

Chapter 8

Priestly figures

1 WHO WERE THE PRIESTS IN ROME?

The term *sacerdos* (**sakro-dho-ts*, 'the one who does the sacred act') should not give the impression that there was a caste of priests in Roman public and private religion. The term is sometimes used as a title (for example, for the *sacerdos publica Cereris*), sometimes to designate priests generally, of whatever kind; but it does not cover all the agents of religion. If, by priests we understand all those who celebrated religious rituals, then *sacerdos* certainly does not cover them all. In fact, every citizen was a priest in as much as that, as the father of a family, he presided over the cult of his domestic community. Furthermore, all those who held authority in public life, at whatever level – magistrate, promagistrate, legate, centurion, college president, or president of a local district, and so on – were also responsible for the cult of the community that they led. Most sacrifices and festivals were celebrated by these men, not by priests in the strict sense of the term. Even senators and, in the colonies and *municipia*, the decurions collectively fulfilled functions which, from a modern point of view, seem eminently priestly. Every important decision involving religion, every innovation and disagreement relating to a religious problem that affected the public cult or other cults that were celebrated in public, fell within their domain. In certain cases it was, by law, the people itself, as a whole, that officiated collectively or took religious decisions.

None of these religious agents had been consecrated or 'called'. They were simply invested with these priestly

functions by virtue of their social role or because they had been elected. It is true that in the Roman world there was no difference between 'secular' life and religious life. Every public act was religious and every religious act was public; sacred law was simply an offshoot of ordinary public law. In consequence, a magistrate was invested (in some cases actually by the auspices) with a function that extended to two complementary fields of action, namely relations with the gods and relations with men. And that applied to all holders of authority as well as to magistrates themselves. What is more, ritual actions performed by magistrates or other community leaders were no different from those made by priests. A sacrifice was a sacrifice whether it was offered by a pontiff or by the president of a town district (*uicomagister*). The only differences lay in the particular cult concerned – the ritual in each cult being, in effect, reserved for those who found themselves charged with performing it. No priest, for example, could celebrate the ritual of a triumph or of the presidency of the Roman or the Plebeian Games just on the strength of his being a priest; and no holder of authority could, simply on that basis, celebrate the rites of inauguration or a sacrifice to Dea Dia. However, it should be added that priestly functions were virtually all compatible with other public functions, so you might say that the Romans were regularly switching from one role to another. Sometimes a magistrate or a senator would act as such, and sometimes he would exercise a priestly role, but he could never confuse the two roles. He was either the one or the other, never both at once. Even the emperor could not act simultaneously as both *princeps* and *pontifex maximus* (chief pontiff).

Those who were called priests were not, in any case, 'men of god' or people devoted entirely to the service of the deity. Some priests might be subjected to extremely exacting ritual obligations (the *flamen* of Jupiter and his wife and, for example, the Vestals), but those are isolated examples and – in the case of the Vestals – temporary. As a general rule, a

priest was a citizen like any other. He was elected by his peers (*cooptatio*) or by the people, and never received any prior training. His duties were limited to specific actions and did not extend to general religious competence. No priest, not even the *pontifex maximus*, was responsible in all areas. Private cults were entirely separate from the power of the public priests; the priests were, in any case, far too restricted in numbers to control anything other than the great public acts of the Roman State. Despite what one modern myth would have us believe, there were no religious or priestly books containing a full account of doctrine and liturgies. The books of the colleges of priests were annual reports in which ritual procedures, celebrations and decisions were registered as and when they took place. They were called 'commentaries'. These documents, some of them ancient, were a mine of information for antiquarians and historians, who extracted from them many items of information which they then set out in their own treatises; it was these which their contemporaries gradually took to calling *libri sacerdotum*, *pontificum*, etc., so helping to create a myth of 'the priestly books' that has proved extremely tenacious.

The majority of priests and celebrants were male, free and Roman citizens. A slave could never officiate in his own name but could do so in that of his master. Women were not excluded from active religious life, except in certain cults (Silvanus and Hercules), but they could not take on any representative religious function on behalf of the state. They could officiate for themselves or for other women, but not for the Roman people or for the family as a whole. Even within the family, they could not cut up the meat or prepare the ritual flour: that role fell to men. Although they were passive in most public cults and did not take part in communal sacrificial banquets, they did attend Games and took the leading role in the cults of *matronae* – for example, in the cults of Bona Dea, Pudicitia, Fortuna Muliebris and Juno Caprotina. In the Secular Games, matrons celebrated a public

sellisternium in honour of Juno and Diana, which implied a sacrifice, but they did so only when the public sacrifices offered by men were over. At supplications, they were at their husbands' sides, as they were also in domestic rites. Finally, there was nothing to prevent a woman or a girl from acting as an assistant during a ritual. In short, the ritual roles of women varied according to the context, and it is incorrect simply to declare that Roman women were excluded from religion.

