

## A Journey in Pictures through Roman Religion

By Ursula Kampmann, © MoneyMuseum

What is god? As far as the Romans are concerned we think we know that all too well from our unloved Latin lessons: Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, the Roman Triad as well as the usual gods of the ancient world, the same as the Greek gods in name and effect. In fact, however, the roots of Roman religion lie much earlier, much deeper, in dark, prehistoric times ...

## How is god experienced? – In the way nature works



**A bust of the goddess Flora (= flowering), behind it blossom. A denarius of the Roman mint master C. Clodius Vestalis, 41 BC**

Roman religion emerged from the magical world of the simple farmer, who was speechless when faced with the miracles of nature. Who gave the seemingly withered trees new blossom after the winter? Which power made the grain of corn in the earth grow up to produce new grain every year? Which god prevented the black rust and ensured that the weather was fine just in time for the harvest? Who guaranteed safe storage? And which power was responsible for making it possible to divide up the corn so that it sufficed until the following year?

Each individual procedure in a farmer's life was broken down into many small constituent parts whose success was influenced by a divine power. This divine power had to be invoked by a magic ritual in order to grant its help for the action.

Thus as late as the imperial period, i.e. in the 1st century BC, to ensure the corn thrived prayers were said not only to a grain goddess, but to the guardian of the first ploughing, the guardian of the second ploughing, to the guardian of cutting the furrows, to the guardian of sowing, of the third ploughing, of hoeing, of weeding, of digging the earth, of reaping, of bringing in the harvest, of storing and distributing it. And in the end all this work could be endangered if only one single operation was not favoured by the protective power.

## How is god experienced? – In the human area



**The goddess Spes (= hope) walking to the left, on her stretched out right hand holding a blossoming flower. A sesterce of the Roman emperor Trajan (98-117 AD), 103-111 AD**

Not only in nature were divine powers at work. They were also present in the way people lived together. All virtues which held a community together, which advanced it, were dispensed by female deities\*. Spes gave people hope, even in a menacing situation. Concordia was responsible for harmony in the community, and Pudicitia endowed the housewife with reticence.

The dispensers of virtues also had to be induced in religious rituals to bestow their gifts on the Romans. Their veneration is evidenced by innumerable depictions of the so-called personifications on the reverse of Roman coins.

\* Our simplified understanding of Roman personifications is based on an error of the Renaissance, which used the Roman symbolic language without understanding the religious undertones of the depictions. Thus Justitia, the divine power that gave just conduct, became symbolic of a ruler's virtue, which was arbitrarily combined with other symbolic figures to create allegories.

## Janus – the god of going in and going out



**The head of Janus, bearded, with a laurel wreath. An as by the Roman mint master L. Piso Frugi, 90 BC**

Janus is a typical god of the Romans. He guarded doorways, which for a Roman farmer were the part of his house at the greatest risk. It was through the door that the dangers of the outside world could force their way into the secure idyll of his living room. So whenever the door was closed Janus Clusivius had to be invoked in a magic procedure to prevent enemies breaking into the house. And another ritual had to be performed to induce Janus Patulcius to protect anyone while crossing into the hostile world outside.

For this reason Janus is depicted with two faces – he looks outwards as Janus Clusivius and looks inwards as Janus Patulcius, which is why Janus additionally became the guardian of the threshold. January, the first month in the year, was named after him.

## The state takes over the most important cults



### The Temple of Janus. An as of the Roman emperor Nero (54-68 AD), around 65 AD

The individual farmer may have found it difficult always to bear in mind all the gods that were responsible for making an action successful. How easy it was for him to forget to invoke Janus Clusivius when he left his house to go to war for Rome as a soldier. And how great was the danger that his personal mistake could turn out to be fateful for the whole of Rome.

So in the course of Rome's early history the state assumed responsibility for all the gods that were decisive for the well-being of the whole city. Rome was provided with, for example, a cult "front door" for the entire city. When the Roman army went to war, the risk was far too great that a single soldier might lose the help of Janus Patulcius if he had performed the rituals without the necessary care demanded by the god for its help. So they were performed by the state on behalf of the whole army at the Temple of Janus. This temple was nothing but a large entrance and exit, which was closed after the army's return, accompanied by the necessary rituals for Janus Clusivius to prevent enemies entering Rome.

