

## Chapter 6

# Sacrifice

A sacrifice lay at the heart of most religious acts – so much so that Macrobius, in his commentary on Virgil, wrote that piety meant knowing how to sacrifice. There were dozens of ways of sacrificing correctly, depending on the type of sacrifice, the context, and the deity to be honoured. Incense might be involved, or some liquid, or plants or animal victims. But the forms of sacrifice did not depend solely on the social context or the deities concerned; they were also dictated by the ritual scenario of all the major religious festivals. The different kinds of sacrifices did not stand in opposition to one another; rather, they were complementary or differed in degree.

### 1 WHAT WAS A SACRIFICE?

#### *1.1 Preparations, victims, offerings*

A sacrifice was a complex rite that took place in an open space, in the presence of the community concerned. Within the framework of the public cult, it was celebrated in front of the temple, close to the altar set up in the religious precinct. Within a domestic framework, it took place on an altar, either fixed or movable, set up in one of the 'public' spaces of the house such as the atrium or the peristyle. Finally, private sacrifices connected with divination or magic were more likely to seek out isolated places, seldom visited – a quiet room, or a necropolis, for example. Sacrifices were offered by those who held authority in the community in question: the father of the family in a domestic context, the president

(*magister*) in a college, the yearly magistrates or public priests in the city. But that authority could be delegated to substitutes. The celebrant of the sacrifice was assisted by attendants and slaves who were responsible for all the manual work entailed in the ritual. The evidence of Cato's treatise *On Agriculture* suggests that the form of sacrifice used in public cults and in the private cults of the leading Roman families was similar.

Both in public and in private religion, the ritual would usually start at the beginning of the day, at sunrise, close to the cult site (by contrast, sacrifices deemed to be 'magic' took place at night, in secret, avoiding any civic participation). First the celebrants and their assistants bathed or washed themselves. They wore special ceremonial robes. In the 'Roman rite', the official dress was the citizen's toga, draped in such a way as to leave the arms free and form a kind of hood or head-covering (the so-called *cinctus Gabinus*; literally, 'knotted in the Gabine fashion' – from the Italian town of Gabii). The animal victims, chosen (*probare*) to match the sex of the deity and in accordance with other ritual criteria, were always domesticated animals (cattle, sheep, pigs or occasionally goats). They were washed and adorned with ribbons and fillets of red and white wool. Their horns were gilded, sometimes decorated with discs (in the case of cattle); the backs of pigs and cattle were covered with a richly decorated, fringed blanket (*dorsuale*).

According to the 'Roman rite', male gods received castrated male victims (except Mars, Neptune, Janus and the *genius*, who were offered intact animals) and goddesses received female victims. Depending on the context, the age of the victim might vary, to express the hierarchy of a group of deities or that of the celebrants. In principle, adult animals (known as *maiores*) were deemed the more suitable for the public cult. Deities of the upper world received white victims, those of the lower world (such as Pluto) or those associated with the night received victims with dark coats. Vulcan and Robigo were offered red-haired animals. In certain sacrifices

to Tellus or Ceres, pregnant cows were offered up. Pigs were generally used for expiations and for funerary cult. Other animals were used in certain special rites, a horse, for example, in the sacrifice of the October Horse (15 October), a dog in a sacrifice to Robigo (25 April), a white cockerel in the cult of Aesculapius. In a domestic context, other kinds of victims might be used, depending on the family's customs. Finally, in sacrifices involving magic, the ingredients varied depending on the purpose and the form of the ritual (the exotic regularly playing a part here).

Plant offerings were brought along in baskets, liquids in jugs, incense in small boxes. We do not know how vegetables were chosen or prepared. We do not even know exactly what was meant by *fruges* ('fruits of the earth'), a very common type of offering: was it a question of cereals or did fruits and vegetables need to be included? No doubt the precise meaning was determined by the context of the ritual. A list preserved by Festus (*De uerborum significatione*, p. 298, ed. Lindsay) mentions, as acceptable offerings in some context which is not exactly clear, 'a grain (*far*), boiled barley flour (*polenta*), leavened bread, dried figs, meat in the form of beef or lamb, cheeses, mutton, boiled grain (*alica*), sesame seeds and oil, scaly fish (except for *squaturn*)'. Salted flour known as *mola salsa*, used constantly in public sacrifices, was prepared by the Vestals at the time of the Lupercalia (15 February), the Vestalia (9 June) and the Ides (13th) of September. But we do not know whether *mola salsa* was used in private sacrifices or in the colonies and *municipia*; and if it was, we have no idea who prepared it – whether the Vestals or someone else. In fact, virtually nothing is known about the forms of sacrifice in the colonies and the *municipia*. The suggestion that ritual was exactly the same there as in Rome is pure conjecture. The problem, in any case, is that there were no Vestals and no sanctuaries of Vesta outside Rome and Latium (where they were to be found in the cities of Lavinium and Alba, the legendary predecessors of Rome, as well as at Tibur).

### 1.2 Preliminary rites

Once preparations were completed, a procession moved towards the altar of the deity to be honoured. Surrounded by their assistants, the celebrants advanced to the altar. The sacrifice began to the strains of a flute. It started with the 'preface' (*praefatio*). The celebrant poured incense and wine into a fire burning in a round, portable hearth or brazier. The verb generally used for this is 'to do' (*facere, fieri*), for sacrifice is defined as an 'action' par excellence: literally, 'one *does* it with incense and wine, one *does* it with a victim'. The portable hearth used to transmit the offering to the deity in some way represents the identity of the celebrant, and so indicates what community is involved. We do not know what rituals were followed in the lighting of the altar fires. According to ancient sources, the goods offered (incense and wine 'unmixed', that is undiluted with water) were closely associated with the nature of the gods. Incense was supposed to represent their immortality and supremacy, while wine represented divine sovereignty. So through this *praefatio* the celebrants ritually proclaimed the immortality and superiority of the gods. In other words, this initial rite should be understood as a respectful salutation, acknowledging the principal qualities of the deities honoured.

In most cases the sources do not identify precisely which deities are honoured in the *praefatio*. In the prescriptions for sacrifice given by Cato, the *praefatio* is addressed to Jupiter, Janus and Vesta; in other cases it is clear that the particular deity to whom the sacrifice was directed was also included in the *praefatio*. This part of the ritual was in all likelihood addressed to all interested deities, from amongst whom the celebrants would sometimes single out one figure or another for special attention. At the same time, the *praefatio* presented the gods with, as it were, an invitation to the sacrifice. At Forum Clodii (Etruria), a religious rule dating from the beginning of the common era specifically declares that with this incense and wine the decurions 'invited to the banquet' the deities concerned (*ILS*, 154. 10–12). The *praefatio* thus

constituted a summary of the rites that were to follow and explained their intention. On that account, it was a particularly popular subject for images of sacrifices and eventually came to signify, quite simply, *pietas*.

