Religious Mobility in the Roman Empire*

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ABSTRACT

The spread of religions throughout the Roman world may be explained partly as a consequence of the movements of peoples, partly in terms of the emergence of new elective cults. Understanding these processes entails exploring the kinds of contacts and exchanges established between individual worshippers, and the contexts — local and imperial — within which they took place. These developments culminated in the emergence of new cults that spilled over the boundaries of the Roman Empire to create the first global religions.

Keywords: Roman religion; migration; diaspora; oriental cults; elective cults; ethnic cults; Christianity; conversion

How exactly religions spread in the Roman Empire between Augustus and Constantine is a deceptively simple question. This article seeks to show that the question is more complex than it might seem at first sight, but also that some patterns can be discerned.[1] Obviously, many cults are newly attested all over the Empire: Jupiter Optimus Maximus, Isis, Jupiter Dolichenus, Mithras, Judaism and Christianity are just the most obvious. How these cults spread and the preconditions for religious mobility need some thought. Of course, cults do not move on their own, their movements depend on the movements of people. Take, for example, the ambassadors to Rome representing the Alexandrian Greeks in their dispute with the Alexandrian Jewish community. According to a later propagandistic Greek account, each party brought to Rome 'their own gods', the Greeks a bust of Sarapis,

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[1] Among recent works on this general topic, note especially: J. Rüpke, 'Patterns of religious change in the Roman Empire', in I. H. Henderson and G. S. Oegema (eds), *The Changing Face of Judaism, Christianity and Other Greco-Roman Religions in Antiquity* (2006), 13–33; N. Belayche, 'Les immigrés orientaux à Rome et en Campanie: fidélité aux *patria* et intégration sociale', in A. Laronde and J. Leclant (eds), *La Méditerranée d'une rive à l'autre: culture classique et cultures périphériques*, Cahiers de la Villa Kérylos 18 (2007), 243–60; *Trivium* 4 (2009). *Les 'religions orientales' dans le monde grec et romain* <http://trivium.revues.org/index3300. html>; A. Chaniotis, 'The dynamics of rituals in the Roman Empire', in O. Hekster, S. Schmidt-Hofner and Chr. Witschel (eds), *Ritual Dynamics and Religious Change in the Roman Empire* (2009), 3–29; idem, 'Megatheism: the search for the almighty god and the competition of cults', in S. Mitchell and P. Van Nuffelen (eds), *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (2010), 112–40; G. Woolf, 'The religion of the Roman diaspora', in Hekster *et al.*, op. cit., 239–52. The abbreviation *RoR* refers to M. Beard, J. North and S. Price *Religions of Rome*, 2 vols (1998).

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and the Jews presumably sacred books. The leader of the Greek embassy, Hermaïskos, was standing up valiantly against the hostile emperor Trajan, when suddenly the bust of Sarapis broke into sweat. Trajan was amazed, crowds gathered, and fled to the hilltops.[2] This fine story is emblematic of the ways that cults formed part of people's literal or metaphorical baggage.

I propose to focus on the movements of people, and the different sorts of cults that they carried with them. Approaching this topic through analysis of one particular cult, for example Isis, Mithras, Judaism, or Christianity, is common, but unsatisfactory, as it runs the risk of failing to present what is distinctive about each cult, or what is common between them. It is also traditional to analyse the pagan cults in terms of their origins, or rather their alleged origins — Rome, Asia Minor, Syria, Egypt and Persia. But distinction on the basis of 'origins' is also extremely unhelpful, as it fails to take into account the social contexts of the cults. I want to suggest that it is crucial instead to distinguish between two sorts of cults, ethnic cults and elective cults: that is between, on the one hand, cults which are part of the actual or imagined ancestral heritage of a *genos* or *ethnos*, and, on the other, cults which a person *chooses* to join.[3] In modern scholarship, the distinction between these two types of cults is mirrored in the divide between the work of Toutain, who emphasized civic (or ethnic) cults in the Latin West, and that of Cumont on 'Oriental' (or elective) religions.[4] Of course, in practice the relationship between the two ideal types of the ethnic and the elective is very complex. Some, perhaps many, cults were both ethnic and elective. They had an ethnic base, but also attracted in outsiders. Nonetheless, the overall typology is useful, and the two sorts of cults involved quite different dynamics.

I shall be exploring the patterns of interaction that often go unexplored under the heading of 'religious mobility', and exposing some of the questions left unanswered by that convenient shorthand. What are the different ways in which a religion can 'move' or 'spread'? What conditions in the Roman Empire made religious mobility more or less likely? What kind of connections (within and outside the family) promoted the spread of a new or foreign cult? Why, for example are so many different religions represented in the tiny town of Dura Europos, and comparatively few in the much bigger settlement of Pompeii? Reflection on these issues will, I hope, offer fresh insights into some of the big problems of Roman imperial religion, from the distinctions to be drawn between western and eastern religious traditions to the rise of so-called 'monotheism' and the place of Christianity within the Roman Empire and the wider geographic and symbolic world.

I shall be drawing on a wide range of sources: literary, epigraphic and archaeological. And from time to time I will explore the patterns of the spread of cults as they can be reconstructed through material that survives on and in the ground. But first a word of warning, in general, about the use of distribution maps in reconstructing religious mobility. It goes without saying that they can plot only the *surviving* or archaeologically *traceable* evidence; and we need always to ask how representative that evidence is of what there once was. Sometimes we can be misled by our traditional assumptions about

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[2] *Corpus Papyrorum Judaicarum* ii, no. 157; H. Musurillo, *Acta Alexandrinorum* (1961), 32–5, translated in *RoR* ii, 327–8. The account of what the Jews were carrying is fragmentary.

[3] The classic exploration of elective cults is A. D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (1933); cf. S. Price, 'The road to *Conversion*: the life and work of A. D. Nock', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 105 (2010), 319–39.

[4] J. Toutain, *Les cultes païens dans l'empire romain* (1907–20); F. Cumont, *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* (4th edn, 1929; 5th edn by C. Bonnet and F. Van Haeperen, 2006). Cf. C. Bonnet, 'L'empire et ses religions. Un regard actuel sur la polémique Cumont–Toutain concernant la diffusion des "religions orientales"', in H. Cancik and J. Rüpke (eds), *Die Religion des Imperium Romanum* (2009), 55–74. R. MacMullen, *Paganism in the Roman Empire* (1981), especially 94–130, explored the movement of cults; for some comments on this work, see S. Price, *JRS* 72 (1982), 194–6.

the physical form that particular cults took. We are used, for example, to thinking of the evidence for the cult of Mithras as very solid, but it has become clear that such solidity is only part of the picture. Of the seventeen sanctuaries of Mithras discovered in the north-western provinces since the Second World War, most are not marked by well-built stone architecture, or by what we think of as the conventional sculptural monuments (Mithras killing the bull, etc.). For example, at Tienen in Belgium the sanctuary, dating to the third century A.D., was conventional in its size (12.5 by 7.5 m) and in the fact that it was sunk 1.2 m below Roman ground-level, presumably to produce the effect of a 'cave', but it was not built of stone and had no stone sculpture.[5] In an age of less careful excavation it would have been missed entirely, with perhaps just a report of the chance discovery of some Mithraic 'small finds'. To put this another way, if we rely too heavily on the well-known reported remains, we may end up with a map that plots our own preconceptions of Mithraism rather than the cult itself.

I shall begin by outlining some of the key features of what I have termed ethnic cults (I), and elective cults (II) and the relationship between them. I shall then go on to discuss the local (III) and imperial (IV) contexts of those interactions, before sketching out the stages by which just a few religions came to transcend the boundaries of the Roman Empire.

I ETHNIC CULTS

To start with ethnic cults, the most important are Roman cults, too often ignored by people working on religious change in this period. The outlines are clear enough.[6] *Coloniae* of Roman citizens established for the urban poor of Rome and for veterans of the Roman army in the late Republic and early Empire included specifically Roman rites: the founding of *coloniae* echoed the foundation rituals of Rome itself, with the taking of auspices and the ploughing of a furrow around the new city, as on the relief from the *colonia* of Aquileia; *pontifices* and *augures*, modelled on the priesthoods at Rome, were found in many, perhaps all, *coloniae*; Capitolia, shrines to the Capitoline triad of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva, were common in *coloniae*, though they do not necessarily date from the time of foundation. But there was no exact blueprint, no imposition of a standard model. Instead, new *coloniae* borrowed from Rome, or from what they imagined Rome was like, sometimes very closely, in their desire to establish themselves as high-prestige mini-Romes in alien lands. Individual Roman citizens living in provincial communities other than *coloniae* might also adopt similar strategies — at Nicaea in north-west Asia Minor dedicating statues of the Capitoline triad to the local god, or in Egypt arranging for the purchase of cockerels for the festival of the Saturnalia[7] — to remind themselves, and the surrounding community, of their prestigious Roman status.