2 THE PUBLIC PRIESTS OF ROME

In the historical period the public priests of Rome – whose exact title was *sacerdos*, pontiff or whatever 'of the Roman people, and the Quirites' – fell into two groups: either what were known as the major colleges, or the sodalities. There were also a number of priests of particular deities, and priests of the ancient Latin communities. The most important public priests of Rome held their position for life and benefited from immunity to public charges and taxes. They also enjoyed the privilege of banqueting at the expense of the people and could occupy places of honour at the Games. They had the right to make announcements to the people by issuing edicts, and to be questioned by the Senate. They may also have had the right to convoke ordinary meetings of the people (*contio*), but not *comitia*.

In public life, in particular when officiating, priests wore the *toga praetexta*, and some also had other special costumes. Augurs wore a purple *trabea*, and male priests wore a kind of cap (a *galerus*). It is known that the *flamen* of Jupiter wore a *galerus* made from the skin of a sacrificial victim topped with an olive branch (*apex*), and his toga was made of wool (*laena*). A *flamen*'s wife wore her hair in a *tutulus*. The Vestals wore the dress of a Roman *matrona* and a bride's veil, and also had a special way of styling their hair.

2.1 The major colleges

Up until 196 BC there were three major colleges: first, in hierarchical order, the pontiffs; next the augurs; then the *decemviri*. In 196, a fourth college was formally created, the *tresviri epulonum*. The membership of these colleges steadily increased in number up until the Augustan period.

The pontiffs, who were under the authority of the *pontifex maximus*, advised the magistrates, the Senate and the other priestly colleges on the rites and customs of the traditional religion and on sacred law. They provided advice to individuals on possible conflict between private rituals and public sacred law. They are believed to have played a central role in the development of the most ancient civil law, which they supervised up until 304 BC. Amongst other things, they had a powerful influence on legal business thanks to their control of the calendar. We know that the *Lex Ogulnia* (300 BC) ruled that there should be nine pontiffs; then Sulla's priestly law (82) increased the number to fifteen; under Caesar (46) it was fixed at sixteen. In 300 BC five of the pontiffs were patricians, four plebeians; previously all had been patrician. In addition to the pontiffs themselves, the college included the *rex sacrorum* (king of the sacred rites) who, together with his wife (the *regina sacrorum*), celebrated a number of rituals believed to date right back to the kings of Rome; fifteen *flamines*, three of whom were known as 'major' (because they were patricians) and twelve minor, three minor pontiffs and, finally, the six Vestal Virgins, who guarded and tended the public hearth. Under the Empire, the *flamines* of Caesar, Augustus and other deified emperors also appear to have been members of the college of pontiffs. Unlike the pontiffs, whose main task was to supervise the rules governing public cult, the job of the *flamines* was to celebrate rituals. The best-known of them, the *flamen* of Jupiter, represented the function of Jupiter (and was, in a sense, the god's 'double') through the obligations and prohibitions to which he was subject. The insignia or emblems of the pontiffs, which appeared on coins and monuments, were a ladle, a jug, a knife and a *galerus* (cap).