## The cult of Vesta



**Left: A bust of Vesta, veiled. Right: The Temple of Vesta, with Sella Curulis inside it, to the left an urn, on the right voting tablets. A denarius of the Roman mint master Q. Cassius Longinus, 55 AD**

Whereas the Temple of Janus was Rome's common front door, in the Temple of Vesta the hearth of the whole city was to be found. In a farmer's household fire was also the central point of numerous magic rituals to ensure that it burnt perpetually without its all-consuming force destroying the whole house. Now the state assumed this task. Like the housewife in earlier times, now the Vestal Virgins looked after the fire. This responsibility goes far back into prehistoric times when there was a lack of an easy source of fire. (The ritual of extinguishing and relighting the fire on 1st March originated from this time. The new fire was kindled by rubbing together two pieces of wood.)

Just as the hearth fire in the temple was Rome's cooking fire on a much larger scale, so the Vestal Virgins were, so to speak, the embodiment of the Roman housewife. They represented all the city's sailors; their virtue guaranteed the goodwill of the gods, just as the housewife's virtue could invoke the protection of the gods for their home. This is why the Vestal Virgins had to be prevented by the state from abandoning their virtue. Our coin shows a procedure in which a Vestal Virgin was condemned to be buried alive for violating the vow of chastity.

## The treasures of the Temple of Vesta



**Aeneas rescuing the Palladium from burning Troy, carrying on his back his old father, Anchises. A denarius of the Roman emperor G. Julius Caesar, minted in Africa, 47-46 BC**

Just as the farmer's wife was in charge of the storehouse in which the supplies were kept for the entire family, so the Vestal Virgins cared for the whole city's cult storerooms in which everything was kept that was important for Rome's religious life. There, for example, the Penates, statues of small gods, could be found which ensured that the whole of Rome had enough to eat. Such statues also stood in every private storehouse in Rome.

The best-known treasure that was kept in the Temple of Vesta is the Palladium, that statuette of Athena/Minerva that Aeneas had rescued from burning Troy and which guaranteed Rome's well-being.

## The priesthood



**Utensils used in Roman cult: ladle, axe and apex (head-dress of the member of a priests' college). A denarius of the Roman emperor G. Julius Caesar, minted in Gaul, 49-48 BC**

The Roman state had assumed, on behalf of its citizens, the task of performing all the magic rituals which guaranteed for Rome the protection of the gods. In order to fulfil this task the popular assembly elected worthy men from its ranks to be priests. The procedures for electing state officials and priests were very similar, and the circle of those from whom the candidates were taken were also largely identical. To become a priest was not a matter of personal conviction, but a political honour which counted all the more in that, unlike an office, it was valid for life. Caesar's first great step up the ladder of his political career was to be elected pontifex maximus, the head of the city's entire religious life.

For a Roman priest it was not necessary to believe in the powers which he venerated in the liturgies. What remained decisive to enjoy the protection of the gods was that all ceremonies were performed as they had once been instituted many ages before.

## Numa Pompilius – the founder of the ceremonies



**Numa Pompilius standing before a burning altar, while a helper brings a sacrificial goat. A denarius of the Roman mint master L. Pomponius Molo, 97 BC**

The Romans regarded their mythical king, Numa Pompilius, as the founder of their oldest religious ceremonies. The Romans believed that he had been chosen to be the second king of Rome after the death of Romulus. According to tradition, Numa Pompilius came from the Sabines, a neighbouring people, to whom an especially close association with the gods was attributed. He was believed to have introduced the calendar, which formed the basis of daily life through its division into days that were protected and not protected by the gods (fas and nefas). Numa Pompilius is supposed to have distributed the religious tasks to the most important colleges of priests. He was also attributed with building Rome's oldest temples, the temples of Janus and Vesta, and the introduction of the oldest games in Rome in honour of the god Quirinus, who was later identified with Mars.