### 1.3 The immolatio: consecrating the offering

After the *praefatio*, the celebrant moved on to the immolation (*immolatio*) of the victim. In the Roman rite, he sprinkled the victim's back with salted flour (*mola salsa*, hence the term *immolatio*), poured a little wine on its brow, then ran the sacrificial knife along its spine. From the prayers of immolation and the commentaries of Roman antiquarians, we may conclude that the rite proclaimed the consecration of the victim. With the knife it symbolically transferred the victim from human property (the sprinkling of the *mola salsa*: flour was characteristically human food) to the god's property (the wine poured on to the animal's forehead). The action with the knife was, as it were, the verb in this proposition, in which the ritual flour represented the purity of the victim and its origin among human beings. Once that transfer was completed, the celebrant ordered a sacrificer to act (*agere*): this man struck down then bled large victims, such as cows or bulls; smaller animals had their throats cut. In principle, the victim had to indicate its consent, particularly by lowering its head. For this reason, it would generally be tied by a harness fastened to a ring at the foot of the altar so that, with a little help from the sacrificer, it would make the gesture of acquiescence. Any manifestation of fear or panic on the part of the victim was forbidden during the ceremony, as were all other disturbances. If any occurred, they constituted an unfavourable omen for the celebrant. In sacrifices conducted in accordance with the Greek rite, the celebrant, whose head would in this case be unveiled and crowned with a laurel wreath, scattered a few grains of wheat and drops of water on the victim's head, and then burned in the sacrificial fire a few hairs plucked from its brow.

Goat  
city

Once slaughtered, the victim was laid on its back and cut open. With the help of his assistants, in particular the *haruspex*, the celebrant ascertained that the offering was accepted by the deity. Such acceptance (*litatio*) was indicated by the normal condition of the entrails (the *exta*, a group of five organs: the liver, the lungs, the gall bladder, the peritoneum and the heart). If these were all normal, it meant that the sacrifice was accepted and matters could proceed. If the *exta* showed any abnormality, the sacrifice was annulled. The entire operation was then started again from scratch, using different victims, and so it continued until the gods accepted it (*usque ad litationem*). In certain types of sacrifices, the *exta* were inspected, in accordance with Etruscan custom, with a view to telling the future (*haruspicio*).

#### 1.4 The sacrificial offering

At this point the victim was divided up. The portions belonging to the gods (the entrails, that is to say the seat of life) were set to cook in a pot in the case of bovine victims, or else grilled on skewers (sheep, pigs). When the boiling or grilling was completed, the celebrant tipped the deity's share, duly sprinkled with *mola salsa* and wine, into the sacrificial fire burning on the altar. Offerings to aquatic gods were tossed into water, those for chthonic deities (the Lares, for example) or deities of the underworld were thrown on to the ground or into a ditch, where they were burned. All these actions were accompanied by prayers which specified, without ambiguity, who was offering, who receiving, and who could expect to benefit from the ritual. In public sacrifices, the prayers always contained the formula 'for the Roman people' (Paul<sup>us</sup> Diaconus, Summary of Festus, *De uerborum significatione*, p. 59, ed. Lindsay).

This description has reduced sacrifice to the bare essentials, but the rites themselves were frequently far more complicated than these basic actions. In the first place, the offering sometimes included other morsels of the victim's flesh: part of the offering might be cooked in a more elaborate

fashion and then be placed, possibly in the form of meatballs, on a table inside the temple. Another variant of a great banquet for the gods was the ancient festival known as the *epulum Iouis*, the banquet of Jupiter on 13 September, at which senators feasted on the Capitol with Jupiter, and probably also with Juno and Minerva as well. This mode of celebration eventually became the general rule, and by the beginning of the common era a simplified form of *lectisternium*, involving a permanent display of couches (*pulvinaria*), had been adopted by most public temples.

Thanks to the records of the Arval Brethren, we know that the god's banquet consisted – at least on some occasions – of two courses, just like a human feast: a meat course and a course of sweet wine and cakes. It was a kind of *symposium* during which the deity's statue was garlanded and perfumed. Throughout all the stages of these ceremonies, the human participants could, by actions and words, remind the deity of his or her functions and ask for favours. Add to this the fact that there was never just one deity in a cult place or a ritual, and that parts of the banquet, perhaps those that came from the subsidiary sacrifices (with victims of a lesser rank), were offered to the other gods and goddesses who were the 'guests' of the main patron deity of the cult site. All this makes clear that a sacrifice needed a good deal of time. The sheer complexity of the ritual meant that it took much longer than the brief formulae given in inscriptions or in ancient literature would often suggest.

#### 1.5 The sacrificial banquet

When the offering had been consumed in the flames or placed on the ground, the rest of the victim was 'rendered profane', that is to say the celebrant 'seized' it by laying his hand upon it, thereby making it suitable for human consumption. The same procedure was followed with liquid offerings and probably also with those with those based on grain and vegetable (broths, cakes and breads). In this way, the celebrant did not consume sacred food but food that the

deity had somehow agreed to let him have. This was far more akin to a gift (*sportula*) given to a client by his patron than to the incorporation of part of the deity by the faithful, as in the Christian Communion. It should be noted that in minor sacrifices offered in the course of large meals, it was the other way around: there, it was the gods who received a 'sportula' from the banquet host (see text box below).

### An account of a public sacrifice: the sacrifice to Dea Dia (Rome, 17, 19 and 20 or 27, 29 and 30 May)

#### 1. In AD 38

On the sixth day before the Kalends of June (27 May), Caius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, the president of the college of Arval Brethren, in his residence, which had belonged to his grandfather, Tiberius Caesar, b[egan] the sacrifice to Dea Dia in the open air, on the altar. Those present were Marcus Furius Camillus, Appius Iunius Silanus, Cnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, Paullus Fabius Persicus, Caius Caecina Largus, Taurus [Statilius] Corvinus, Lucius Annius Vinicianus, [Caius] Calpurnius Piso.

On the fourth day before the Kalends of June (29 May), in the sacred grove, the vice-president Taurus Statilius Corvinus, in the name of the college of the [Arval] Brethren, immolated a cow to Dea Dia. On the same day, at the same spot, Caius Caesar Augustus Germanicus, [president] of the college of the Arval Brethren, in the company of the flamen Appius Silanus, immolated a plump female lamb [to Dea Dia], and gave the signal to the four-horse chariots and the vaulting horsemen. Those present were Paullus Fabius Persicus, Cnaeus Domitius Ahenobarbus, Marcus Furius Camillus, Caius Caecina Largus, Lucius Annius Vinicianus, Caius Calpurnius Piso.

(The third day is not reported.)

#### 2. In AD 87

(The ceremony of 17 May is not reported.)