The public priests of Rome under the Republic

The major colleges

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| The college of pontiffs | Pontiffs (3, 5, from the <i>Lex Ogulnia</i> on 9, from Sulla on 15, from Caesar on 16, then probably 19 from Augustus on). <i>Rex sacrorum</i> (king of the sacred rites) plus <i>regina sacrorum</i> . 3 major <i>flamines</i> (of Jupiter, Mars and Quirinus). 12 minor <i>flamines</i> (<i>Carmentalis</i> , <i>Cerialis</i> , <i>Falacer</i> , <i>Floralis</i> , <i>Furrinalis</i> , <i>Palatualis</i> , <i>Pomonalis</i> , <i>Portunalis</i> , <i>Volcanalis</i> , <i>Voltornalis</i> and two others unknown). Major <i>flamines</i> and <i>rex sacrorum</i> = patrician. Pontiffs originally patrician; in 300, 5 patrician plus 4 plebeian. 6 Vestal Virgins (president: <i>Virgo Vestalis Maxima</i>); (later) <i>flamines</i> of deified emperors. President: <i>pontifex maximus</i> . | The pontiffs advised on religious traditions and sacred law, when asked to do so by magistrates, priests or the Senate. They controlled the <i>sacra</i> , sacred places and cemeteries. They established the calendar and organised its intercalation. The <i>flamines</i> celebrated the cult and established the presence of the god whose name they bore. The Vestals tended the public hearth. |
| The college of augurs | 3, 6, from the <i>Lex Ogulnia</i> on 9, from Sulla on 15, from Caesar on 16, then, probably from Augustus on, 19. Originally patrician; in 300, 5 patrician, 4 plebeian. President: the oldest of them. | Controlled the auspices, assisted magistrates (signs), inaugurations. |
| The college of the (<i>quin</i>) <i>decemviri</i> , responsible for consulting the Sibylline Books | 2, from 367 BC on 10, from the second century BC on 15, from Caesar on 19. Originally patrician; in 367, 5 patrician, 5 plebeian. President: one or several yearly <i>magistri</i> . | Looked after and consulted the Sibylline Books, verified the application of Sibylline oracles. |
| The college of the <i>septemviri</i> | In 196 BC 3, from the <i>Lex Domitia</i> on 7, from Augustus on 10, possibly a few more. | Controlled the Roman Games, and probably also all the other public Games. |

► The sodalities

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| Fetiales | 20(?), operated in pairs (the <i>uerbenarius</i> and the <i>pater patratus</i>). | Ritually communicated the diplomatic decisions of the Senate (war, treaties, ultimata). |
| The salii | 2 companies of 12 members each: the <i>salii</i> of the Palatine and of the Quirinal. Patrician. Their function was incompatible with a magistracy or any other priesthood. President: the <i>praesul</i> . | Linked with Mars; processions and dances in the streets of Rome. |
| The luperci | 2 groups, the <i>luperci Quinctiales</i> and the <i>luperci Fabiani</i> . Under Caesar, temporarily, also the <i>luperci Iuliani</i> . 12 members in each group(?). | Celebrated the Lupercalia (15 February). |
| The Arval Brethren | 12. President: the annual <i>magister</i> , assisted by a <i>flamen</i> . | Celebrated the sacrifice to Dea Dia (late May). |

Special priesthoods

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| <i>Curiones</i> | 30, elected by the <i>comitia curiata</i> . From 209 BC all plebeians. President: the <i>curio maximus</i> . | Celebrated the sacrifices of the <i>curiae</i> |
| The public priestess of Ceres | In theory a native of Magna Graecia; of low social status. | Celebrated the rituals of <i>matronae</i> introduced into the cult of Ceres at the end of the third century. |
| The high priest(ess) of the Great Mother | In theory, non-Roman; of low social status. | Together with the <i>galli</i> (president: the <i>archigallus</i>), celebrated the Phrygian rites of the Great Mother. |

The augures, whose numbers increased in step with those of the pontiffs, were responsible for auspical law, for inaugurations and various ways of defining space. They also celebrated occasional rituals of divination, such as the *augurium salutis*, which took place in periods of total peace and was related to success for the Roman people in the coming year. We also know that they offered up sacrifices on the *Arx*, according to secret formulae (this does not mean that all the formulae that they used were secret). Thanks to Varro, we know the formula used for the creation of a *templum* on the ground, probably that of the *auguraculum* on the *Arx*. Also according to Varro, the formulae would vary depending on the context. The emblem of augurs was a small 'crook', the *lituus*, which they held while they officiated at rituals.

Up until the time of Sulla, there were ten guardians of the Sibylline Books (the *decemviri*). The *Lex Cornelia* increased these to fifteen (*quindecimviri*), and under Caesar or Augustus, their number increased to nineteen. They took care of the books, consulted them, and sometimes supervised how the oracles were acted upon. A number of public rituals, whether or not recommended by the Sibylline oracle, were also entrusted to them. Their emblem was a tripod.

The *tresviri epulorum*, who became seven (*septemviri*) under Sulla, relieved the pontiffs of their task of organising the great banquets for the Capitoline triad and the Games. Their emblem was a *patera* (a shallow bowl used in ritual).