Such borrowings from Rome were rooted in the imagined past of Rome itself. An important part of Roman memories about their past was that Aeneas managed to rescue his household gods, the Penates, from the sack of Troy and brought them with him safely to Italy, establishing their cult at Lavinium, not far from where Rome was to be.[8] The large series of reliefs of the Homeric stories produced in Rome in the first century A.D., the so-called Tabulae Iliacae, includes Aeneas carrying his father Anchises with the Penates on his lap, first leaving Troy and then boarding the ship that would take them

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[5] M. Martens and G. De Boe (eds), *Roman Mithraism: The Evidence of the Small Finds* (2004).
[6] J. Scheid, 'Sanctuaires et territoire dans la Colonia Augusta Treverorum', in J.-L. Brunaux (ed.), *Les sanctuaires celtiques et leurs rapports avec le monde méditerranéen* (1991), 42–57; *RoR* i, 313–39.
[7] *RoR* ii, 336–7.
[8] cf. S. Price and P. Thonemann, *The Birth of Classical Europe* (2010), 180–1, 193.

west. The story was depicted in the Forum Augustum, from which it was picked up in the decoration of the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias. It was also well-enough known to be used on the tombstone of an Italian freedwoman, expressing the ideal of devotion between the generations. And it was even parodied in a Campanian wall-painting, with a dog-headed, ithyphallic Anchises carrying not the Penates but a dice box.[9] Not only was Rome itself founded, indirectly, by Aeneas, but important tokens of this event were visible in the living cults of the late Republic and early Empire. Such memories of the movement of cults that lay behind the foundation of Rome were built on and adapted by those creating new communities that were modelled on Rome.

At the same time as Roman cults were being recreated in the provinces, both east and west, eastern ethnic cults were being brought to the West. Here the picture is in detail extremely complicated, but at least the outlines are clear. By the time of Augustus, according to a contemporary observer, Rome itself had become the home for innumerable ethnic groups, all 'of absolute necessity worshipping their ancestral gods according to their local customs'.[10] A vivid example of this general phenomenon is provided by the sanctuary of the Palmyrene gods in Trastevere on the west side of the river Tiber.[11] The sanctuary contained dedications by immigrants from Palmyra to 'their ancestral gods'. The languages of the dedications emphasized the dedicators' eastern roots: Greek and Palmyrene were employed, as well as Latin. For example, the latest such monument from Rome depicted Aglibol and Malakbel, with a dedication in Greek and Palmyrene.[12] The dedication was to 'the ancestral gods' by a man who described himself, in the Greek version, as a Palmyrene, and who dated the offering in the Seleucid calendar used at Palmyra. The two gods were worshipped together in Palmyra, and the iconography of the gods shaking hands employed here reflects that used in the homeland, the cypress tree between them alluding to their 'sacred grove' at Palmyra.

Diaspora Jewish communities also belong in the context of ethnic cults. At Rome there were at one time or another at least ten synagogues, with a community numbering in the thousands.[13] Adherence to eastern origins is evident in both language and iconography. In the Jewish catacombs Greek was used in three-quarters of the epitaphs, and imagery was based on a specifically Jewish repertoire (including the menorah). The social dynamics underlying the diaspora differed in different parts of the Empire. In the Greek East, widespread Jewish settlements are found in the Hellenistic period, resulting from voluntary emigration by Jews, presumably for commercial reasons amongst others, much as with the Palmyrenes and many of the other ethnic groups in Rome. In the early Empire, Jews lived in the port cities of Puteoli and Ostia, again for commercial reasons. But in Rome the Jewish diaspora was probably largely the result of Roman enslavement of Jews in Judaea, from the time of Pompey onwards. For example, one of the synagogues in Rome was named after a Volumnius, probably the procurator of Syria under Augustus, and the community may originally have consisted of the family's slaves and freedmen. In the middle of the first century A.D. a well-informed Alexandrian Jew,

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[9] P. Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus* (1988), 209, fig. 162.
[10] Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 2.19.3. He notes with surprise that none of these foreign cults had been taken over by the Roman state.
[11] *RoR* i, 272; E. E. Schneider, 'Il santuario di Bel e delle divinità di Palmira. Comunità e tradizioni religiose dei Palmireni a Roma', *Dialoghi di Archeologia*, 3rd ser. 5.1 (1987), 69–85; F. Chausson, '*Vel Iovi vel Soli*. Quatres études autour de la Vigna Barberini (191–354)', *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome. Antiquité* 107 (1995), 661–765; S. Ensoli, 'Communautés et cultes syriens à Rome: les sanctuaires de la regio XIV Transtiberim', in J. Charles-Gaffiot, H. Lavagne and J.-M. Hofman (eds), *Moi, Zénobie reine de Palmyre* (2001), 123–8, unfortunately without knowledge of Chausson.
[12] *Inscriptiones Graecae Urbis Romae* 119 (A.D. 236). Cf. T. Kaizer, *The Religious Life of Palmyra: A Study of the Social Patterns of Worship in the Roman Period* (2002), 124–43.
[13] E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, rev. edn by G. Vermes, F. Millar and M. Goodman, 3 vols (1973–87), iii.1, 73–82, 95–102.

Philo, believed that most of the Jewish population of Rome under Augustus consisted of freedmen, brought to Italy as war captives and set free by their owners, without having been forced to alter any of their ancestral customs.[14] The suppression of the major revolts in Judaea in A.D. 70 and 135 resulted in tens of thousands more Jews being sold into slavery, some of whom were brought to the West. This may account for the Jewish community in Carthage, not attested before the second century A.D.[15]

The Palmyrenes and the Jews exemplify a general pattern of continued devotion to their ancestral cults by those from the eastern half of the Roman Empire.[16] Examples abound of this devotion on the part of people from Greece, Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt. The reasons for migration were very varied — for economic reasons, because of enrolment in the Roman army, or because of enslavement — but the key point, not always sufficiently emphasized, is that evidence for the movement of religions must be set in a socio-political context.

The actual distribution patterns of these mobile cults varied, depending on the specific reasons for migration — eastern traders did not always go to the same places as Roman soldiers — but the principles of transmission were the same. For cults of soldiers, we are fortunate to have a fairly good grip on the movements of groups of legionary soldiers from one posting to another, postings sometimes involving moves of thousands of miles. In the case of auxiliary cohorts we know from their names where the cohort was levied, and so how far a particular group of soldiers moved.

The situation is more murky with the movements of civilians. At least in the major cities, there were regulations about rights of residence and there were the means to enforce those regulations,[17] but it is also clear that there was a huge amount of movement of people within the Roman Empire, with individuals flowing fairly freely, and goods simply liable to local and Roman taxes. This can all look very random, but of course the movements of people are not random, just extremely complicated to picture, especially on the basis of surviving scraps of evidence. So we might note the man who is probably a Syrian trader at Lyon, whose tombstone noted him 'bringing to the Celts and the land of the West all that God has fixed to be born by the land of the East, fertile in all products'.[18] In addition to such individual items, there is the varied evidence for common routes for the transmission of material goods.[19] Long ago, Cumont realized the importance of trade routes but, at the time he was writing, scholars accepted the dominance of 'Oriental' centres of production and exchange. Of course those centres were important (witness our Syrian trader at Lyon), but today we can no longer accept 'Oriental' economic dominance. Instead, the modern picture is of a much more multi-centred economic world, with North Africa and Spain also having major centres of production of goods such as grain, wine, olive oil and fish sauce. This new picture no longer

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[14] *Legatio* 155.

[15] J. B. Rives, *Religion and Authority in Roman Carthage from Augustus to Constantine* (1995), 214–23. Elsewhere in the Latin West some Jewish communities have been surmised before the fourth century A.D., but are not directly attested.

[16] Belayche, op. cit. (n. 1); cf. P. Martzavou, *Recherches sur les communautés festives dans la «vieille Grèce» [IIe siècle a.C.–IIIe siècle p. C.]. Contribution à l'étude du contexte historique et sociologique des cultes dans la Grèce ancienne*, École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris: Ph. D. (2008), ch. 3, on migrants taking cult of Zeus Hypsistos from Mysia to Macedonia.

[17] C. Moatti, 'Le contrôle des gens de passage à Rome aux trois premiers siècles de notre ère', in C. Moatti and W. Kaiser (eds), *Gens de passage en Méditerranée de l'Antiquité à l'époque moderne: procédures de contrôle et d'identification* (2007), 79–116.