In the consulate of Caius Bellicius Natalis Tebanianus and Caius Duce-nius Proculus, on the fourteenth day before the Kalends of June (19 May), in the sacred grove of Dea Dia, with Caius Iulius Silanus presiding and

► Caius Nonius Bassus Salvius Liberalis officiating, the Arval Brethren celebrated the sacrifice to Dea Dia. Caius Salvius Liberalis, who was officiating in the place of the president Caius Iulius Silanus, in front of the sacred grove immolated on the altar two expiatory sows for the pruning of the sacred grove and the works to be done there; then he immolated a cow in homage to Dea Dia. Caius Salvius Liberalis Nonius Bassus, Lucius Maecius Postumus, Aulus Iulius Quadratus, Publius Sallustius Blaesus and Quintus Tillius Sassius seated themselves in the tetrastyle and consumed a sacrificial banquet. Each having donned a *toga praetexta* and a crown of wheat ears adorned with ribbons, they climbed the slope of the sacred grove of Dea Dia, after having dismissed their assistants, and through the medium of Caius Salvius Liberalis, who was officiating in the place of the president, and also through that of Quintus Tillius Sassius, who was officiating in the place of the *flamen*, they immolated a plump female lamb to Dea Dia; once the sacrifice was completed, they all made offerings of incense and wine. Then, having had the crowns carried into the sanctuary and having perfumed the statues, they elected Quintus Tillius Sassius as the annual president from the forthcoming Saturnalia until the next Saturnalia, and Celsus Marius Candidus as *flamen*. Then they descended to the tetrastyle, and reclining in the *triclinium* they banqueted with the president Caius Iulius Silanus. After the banquet, carrying the *ricinium*, sandals, and a crown of intertwined roses, and having dismissed the attendants, he (*sic*) climbed up beyond the barriers and gave the signal to the four-horse chariots and the vaulting horsemen. Under the presidency of Lucius Maecius Postumus, he (*sic*) decorated the victors with palms and silver crowns. On that same day those who had been present in the sacred grove dined in Rome with the president Caius Iulius Silanus at his home.

On the thirteenth day before the Kalends of June (20 May), the Arval Brethren dined with the president Caius Iulius Silanus at his home in order to conclude the sacrifice to Dea Dia. And in the middle of the banquet Caius Salvius Liberalis Nonius Bassus, Lucius Maecius Postumus, Aulus Iulius Quadratus, Publius Sallustius Blaesus, Quintus Tillius Sassius and Lucius Venuleius Apronianus made a sacrifice of incense and wine, assisted by the same boys, each with a living father and a living mother, as on the sixteenth day before the Kalends of June (17 May). And they had the offerings of cereals carried to the altar, touched the *tuscanicae* with flaming torches and made their assistants carry them to their homes. The boys [each with a living father and mother] who were present at the sacrifice to Dea Dia [were . . . ] Ilius Marcianus, Publius Calvisius, the son of Ruso, [ . . . ] Marcus Petronius Cremutius, the son of Umbrinus [ . . . ]

### 3. In AD 240

On the sixth day before the Kalends of June (27 May), in the home of the vice-president Fabius Fortunatus, which is situated on the Capsaria street on the greater Aventine, [the vice-president] began the sacrifice to Dea Dia at sunrise; he touched fresh and dried cereals and loaves of bread surrounded by laurel leaves, and perfumed the goddess. Other priests, wearing the *toga praetexta* and fillets, in their turn sacrificed with incense and wine, touched fresh and dried cereals and loaves surrounded by laurel leaves, perfumed the goddess, sat down on chairs, and each received a *sportula* of one hundred *denarii*. Before midday, the vice-president, having bathed and donned a white dining costume, reclined on a couch and consumed the banquet. And the boys, sons of senators and each with a living father and mother, Lucius Alfenius Virius Iulianus and Lucius Alfenius Virius Avitianus, sat on chairs to eat and likewise consumed the banquet. After the meal, the table placed before the vice-president was removed. He washed his hands with water, a cover decorated with appliqué work was placed [on his couch] and he sacrificed with incense and wine, assisted by the boys, each clad in a *toga praetexta*, [who], together with public slaves, carried [the offerings] to the altar. The vice-president received a *sportula* and banqueting crowns [. . . gap . . .]

[On the fourth day before the Kalends of June (29 May), in the grove of Dea Dia, close to the altar, the vice-president Fabius Fortunatus Victorinus immolated two young sows to expiate the pruning of the sacred grove and the work to be done there; and there [he] immolated an honorific [cow] to Dea Dia; [then, having returned to the tetrastyle,] he sat down. [When he returned to the] altar he offered up to Dea Dia the entrails of the [two] young sows and, close to the silvered brazier, the entrails of the cow. He expressed [congratulations,] then, returning to the tetrastyle, he sat on the benches and ordered it to be noted in the *codex* that he had been present, had celebrated the sacrifice, and had offered up the entrails. He then laid aside the *toga praetexta* and went off to bathe. When he returned, he welcomed his colleagues, who were arriving. When the required number of colleagues had gathered, each laid aside his *toga praetexta*, sat down on the benches in the tetrastyle and had it noted in the *codex* that he had been present and had celebrated the sacrifice. Then a low table with no iron components was placed before them. They were served with bread rolls made from fine flour, consumed the 'black pudding' of the young sows, shared out [the meat from] them, and banqueted. They then veiled their heads in the tetrastyle and climbed up the slope of the sacred grove. The vice-president and the flamen sacrificed with pastries and griddle-cakes, immolated a plump, white, female lamb, inspected the entrails [to ascertain] the acceptance [of the goddess], and offered it as a sacrifice. They then

entered the sanctuary and, on a table on a grassy mound in front of [the statue of] Dea Dia, they each sacrificed three times on the table with three balls of liver bound together with milk and flour, then, in similar fashion, they each sacrificed twice on the earth with three more [balls] on the mound. Then having returned outside, close to the altar they prayed with the help of three balls of liver and three griddle-cakes. Re-entering [the sanctuary], they prayed again and touched the cooking pots with the boiled mixture. Then the vice-president, the *flamen* and the public slaves, and two priests were handed the cooking pots and, when the doors were opened for them, they cast the meal for the Mother of the Lares down the slope. Then, once the doors were closed, they sat down on the marble benches and shared the loaves made from fine flour and encircled with laurel leaves with their slaves and the rest of the staff. They then left the sanctuary and stood before the altar. The vice-president and the *flamen* sent two of their colleagues to fetch the cereals. When these returned with the cereals, the vice-president and the *flamen*, holding cups of wine, handed them over with their right hands and took the cereals in their left hands. Next, they recited a prayer and then, standing close to the altar, they all sacrificed with their boxes of incense and the cups of wine sweetened with milk. Then, with a basket, they sacrificed close to the altar with cakes as a form of contribution. They then re-entered the sanctuary, were handed the books and, striking the ground with a triple beat, they read out the hymn. At the given signal, they returned the books to the staff. They then perfumed the goddesses and offered lighted candles. The central door of the sanctuary of Dea Dia was opened and the crowns offered to Dea Dia were carried in, while Arescon Manilianus, the secretary, proclaimed the names of our Lord Gordian Augustus and those of the other priests. Next they read the book and elected (?) a president for the coming year, which [was to run] from the next Saturnalia [to the following Saturnalia] and proposed the name of the *flamen*. Congratulations followed and, each of them wearing a *toga praetexta*, they all descended from the sanctuary and entered into the 'pavilions' to change their garments. Having donned white outer garments and sheepskin sandals (?), [they moved] into the tetrast[yle] [. . . gap . . .].

(The account of the third day has not been preserved.)

Extracts from J. Scheid, *Commentarii fratrum arvalium qui supersunt: les copies épigraphiques des protocoles annuels de la confrérie arvale* (21 av.-304 apr. J.-C.), Rome, 1997 (pp. 28ff., no. 12; pp. 146ff., no. 55; pp. 331ff., no. 114).