The public priests of Rome under the Empire

The major colleges

No change. All these priests celebrated the Games and the vows for the wellbeing of the emperor and his family on 3 January. Every 110 years, the *quindecimviri* celebrated the Secular Games. The number of priests was increased only in exceptional circumstances, by one or two places. The minor *flamines* and minor pontiffs were now drawn from the equestrian order.

► The sodalities

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| The sodalities of the cult of the deified emperors | 25 in each sodality. The <i>sodales Augustales</i> (AD 14), who in 54 became the <i>sodales Augustales Claudiales</i> ; the <i>sodales Flaviales Titiales</i> (81); the <i>sodales Cocceiani</i> (98), <i>Ulpiales</i> (118), <i>Hadrianales</i> (137); and, from 160 on, the <i>sodales Antoniniani</i> . | These celebrated the public cult of the deified emperors. |
| The Arval Brethren | 12 members chosen by co-option with no popular participation. President: an annual <i>magister</i> , assisted by a <i>flamen</i> . | The brethren celebrated the sacrifice of Dea Dia at the ancient boundaries of the territory of Rome. |
| <i>Sodales Titii</i> (or <i>Titenses</i>) | 20 (no other information) | (no information) |
| The priests of old Latin communities | The Laurentes Lavinates (Lavinium); the <i>sacerdotes Albani</i> (Alba); the Caeninenses (Caenina); the Tusculani (Tusculum); the Lanuvini (Lanuvium); the Suciniani (Sucinium). These priests bore the titles of magistrate, priest or sometimes citizen of the community concerned. | They celebrated the cults of the communities absorbed by the Romans or the cults shared by cities subject to Rome. |

Under the Empire, the number of priests per college did not increase. From time to time supernumerary places were made available in the colleges for members of the ruling dynasty. The emperors regularly created new priesthoods, so the total number of public priests increased anyway. Under the Republic, priests were often co-opted before becoming members of the Senate. Under the Empire, the prestige of the great priesthoods led to stricter selection: generally, members of the major colleges were coopted around the age when they

held the consulate – about 40 for non-patricians. Under Augustus and later, members of the four major colleges were regularly made responsible for new rituals: quinquennial Games for the wellbeing of the emperor under Augustus, and annual vows for the wellbeing of the emperor and his family.

2.2 The sodalities

The functions of sodalities were less wide-ranging and less important at the political level. Whereas the pontiffs, augurs and (*quin*)*decemviri*, through their advice and their jurisdiction, exerted a direct influence on political and institutional life, the sodalities devoted themselves to particular ritual tasks. Their responsibilities did not extend beyond the celebration of a ritual or a festival. Unlike the Vestals, they were not even figures whose existence was seen, as it were, as a necessary condition for the existence of Rome. Because of their relative marginality, the sodalities did not evolve in the same way as the major colleges, hence they are often described as 'minor'. Untouched by the major priestly reforms of 300 and above all 104–103, they continued to bear witness to more ancient institutional forms.

In accordance with that tradition, the sodalities continued to recruit for themselves. The *nominatio* and co-optation of new priests (which, for them, took the place of election) took place behind closed doors amongst the college members, with no intervention from the people. We know virtually nothing about these sodalities under the Republic. Some were so marginal (or aristocratic) that they may even have ceased to be active during the last two centuries of the Republic, or at least during the Civil Wars. But they were all resuscitated by Augustus, as models of an ancient form of priesthood, based originally on groups of aristocrats. Under the Empire, these sodalities both carried out the specific rituals for which they were responsible, and took part in the vows and sacrifices celebrated for the wellbeing of the emperor. As they were not subject to the prohibitions of

priestly laws, these priesthoods could be combined with the major priesthoods.

The function of *fetiales* was to conclude treaties, denounce violations of them, insist on reparations and ritually transmit declarations of war. When on these missions, one of the priests was called the *pater patratus*, the other the *uerbenarius* (the bearer of ritual herbs?). We do not know what the function of the *fetiales* was under the Empire.

The *salii* sported an archaic warrior's uniform and carried shields and spears. Thus equipped, they paraded through the town at the opening (19 March) and the close (19 October) of the war season, singing a hymn of invocation to Janus, Jupiter, Juno, Minerva and Mars. Under the Empire, the *genius* of the reigning prince, the names of deified emperors and those of a few deceased members of the dynasty were included in this hymn. Augustus' name was added during his lifetime.

The *luperci* were responsible for celebrating the ritual of the Lupercalia (15 February), which included the sacrifice to Faunus of a ram and a dog, followed by a famous race round the Palatine run by priests clad in goat-skins.