## The gods cling to the rituals



**The two emperors sacrificing at a burning altar, behind them a flute player. A sesterce of the Roman co-emperor Geta (209-211 AD), 211 AD**

Roman faith had magic features. It was only possible to make the divine powers provide help if the rites needed for this were performed correctly in every detail. Even leaving out a meaningless phrase in the prayer or the loud squeak of a mouse could make a whole sacrifice ineffective.

In order to prevent the gods from noticing such a mistake in the ritual a flautist played as loudly as he could to drown out any inappropriate background noise.

## The gods only react when they are called by the right name



**Left: Jupiter Capitolinus. A denarius of the Roman mint master Petillius Capitolinus, 43 BC. Centre: Jupiter Tonans. A denarius of the Roman emperor Augustus (31 BC-14 AD), minted in Spain, 19-18 BC. Right: Jupiter Custos. A denarius of the Roman emperor Vespasian (69-79 AD), 75-79 AD**

Just as the Roman gods insisted on the precise performance of the ritual to which they were entitled, so they also wanted to be called by the right name. For requests that affected the entire Roman state Jupiter Capitolinus, the great god who dwelt on the Capitol, was responsible.

Augustus had a temple built to Jupiter Tonans, the thunderer, because he had once spared him in a thunder storm and killed a sedan bearer with his lightning. Jupiter Custos was called on when the Roman state was to be protected and Jupiter Stator brought a fleeing army to a standstill.

## Vows made to Jupiter for the good of the state



**Wreath, in which is written: "VOT / XX / MVLT / XXX." A silqua of the Roman emperor Constantius II (337-361 AD), minted in Constantinople, 346-347 AD**

The safest way of ensuring the help of the gods was the vow. A solemn promise was made to a certain deity that a sacrifice would be performed if the god granted a request. Once the help was forthcoming the worshiper fulfilled his obligation.

Such a vow for guarding the safety of Rome was taken every year by the consuls on behalf of the state. Later the emperors promised to make a sacrifice to the gods at every jubilee of the government if they celebrated the next jubilee as emperor. Thus in the Roman imperial period a great festival took place every five years at which the last vow was fulfilled and at the same time the next was taken.

## Vows made to Jupiter for victory



### **The triumphator entering the city. An as of the Roman emperor Macrinus (217-218 AD), 218 AD**

Before every military campaign a vow was also taken to Jupiter to receive his help in the fight. When victory had been achieved the general who had been responsible for waging the war had the pleasant duty of fulfilling the vow and making a sacrifice to Jupiter. Part of the sacrifice was the ceremonious entry into the Capitol, which we know today as a triumphal procession.

The general, dressed like the ancient statue of Jupiter Capitolinus, would ride into the city on a chariot wearing an embroidered toga, his face coloured red. He was accompanied by the victorious troops. Part of the booty was carried into the city on numerous chariots as a gift for Jupiter.

Since the period of the late republic many ambitious politicians had used the triumphal procession, which was actually religiously motivated, for the purpose of self-enhancement.

## The will of the gods – the bird oracle



**A pitcher and lituus, the utensils of the augurs when they consulted a bird oracle, below it the inscription "IMPER" (imperator, general), hence the victor's laurel wreath surrounding them. A denarius of the Roman mint master Q. Caecilius Metellus, 81 BC**

Even the greatest vow could not be successful if the gods were not well disposed to an undertaking. For that reason, before all important major acts of state the Romans consulted an oracle for which the augurs were responsible. According to the flight of birds it was decided whether the gods approved of a proposed action or not. No campaign, no battle, was begun without first being certain of the gods' consent. It was regarded as so important that the utensil of the augurs, the crook, became the symbol of the pope as successor to the pontifex maximus.

## The will of the gods – the Sibylline Books



**The head of the Sibyl with an ivy wreath/tripod. A denarius of the Roman mint master L. Manlius Torquatus, 65 BC**

In religious matters the Romans consulted the so-called Sibylline Books, a collection of prophecies. It was used to justify the introduction of new gods and festivals.

These scrolls were traditionally offered for sale by the prophetess Sibyl herself to the mythical king, Tarquinius Superbus. The first time, he refused to buy the nine scrolls for the exorbitant price the old woman demanded for them. But the Sibyl returned next day, this time with only six scrolls, for which she wanted the same sum. She had burnt the other three. When she came back on the third day with only three scrolls, Tarquinius Superbus considered the offer and bought them for the price for which he would have received all nine scrolls on the first day.