Sacrificial victims offered to the deities of the underworld were completely incinerated (a holocaust), for the 'living'

could not sit down at the table with gods who presided over the world of death. Sacrifices offered in a bid to gain influence over a deity often took the form of a holocaust, as these were generally addressed to gods of the underworld. Because people expected a specific result from these rituals, the offerings and the general context were somewhat different from the usual, everyday ones.

The consumption of portions of meat (accompanied by bread and diluted wine) or of liquids offered by the celebrant of a sacrifice is a complex problem, for the forms of this were legion. The only general principle governing sacrificial banquets was that of hierarchy and privilege. The celebrants and sacrificers generally consumed their portions on the spot, paid for by the community. In some festivals, particular social groups within the city banqueted at the public's expense (*publice*) at a specific cult site: so, for example, the senators ate on the Capitol on the occasions of the *Epulum Iouis*, the great sacrifice to the Capitoline triad on 13 September (the *Ludi Romani*) and 13 November (the *Ludi Plebei*). Under Augustus, they were granted the privilege of banqueting on all occasions at the expense of the people. Priests also enjoyed certain privileges, as did the Capitol's official flute players and probably also the *parasiti* of Apollo (theatre actors) in the temple of this god. These rules imply that not all citizens, not even all of those present at the sacrifice, took part in banquets at the people's expense. They probably had to buy their portions, either on the spot or at a butcher's shop, unless some benefactor offered to pay for their meat, along with the bread and wine that accompanied it. In any case, it seems that many public sacrifices produced no more than a limited banquet for the celebrants. The portions of meat that were left over were presumably sold in the butchers' shops to the other citizens. Following traditional Roman logic (as in the *census*, which gave greater voting power to the rich), the most eminent members of a group and those with authority always took precedence and received the best portions. All kinds of ways were found to

satisfy the idea that public sacrifices were ostensibly offered for the Roman people as a whole: sometimes it was the people's representatives who banqueted, sometimes all the citizens who were present; sometimes – finally – all those prepared to buy the meat from a butcher. In smaller communities, at the level of a city district, a college or a family, the sacrifice and the banquet were more closely linked: those present consumed the sacrifice that they offered. All the same, the existence of numerous foundations set up by benefactors to finance the distribution of sacrificial meals suggests that normally the sacrificial meat was not shared out between all those present as a matter of course.

One particular, but very common, type of sacrifice was that offered during a public or private meal. In between the first course and the second, incense and wine would be offered up along with certain elements of the banquet and other specifically chosen offerings. This simpler form of sacrifice sometimes constituted the first or last phase in a major public sacrifice: it took place during the sacrificial banquet in the strict sense of the term. There can be no doubt that it constituted the most common ritual celebrated within a domestic framework. In all banquets, a sacrifice of this type was made to the Lares and the Penates and, from the end of the first century BC, also to the *genius* of Augustus. These sacrifices clearly underline the connection of the ritual with the practice of eating and feasting. During the offering the celebrants of the sacrifice would recline on dining couches (*triclinia*) and would share the food with the gods. In this variant of a sacrifice the mortals were the first to eat. This inevitably sets it apart from blood sacrifice, or at least from sacrifice celebrated in a sacred space, near an altar or a temple. If the sacrifice took place in a *triclinium*, in short in a human space, the mortals held the foremost role; if it took place inside the dwelling of a deity, the mortals waited respectfully for the 'owner' to consume his share, before appropriating the remainder of the offering.

## Two private sacrifices (second century BC)

Before harvest the sacrifice of the *porca praecidanea* (offered before the harvest) should be offered in this manner: offer a sow as *porca praecidanea* to Ceres before harvesting spelt, barley, beans and rape seed; and address a prayer, with incense and wine, to Janus, Jupiter and Juno before offering the sow. Make an offering of cakes to Janus, with these words: 'Father Janus, in offering these cakes, I humbly beg that thou wilt be gracious and merciful to me and my children, my house and my household.' Then present the wine to Janus, saying: 'Father Janus, as I prayed humbly in offering the cakes, so wilt thou to the same end be honoured by this wine placed before thee.' And then pray to Jupiter thus: 'Jupiter, wilt thou deign to accept the cake; wilt thou deign to accept the wine placed before thee?' Then offer up the *porca praecidanea*. When the entrails have been removed, make an offering of cakes to Janus, with a prayer as before. After the same manner, also, offer wine to Janus and offer wine to Jupiter, as was directed before for the offering of the cakes, and the consecration of the cake. Afterwards offer entrails and wine to Ceres.

Cato, *On Agriculture*, 134

The offering is to be made in this way: offer to Jupiter Dapalis (of sacrifices) a cup of wine of any size you wish, observing the day as a holiday for the oxen, the teamsters and those who make the offering. In making the offering, use this formula: 'Jupiter Dapalis, for as much as it is fitting that a cup of wine be offered thee, in my house and in the midst of my people, for thy sacred feast; and to that end, be thou honoured by the offering of this food.' Wash the hands and then take the wine and say: 'Jupiter Dapalis, be thou honoured by the offering of thy feast.' Then, if you wish, make an offering to Vesta also. The feast of Jupiter consists of roasted meat and an urn (= 12.5 litres) of wine. Let the celebrant make the offering with ritual purity, and let him make it profane (= suitable for human consumption), by laying his hand upon it.

Cato, *On Agriculture*, 132

### 1.6 Other sacrificial rituals

At some specific rituals, such as the great *lectisternia*, all family heads would hold banquets, to which they invited all their neighbours and passers-by. It was a way of demonstrating the hospitality that they were offering to the gods,

whether to thank or to appease them. Great sacrificial meals seem to have been the rule in the cult of Mithras under the Empire, for the Mithraic cult sites took the form of a large *triclinium* with an altar at one end. The initiates banqueted, and water, bread and wine were offered up; but we do not know when or how the blood sacrifice took place. As far as we can tell, some of the rituals celebrated on the occasion of the Megalesian Games in honour of the Great Mother (4–10 April) consisted in private banquets. Leading families formed 'sodalities' to host lavish feasts known as *mutitationes* ('invitations to banquets financed in common'), no doubt in the company of the goddess, on the last day of the festival. This ritual calls to mind the hospitality that great patrician families offered to the Great Mother when she arrived in Rome in 204 BC. Alongside the *mutitationes*, the urban praetor offered up a public sacrifice. We know nothing, in the Republic at least (for later, see below), about the 'Phrygian' sacrifices made by the priests specifically attached to the goddess's cult.

As for the cult of Syrian gods, we know that this included sacrifices, but we have no information on their form. We may assume that they were subject to particular rules regarding purity. To judge by the equipment found in cult places of the goddess Isis, sacrifices did take place there; and we know of libations of water and offerings of incense. But the details of these rituals are unknown. In all imported cults such as these, the processions and the spectacular rites of ecstasy and self-mutilation are better attested in our sources than are the rituals of sacrifice, no doubt because these were not all that different in their practice from those in traditional Roman sacrifices.