The twelve Arval Brethren, resuscitated or reformed by Augustus in about 29/28 BC, celebrated the sacrifice to Dea Dia (in late May) and tended the goddess's grove.

On the *sodales Titienses* or *Titii*, who were probably likewise resuscitated by Augustus, nothing is known – except that there were twenty of them.

After Augustus' death, *sodales* devoted to the cult of deified or deceased members of the dynasty were created (twenty priests, and five members of the dynasty). The twenty-five *sodales Augustales* were appointed in AD 14. When Claudius died in 54, their services were extended to the deified Claudius and they were now known as the *sodales Augustales Claudiales*. In about 81, they were followed by the *sodales Flaviales Titiales* for the deified Vespasian and Titus, the *sodales Cocceiani Ulpiales Hadrianales* (whose name ended up simply as *Hadrianales*) for Nerva, Trajan and Hadrian,

and finally the *Antoniniani*, after the deification of Antoninus Pius. After that, no more sodalities were created, but the nomenclature of the *Antoniniani* was altered at each new deification, when an extra *diuus* would be added to the priests' title.

There were also a number of priesthoods that carried out ancient rituals some of which originated from the conquest of Latium.

The *curiones*, who were of senatorial or equestrian rank, celebrated certain rites associated with the organisation of the thirty Roman *curiae* that they represented. In particular, they took part in the ritual of investiture for leading magistrates. Under the Republic, the Romans had celebrated a number of cults in common with the conquered Latin peoples, cults that the leading magistrates carried out every year (Juno Sospita in Lanuvium, the Penates and Vesta in Lavinium). During the Latin festivities on the Alban Mount, the leading magistrates, along with delegates from the thirty Latin cities, had to offer up a sacrifice to Jupiter Latiaris. These rites continued to be celebrated throughout the imperial period, but the role of the representatives of the Latin peoples was progressively taken over by Roman knights: colleges of priests composed of Roman knights were given the job of fulfilling the religious duties of ancient communities which, in many cases, had disappeared from Latium (Alba, Lavinium, Caerina, Tusculum, Lanuvium) or from Etruria (Sucinium), communities whose cults the Romans had amalgamated or whose duties they had absorbed. The best-known example is that of the Laurentes Lauinates, who replaced the people of Lavinium in the celebration of the rites shared between Lavinium and Rome and also at the annual re-enactment of the treaty concluded with the Romans in 338 BC. All these ancient priesthoods were linked with the institutional life of the ancient alliance between the Latins and Rome. Under the Empire, the opening up of the metropolis to citizens throughout the world was heralded – particularly at Lavinium and Alba – by these rituals and priesthoods (which were partly linked with the investiture

of leading Roman magistrates) and by the myths woven around them.

2.3 *The organisation of the priestly colleges*

The priestly colleges, like the sodalities, were organised like Roman colleges in general. Their meetings took place in the same manner as the assemblies of any group. Generally, a *magister* ('superior') elected by the members of the college, presided, but sometimes his place was taken by a vice-president (*pro-magister*). The 'superior' of the pontiffs, the *pontifex maximus*, was elected directly by the people and his presidency was a life appointment. From the time of Augustus on, this extremely prestigious function was allotted to the emperor. In religious festivals celebrated by priests, authority was in many cases exercised by two individuals: one represented the active authority, and operated, as it were 'in real time' (he gave his name to the year, was elected, called meetings for his colleagues, and acted and issued decrees in their name); the other remained passive (dictated the formulae pronounced by the former, was present at the celebration of the ritual, and was 'taken' or 'seized' rather than elected). So, for example, we find the pontiff assisted by a *flamen* or by the Vestals, the *magister* of the Arvales side by side with a *flamen*, a *pater patratus* accompanied by a *uerbenarius*. In the rites celebrated by magistrates, it would be a pontiff or an augur who took the 'passive' role.

Every priestly college had an official headquarters, financial resources, and public slaves who performed administrative and ritual tasks. Every priest was also served by an assistant (*kalator*), usually one of his freedmen. These assistants also formed colleges and were responsible for managing the day-to-day affairs of their patrons and also for certain less central ritual tasks, such as expiations.