[18] C. P. Jones, 'L'inscription grecque de Saint-Juste', in *Les Martyrs de Lyon* (1978), 119–27; *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 32 (1982), 1079. These authors argue against the idea that the man was a Christian missionary, but note the doubts of J. and L. Robert, 'Bulletin épigraphique', *Revue des Études Grecques* (1984), no. 532.

[19] See, for example, the map in P. Arnaud, *Les Routes de la navigation antique: itinéraires en Méditerranée* (2005), 10.

provides the neat fit that Cumont saw between trade centres and the spread of 'Oriental' cults to Italy and the West. In other words, some, but only some of the mobile traders worshipped their ancestral cults in their new homes.

In particular, the striking absence of western Mediterranean cults in Italy and the Greek East requires explanation. People moved east from Spain or Gaul, but did not obviously take their local ancestral cults with them. The explanation lies in the nature of changes to the religious systems of the Latin West under Roman rule. As a broad generalization, local pre-Roman cults were transformed with the coming of Rome.[20] The processes of transformation are not easy to plot, because in most cases the local deities become visible to us only under Roman rule, with the greatly increased use of writing on durable surfaces, and iconographic representations on stone. Changes in the nomenclature of the gods are the most obvious point, from Trumusiatis or Tribusiatis to Apollo, or from Mullo to Mars Mullo. Such changes were not merely cosmetic. To call a god not Trumusiatis but Apollo, or not Mullo but Mars Mullo, was to subordinate the local god to the broader Roman pantheon. Such subordination explains the general invisibility of western gods elsewhere in the Empire. Admittedly, soldiers recruited from the Tungri, a tribe living just west of the river Maas in Gallia Belgica, very occasionally made dedications in Britain to their unRomanized local deities (Ricagambeda, Viradecthis, etc.),[21] but such dedications were rare. The more normal pattern is represented by a dedication in Rome by two members of the Praetorian Guard to 'the holy, ancestral gods'.[22] The pair specified their origins (as did other praetorians making similar dedications) as coming from another tribe in Gallia Belgica, in the upper Somme basin, so one might expect that their gods would be local ones, but the long list of their ancestral gods reads as follows: Iupiter Optimus Maximus, (Sol) Invictus, Apollo, Mercury, Diana, Hercules and Mars, all utterly unremarkable in Rome at this time. That this pair of soldiers was completely invested in the transformation of their local religious system illuminates why local western gods almost never formed part of the baggage of migrants from their homelands.[23] Thus those Treveri who made dedications outside their homeland never made them to Lenus Mars, their principal deity.[24] However, if the deities ceased to be purely local and became instead regional or ethnic in a broader sense, then they were more obviously acceptable and mobile, as for example with the dedications in Britain to the Italian, German, Gallic and British Matronae, and to the African, Italian and Gallic Matres.[25]

In the case of ethnic cults from the East, the routes of transmission can in some cases be plotted. Take, for example, cults of Isis in the West. As Bricault's excellent map shows, most of the cults lie on or close to the Mediterranean coast.[26] The cults were brought here by merchants from the eastern Mediterranean. For example, in the Spanish

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[20] *RoR* i, 316–17, 344–7; ii, 54–6; T. Derks, *Gods, Temples and Ritual Practices. The Transformation of Religious Ideas and Values in Roman Gaul* (1998); W. Van Andringa, 'Nouvelles combinaisons, nouveaux statuts: les dieux indigènes dans les panthéons des cités de Gaule romaine', in D. Paunier (ed.), *La Romanisation et la question de l'héritage celtique* (2006), 219–32, translated in J. North and S. Price (eds), *The Religious History of the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (2011), 109–38.
[21] *Roman Inscriptions of Britain* 2107–8. Cf. E. Birley, 'The deities of Roman Britain', *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* ii.18.1 (1986), 3–112, at 74–7.
[22] *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* VI, 32550 (mid-third century A.D.).
[23] The obvious exception is Epona. Her cult originated in central and northern Gaul, but was spread in the second century A.D. throughout the Rhine-Danube provinces, partly by soldiers, especially *beneficiarii*, and partly by those involved in commercial transport (M. Euskirchen, 'Epona', *Bericht der Römisch-Germanischen Kommission* 74 (1993), 607–838).
[24] J. Krier, *Die Treverer ausserhalb ihrer Civitas: Mobilität und Aufstieg* (1981), 205; however, they did make dedications to Mars Loucetius. I owe this reference to Professor Van Andringa.
[25] *Roman Inscriptions of Britain* 88 and 653. M. Henig, *Religion in Roman Britain* (1984), 48–9, notes the highly Romanized contexts of dedications to Matres in Britain.
[26] L. Bricault, *Atlas de diffusion des cultes isiaques (IVe s. av. J.-C.–IVe s. apr. J.-C.)* (2001), Map 40.

provinces the earliest cult, probably at Emporiae (modern Ampurias), was founded in the first century B.C. by a family from Alexandria, who had business interests at Emporiae.[27] In Gaul we cannot be so specific, but the pattern is clear.[28] The cults, dating mostly to the second century A.D., were found mainly near the Mediterranean coast, and it is here alone that we find organized priesthoods and religious associations. Cults were also taken inland up river routes, especially the Rhône, presumably by eastern traders. But there are large blank areas on the map. The cults were not taken further, to inland Iberia, Gaul or Britain. Contrary to impressions given by some studies, cults of eastern origin were not ubiquitous.[29]

II ELECTIVE CULTS

The spread of entirely elective cults was also dependent on people moving, but these cults were more complicated in that they required the creation of new worshipping groups. Take Mithraism as an example. At Aosta our only evidence of the cult is a dedication to Mithras by a *circitor*, a travelling customs officer, belonging to the Gallic customs region, the Quadragesima Galliarum, which extended from the Rhine to the Alps.[30] As he may have been on the move, he could make a dedication, but was hardly in a position to found a new cult group at Aosta. But other movers did have that opportunity. For example, one Firmidius Severinus served for twenty-six years in the Roman army, in a vexillation of the Eighth Augustan legion seconded to Lyon, and then retired to Geneva. Still styling himself 'soldier' and not 'veteran', and so presumably soon after his arrival at Geneva, he dedicated an altar to 'the Unconquered God, Genius of the place' in A.D. 201.[31] As the phrase 'Genius of the place' is highly unusual in this context, and as the altar was dedicated as the result of a vow, we should assume that Severinus on settling in Geneva managed to found a Mithraic sanctuary and association. Something similar may have happened also at Tienen, which we noted above. Tienen is notable because it was not a military settlement, which was the usual context for Mithraic worship in the north-western provinces. It is also important because the wonderfully careful excavations have shown that a grand feast for over one hundred people was held here, perhaps at the summer solstice, and perhaps to mark the building or renovation of the sanctuary. Such a feast must have been held outside the building. This is a striking corrective to the standard view that all Mithraic rituals were held away from the public eye inside the cult buildings. In this case, one might hypothesize that a veteran from the Roman army retired to Tienen, creating a new Mithraic sanctuary, and inviting much of the town to a special feast.

In some cases, it is possible conjecturally to reconstruct not the movements of individuals, but routes of transmission of cults. In Syria there is evidence for the cult of Mithras from the mid-second century A.D. onwards.[32] It is attested at three coastal sites, notably Caesarea Maritima at the south, and at inland sites: three between Bostra and Damascus; two north-east of Apamea; and Dura Europos off to the east. On the model

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[27] J. Alvar and E. Muñiz, 'Les cults égyptiens dans les provinces romaines d'Hispanie', in L. Bricault (ed.), *Isis en occident: Actes du IIème Colloque international sur les études isiaques*, RGRW 151 (2004), 69–94.
[28] J. Leclant, 'Le diffusion des cultes isiaques en Gaule', in Bricault, op. cit. (n. 27), 95–105.
[29] As argued long ago by Toutain, against Cumont, op. cit. (n. 4).
[30] *L'Année Épigraphique* 1989, 334, with J. France, *Quadragesima Galliarum: l'organisation douanière des provinces alpestres, gauloises et germaniques de l'Empire romain (1er siècle avant J.-C.–3er siècle après J.-C.)* (2001), 157–9, 443–4, though his claim that the man was actually based at Aosta runs counter to the terminology of his title.
[31] *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum* XII, 2587.
[32] R. L. Gordon, 'Trajets de Mithra en Syrie romaine', *Topoi* 11.1 (2001 [2004]), 77–136, whom I follow.

