering on caricature, but it sets the right tone: in the second century many people in large parts of Europe, the Mediterranean basin, and the Near East would have viewed the senators as rulers and arbiters of the world, and as Livy imagines of the Gauls’ initial reactions to Roman *nobles*, perhaps near to gods. Senators and generals were in a profound sense catalysts for the development of Roman imperialism, and on the long view they shaped not only the history of Europe, but that of the world. The study of elites in the Middle Republic, the period of ancient Rome’s rise to Mediterranean-wide hegemony, especially in an area where there may linger a centuries-old historical distortion, is therefore in need of no further defense and justification. While we know much about these elites, there are gaping omissions and misinterpretations that require further examination, as they affect the historical record many purport to know.

In attempting to understand religious behaviors of Roman elites, we might draw on the evidence of epigraphy, as in the case of the priesthood of the Arval Brethren, archaeological evidence for Roman burials and funerary artifacts, public art and architecture, and magical spells and curse tablets. The epigraphical evidence for the Arval Brethren, we may note in passing, is likely to strike the present-day reader in much the same way as the elaborate tomb preparations of the Chinese Qianlong emperor, Hongli. The inscriptions show a remarkable obsession with ritual detail for these elite priests’ religious practices, some of which were conducted away from public view and scrutiny. I shall draw on these kinds of nonliterary evidence in the pages that follow, but my arguments are based for the most part on literary texts. This is because my expertise lies in textual analysis rather than material evidence, but also because the latter is not a more reliable source for revealing subjective mental and emotional states. As Rodney Needham observed:

> It is a notorious matter of common experience . . . that the conventional externals of religious belief do not entail a real adherence to the doctrines that they are supposed to acknowledge. Genuflections at the altar, prostration on a prayer mat, and bloody sacrifice tell us little

35 For the senators as a council of kings, see Plut. *Pyrrh.* 19.5 (the ambassador Cineas speaking to King Pyrrhus).


37 Cf. Scheid 1990: 752, “Devant les autels, les prêtres exécutaient des enchaînements rituels avec une rigueur qui a fait sourire les observateurs modernes”; and Harris 1989: 171, “The well-known Roman uses of the written word for religious purposes, for public dedications to deities and for the transmission of arcane pontifical, augural, and other texts . . . have nothing democratic about them.”
about the internal states of those who perform these public actions. No rite shows by its performance that the participants do or do not hold a certain attitude towards—“believe”—the ideological premises of what they do. . . . Even when we are convinced that a person genuinely believes what he says he believes, our conviction is not based on objective evidence of a distinct inner state.38

At the outset I would like to make some observations about the literary texts upon which my arguments are built. What are we to make of statements about religious practices and ritual performances embedded in such literary texts, in contexts in which there is absolutely nothing to suggest tongue-in-cheek foolery, disingenuousness, sarcasm, or incredulity as part of the authorial intention? For an example, in his work *On Agriculture*, written around the year 160, the elder Cato prescribes a magical remedy for sprains and fractures. It entails taking a green reed four or five feet in length, splitting it in half down the middle, and having two men hold it against the hips. Then the sufferer must chant, *motas vaeta daries dardares astataries dissunapiter*. These words cannot be translated because they have no syntactical relationship or propositional content. After chanting, a knife must be brandished above the reeds, and when they touch one another, they must be grasped and cut with the knife on the right and left. The pieces of reed are then to be applied to the injured site, and healing will take place. In any event, chanting must be kept up every day, and in case of dislocation, another nonsensical collocation of words may be uttered, *huat haut istasis tarsis ardannabou dannastra*.39 To take another example, the agricultural writer Columella prescribes a Dardanian magical practice against certain plant parasites: leading a bare-footed, bare-breasted menstruating virgin three times around the garden plot.40 What was the intended audience for such agricultural magical prescriptions? The conclusion is inescapable: Cato, Columella, and other agricultural writers were writing for elite, literate minorities, who must have taken their ritual prescriptions and sacrificial injunctions seriously.41

38Needham 1972: 100–101; cf. Bell 1992: 182–96; Bendlin 2001; Rüpke 2007: 68. Of course, of the types of nonliterary evidence mentioned in the text, the inscriptions of the Arval Brethren, which describe elites’ religious practices not performed in public settings, and many curse tablets and binding spells, by their very find spots, demonstrate religious behaviors that would be difficult to explain in elite-instrumentalist terms. For an overview of ritual in the ancient Mediterranean context, see Bremmer 2007.


40Columella, *Agr.* 10.357–63; cf. 11.3.64, for Democritus’ prescription of having a menstruating woman with hair disheveled and feet bare walk three times around herb beds in order to kill vermin.