2.4 *Election and co-option*

Up until the second century BC, the priestly colleges co-opted their members. Later, their autonomy was reduced. Already

by the end of the third century AD, the *pontifex maximus* was elected by the *comitia tributa* from three candidates put forward by the college of pontiffs. In 196, the same procedure was introduced for the *epulones*. After an initial setback in about 145, the system was extended to the three major colleges by the *Lex Domitia* of 104/103 BC. Every time a death occurred, each member of the college concerned had the right to propose (*nominare*) a candidate. It was then up to the *comitia tributa*, or rather a subsection of seventeen of its tribes chosen by lot before the vote, to elect (*creare*) the future priest from among the proposed candidates. Once elected, the future priest was co-opted (*cooptare*) by the college in question. Certain priests, such as augurs and *flamines*, were also 'inaugurated'. Under the Empire, the elections of major priests evolved, along with the system of assemblies. From the reign of Tiberius(?) on, the *nominatio* and election took place in the Senate, but up until Domitian at least, every election was formally confirmed by a vote taken in the *comitia tributa*. *Flamines* and Vestals were 'seized' (*capere*) by the *pontifex maximus*. Under the Empire, when Augustus resuscitated the post of the *flamen* Dialis (of Jupiter), a number of rules determining the choice of these priests were reformed. However, the essential core of rules meanwhile remained in place, so it was hard to find candidates who satisfied all the requirements. To be a *flamen*, it was necessary to be married according to the ancient rite of *confarreatio*, which most of the leading families had abandoned. Besides, in order to supply candidates for all the patrician priesthoods, the emperors were regularly obliged to create new patricians, since the old families were dying out.

At the end of the Civil Wars, Octavian (the future emperor Augustus) received the right of proposing candidates for all vacant priestly posts and, as his candidates were never beaten, this gave him indirect control over the decisions of the colleges. Then, gradually, he himself came to be elected by all the colleges, which made it possible for him to dispense with that earlier right. Under the Republic, the accumulation of

major priesthoods had been banned by the *Lex Domitia*, which had even tried to prevent two close relatives belonging to the same priestly college. But from Tiberius on, the emperor was *ex officio* elected and co-opted into all the colleges at his accession. He was thus in a position to control all priestly decisions.

Under the Republic, not all the priests in the major colleges had been of senatorial rank. By the end of that period all major priests were senators and rather less than half were patricians. It is not known what became of the traditional distribution of seats between patricians and plebeians under the Empire. The *rex sacrorum*, the major *flamines* and the *salii* were invariably of patrician rank, but we do not know enough about the rest of the priests to be able to check whether the tradition continued in the various colleges. Under the Republic, even though most priests were actually from senatorial or equestrian families, the choice of candidates was not formally limited to those two orders. Augustus reinforced the census qualification of priesthoods and of the priestly hierarchy. He made most of the important priesthoods senatorial and gave others (minor *flamines*, *luperci* and Latin priesthoods) equestrian rank.

3 OTHER PUBLIC PRIESTHOODS

3.1 The cults of Ceres, the Great Mother and Isis

Recruitment for the public priestess of Ceres (under the Republic, at least) had to be from 'foreigners', who were then given civic rights. We know nothing about the rules by which this priestess was governed. She was of lower social status than other priests. Likewise, we know virtually nothing about the high priests and priestesses of the Great Mother or the organisation of the *galli*. At the end of the reign of Antoninus Pius, an *archigallus* presided over them. The college of *dendrophori*, created under Claudius, and that of the *cannophori*, attested since the mid-second century, also participated in the cult of the Great Mother and Attis. The

Egyptian cults became part of Roman public cult under Caligula and later, above all, the Flavians, but the cult officials of Isis and Serapis were not incorporated into the system of public priesthoods. As well as the college of *pastophori*, who had administered the cult of Isis since the time of Sulla, and the *Anubo-* or *Bubastophori*, who had the right of carrying in procession the shrines with the insignia of the deities, there existed a numerous and specialised clergy (priests of Isis), over which a high priest (the 'prophet') probably presided.

3.2 The districts of Rome

The priesthoods of the various quarters of Rome were of lower rank, but had an important social function. The *magistri* and *flamines* of the *pagi* and the *montes* of the Republic were replaced, from 12 BC on, by *uicomagistri* and *uicoministri* (of servile rank) whose task was to celebrate the cult of the *Lares compitales*, later the *Lares Augusti*. Their colleges included free men, freedmen and slaves.