of Isis in Gaul, one might think that the cult was taken inland from the coastal sites. This is probably true for the southerly inland sites, from Caesarea east to Bostra. But the cult at one of the more northerly coastal sites, Sidon, is attested only in the fourth century A.D., and in any case geography — the great ranges of mountains behind the two northerly coastal sites — makes this model of transmission unlikely for the northerly inland sites. The cults probably reached the northerly inland sites as a result of troops travelling along the major Roman road running from Europe through the Cilician Gates to the Euphrates. Certainly, at Caesarea the Danubian-style roundel proves that there was direct connection between the cults of Mithras on the Danube and in Syria, and at Dura the cult was broadly-speaking indebted to cults in Italy and more generally the Rhine-Danube frontier zone.[33]

As the example of Mithraism shows, people who travelled sometimes took cults with them. A Christian carpenter Papos, born at Arados in Phoenicia, worked and died at Nicomedia in north-west Asia Minor, aged forty-one.[34] He presumably created a Christian family for himself, or at least found a Christian community that knew him as Eumoirios ('Blessed') and buried him as he wished, with a discrete but unambiguous cross carved towards the bottom of the tombstone. Or there is the case of Arberkios, Bishop of Phrygian Hierapolis, who travelled west to Rome and east to Syria and beyond to Nisibis in Mesopotamia, apparently meeting Christians everywhere he went.[35] Aberkios represented himself as travelling within a network of pre-existing Christian communities. At the same time, pagans travelled to healing cults, oracles or Panhellenic festivals, similarly operating within a pre-existing network, not creating new cults.[36]

As part of this travelling world, cults and religious objects could be taken anywhere. Consider just two examples. At the great healing sanctuary at Grand in the Vosges, a sanctuary rooted in local traditions, the finds include splendid ivory astrological tables from Egypt.[37] We have no idea how they got there, but for them to be useful, there would have to be also a person learned in arcane lore. From the East, in the highlands of Phrygia in central Asia Minor, about as far as one can get from major centres of population, there is rich epigraphic evidence of Christian communities in the second and especially third centuries.[38] At Eumeneia and its surroundings about twenty funerary texts have Christian formulae. In the territory of Appia, in the upper Tembris valley, more than twenty tombstones inscribed 'Christians for Christians' are known, dating between the mid-third and mid-fourth centuries. Or at Temenothyrae, in western Phrygia, we find a community of Montanists (a Christian prophetic movement), which is consistent with the literary view of Montanism as originating in Phrygia. So all nicely remote, or maybe not. After all, Phrygian Christians in the second century were in contact with their fellow Christians in Lyon,[39] and in turn Christian authorities took action against what they saw as the Montanist heresy. The Roman Empire depended on connections: everyone in the Empire would know of a change of emperor as fast as communications permitted. (There was surely no-one in the Roman Empire like the Japanese soldier who fought in the Philippines during the Second World War, and

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[33] *RoR* i, 302
[34] L. Robert, *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 102 (1978), 395–543, at 413–15, reprinted in his *Documents d'Asie Mineure* (1987), 91–239, at 109–11, third century A.D.
[35] *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 30.1479, with W. Wischmeyer, 'Die Aberkiosinschrift als Grabepigramm', *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 23 (1980), 22–7; *RoR* ii, 333–4.
[36] I find the category of pilgrimage unhelpful outside the context of Christianity. J. Elsner and I. Rutherford in the introduction to their edited volume *Pilgrimage in Graeco-Roman and Early Christian Antiquity: Seeing the Gods* (2005), 2–8, very honestly set out the arguments; see further in the same volume, S. Scullion, '"Pilgrimage" and Greek religion: sacred and secular in the pagan *polis*', 111–30.
[37] *RoR* i, 232–3; *Les Tablettes astrologiques de Grand (Vosges) et l'astrologie en Gaule romaine* (1993).
[38] S. Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor* (1993), ii, 37–43, with map on p. 42.
[39] Eusebius, *History of the Church* 5.3–4.

refused to believe in the Japanese defeat, surrendering only in 1974.) Nowhere was truly isolated in the Roman Empire; everywhere was connected in one way or another.

The elective cults required new religious communities to be formed for them to operate fully.[40] There arises therefore the major question of how new people were brought into elective cults. Public spectacle and shows are not likely to provide the answer for newly arrived cults. Mithraists and Christians generally did not put on public rituals, and — though the public ceremonials surrounding the martyrdom of Christians may, as is often claimed, have attracted some new adherents — they were hardly in themselves great advertisements for the cult. Nor, I think, is it useful to think of a Market Place of Religions, where individuals could shop around for the cult that suited their needs.[41] The model of a 'market' with choices being made by individual consumers is surely anachronistic. All the cults discussed in this article, ethnic and elective, pagan and non-pagan, were based on groups, large and small. Those groups created religious ideas and meanings, and expected high levels of engagement. There is no sign of a consumer approach to religion. Rather than spectacles and displays, soap-box evangelism, or Market Places, we should think instead, as many have said in the past, of the dissemination of cults by personal contact, within family, professional or social contexts.[42] That is easy to say, and is commonly assumed, yet it is only a starting point. We need to go further and ask in what contexts such contacts worked and in which others — and why — they did not.

The cult of Mithras offers perhaps our best vignette of contexts and mechanisms for any of the elective cults. A magnificent bronze tablet lists members of the Mithraic sanctuary at Virunum (in modern Austria).[43] The document was drawn up originally in A.D. 183, with a list of thirty-four names filling the first column and a half, recording those who had paid for the restoration of the 'temple' of Mithras, perhaps after a storm. The lay-out shows that the originators expected to add new names as time passed. Indeed, in the first year or so, probably as a result of the plague, no less than five members died, their names being marked with a theta, for the Greek *thanon*. Eight new members were enrolled in A.D. 184, and, according to the very plausible theory of the original publisher of this text, new names, sixty-four in all, were added annually until A.D. 201, the additions being in very obviously different hands. In this document we have a unique glimpse of the ongoing recruitment over a seventeen-year period to an existing Mithraic community, which had perhaps been founded a generation earlier.[44] How this recruitment took place, both initially and subsequently, is the issue. Virunum was the capital of the province of Noricum, and remained the centre for the administration of the province's

[40] Mobile individuals could always make do with private worship of the cult into which they had been initiated, as is shown by the significant proportion (*c.* 15 per cent) of Mithraic reliefs that are too small for a communal space: R. L. Gordon, 'Small and miniature reproductions of the Mithraic icon: reliefs, pottery, ornaments and gems', in Martens and De Boe, op. cit. (n. 5), 259–83.

[41] A. Bendlin, 'Nicht der Eine, nicht die Vielen. Zur Pragmatik religiösen Verhaltens in einer polytheistischen Gesellschaft am Beispiel Rome', in R. G. Kratz and H. Spieckermann (eds), *Götterbilder – Gottesbilder – Weltbilder: Polytheismus und Monotheismus in der Welt der Antike* (2006), ii, 279–311, of Republican Rome. The model of John North, which focuses on competition between cults for members, is different, and not vulnerable to this criticism: 'The development of religious pluralism', in J. Lieu, J. North and T. Rajak (eds), *The Jews among Pagans and Christians* (1992), 174–93.

[42] cf. K. Hopkins, 'Christian number and its implications', *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 6.2 (1998), 185–226.

[43] *L'Année Épigraphique* 1994, 1334, originally published by G. Piccottini, *Mithrastempel in Virunum* (1994). Cf. R. Beck, 'On becoming a Mithraist: new evidence for the propagation of the mysteries', in L. E. Vaage (ed.), *Religious Rivalries in the Early Roman Empire and the Rise of Christianity* (2006), 175–94.

[44] Another Mithraic document (*L'Année Épigraphique* 1994, 1335), dating A.D. 201–209, lists the same names, in the same order, as those in columns two to four of the bronze plaque. This may have been in connection with another renovation of the 'temple', *c.* A.D. 202, or else the foundation of a new 'temple' because the original one could no longer accommodate enough new members.

finances, though some elements of administration had recently been moved elsewhere.[45]
Unsurprisingly, all but two of the members were Roman citizens (with one free
non-citizen and one slave member). About a quarter of them were freedmen, and very
few had local, Celtic names. In general, the members seem modestly successful — rich
enough collectively to pay for the rebuilding of the 'temple', without the intervention of
any named patron. In addition, one member was a local magistrate and imperial priest,
another was able to pay for the bronze plaque and the paintings on the ceiling of the
'temple', but neither were *patres*, holders of the highest grade in the association. Some
of the members were close kin (father-son, or brothers), others were freedmen of
existing members. Ongoing recruitment happened within families (kin and freedmen)
and from other local contacts. In addition, we know of two new members who were
immediately made *patres*. They must have brought their Mithraic rank with them when
they moved from elsewhere, which is an interesting point about the recognition of a
Mithraic pattern of initiation.