41I have learned a great deal about the sociology of reading in Greek and Roman antiquity from Johnson 2000 and Johnson and Parker 2009.
I have one final point to make about the literary texts I employ, which is perhaps obligatory in the wake of the challenges to doing history posed by Jacques Derrida and the poststructuralists, by the “linguistic turn” in historical studies, and more specifically by theorists of history and historiography, such as Hayden White and Dominick LaCapra. I hope it will not be too reductionist and distorting to characterize this work briefly by saying that in general it enjoins us to pay attention almost exclusively to historical writings in terms of their own narrative structures, logics, and rhetorical agenda, and that to use them as material for reconstructing past events, not to mention historical agents’ motivations and behaviors, is naïve and misguided. I have learned a great deal from literary critics’ historiographical analyses and narratological investigations, which have enriched my understanding and informed the way I go about my work. Indeed, I have tried for a number of years to foster appreciation for the neglected literary qualities and narrative techniques of the Greek historian Polybius, who has often been used as little more than a source for historical reconstruction, and who has been neglected as a writer in his own right. I nevertheless proceed with the assumption that I can use literary texts, primarily the historical writings of Polybius and Livy, in order to address problems posed in this book. This may invite criticism that I am practicing an outmoded, “positivistic” brand of history, but when Polybius writes about the disaster at Cannae and the effects this had at Rome and in the Senate, or when Livy relays the extraordinary religious measures undertaken by the authorities in response to the military disaster at Trasimene, I can see no reason not to take them at their word. While I do not discount the need for the historian of ancient Rome to appreciate possible historical distortions caused by literary embellishments on the part of ancient Greek and Roman historians, the importance of generic conventions in the ways they went about their task, and the chasm that separates ancient and present-day historiographical conceptions, I subscribe in this book to the approach Albert Einstein once suggested for understanding his own colleagues: “If you want to find out anything from the theoretical physicists about the methods they use, I advise you to stick closely to one principle: Don’t listen to their words, fix your attention on their deeds.” With all due circumspection, I have tried to use ancient literary texts in such a manner.

Chapter 1 begins by examining the origins of elite-instrumentalist interpretations of Roman religion in Greek and Roman writers, and considers how it persists in recent scholarship, despite efforts of experts in Roman religion to lead us in new directions. It also lays out definitions, parameters,

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42 For an exemplary study of how this can be done for Polybius, see Davidson 1991. See Champion 2004a, with references to earlier studies, to which add Champion 2007b and Champion 2013.
43 For discussion and sources, see chapter 4, section 2. On the dangers of “historical realism,” see Otto, Rau, and Rüpke 2015: 1–18, esp. 4.
44 Einstein (1949) 1956: 30.
Introduction

and theoretical/methodological underpinnings for chapters that follow. Chapter 2 studies domestic politics and religion in Rome itself, examining structures and interrelationships of the priesthoods among themselves and in relation to the Senate, political/religious disputes conducted in public political arenas, the role of the populus Romanus in these controversies, the proportion of the total citizen population that could have participated in enactments of the state religion, and the extent to which religious institutions served the personal physical and spiritual needs of the populace. Chapter 3 examines the harsh international environment in which the Republic existed, the terrifying exigencies of ancient warfare, the extraordinarily stressful independent decision-making responsibilities of generals on military campaign, and the punctiliously observed prescriptions of religious ritual in battlefield contexts. This chapter also further considers the city of Rome itself in times of military crisis and peril. Chapter 4 bridges the domestic and foreign spheres, taking up questions of traditional, ancestral gods and religious practices and the acceptance or rejection of new foreign deities and rituals. It finds an inconsistency in the reception of new state cults, sporadic attempts to expel “foreign elements,” an inability to police religious practices in any effective and sustained manner, and evidence for an independent nonelite religious culture (a theme introduced in chapter 2, and reprised in chapter 5). The discussions in Chapters 1–4 are all presented with an eye to demonstrating the need for complementary approaches to elite-instrumentalism. Chapter 5 sketches outlines of some theoretical positions and methodologies, which promise more satisfying historical reconstructions of the religious life of republican elites.

I emphasize two points at the outset. First is a word about exposition. In this Introduction and in chapter 1, I lay out what I consider to be essentials of the argument, but in the interests of clarity and organizational efficiency I have not given advance notice and preliminary signposts for every twist and turn, every nuance, every elaboration and development of those arguments. It is an artistic decision, I suppose, and one that will perhaps not be to every reader’s liking, but I do so because in my view the force of many of the arguments is best served by allowing them to appear for the first time at the points where the large narrative trajectory calls for them. Second, I wish to stress that I am not suggesting that elite-instrumentalism is without some validity in studying Roman elites’ religious behaviors. Elite-instrumentalism and the alternative approaches I suggest are not mutually exclusive. It is rather a matter of degree and emphasis. The goal here is to give elite-instrumentalism its proper proportion, not to obliterate it entirely. With these preliminary remarks out of the way, the first tasks are now to show that elite-instrumentalist readings of elites’ religious practices arose in Greek and Roman antiquity, and more important, to demonstrate that even some of the most recent scholarship exhibits elite-instrumentalist presuppositions. But that fact alone
does not exhaust the reasons for writing a book like this. Elite instrumentalism can serve as a useful and illuminating counterpoint for developing new approaches to understanding Roman elites’ religious practices. Surprisingly, the hold of this outdated model on present-day scholars has been tenacious, and even more unexpectedly, the model gains a new lease on life as a powerful hermeneutical tool. It is “good to think with.”