3.3 Colonies and municipia

The colonies and *municipia* had a simplified or less highly developed system of traditional Roman priesthoods. Under the Empire, alongside pontiffs and augurs (at least three in number) there might be found the *flamines* of deified emperors, priests of Rome and Augustus, and a few priesthoods of important local deities. At a lower level, the *Augustales* and *seuiri Augustales* (the number of whom varied) celebrated the same type of cults as the Roman *uicomagistri*. Finally, as the constitution of Colonia Genetiva (Urso) states, public temples and cults not managed directly by magistrates or priests were entrusted to annual *magistri*, appointed by the council of decurions.

Under the Empire, the conquest of the Mediterranean world and the organisation of the provinces gave rise to annual cults linking all the cities of a given province. These sent delegated representatives to a federal sanctuary where

they took part in a great sacrifice addressed to Rome and Augustus. At this sanctuary the representatives each year elected the provincial priest, who directed the rites and sacrifices in question. The honour of being chosen as the delegate of their city and possibly being elected provincial priest represented the apex of the careers of members of the local elites. These sanctuaries and cults were developed first, from the time of Augustus on, in the Greek world, then likewise in the chief towns of all the provinces. According to a rescript of Constantine to the Hispellates (*CIL*, 11.5265), a similar system was set up in Italy at the time of the creation of judicial districts under Marcus Aurelius.

4 PRIVATE PRIESTHOODS

In families, it was the father or his representatives who carried out religious rituals. The head of the family fixed the calendar, decided which deities to honour, and celebrated the family festivals inside the home and at public cult sites. The greatest families had cults associated with their own 'clan' (*gens*), which from time to time reunited all those who claimed to belong to the same gens. Some of those cults may have been public. One such, some scholars think, was the cult of Hercules at the Great Altar, entrusted to the Potitii and the Pinarii until the city bought the priesthood in 312 BC. At a later date, the *gens Iulia* celebrated clan cults at Bovillae, ten miles out of Rome along the Via Appia; under the Empire, the cult of the imperial family (*domus Augusta*) was established at this spot.

Families would be surrounded by professional priests and priestesses who gravitated to them, offering their skills in divination or ritual for payment. *Haruspices*, astrologers, Chaldaeans, sorcerors, healers and *magi* were mocked and criticised, sometimes even persecuted, but everyone consulted them, the elite as well as the common people. In this type of priesthood, the priest would often be thought to be close to the deities and able to influence them, or even to bend them

to his will, and the rites practised offered all the picturesque elements likely to impress the minds of his clients. The formulae and practices of these charlatans were not so very different from those in use in public or private cults. The cures recommended by Aesculapius, for example, resemble those of the healers who touted for custom at crossroads; and the venerable public rites of *deuotio* and the burial of living Gauls and Greeks were, in the last analysis, also magical rites of a spectacular kind. In 186 BC, traditional Bacchic rites were transformed by a Campanian priestess, in order to make a particularly powerful – and, in the view of the authorities, fraudulent – impact upon the initiates. A number of myths circulating in the Augustan period represented the Roman priests of archaic times as invested with extraordinary powers similar to those possessed by ‘sorcerers’, as if to stress the efficacy of the traditional rites and the power of priests.

Chapter 9

The double life of the Roman gods

The Romans, like the Greeks, accepted the fundamental principle that the gods lived in the world alongside men and strove with them, in a civic context, to bring about the common good. They also believed that the deities surpassed the city and its mortal inhabitants by far, in fact were awesomely superior. In religion, however, human relations with the immortals came down essentially to an image of deities who were close, benevolent, and unwilling to make use of their superhuman powers in day-to-day life. The gods did occasionally reveal their true faces, either in particular rituals or when they were angered; and then their language was one of cataclysms, epidemics and devastation – in short, terror. But in ordinary life, they did not behave as absolute masters and tyrants, but as fellow-citizens and benevolent patrons. They did not demand dishonourable behaviour or humiliating devotion from mortals and, above all, they did not attempt to control men’s thoughts. In a passage discussing the behaviour one should adopt towards slaves, Seneca compares the gods to masters who act as patrons rather than as tyrants: ‘They (slaves) ought to respect you rather than fear you . . . Some may say “This is what he plainly means: slaves are to pay respect as if they were clients or early-morning callers!” Anyone who holds this opinion forgets that what is good enough for a god cannot be too little for a master’ (*Letters to Lucilius*, 47.18).

To be sure, the immortals had a right to the honours assigned to their extremely high rank in earthly society, but like other citizens of high rank – magistrates, senators and the