## 2 THE MEANING OF SACRIFICE

### 2.1 How should sacrifice be understood?

A study of the rituals known to us (mostly public ones), ritual vocabulary, and remarks found in ancient literature make it



clear that Roman sacrifice was first and foremost a banquet, quite literally. In Roman ritual, as in the sacrifices in the Greek world, to sacrifice was to eat with the gods. But the meal offered to the gods was more than a banquet. To sacrifice was – in the course of a feast to which the gods were invited – to divide the food into two parts, one for the deities, the other for the human beings. Through this division of food between the gods and the humans, sacrifice established and represented the superiority and immortality of the former, and the mortal condition and pious submission of the latter. The occasion was not placed under the sign of the terror inspired and exercised by the gods. The idea of human sacrifice was ruled out, even symbolically. The violence was discreetly done to a third party, an animal or a plant, and it represented a clear line in the hierarchy of beings. The gods and men were above the line which marked out peaceful relations with due regard for civic liberty. Below the line were beings that were similar but inferior, destined for servitude to, and use by, their superiors.

## 2.2 Variants and deviations

We may well wonder whether banquets played a role in Egyptian cults, but we know too little about them to be certain. The idea of Mithraic sacrifice, while clearly linked with the context of a banquet, was founded on other representations too, notably the images of Mithras' violent immolation of a bull; through these it is possible to analyse something of the ritual's significance. It seems likely that during the Empire in the Phrygian cult of the Great Mother, as well as in Syrian cults, sacrifice (particularly the distinctive ritual of the *taurobolium*) had other connotations, which involved the submission of the victim, in contrast to the consent of the animal that was central to the traditional ritual. The effect of this proliferation of variants and refinements in the context of Roman sacrifice was to emphasise the complex nature of the gods. For those who reflected on Roman religion as a whole, the rites of Mithras or of the Great

Mother, taken together with traditional Roman sacrifices, represented the two types of relations that could obtain between mortals and immortals.

We can also understand why 'magic' sacrifices aroused hostility: not only were they believed to inflict physical or material damage on others, for the benefit of those who celebrated them, but they set out to subject a deity and, in many cases, a fellow-citizen to the will of the celebrant or his client. Such conduct flouted the principle of civic liberty and fell into the category of crimes of violence. A 'gentler' ritual, favoured by some philosophers, consisted in seeking particularly privileged relations with the deities (this was known as 'theurgy'). In principle, this ritual was not classified as violent, but the dividing line between speculation and transgressive behaviour was a tenuous one, and theurgy was viewed with just as much suspicion as 'magic'.

Human sacrifice was not altogether unknown in Rome. While opposed to this practice, which seems to have been performed sporadically up until the time of Pliny the Elder, the Romans did nevertheless describe as public sacrifices the burial alive of a pair of Gauls and a pair of Greeks, in the Forum Boarium. This was an exceptional ritual to which they resorted in periods of danger; through it they offered representatives of the enemies of the Roman people to the deities of the underworld. In similar fashion, the Romans would solemnly dedicate besieged towns to the gods of the underworld or, at the private level, their own personal enemies, using magical rites. These examples show clearly that the Romans did on occasion resort to the sacrifice of human beings, in order to shift the emphasis in relations between mortals and immortals by granting the immortals absolute power over mortals other than the Romans themselves.

## 2.3 Sacrifice, a 'credo' expressed by action

The kernel of the rite of sacrifice may be seen as a 'credo' expressed in action rather than words. This 'credo' was neither explicit nor prior to the ritual action itself: it was

rather inherent in the ritual and proclaimed solely through a sequence of ritual actions. The only things prescribed were the order of these rituals and their permanence. So, for example, the ritual of the *praefatio*, which was repeated at the beginning of every new ritual sequence, had to follow a precise order of actions, but it was not necessary for the celebrants and those attending to be aware of its 'meaning' or explicitly to formulate in their own minds the salutation and homage that the ritual expressed. And the prayers that accompanied the actions of the *praefatio* added nothing to the homage expressed by the rituals. The division of food and the banquet that followed the slaughter of the victim, and the libation also, in their turn, proclaimed the 'credo'. The parts of the sacrificed animal that fell, as of right, to the god were the vital organs. Furthermore, the deity was privileged to be the first to 'banquet'; at least that was the case in actual cult sites (see above). In sacrifices involving liquids and plants too, that precedence granted to the gods drew a distinction between the immortals and the mortals. The secondary distribution of offerings 'made profane' (see above) similarly established and reflected the social hierarchy among the celebrants and others present.

### 3 ADDITIONAL FACTORS

Sacrifice was central to all major ritual celebrations. But, as we have seen, it took many different forms and was, furthermore, combined with a wide variety of intentions and contexts. Traditional Roman sacrifice did not commemorate any particular event (in the way that Mithraic sacrifice did or a Christian Mass does). It did not symbolise total abandonment to the deity or aspire to incorporate the god. Sacrifice was a banquet which offered men the possibility of meeting their divine partners, of defining their respective qualities and status, and of dealing together with business that needed to be done. For example, human beings could make the most of this meeting to make their excuses for any deliberate or

unavoidable infringement of the deity's property or dignity (with an expiatory sacrifice), to present a request or to convey thanks (through supplications or prayers for mercy), or to conclude contracts (with vows). Sacrifice thus constituted the culminating point in a widely diverse range of celebrations. Although sacrifice always affirmed the superiority and immortality of the gods and also their friendship towards humans, this 'credo' took on particular meanings according to the context. That explains why sacrifice was central to the regular festivals in the calendar. The anniversary of the foundation of a temple began with a sacrifice; complex and picturesque rites in the contexts of one or more sacrifices could proclaim the function of a deity and ask him or her to discharge it with generosity. Certain major rituals, such as the regular vows at the beginning of the year, great festivals such as the Roman Games of 13 September and the Plebeian Games of 13 November, extraordinary ceremonies such as those involving vows, triumphs, *lectisternia*, dedications, purifications and the Secular Games all featured sacrifices or often even culminated with them. Within the space of this book, it is not possible to describe all the rituals that provided a setting for Roman sacrifices. Detailed descriptions can be found in encyclopedias and larger textbooks. We shall simply consider briefly the major categories of celebrations that included one or more sacrifices. But first, a few words on the ritual of prayer and sacrificial offerings.

#### 3.1 Prayer

We have already mentioned the language of action, which finds its full expression in sacrifice and its wider ritual context. But very little has been said about the words, the prayer (*precatio*), that accompanied sacrifice and all other rituals.

Prayer was closely linked to ritual. It was an indispensable element in ritual and – vice versa – there was no praying without ritual. Prayers were recited while a celebrant performed the prescribed actions: like the instruments of sacrifice, prayer served as a means of celebrating the rite.

Inseparable from action, prayer was superimposed upon it; it said in words what the body of the celebrant conveyed by its actions. Prayers were often formulated as imperatives and were to be understood as official instructions, conveyed in the plain language of Roman magistrates.