## New gods are admitted into the Roman pantheon



**Asklepios/Aesculapius with a snake stick standing facing. A denarius of the Roman emperor Caracalla (198-217 AD), 215 AD**

In extreme emergencies it was ascertained with the help of the Sibylline Books which cult should be transferred to Rome to obtain the aid of the deity honoured in it. In 293 BC Asklepius from Epidaurus, for example, was brought to Rome to provide aid during a widespread plague. The priests of Epidaurus had given the Roman envoys one of his snakes as a symbol of the living god. It is supposed to have escaped from its basket in the Tiber in some inexplicable way and swum to an island, where a sanctuary was erected to the god Aesculapius, who had indicated in this way where it wanted to live.

## A Roman god is not the same as a Greek god



**Mars, the war-god, in full armour storming into battle. An aureus of the Roman emperor Hostilian (251 AD)**

Even if the Roman poets had used the names of Greek gods synonymously with those of the Roman ones at the latest since the middle of the last century BC, the corresponding gods cannot be equated. This can be seen especially clearly in the case of the god Ares/Mars. Whereas the Greek Ares represented the experience that the normal family father has when he becomes a fighting machine, blind with rage, in the line of battle, and which the Greeks regarded with great mistrust, the Roman Mars corresponded to Quirinus and was thus first and foremost a protector of his own country by force of arms. In Rome therefore this god was highly respected and one of the oldest cults was devoted to him.

## Ancestral worship



**A portrait of C. Servilius Ahala, magister equitum, 439 BC. A denarius of the Roman mint master M. Junius Brutus, 54 BC**

It is not surprising that the realistic portrait achieved sheer perfection in Roman civilisation. After all, in every house the ancestral gallery, a collection of wax masks of dead ancestors, was an essential part of the greatest shrines. The ancestors guarded over their descendants as manes and in return they were given sacrifices of food, which ensured that they would continue to exist.

At funerals the ancestors came back to life, so to speak. Actors put on the wax masks of the deceased to walk ahead of the bier and bring back to life the past of the whole family before the eyes of the onlookers. The deceased joined them, as it were, by an actor wearing the wax mask just taken from the corpse and resembling the dead person by his clothing. Thus at the funeral the deceased was present twice, firstly, in the corpse, which still connected him to human beings, and, secondly, through the actor with the wax mask in the circle of the venerated protective ancestors.

## The dead emperor



**Empress Paulina on a peacock riding into heaven. A denarius of Maximinus I Thrax (235-238 AD), 236 AD**

After their death, the emperor and empress, too, could guard the empire as tutelary deities. For this a formal decision of the senate was necessary. The prerequisite for such a senate decree was a witness who had seen the emperor on an eagle or the empress on a peacock riding into heaven. To make certain that this witness did not have to lie, an appropriate bird is said to have been placed in the funeral pyre that was set up to cremate the body of the deceased member of the imperial family.

The decision to raise an emperor to divinity or to abandon him to *damnatio memoriae* was a means available to the senate with which the rule of every emperor or empress could subsequently be acclaimed or condemned.

## The Roman form of piety



**Pietas standing before a burning altar, the veil for the sacrifice drawn over her head, strewing incense from a box over the flames with her right hand. An aureus of the Roman co-emperor Lucius Verus (161-169 AD), minted for his wife Lucilla**

Whereas for us piety tends to be a general attitude which remains locked away deep down in an individual's soul, for the Roman pietas was considered to be the most reverent performance of all that was traditional. A person with pietas practised the domestic ritual just as carefully as he accepted his duty in public life. It was "pius" to observe the ancient laws of one's ancestors and to conduct oneself according to their moral precepts. Whoever as a person displayed pietas was considered a favourite of the gods, someone who enjoyed their special protection. The same applied to the entire Roman nation. Because it – according to Cicero – exceeded all other nations in its pietas, the gods had bestowed upon it the dominion over the world.

Hand in hand with this, however, went the obligation to adhere to this pietas in order not to rouse the wrath of the gods, which could withdraw their favour at any time.

Thus religion and pietas became the basis of the Roman state.