

# Roman religion

## Sacrifices and presents to the gods

In this Stage Cogidubnus sacrificed a lamb to Sulis Minerva in the hope that the goddess would be pleased with his gift and would restore him to health. This was regarded as the right and proper thing to do in such circumstances. People in the ancient world thought that by offering animal sacrifices and other gifts to the gods they could keep on good terms with them and stand a better chance of getting their prayers answered. This was true at all levels of society. For example, if a general was going off to war, there would be a solemn public ceremony at which prayers and expensive sacrifices would be offered to the gods. Ordinary citizens would also offer sacrifices, hoping for a successful business deal, a safe voyage or the birth of a child; and in some Roman homes, to ensure the family's prosperity, offerings of food would be made to Vesta, the spirit of the hearth, and to the lares and penates, the spirits of the household and store cupboard.

People also offered sacrifices and presents to the gods to honour them at their festivals, to thank them for some success or an escape from danger, or to keep a promise. For example, a cavalry officer stationed in the north of England set up an altar to the god Silvanus with this inscription:

C. Tetius Veturius Micianus, captain of the Sebosian cavalry squadron, set this up as he promised to Silvanus the unconquered, in thanks for capturing a beautiful boar which many people before him tried to do but failed.



*An emperor, as Chief Priest, leads a solemn procession. He covers his head with a fold of his toga. A bull, a sheep and a pig are to be sacrificed.*





*A model liver. Significant areas are labelled to help haruspices interpret any markings.*



*A haruspex examining a sacrificed bull.*

Another inscription from a grateful woman in north Italy reads:

*Tullia Superiana takes pleasure in keeping her promise to Minerva the unforgetting for giving her hair back.*

## Divination

A haruspex, like Memor, would be present at important sacrifices. He and his assistants would watch the way in which the victim fell; they would observe the smoke and flames when parts of the victim were placed on the altar fire; and, above all, they would cut the victim open and examine its entrails, especially the liver. They would look for anything unusual about the liver's size or shape, observe its colour and texture and note whether it had spots on its surface. They would then interpret what they saw and announce to the sacrificer whether the signs from the gods were favourable or not.

Such attempts to discover the future are known as divination. Another type of divination was performed by priests known as augurs who based their predictions on observations of the flight of birds. They would note the direction of flight, and observe whether the birds flew together or separately, what kind of birds they were and what noises they made.

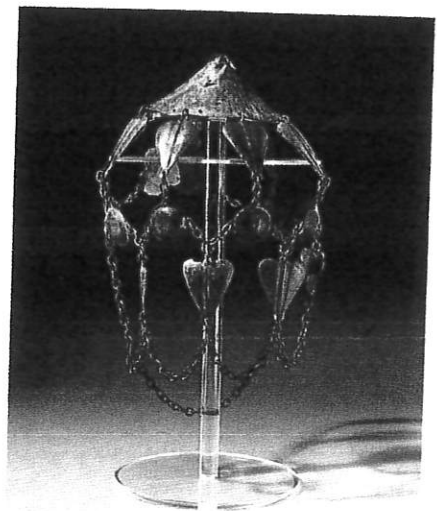


*In this sculpture of a sacrifice, notice the pipe-player, and the attendants with the decorated victim.*

## The Roman state religion

Religion in Rome and Italy included a bewildering variety of gods, demigods, spirits, rituals and ceremonies, whose origin and meaning was often a mystery to the worshippers themselves. The Roman state respected this variety but particularly promoted the worship of Jupiter and his family of gods and goddesses, especially Juno, Minerva, Ceres, Apollo, Diana, Mars and Venus. They were closely linked with their equivalent Greek deities, whose characteristics and colourful mythology were readily taken over by the Romans.

The rituals and ceremonies were organised by colleges of priests and other religious officials, many of whom were senators, and the festivals and sacrifices were carried out by them on behalf of the state. Salvius, for example, was a member of the Arval brotherhood, whose religious duties included praying for the emperor and his family. The emperor always held the position of **Pontifex Maximus** or Chief Priest. Great attention was paid to the details of worship. Everyone who watched the ceremonies had to stand quite still and silent, like Plancus in the Stage 17 story. Every word had to be pronounced correctly, otherwise the whole ceremony had to be restarted; a pipe-player was employed to drown noises and cries, which were thought to be unlucky for the ritual.



*A priest's ritual headdress, from Roman Britain.*



**Three sculptures from Bath illustrate the mixture of British and Roman religion there.**

**Above: A gilded bronze head of Sulis Minerva, presumably from her statue in the temple, shows the goddess as the Romans pictured her.**

**Top right: Nemetona and the horned Loucetius Mars.**

**Right: Three Celtic mother-goddesses.**

## Religion and romanisation

The Roman state religion played an important part in the romanisation of the provinces of the empire. The Romans generally tolerated the religious beliefs and practices of their subject peoples unless they were thought to threaten their rule or their relationship with the gods which was so carefully fostered by sacrifices and correct rituals. They encouraged their subjects to identify their own gods with Roman gods who shared some of the same characteristics. We have seen at Bath how the Celtic Sulis and the Roman Minerva were merged into one goddess, Sulis Minerva, and how a temple was built in her honour in the Roman style. Another example is provided by an inscription recording the fulfilment of a promise made by a man

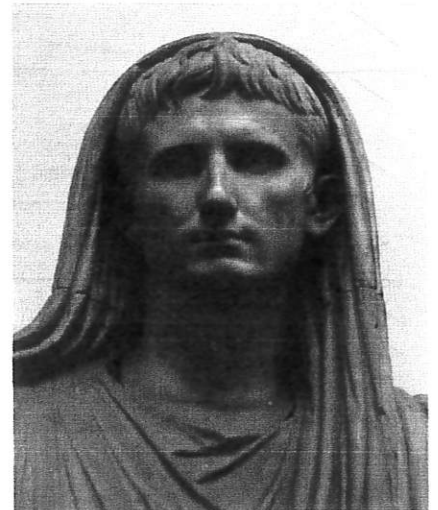
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called Peregrinus to Mars Loucetius and Nemetona. Here the Celtic god Loucetius has been linked to Mars, the Roman god of war.

Another feature of Roman religion which was intended to encourage acceptance of Roman rule was the worship of the emperor. In Rome itself, emperor worship was generally discouraged. However, the peoples of the eastern provinces of the Roman empire had always regarded their kings and rulers as divine, and were equally ready to pay divine honours to the Roman emperors. Gradually the Romans introduced this idea in the west as well. The Britons and other western peoples were encouraged to worship the **genius** (protecting spirit) of the emperor, linked with the goddess Roma. Altars were erected in honour of 'Rome and the emperor'. When an emperor died it was usual to deify him (make him a god), and temples were often built to honour the deified emperor in the provinces. One such temple, that of Claudius in Colchester, was destroyed by the British before it was even finished, during the revolt led by Queen Boudica in AD 60. The historian Tacitus tells us why:

'The temple dedicated to the deified Emperor Claudius seemed to the British a symbol of everlasting oppression, and the chosen priests used religion as an excuse for wasting British money.'

In general, however, the policy of promoting Roman religion and emperor worship proved successful in the provinces. Like other forms of romanisation it became popular with the upper and middle classes, who looked to Rome to promote their careers; it helped to make Roman rule acceptable, reduced the chance of uprisings and gave many people in the provinces a sense that they belonged to one great empire.



*Emperor Augustus as Pontifex Maximus. In the provinces of the empire, the rulers were often worshipped, particularly after their death.*