Prayer was performative. Whereas actions were not strictly supervised and could be repeated, if incorrect, at the cost of an expiatory sacrifice (*piaculum*), prayers were closely monitored, for they could not be repeated or corrected. Once pronounced, they produced their effect, for better or for worse. That is why those who pronounced the prayers read out the most important of them from texts or had them dictated by an assistant (*praeire in uerbis* or *uerba praeire*). A gesture could be ambiguous: for example, the act of touching could be interpreted in many different ways. But speech was not ambiguous; it was precise. So celebrants accordingly had to take great care over the names of the deities they invoked and of those who were to be beneficiaries of the ritual, as well as over the exact formulation of what they wanted. These precautions were particularly important in rites designed to force a deity to render a specific service. 'Sorcerers' claimed that they knew the 'true' secret names of the deities and could use them to ensure that the rites were effective. These are the exotic, barbarian names that appear on curse tablets and on magical papyri. But similar precautions were also taken in the most official form of cult. The tradition that Rome itself had a secret name, which was supposed to protect the city against an *euocatio* (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 28.18; Plutarch, *Roman Questions*, 61) may be of late date and simply speculation on the part of antiquarians, but it certainly refers to the hold one could gain over a deity if one knew his or her real name. In that case prayer was guaranteed to be effective. Despite their importance, however, prayers were not superior to actions. They were the equivalent of the latter and their necessary complement, and vice versa. The function of prayer was not to provide a metaphysical or spiritual basis for ritual. It was not designed to explain it. It simply

expressed it in words and, by making it explicit, conferred a formal perfection upon it.

Some rituals involved the recitation of hymns (*carmen*), which in some cases were sung to a musical accompaniment. This practice was adopted in traditional rites such as the processions of *salii* and the sacrifice to Dea Dia, in expiatory ceremonies recommended by the Sibylline oracles or in conclusion to the Secular Games. Hymns, whether of ancient or more recent origin, were not, strictly speaking, prayers. Rather, they were works of art designed to give pleasure to the deities, much as the Games did. They also differed from prayers in that they were frequently addressed to several gods at once, included mythological and exegetic elements, and were not so much precise as pleasing. A prayer, in contrast, could never be addressed to more than one god and never contained any commentary on any kind of rite: it was an act, not an ornament. A hymn, for its part, would be composed by a poet (in 17 BC the hymn for the Secular Games was composed by Horace), and would not be repeated from traditional texts controlled by the priests. A hymn was designed to win the gods over by the aesthetic and intellectual pleasure that it afforded them. It constituted an ornament added to the rite, but unlike prayer was not a necessary element in it. In fact, the recitation of a hymn constituted a rite in itself, in the same way as supplications or the Games did.

### 3.2 Offerings

Relations between mortals and immortals were founded upon the exchange of gifts and counter-gifts. Sacrifice, which organised an exchange of offerings in the form of food and homage, fell into this category but was not the only means of maintaining those relations. At every level of society, individuals and communities offered gifts to the gods: there were gifts from the fathers of families, gifts from children when they passed into adulthood (the first beard, *bullae*, dolls and toys), gifts from the city, gifts from the senate and from individual

military units, gifts from one of the tribes of the Roman people or from a college, and so on. The objects offered ranged from temples to small cult accessories and statuettes in wax or earthenware. Offerings are wrongly lumped together and all called *ex-votos* by modern scholars, for only some of them properly qualify for such a description. Many of these objects were given as tokens of thanks, or to conciliate a god or pay homage rather than in the fulfilment of a vow (which is what *ex-voto* strictly means). Besides, the little earthenware or wooden offerings in many cases were not the essential part of the gift that was made. Often they acted as a sign that a ritual had been completed, and that ritual was usually a sacrifice. These so-called 'ex-votos' were far more numerous than is generally believed, for small tablets or inscriptions on wood, objects made of wood or wax, placards, graffiti and objects in bronze and precious metals, which commemorated exchanges effected between mortals and some deity, have often vanished leaving hardly a trace. Small offerings themselves were regularly representations of the beneficiaries of the ritual: statuettes of those who said prayers, of *matronae* (that is to say, women who had had children: we should take care not to describe these statuettes automatically as 'mother-goddesses'), of children, as well as busts of men and women. Other objects allude to what was at issue in the ritual concerned: physical organs and limbs refer to a cure or perhaps to a successful birth or to fertility. But it would be over-hasty to conclude that these representations of organs and limbs always referred to rituals of healing, for some are ambiguous. If we study the *ex-voto* offerings that are explained by an accompanying inscription, we sometimes discover that feet may refer to a journey, a two-way journey (two pairs of feet, pointing in contrary directions), possibly a visit to a cult site. Ears may refer either to a cure or to a deity's granting of a request, or possibly to both. Hands may sometimes represent mutual trust and confidence (*fides*). Other examples certainly did commemorate cures or at least the preservation of health, a successful birth or a desire for children.

There were also many flasks of perfume, jars of wine, receptacles containing offerings of foodstuffs, representations of sacrificial victims, and altars both large and small, which referred more directly to the sacrificial context of the exchange. Finally, in some cases statues of gods, large or small, were offered to the deity who was to be honoured. They did not necessarily represent the deity to whom the temple was dedicated, so it is always risky to identify the temple's main god or goddess from the evidence of just a single statuette. All these objects could be fashioned either life-size or on a small scale – a choice that was not necessarily an indication of the social rank of the person sponsoring the dedication. The custom of depositing objects, whether or not strictly 'votive', in religious places dated from the archaic period. Very common in central Italy and Etruria from the fourth to the second century BC, offerings of model organs and limbs and earthenware statuettes disappeared at the end of the second century AD; the practice reappeared in the provinces of Gaul under the Empire.

Public offerings were consecrated. By an act of dedication, as described above, they became the property of the gods. Inscriptions spell out this fact, but often they do no more than simply mention the word *sacrum*, 'consecrated'. This word also appears on private offerings but, as we have seen, in that case it is not enough to make the objects legally consecrated; the authorities behaved *as though they had been consecrated*, and allowed them to remain where they had been left so long as they did not get in the way of the regular cult. The same principle applied to official consecrations made outside the *ager Romanus* and, after the Social War, outside Italy. If the offerings became too numerous or old and dilapidated, they were tidied away into suitable buildings or into storage containers within the sacred domain.

### 3.3 Vows

Many offerings and dedications, and also sacrifices and Games, were occasioned by public or private vows. A vow

was a contract concluded with a deity. The settlement of a vow was conditional (see below); it sometimes, but not always, fell on a fixed date. One of the regular days for vows to be honoured corresponded to the New Year. Under the Republic, on 15 March, and after 153 BC on 1 January, the two consuls honoured the regular vows to the Capitoline triad and to *Salus publica* for the wellbeing of the Roman people, and pronounced new ones. This vow consisted in sacrifices. Jupiter received an ox, the three goddesses cows. Sometimes gifts made of precious metals accompanied the sacrifices, which, as may be imagined, were acts of solemn homage. This ceremony opened the civic year; that is to say, the first public act of the New Year was to recognise the honouring of the vows made the previous year by the consuls and the Senate, gathered together at the Capitol. Once the responsibilities of the magistrates at home and overseas had been defined, the consuls formulated the vows for the coming year. From the Empire onward a second vow was added, the vow for the health of the emperor and his family. After various experiments through the early decades of the Empire, in the reign of Tiberius the ceremony was fixed to 3 January. In Rome, public vows were pronounced by the consuls, but under the Empire, on 3 January colleges of priests and probably many other social groups also pronounced vows for the emperor's health. The same happened in the colonies, the *municipia* and the foreign (*peregrini*) cities of the empire. This ceremony developed into one of the greatest festivals of the year, while the traditional feast of the Kalends of January became an essentially private celebration.