    We may agree that spread through personal contacts and individual movements is basic,
indeed obvious, but we need to think more carefully about exactly what model we might
best use. Contemporaries opposed to religious innovation employed the vigorously
negative model of the spread of diseases. Pliny, commenting as Roman governor on the
spread of Christianity in Pontus in northern Asia Minor, said that 'it was not only in
towns, but also in villages and the countryside that the contagion of this dreadful
superstition has spread'.[46] 'Contagious disease' is a misleading metaphor. Not only does
it embody a negative view of the spread of cults (which will hardly do); it also leads us
to think of a linear spread, along sea- or river-routes, and along the land arteries of the
Empire, whereby the new cult infected each place through which it passed. The varied
case-studies which I have already presented have suggested that continuous linear
diffusion was not the case. If personal contacts are basic, then the movement of
individuals and groups, even if along obvious routes, does not entail the creation of new
cults all along those routes. It must be much more rooted in community, contact and
interaction.

    So the question is: what sorts of personal contacts are at issue? At this point, a
distinction favoured by modern sociologists is useful. Inspired by the American
sociologist Mark Granovetter, they distinguish between 'strong' and 'weak ties'.[47] Strong
ties are links between an individual and family or close friends; weak ties are the links
between an individual and acquaintances. We tend to imagine that strong ties are the
ones that are most important in our lives. Granovetter does not dispute their significance
for each of us, but he has shown that weak ties have crucial strength (hence his catch
phrase: 'the strength of weak ties'). Weak ties enable us to reach out beyond our closely
bound network of family and close friends to another, loosely-connected network, in
which few of one's acquaintances may know each other. Granovetter's interest was in
the ways that people make use of their strong and weak ties to get jobs for themselves.
We might hypothesize that those people with a good set of weak ties are in a strong
position to bring in members to a new cult; in fact, it would only be possible for an
elective cult to gain a substantial number of followers if it did exploit such weak ties.
People working together in imperial finances at Virunum would be a good example of a
group of such people. Strong ties, say within a particular family, could also be

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[45] G. Alföldy, *Noricum* (1974), 161.
[46] *Letters* 10.96.
[47] M. Granovetter, 'The strength of weak ties', *American Journal of Sociology* 78.6 (1973), 1360–80, revisited in
his 'The strength of weak ties: a network theory revisited', *Sociological Theory* 1 (1983), 201–33. J. Ober,
Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens (2009), has seen the interest of
Granovetter's ideas for Classical Athens. A. C. F. Collar, 'Network theory and religious innovation',
Mediterranean Historical Review 22 (2007), 149–62, has urged the interest of network theory.

important, as we know was the case in some ancient cults, but would not lead so easily to their wider dissemination. For example, an inscription records the numerous members of the ancestral cult of Dionysus within a senatorial family in Rome, but this was an essentially static context.[48] This model of connection, approved from the top, was unproblematic for members of the élite, but innovation from below, infiltrating into such families, was very likely to be viewed negatively by them.[49]

Given the importance of personal contacts, and especially of personal contacts involving weak ties, the next question is why people listened to an acquaintance suggesting that they join this new cult. This raises all kinds of unanswerable questions about the day-to-day interaction of 'ordinary' men and women in the Roman world, about who could say what to whom, and about different forms of persuasion. But one thing is clear: context is crucial. The listener needs to be receptive for the message (however it is delivered) to be successful. We should not assume, however, that because a particular cult or message did turn out to be successful, the world must therefore have been 'yearning' for it. For example, some of the cults constructed death as much more of a 'problem' — and at the same time offered a 'solution' to it. But that does not mean that the pre-Christian world in general was yearning for a new answer to the 'problem' of death.[50] That would be an entirely circular argument.

Two arguments about context were once very influential. Scholars used to argue that the Greek world after Alexander the Great was essentially deracinated, with populations uprooted from the communal ties that had bound them together in the Archaic and Classical periods. The second argument was that civic cults had lost their meaning for people, leaving them adrift in a vast and potentially meaningless world. For the Greek East, this second argument followed closely from the first. For Rome, it had different roots, in the old orthodoxy of the emptiness of Roman cults in the late Republican and Imperial periods. As Cumont said, 'Il n'a peut-être jamais existé aucune religion aussi froide, aussi prosaïque que celle des Romains'.[51] This dramatic statement is an important element in Cumont's explanation of why his oriental cults spread as they did. But today the Hellenistic world is seen not as deracinated, but as firmly rooted in evolving civic structures. And civic cults, both Greek and Roman, are seen as lively focuses of communal and individual energy, and as continuing bearers of meaning for their citizens.[52]

The current argument that has taken over as a major feature in the analysis of context is the alleged rise of monotheism.[53] Polytheism, it is claimed, with its multiplicity of gods, each with different functions, was intrinsically less attractive than monotheism in offering an over-arching framework of meaning. Such a framework was especially important in a world whose horizons were now so broad. Whereas civic cults, vibrant though they were, offered only fragmented world-views, the new cults, whether of Isis, Mithras, Judaism or Christianity, were alike in offering the idea of one god, which entailed the construction of global and hierarchized world-views. Common though this argument is, it is in my view fundamentally flawed.[54] We certainly cannot assume that monotheism triumphed because it is inherently more coherent and hence rational a

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[48] *Inscriptiones Graecae Urbis Romae* i.160, with J. Scheid, 'La thiase du Metropolitan Museum', in *L'Association dionysiaque dans les sociétés anciennes*, Collection École Française de Rome 89 (1986), 275–90, and *RoR* i, 271.
[49] cf. Tacitus, *Annals* 14.44.3.
[50] This point is made already at *RoR* i, 289 and n. 129.
[51] Cumont, op. cit. (n. 4), 25: 'Perhaps no religion has ever been as cold and as mundane as that of the Romans.'
[52] e.g. S. R. F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (1984); R. Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (1986).
[53] e.g. Rüpke, op. cit. (n. 1).
[54] J. A. North, 'Pagan ritual and monotheism', in Mitchell and Van Nuffeln, op. cit. (n. 1), 34–52; cf. S. Price, *Religions of the Ancient Greeks* (1999), 11; P. Athanassiadi, 'The gods are god. Polytheistic cult and

system than polytheism (drawn though we might be to such an assumption by the modern dominance of Judaism, Christianity and Islam). Polytheism was, and is, capable of constructing viable and meaningful world-views, and might indeed be thought of as a more complex and sophisticated system than monotheism. The point is evident from structuralist and later studies of the Greek gods, and from studies of Hinduism in India today.[55]

But we should not simply assert the equality of the two terms, monotheism and polytheism, but rather question the meaningfulness of the alleged opposition between them. After all, the key point about the Greek and Roman gods is that the ancients both recognized their variety and multiplicity, and also conceived of them as forming some sort of unity. The conjunction of these two views is not a relatively late development in the Roman Imperial period, but went back to much earlier times.[56] For example, Xenophon recounts the following story about his own military exploits: when attacking a city, but finding himself trapped inside, he realized that it was only divine power that had intervened and had enabled him and his men to escape. Xenophon did not see the epiphany of a particular god, but talked of 'one of the gods (θεῶν τις)' as providing the means of salvation.[57] Or to take another example, when Greeks and Romans created anthropomorphic cult statues, they were not committed to the belief that the gods were just like people (a belief which is, and was, absurd to the philosophically minded), but rather to the idea that the human form offered one way of representing the gods.[58] In other words, polytheism was an attempt to understand and make sense of divine power. As such, the multiplicity of the gods was perfectly compatible with a sense of the oneness of being. It follows that there was no trend towards 'pagan monotheism', because there was no perceived lack of monotheism. There was a whole series of changes and developments within paganism, including the idea of declaring one's commitment to a group, and the development of new types of world-views. Perhaps the key development comes with the Jewish and then Christian idea of exclusivity of commitment, of the idea that our god is not just the over-arching and all-encompassing deity, but also a jealous deity to whom alone worship should be given.

III THE LOCAL CONTEXT

In addition to worrying about how we should characterize the broad cultural and conceptual context of the spread of cults in the Roman Empire, we need also to pay proper attention to local contexts. Local contexts offer another important way of thinking about the receptivity of individuals to propositions put to them by their acquaintances. At the level of individual cults, it is often claimed that the existence of a Jewish community in a particular town smoothed the path for those seeking to create a Christian community there. The evidence for this point is not straightforward. The *Acts of the Apostles* often shows such a situation, but its picture is so highly tendentious in

monotheistic theology in the world of Late Antiquity', in T. Schabert and M. Riedl (eds), *Gott oder Götter? God or Gods*, Eranos n.s. 15 (2009), 15–31.