We also know that regular vows were pronounced every five years by the censors, and that, as they left Rome, consuls and legates departing on military campaigns made vows for victory and a safe journey and return. In private life too, many vows were made. During temple festivals such as that of the temple of Ceres, on 13 September, which is described by Pliny the Younger (*Letters*, 9.39.2), vows, to be fulfilled on a fixed date, were concluded between the temple's titular

deity and private individuals. But most vows were to do with the hazards of human life. Both public and private vows were devised for cases of sickness, travel, expectation or risk, and also for whole periods of life (childhood, for instance). The consuls formulated many special ('extraordinary') vows in the light of events as they occurred, particularly during the perils of war. Under the Republic, these extraordinary public vows were always formulated for the Roman people and in its name. This meant that, for the vow to be valid, it had to be approved by the Senate; otherwise only its author was bound by it. Many Roman temples were built as a result of this type of vow. Under the Empire, however, military dangers related above all to the emperor, who, in the name of the people, was in command of the so-called 'armed' provinces. That is why all the extraordinary vows known for this period are concerned with the success of the ruler.

Both regular and extraordinary vows were conditional. In other words, so long as the request had not been granted by the deity, the author of the vow was not obliged to discharge it. Thus, the famous vow of the *uer sacrum* ('consecrated spring') of 217 BC covered a period of five years and depended on victory for the Romans. As circumstances in 212 did not at all match up to the terms of the votive contract, the honouring of the vow was deferred. Livy, whose account is very precise, does not even mention the suspension of the vow's execution. That only arose in 195, twenty-two years later. At that point, with the conditions finally satisfied, the vow was immediately discharged. The vow of the 'consecrated spring' was of a particular type, perhaps borrowed from the Italic people, but subsequently adapted by the Romans. It involved the consecration of all the animals that would be born during the spring of the year when the honouring of the vow fell due. Because this vow affected not the property of the Roman people, that is, the state, but that of all Romans, the Senate ruled that it should be pronounced by all the citizens, gathered together in the Forum.

Other examples of annulled vows are attested under the Empire. When Emperor Titus died in September AD 81, the fulfilment of the vows made for his health on the previous 3 January were never again mentioned by the Arval Brethren. They were now content simply to 'commend' (*commendare*) once more the health of Domitian to the Capitoline triad and *Salus publica*. In other words, the vows for Titus lapsed and the priests confirmed the vows pronounced for Domitian Caesar on the previous 3 January, pointing out his change of status: for now he had become Domitian Augustus. Two other attested examples date from the Principate of Trajan. On 3 January 101 and 105, the Arvals ordered it to be noted in their records that on that date new vows were pronounced but no sacrifice was made. This was their way of saying that, at this time when the security of the Empire and the emperor were gravely threatened on the Danube, the conditions of the vows formulated in 100 and 104 had not been fulfilled. So the vows were no longer valid. There can be no doubt that these spectacular deferrals not only won support but also favoured the political propaganda of the imperial house. It is not hard to see why the exact terms of votive contracts were always carefully checked and recorded. Public vows were noted down in the records of magistrates and priests, and were announced in public under dictation by a colleague. Private vows were recorded on tablets that were sometimes posted up at a cult site, or even deposited at the foot of the god's statue. Many containers that originally held the seals of votive tablets have been found at cult sites. It is not hard to appreciate the legal importance of an offering made *ex-voto* in the strict sense of the term: it attested before all and sundry that the contractual obligation had been carried out by the appointed date. At the same time, the *ex-voto* celebrated the power and *pietas* of the deity so honoured.

There were several special types of vows. The ancient public ritual of *evocatio* involved luring the enemy god or gods into the Roman camp during a siege by vowing to set up a residence and a cult for them among the Romans.

According to tradition, Juno Regina of the Aventine had been 'evoked' in this way from Veii. The same ritual was employed in 146 in the siege of Carthage, and an inscription recently discovered in Turkey formally attests its use there in the first century BC.

### 3.4 Deuotio, defixio, sacratio

A ritual even more aggressive than *evocatio* was that of the *deuotio* of enemies. *Deuotio* was used in both public and private life. Generals, for example, sometimes vowed enemy troops to Tellus and the *di manes*; antiquarians preserved a formula that was supposed to have devoted the Carthaginians and their territory to Veiovis, Dispatēr and the *di manes* during the siege of 146 BC. A spectacular variant of the same ritual consisted in including a Roman or even oneself in the vow and then seeking death in battle: particularly renowned in Roman tradition was the *deuotio* of two members of the Decii family (Livy, 8.6.9f.; 10.8f.; but the tradition that involves a third Decius carrying out the ritual is doubtful). By devoting living beings to chthonic deities and the gods of the underworld, one consigned them to death, for it was expected that the deities in question would hear the vow and appropriate the persons consecrated to them. The terms of the contract were that the gods accepted the lives of the persons consecrated to them and, in return, wiped out the Romans' enemies.

The *deuotio* and its variant, the *defixio*, were frequently used in private life to vow personal enemies or rivals to the gods of the underworld. The votive 'contract' was inscribed on a small lead tablet which was then buried in a tomb so that the interested parties, that is the *di manes*, could read it and pass on the message to the gods of the underworld. Germanicus' death in AD 19 was attributed to a *deuotio* (Tacitus, *Annals*, 2.69), and countless such tablets have been found in the tombs and cult sites of the Roman world. In some cases the tablets (*lamellae*) were rolled up and pierced by a nail, seemingly the better to 'fix' the enemy. But devotions were

not always addressed to the underworld gods. Any deity could be the beneficiary of one. It was, for example, quite common to devote a stolen or lost object to a deity so as to turn it into a sacred object and call down divine vengeance upon the thief.

When a solemn treaty (*foedus*) was concluded or a *clarigatio* (a claim for reparation) was made, a fetial priest called on Jupiter, Mars and Quirinus to witness it, and 'devoted' his own person and the Roman people in the event of the commitment being broken. Similar formulae were used when oaths were sworn. But in the case of oaths it was a matter not of a vow but rather of a conditional consecration (*sacratio*) similar to that which, ever since the archaic period, struck those who violated certain laws. A man who was *sacer* and so belonged to the deities to whom he was consecrated was nevertheless not supposed to be simply killed out of hand. However, if he was, the man responsible was not considered a murderer. *Deutio* to the gods of the upper world is also attested by curse or binding tablets (*defixiones*) discovered in cult sites and by 'self-devotions' for the wellbeing of the emperor. The memory of this practice was preserved by the later formula 'devoted to his power and dignity' (*deuotus numini maiestatique eius*).

All these practices show that there was no gulf separating religion and 'magic', just a difference of degree. Devotions could be applied to the officiant himself or to enemies of the Roman people without attracting criticism. Quite the reverse: such rituals were counted among the exemplary traditions of Rome. However, when they were directed against fellow-citizens they were condemned. So it was the intention and the application that rendered the ritual criminal, not the practice itself, unless it was also linked to the violation of a tomb.