[55] e.g. R. C. T. Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (2005), 387–451, with reference back to the classic studies of Vernant and Detienne. C. J. Fuller, *The Camphor Flame. Popular Hinduism and Society in India* (1992).
[56] M. L. West, 'Towards monotheism', in P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede (eds), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (1999), 21–40.
[57] *Anabasis* 5.2.24. On the conventionality of Xenophon's views, see M. P. Nilsson, *Geschichte der griechischen Religion* (3rd edn, 1955–67), i, 784–91; Price, op. cit. (n. 54), 1–3.
[58] R. L. Gordon, 'The real and the imaginary: production and religion in the Greco-Roman world', *Art History* 2 (1979), 5–34, reprinted in his *Image and Value in the Graeco-Roman World* (1996); Price, op. cit. (n. 54), 56–7.

relation to the Jews (who are shown at the end as turning their backs on the teachings of Christianity) that it is hard to take individual anecdotes at face value.

Is it more fruitful to think about the structural implications of variations in the scale of urban complexity? Were the smallest towns the most homogeneous, and the least open to new cults? Certainly, Rome, the largest city by far in the Roman Empire, also had the greatest range of ethnic and elective cults of any city in the empire.[59] The point was obvious to the jaundiced eyes of Tacitus, who viewed the spread of Christianity from Judaea to Rome as characteristic of the way that 'all hideous and shameful practices collect and gather [in Rome] from every quarter and are extremely popular'.[60] The public festivals of the city provided some sort of framework for all those in the city, if they chose to participate, but alongside them flourished all sorts of other cults. And Rome was wholly exceptional, not just for its size, but also for the variety of cults worshipped there. Ephesus and Carthage, among the next largest cities in the Empire, each had a much more restricted range of cults. So too with the more modest coastal towns round the Bay of Naples. At Pompeii and Herculaneum the ancestral civic and domestic cults provided the principal religious framework for most of the population of the towns. There were cult associations — to Isis, Venus, Bacchus and Sabazius — but it seems very likely that those associations were marginal to the life of the towns.[61] By contrast the Christian communities in tiny towns in Phrygia, at which we have already looked, show us that flourishing new communities can be found in places that we might have expected to be the bedrock of conservatism and commitment to ancestral deities. In other words, variations in urban complexity do not predict much in terms of religious diversity.

Nonetheless, it is important to consider how much variety there was in religious life in towns in the Empire. Were they mainly like Pompeii and Herculaneum, or were they mainly much more diverse? The eastern town whose religious life we know best is Dura Europos in eastern Syria, with its famous Mithraic sanctuary.[62] Because Dura was sacked by the Sasanians in A.D. 256 or 257 and then abandoned, the third-century town is well preserved. Its state of preservation makes it tempting to treat the town as 'potentially our best case study for social and religious life in a normal Near Eastern small town under the early and high Empire'.[63] The underlying problem is that the excavations carried out here under the aegis of Cumont and Rostovtzeff, though written up with brilliant panache, need further work, now being carried out by the Franco-Syrian team under Pierre Leriche. In addition, few have taken the opportunity to look synoptically at the evidence for all the cults found in the town, though Ted Kaizer has now taken on this daunting task. In our present state of knowledge, it is clear that there were numerous religious buildings, fifteen in all, for a settlement covering about 60 hectares, with a total population which I would estimate at about three thousand people

[59] As discussed in *RoR* i, 245–312.
[60] *Annals* 15.44.
[61] W. Van Andringa, *Quotidien des dieux et des hommes. La vie religieuse dans les cités du Vésuve à l'époque romaine*, Bibliothèque des Écoles Françaises d'Athènes et de Rome 337 (2009), 325–39 implies this marginality.
[62] The best starting points are: F. Millar, 'Dura-Europos under Parthian rule', in J. Wieshöfer (ed.), *Das Partherreich und seine Zeugnisse*, Historia Supp. 122 (1998), 473–92, reprinted in his *The Greek World, the Jews, and the East* (2006), 406–31; T. Kaizer, 'Religion and language in Dura-Europos', in H. Cotton, R. G. Hoyland, J. J. Price and D. J. Wasserstein (eds), *From Hellenism to Islam. Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* (2009), 235–53; idem, 'Patterns of worship in Dura-Europos: a case study of religious life in the Classical Levant outside the main cult centres', in C. Bonnet, V. Pirenne-Delforge and D. Praet (eds), *Les religions orientales dans le monde grec et romain cent ans après Cumont (1906–2006): Bilan historique et historiographique* (2009), 153–72; idem, 'Dura-Europos under Roman rule', in J. M. Cortés Copete, F. Lozano Gomez and E. Muñiz Grijalvo (eds), *Ruling through Greek Eyes. Interactions between Rome and the Greeks in Imperial Times* (forthcoming).
[63] Kaizer, op. cit. (n. 62; 'Religion and language'), 235.

in the Hellenistic period.[64] What do we make of a small town, little more than a village, often assumed to be an isolated outpost of the Roman Empire, with such a variety of religious options?

I would like to raise the question of how typical Dura was, and so how far, and in what ways, we can generalize from it. Dura, meaning 'fortress' in Aramaic, lies on a steep bluff overlooking the Euphrates, protected by wadis on two sides. The town was founded as Europos in the third century B.C. by the Seleucid king Seleucus Nicator, was captured by the Parthians towards the end of the second century B.C., remaining in their hands, apart from a brief interlude in A.D. 115, until captured by the Romans in A.D. 165. There was a modest Roman military presence for the next thirty years, but in A.D. 194 Dura became a major Roman military base, first against the Parthians, and then the Sasanians. Fortifications surrounded the town on three sides, with a great gate at the entrance of the route to Palmyra. On the highest point of the site was a large fort, with cliffs below it dropping down to the Euphrates.

The fifteen religious places in Dura are extremely varied, falling into at least seven different categories. Worshipped there were Greek gods, whose priesthoods were still held in the second century A.D. by people claiming Macedonian descent: Zeus, Apollo, Seleucid Ancestors, Seleucus Nicator, and also Artemis; Palmyrene deities: Bel, Iarhibol, Aglibol and Arsu, and the Gaddé (or Tyche) of Dura; deities from the village of Anath, 140 km downstream from Dura, deities called Aphlad and Azzanathkona; Aramaic cults: Artagatis, Adonis, and Zeus Kyrios Baalshamin; military cults: Mithras and Jupiter Dolichenus; a Jewish synagogue; and a Christian church. This variety is quite extraordinary.

Dura provides wonderful evidence for people and cults living side by side. But it is hard to tell what they made of each other. In a town of this size, people must have known of the existence of the range of cults. There is no surviving evidence to suggest hostility towards other cults, but then all or most rituals will have been performed within the walls of the individual religious places, not exacerbating negative attitudes held for other reasons. At the most there was, as Jaś Elsner has argued, passive resistance, as individual cults articulated their identities and expressed their superiority over other cults.[65]

Who brought this great variety of cults to Dura? Some cults were maintained as part of the Macedonian heritage of the town. Others were established by people from Palmyra. Some were brought in by Roman soldiers (legionaries transferred from the Danube and auxiliaries from Palmyra). That much is easy. Beyond that we have to think harder about the economy of the town.[66] The possible peculiarity of Dura is raised if one looks from the town west, into the Roman Empire. Here Dura is, and was in antiquity, surrounded by desert, or steppe if you like, useful only to nomadic pastoralists. On this side Dura had no agricultural hinterland. Hence perhaps the old idea that Dura was simply a 'caravan city'. In reaction to that idea, some suggested that Dura in the Roman period was simply a military base, with nothing much going on beyond locals supplying the army. In fact, inhabitants of Dura since the Parthian period had owned vineyards

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[64] The excavators' map shows 456 houses. My estimate assumes five people per house; cf. S. Price, 'Estimating ancient Greek populations: the evidence of field survey', in A. K. Bowman and A. Wilson (eds), *Settlement, Urbanisation and Population*, Oxford Studies in the Roman Economy 2 (2011), 17–35; E. Will, 'La population de Doura-Europos: une évaluation', *Syria* 65 (1988), 315–21, accepts a higher estimate, which generates a total of 5,000–6,000.

[65] J. Elsner, 'Viewing and resistance: art and religion at Dura Europos', in his *Roman Eyes: Visuality and Subjectivity in Art and Text* (2007), 253–87 (revised version of his 'Cultural resistance and the visual image: the case of Dura Europos', *Classical Philology* 96 (2001), 269–304).

[66] E. Key Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (1999), 1–5, 72–6, on pastoralism; K. Ruffing, 'Dura Europos: a city on the Euphrates and her economic importance in the Roman era', in M. Sartre (ed.), *Productions et échanges dans la Syrie grecque et romaine*, *Topoi* Supp. 8 (2007), 399–411, on local economy.

and olive trees and grown grain and legumes on the fertile land beside the river Euphrates. Parapotamia, 'Land beside the River', the term used in an official document, extended perhaps 200 km along the Euphrates.[67] Dura certainly had a significant local economy of its own.

In addition, regional and long-distance trade were important. Trade overland certainly took place. For example, the sarcophagus of a rich merchant from Palmyra now in the local museum displays on the side the animal that made possible this trade, a camel.[68] A man from Hatra, 200 km to the north-east, made a bilingual dedication in Hatrean and Greek in the sanctuary of Atargatis in Dura, recording his gift of money to the Sun god, the main deity of Hatra.[69] The dedication is most simply explained if the man from Hatra was in Dura because of trading ties. But it was access to the Euphrates that was crucial. The river was a major trading route down to Mesopotamia, the Persian Gulf and beyond to the Far East. Dura's connections with Mesopotamia are exemplified in the close ties that the Jewish synagogue had with that area. Among the texts from the synagogue are graffiti in Persian, recording the (positive) views of Jewish visitors from the east on the synagogue paintings.[70] Rabbinic texts of this period assume a steady flow of people between the long-standing Jewish community in Babylonia and Judaea. A few Jews may have been travelling to see particular religious teachers, but they cannot have been travelling in this period to celebrate religious festivals in Judaea, and most, including those who came to Dura, must have been traders. As for trade west from Dura, the town may lie on one of the two routes between the Euphrates and Palmyra, some 300 km to the west. That route must explain why Palmyrene religious interest in Dura is a major feature of the town from the first century B.C. onwards.[71]

The evidence for Dura's richly diverse religious life has to be set in context. Dura's political and religious ecology was very peculiar. The town, despite its size and prosperity, had little in the way of ordinary civic institutions, it shows no signs of benefactions to the city by the local élite, and it lacked any ordinary Greek civic or religious architecture.[72] Some, and perhaps most, of the religious sites were the preserve of particular groups. And those groups were a complex mixture of the ethnic and the elective. I would suggest that the variety of its religious life was the product of its economic life, which brought people here both from its hinterland and from further afield.[73] In some respects, Dura should perhaps be seen as more comparable to Mediterranean port towns, like Puteoli or Ostia, than to ordinary small towns in the Roman East.

[67] As the document (*P. Dura* 20) was written in the village of Paliga, 50 km upstream, at the confluence of the Chabur and the Euphrates, the region must have extended at least that far; it presumably extended downstream at least as far as Anath, whose religious importance we have just noted.
[68] Sarcophagus inv. 2677 b 8982. For depictions of camels at Palmyra, see E. Will, *Les Palmyréniens: la Venise des sables* (1992), 99–101. On the caravan trade through Palmyra, see F. Millar, 'Caravan cities: the Roman Near East and long-distance trade by land', in M. Austin, J. Harries and C. Smith (eds), *Modus Operandi: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey Rickman*, BICS Supp. 71 (1998), 119–37, reprinted in his *The Greek World, the Jews, and the East* (2006), 275–99, at 291–6.
[69] Kaizer, op. cit. (n. 62; 'Religion and language'), 245–6.
[70] G. D. Kilpatrick, 'Dura-Europos: the parchments and the papyri', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 5 (1964), 215–25; Kaizer, op. cit. (n. 62; 'Religion and language'), 236. By contrast, the ties of the Christian church at Dura were to the Greek-speaking world.
[71] L. Dirven, *The Palmyrenes of Dura-Europos: A Study of Religious Interaction in Roman Syria*, RGRW 138 (1999).
[72] S. B. Downey, *Mesopotamian Religious Architecture: Alexander through the Parthians* (1988), 76–130, on religious architecture.
[73] Palmyra, with its massive temples of the Roman period, differs from Dura because the city has a quite different history, being formed from local tribal groups, and also because of the impact of Roman traditions.

IV THE IMPERIAL CONTEXT

I turn now from the context of individual towns to the broadest context of all, that of the Roman Empire. The first point to make is that most of the ethnic and elective cults did not spread beyond the Roman Empire. There were no cults of Isis, Jupiter Dolichenus or even Mithras across the frontiers, even though some people, especially traders, travelled far and wide. Outside the Empire, I note only a solitary 'temple of Augustus' marked on a Roman world map, the Peutinger Table, in southern India.[74] And conversely, we find almost no cults from outside the Empire within its bounds. Dura, which was in prime position for such cults, has none; no cults from Mesopotamia or further east are found there. Mithraism might seem to be an exception, because of its claim to Persian origins, but of course that claim is largely fictive, and the cult was to all intents and purposes constructed within the Empire.[75] The one significant exception was Manichaeism, to which we will return shortly, and it was repressed in North Africa by the emperor Diocletian precisely because of its advance from Persia: Manichaeans were attempting 'through the accursed customs and perverse laws of the Persians to inject people of a more innocent nature, namely the temperate and peaceful Roman race and our whole world, with (as it were) their malignant drugs'.[76] Diocletian's rhetoric shows that the power of the state could be made to protect the boundaries of the Roman Empire from foreign religious incursions, a rhetoric that also underpinned his vigorous actions against the Christians.

The important issue here is how the various cults represented themselves in relation to the Empire. The mobile ethnic and elective cults continued to focus on their actual or alleged places of origin: Isis in Egypt; Mithras in Persia; Jupiter Dolichenus in Commagene in eastern Asia Minor; Aglibol and Malakbel in Palmyra; Jahveh in Jerusalem. Indeed a focus on now remote places was part of the point of these cults. But they also provided in different ways their own sacred canopies, generalized and sometimes utopian frames of reference.[77] These sacred canopies related explicitly to the Roman Empire in different ways. They were all at least compatible with the Roman order, with dedications, sacrifices and prayers being offered 'for the well-being' of the emperor. The cult of Jupiter Dolichenus is interesting in going further than that.[78] In the second century A.D. the common name of the deity was not simply Jupiter Dolichenus, but Jupiter Optimus Maximus Dolichenus, and his female consort Juno Regina. That is, the worshippers borrowed the names of two of the principal deities of the Roman state. In so doing they implicitly asserted the over-arching position of the deities of Doliche, perhaps in competition with the Roman state cult. It was the deities of Doliche that provided a sacred canopy for the whole Roman Empire.[79]

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[74] Note also the magnificent 'temple' at Gorneae, Garni in Soviet Armenia, perhaps the tomb of a second-century Romanized client king (T. Cornell and J. Matthews, *Atlas of the Roman World* (1982), 155).

[75] The fictive nature of the Persian origins was first exposed by R. L. Gordon, 'Franz Cumont and the doctrines of Mithraism', in J. R. Hinnells (ed.), *Mithraic Studies* (1975), i, 215–48. The dramatic paintings at the Mithraic sanctuary at Hawarte (Syria) might show fusion with local traditions, or they might embody learning from the East, but in any case they date to the fourth century A.D. Cf. M. Gawlikowski, 'The mithraeum at Hawarte and its paintings', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 20 (2007), 337–61.

[76] *Fontes iuris Romani anteIustiniani* ii, 580–1, translated in *RoR* ii, 282.

[77] On 'locative' and 'utopian' religions, see J. Z. Smith, *Map is not Territory* (1978), 88–103, 104–28, 172–89, and *Drudgery Divine* (1990), 121–2.

[78] cf. *RoR* i, 295.

[79] Belayche, op. cit. (n. 1), 256 claims that in the third century this claim is dropped, but U. Bianchi in G. M. Bellelli and U. Bianchi (eds), *Orientalia sacra urbis Romae: Dolichena et Heliopolitana: recueil d'études archeologiques et historico-religieuses sur les cultes cosmopolites d'origine commagénienne et syrienne* (1996), 599–603, has evidence for the conjunction of IOMD and *deus paternus Commagenus*, suggesting that the ancestral aspects of the cult were not forgotten.