#### 4 GAMES

The great sacrificial rituals often included Games (*ludi*), whether in the form of theatrical shows (*ludi scaenici*) or

circus games (*ludi circenses*). In principle these Games concluded the sacrifices that were celebrated during festivals – festivals which in many cases were named after the Games in question. At the Roman Games and the Plebeian Games, the *Epulum Iouis*, the great sacrificial banquet of 13 September and 13 November, formed the heart of the festival. In the historical period, the *epulum* was preceded by nine days of theatrical Games and followed by four days of chariot racing in the Circus Maximus – the Roman and the Plebeian Games proper falling, respectively, on 15 September and 15 November. Other spectacles were added as extra acts of homage. On the day of the Games, the statues of the Capitoline triad were carried in procession to the circus, where they watched the races along with the Romans, in a space designed 'to bring the gods and men together' (Livy, 2.37.9).

The magistrates presiding over the games (who, in the Roman and the Plebeian Games, would be the curule or the plebeian aediles) wore the garments of a *triumphator*, which suggests that these solemn Games were derived from the ancient triumph. Before they became permanent fixtures, most of these spectacles had originally been votive and linked with victories. The number of days that they lasted at Rome was constantly being extended. Despite repeated interventions to reduce them, for example by Nerva (Dio Cassius, 68.2.3), in the reign of Marcus Aurelius they numbered as many as 135. And on top of that figure we need to take account of a number of days of Games that were repeated (*instaurati*) thanks to an omission or mistake in the ritual.

The chariot races also featured vaulting riders (*desultores*) who leapt from one horse to another. From the second century BC on, these races were frequently followed by running races and wrestling and boxing matches. From 186 BC (when the votive games of M. Fulvius Nobilior were held), there are also mentions of hunts (*uenationes*). All these spectacles complemented the programme of the traditional games. An innovation of the Empire were the special competitions (*agones*), which included gymnastics, poetry

(*mousikoi*) and horsemanship. As a rule, these *agones* took place every five years. The best-known was the competition founded by Domitian in honour of Capitoline Jupiter (*agon Capitolinus*), for which a stadium was constructed underneath the present-day Piazza Navona, as well as an odeon. Although some hunts and athletic competitions were included in the programme of the traditional Games from the end of the Republic on, gladiatorial fights were not. Along with hunts, these constituted separate spectacles (*munera*). Originally these contests took place in the course of private games offered on the occasions of funerals. They are first attested in Rome in 264 BC. One hundred and fifty years later, in 105, they were turned into a programme of extraordinary games, that is to say games not scheduled in the traditional programme. Gradually it became the custom for magistrates to offer them as a gesture of thanks, when they took office in Rome or in other Roman cities. These bloody spectacles, on which the ancients were extremely keen, were not linked to a sacrifice or a cult.

### 5 LECTISTERNIA, SELLISTERNIA, SUPPLICATIONS, EXPIATIONS

From 399 BC on, the Romans from time to time celebrated *lectisternia* and *sellisternia*. These were great sacrificial banquets at which several deities (six or twelve) were installed on dining couches or chairs in some consecrated place. Goddesses, like Roman *matronae*, took part seated on chairs (*sellisternia*). Introduced on the recommendation of a Sibylline oracle, the *lectisternium* was originally a ritual designed to restore concord between the gods and the Romans. A kind of *lectisternium* had already figured among earlier, strictly Roman traditions. On the occasion of a birth, a couch and a table would be set up in the atrium of a leading family's house, in honour of Juno Lucina and Hercules; and a couch would also be available for Pilumnus and Picumnus, two divine protectors of mothers who had just given birth. The Sibylline oracle of 399 was inspired by the Greek

tradition of banquets shared between men and gods (theoxeny), to create a Roman ritual adapted to its new context. Little by little, this ritual of reconciliation spread, until eventually most cult sites and festivals organised their own *lectisternia*. This picturesque ceremony now offered a variant or complement to the traditional sacrificial banquet.

Supplication appears to have been a truly ancient ritual. Wearing wreaths and carrying branches of laurel, Roman men would do the rounds of cult sites, accompanied by their wives and children, to 'supplicate' the gods. They prostrated themselves to beg for help in times of danger or to thank them in times of victory and success. Incense and wine would be offered to the gods, and *matronae* would kneel on the ground and sweep it with their hair. Under the Empire, supplication with incense and wine was a ritual particularly associated with ceremonies connected to the imperial house. Supplication dramatised the ritual of *praefatio*, the solemn salutation of the gods, and extended it to all the Roman deities in a spectacular and 'realistic' manner. At root, a supplication was a particularly solemn *praefatio* celebrated by all citizens.

Under the Republic, *lectisternia* and supplications, often celebrated in conjunction, were frequently associated with processions that led choirs of girls from the sanctuary of Apollo (*in Circo*) right round to the Capitol and Palatine. Under the Empire, this type of ceremony was replaced by the Secular Games and the centenary festivals of Rome. The Secular Games, whose history in the Republican period remains obscure, were celebrated on the recommendation of a Sibylline oracle, to bring to an end a period of one hundred and ten years, the maximum duration of a 'generation' (*saeculum*), and to request success and wellbeing for the next *saeculum*. Under the Empire, the gods honoured were the Moirai, Ilithyia and the Terra Mater on the one hand, and Jupiter, Juno, Apollo and Diana on the other. The festival proper lasted three whole days, during which sacrifices were celebrated both by night and by day in a number of places (the Campus Martius, the Capitol, the Palatine). It



ended with a procession of boys and girls singing a 'secular' hymn several times in succession. An extra week of theatrical and circus games followed on after the rites. Celebrated for the fifth time (so it was said) under Augustus in 17 BC, these games were repeated in AD 88 by Domitian and in 204 by Septimius Severus. To make the most of the pomp and ceremony of the Secular Games, from the reign of Claudius on (AD 48), Roman rulers also celebrated the centenaries of the foundation of Rome, using a very similar set of rituals. After the celebration of the ninth centenary in 148, Rome's millennium was commemorated in 248, under Philip the Arab.

## Chapter 7

# Auspices and rituals of divination

## 1 GENERAL PRINCIPLES

We know virtually nothing about divination in the archaic period and even relatively ancient documents such as the inauguration formula for the *templum* on the *arx* on the Capitoline hill (Varro, *On the Latin Language*, 7.8) have come down to us cast in later language. On the other hand, the last two centuries of the Republic is a period marvellously well documented for any study of Roman divination. There is plenty of direct evidence and, furthermore, Cicero's treatise *On Divination* provides us with a selection of learned opinions on divinatory practices, both for and against. During this period public divination depended on auspices, Sibylline oracles, extispicy (the reading of entrails) and haruspicy, and occasionally involved the consultation of foreign oracles. Private divination was more eclectic, for side by side with traditional auspices people turned to astrologers and itinerant soothsayers. Under the Empire, practices evolved. General institutional changes were reflected in the field of public divination: auspices and the consultation of Sibylline oracles no longer played a primary role, while the interpretation of prodigies and the techniques of astrological prognosis gained in importance. Meanwhile at the private level the unification of the Empire and the extension of the Roman people favoured the spread of techniques of divination from every corner of the Empire.

It is the divinatory system of the first century BC that is the best known to us and the most fully attested. So let us concentrate on this period, for it will allow us to make a