The worshippers of Jupiter Dolichenus could make this grand claim with some degree of safety because their cult was, or seemed to be, an ethnic cult.[80] Worshipping the gods of one's ancestors could be presented as obviously virtuous and almost entirely unproblematic. On the other hand, adherence to elective cults, or adherence by outsiders to ethnic cults, raised serious problems of religious and social identity. Judaism I have mentioned so far simply as an ethnic religion, but of course it was more than that, attracting new, gentile adherents. Jewish proselytes were condemned by Tacitus for their wickedness in scorning their ancestral religion, and according to a Greek historian, Dio Cassius, the emperor Domitian put to death his own cousin and exiled his wife on charges of 'atheism' (or what in Latin would have been called *superstitio*), because 'they had drifted into Judaism'.[81]

Christianity faced even greater problems in relation to issues of tradition and adherence to ethnic, ancestral cults. A cult whose founder had been put to death by the Romans, and whose adherents could also be executed simply for being Christians was in a tricky position. In the eyes of some outsiders, it was an unacceptable form of *superstitio*, and could claim no legitimate authority, having fallen away from the faith of the Jews (whose standing was itself problematic), and was now targeting non-Jews as members. These issues come together in a third-century graffito from the imperial palace on the Palatine in Rome: Alexamenos is mocked for worshipping his god, a crucified donkey.[82]

In response to such views, Christianity was presented by some as an ethnic religion, and hence as socially acceptable. Second-century Greek apologists made Christians themselves another *genos* or race, with its own history and legitimate religious practices.[83] Aristides, the author of an *Apology* for Christianity, reshaped the traditional ethnic divisions of the world to accommodate Christians. According to the version preserved in Syriac, there were four divisions: 'barbarians and Greeks, Jews and Christians'; the barbarians claimed origins in Rhea and Kronos, the Greeks from Hellen, the Jews from Abraham, while the Christians traced the 'origins of their religion' back to Jesus the Messiah. In the alternative version preserved in Greek, the world was divided not into four but three races: 'the worshippers of those called by you gods' (itself subdivided into Chaldaeans, Greeks and Egyptians), Jews and Christians. It was the idea of three races that became the most common.[84]

The point may have originated in accusations levelled at Christians by outsiders: Suetonius, for example, described the Christians as 'a *genus* of people holding a new and mischievous *superstitio*'.[85] The Christian apologist Tertullian in his *ad nationes*, mocked the common accusation that 'we are called a third race', claiming that it was not obvious which were the first and second races, and that in any case they were all Christian now.[86] Whereas Tertullian simply sought to refute the allegation (as many other allegations made against Christians), Aristides and others sought to spin the accusation to their advantage, in the hope of obtaining socio-political legitimacy.

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[80] Relevant considerations on the complexity of 'ethnicity' are raised by M. Beard, 'The Roman and the foreign: the cult of the "Great Mother" in imperial Rome', in N. Thomas and C. Humphrey (eds), *Shamanism, History and the State* (1994), 164–9. She argues that, in the case of the cult of Cybele in Rome, there was a contested interface between an elective, a 'traditional' Roman and an explicitly foreign, ethnic cult. In fact, she suggests, that the striking 'ethnicity' of the cult is in part a construction of internal 'Roman' discourse.

[81] Tacitus, *Histories* 5.5; Dio 67.14. Cf. *RoR* i, 276.

[82] *RoR* ii, 57–8.

[83] P. Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (1969), 22–5; J. M. Lieu, *Christian Identity in the Jewish and Graeco-Roman World* (2004), ch. 8, especially 259–66; D. K. Buell, *Why this New Race? Ethnic Reasoning in Early Christianity* (2005). G. G. Stroumsa, 'Barbarians or heretics? Jews and Arabs in the mind of Byzantium (fourth–eighth centuries)' (forthcoming), explores the development of these ideas in Late Antiquity.

[84] Pseudo-Cyprian (*de pascha computus* 17) says casually: 'we are the third race' ('tertium genus sumus').

[85] *Nero* 16.2.

[86] 1.8; cf. 1.20; accusation of crowd in circus in *Scorpiace* 10.

So the Roman Empire was the context for most of these cults, but it did not necessarily define the ambitions of all of them. Mithraism, as we have noted, claimed its locative centre outside the Empire, in Persia, and its initiates proclaimed 'Hail [to the Fathers] from East to West under the protection of Saturn'.[87] The Mithraists' imaginative world did not map onto the Roman Empire, but extended from east to west, with a strong astronomical canopy.

The ambitions of Christianity also were not limited by the Roman Empire. I am not thinking in the first instance of the political loyalty or otherwise of Christians, but of how Christians conceived of the position of their faith in the world. The rhetoric of Eusebius, who argued for the loyalism of Christianity, is instructive. Towards the beginning of his work on the *Preparation of the Gospels*, he noted the multitude of rulers and how violence and disorder was eliminated by Augustus after the birth of Christ, in fulfilment of the prophets (1.4). And in his *History of the Church*, he claimed that in the reign of the emperor Tiberius Christianity spread rapidly throughout the whole world, with churches established in every city and village. Indeed Tiberius himself, so Eusebius claimed on the authority of Tertullian, threatened the accusers of Christians with death. 'Heavenly providence had wisely installed this into his mind in order that the doctrine of the Gospel, unhindered at its beginning, might spread in all directions throughout the world.' That is how Eusebius ended Book 2 of his *History of the Church*, with 'the world' being by implication 'the areas under the authority of Tiberius'. But he opened Book 3 on a much broader canvas. After a reference back to the condition of the Jews, Eusebius continued: 'Meanwhile the holy apostles and disciples of our Saviour were dispersed throughout the world' (3.1). The first region mentioned is Parthia, off to the east (assigned to Thomas), then Scythia, off to the north (assigned to Andrew), and only then other regions that fell within the Roman Empire. But it is very striking that Eusebius does not specify them as falling within the Empire. By this time, he really was thinking of a global religion.

Manichaeism developed the global ambitions of Christianity. Its founder Mani was born outside the Roman Empire, in Mesopotamia, receiving his calling in the year we call A.D. 240, but which he dated by the achievements of the Sasanian kings. His evangelizing began in the Persian empire (as the Sasanians styled it), converting a local ruler to the new faith, appearing before the Sasanian king Shapur I, and then attempting conversions also in India. From *c.* A.D. 260, he also sent out apostles to the west, to Egypt, Syria, and perhaps as far as Rome. According to a later account preserved in Middle Persian, 'Many wonders and miracles were wrought in these lands. The religion of the apostle was advanced in the Roman Empire'.[88] One such miracle was wrought by Mâr Addâ, one of the earliest missionaries in the Roman Empire, who was said to have cured the sister of Zenobia, Queen of Palmyra; the story offers a neat sidelight on the importance of Palmyra on the route from Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean.[89] We have already seen how worried Diocletian was by the spread of the cult in North Africa, and we now know that the spread of Manichaeism in the Empire was not just a set of ideas that lingered on to influence the young Augustine, but was indeed a religion with real adherents. The Manichaean texts from the Dakhleh Oasis in Egypt's western desert, 600 km south of Alexandria, reveal a flourishing community here in the fourth century, in contact with Manichaeans in the Nile valley, using Syriac-Coptic glossaries of Manichaean technical terms to aid their mission.[90]

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[87] M. J. Vermaseren and C. C. van Essen, *The Excavations in the Mithraeum of the Church of Santa Prisca in Rome* (1965), 179–84, translated in *RoR* ii, 319.
[88] I. Gardner and S. N. C. Lieu, *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire* (2004), 111.
[89] I. M. F. Gardner and S. N. C. Lieu, 'From Narmouthis (Medinet Madi) to Kellis (Ismant El-Kharab): Manichaean documents from Roman Egypt', *JRS* 86 (1996), 146–69, at 152–4.
[90] I. Gardner, 'The Manichaean community at Kellis: a progress report', in P. Mirecki and J. BeDuhn (eds), *Emerging from Darkness: Studies in the Recovery of Manichaean Sources* (1997), 161–75; Gardner and Lieu,

Mani's ambitions for his religion were more universal than those of the other religions that he knew — Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Judaism and even Christianity. Calling himself 'the Apostle of Jesus Christ', he articulated a vision of a church that was, he believed, superior to that of Christianity. To Mani was widely attributed an extraordinary ten-point list of the advantages of Manichaeism over the first churches (i.e. Christianity). The first of the ten points observed how the first eastern and the first western churches were divided from each other. Mani's hope was that his proclamation would be heard in both East and West, in every language, and in all cities.[91] His mission was to spread his universal message, in every language (a crucial point), throughout the world. For him the ideology of the Roman Empire was a matter of supreme unimportance. His was a vision of a world religion.[92]

op. cit. (n. 88) includes the texts in translation. Manichaeaism originated in a Syriac-speaking world, but translated texts into Greek, and into Coptic at least as early as Christianity, and into languages outside the Empire long before Christianity.

[91] Gardner and Lieu, op. cit. (n. 88), 109, 265–8, two parallel versions, in Coptic and Middle Persian.

[92] Simon Price died on the 14 June 2011. A tribute to his contributions to the Roman Society and to this Journal was published at the beginning of *JRS* 99 (2009) to mark his early retirement on grounds of ill health. A volume of essays in his honour, *Historical and Religious Memory in the Ancient World* (2012), edited by B. Dignas and R. R. R. Smith, has just appeared. It includes a paper by him and a bibliography of his published work. Simon is much missed. We are very grateful that he offered us this article shortly before his death, and are conscious of how much more he might have contributed to the debate he surveys here.