

# OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

1 Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
and education by publishing worldwide in

Oxford New York

Athens Auckland Bangkok Bogotá Buenos Aires Cape Town  
Chennai Dar es Salaam Delhi Florence Hong Kong Istanbul Karachi  
Kolkata Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Mumbai Nairobi  
Paris São Paulo Shanghai Singapore Taipei Tokyo Toronto Warsaw

with associated companies in Berlin Ibadan

Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press  
in the UK and in certain other countries

Published in the United Kingdom  
by Oxford University Press Inc., New York

© The Past and Present Society, 2008

The moral rights of the author have been asserted  
Database right Oxford University Press (maker)

First published 2008

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means,  
without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press,  
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with the appropriate  
reprographics rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction  
outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department,  
Oxford University Press, at the address above

You must not circulate this book in any other binding or cover  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

A catalogue for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication  
Data (data available)

ISBN 0-19-956137-7  
ISBN 978-0-19-956137-7

Subscription information for Past & Present is available  
from: [jnl.cust.serv@oxfordjournals.org](mailto:jnl.cust.serv@oxfordjournals.org)

Typeset by Cepha Imaging Pvt Ltd, Bangalore, India  
Printed by Bell and Bain Ltd, Glasgow, UK

## Past and Present Supplements

Supplement 3, 2008

### The Religion of Fools? Superstition Past and Present *Edited by S. A. Smith and Alan Knight*

## *Superstitio*, Superstition and Religious Repression in the Late Roman Republic and Principate (100 BCE–300 CE)

Richard Gordon

Rather more than a century ago, Georg Wissowa, editor of the multi-volume encyclopaedia of Classical Antiquity, *Paulys Realencyclopädie*, commissioned for the first volume of the new enterprise an article on Superstition, 'Aberglaube', from the respectable and industrious Ernest Rieß. Rieß duly turned in an article of 64 closely-printed columns in which he listed hundreds of bizarre ancient beliefs and practices, from meteorological phenomena to birth and death, from magical stones to plant-remedies, many of them culled from the Elder Pliny's *Natural History* (written around 70–75 CE).<sup>1</sup> For example, if you wash your mouth twice a month in the forenoon with pounded lettuce-leaves mixed with vinegar, you will not be troubled by tooth-ache; if you take a living bat, carry it three times around the house and nail it head-down over the window, it will protect you and your household, especially the sheep-pens, from witchcraft.<sup>2</sup>

Rieß noted that the Greek word *deisidaimonia* and the Latin *superstitio* do not coincide fully with the semantic range of German 'Aberglaube'. He defined the last as 'ideas about the supernatural, that have sunk down out of the realm of living religious consciousness and become to some extent petrified, and the associated ritual practices'. Properly conceived, superstition is one form of religious or mythological thinking, and can usually be explained by means of historical research. For example, belief in the werewolf can be accounted for by tracing it back to a cult involving human sacrifice, and beyond that, to the semantic link in Indo-European pre-history between the (Greek) word for wolf, *lykos*, the god of Light (Latin *lux*, *lucere*), and the god's birth, as Zeus Lykaios, on Mount Lykaion in Arcadia in the central Peloponnese. A routinized philological historicism thus underlay Rieß' confidence that superstitions could in principle be explained without residue. It was simply a matter of seeing the historical connections.

<sup>1</sup> E. Rieß, s.v. 'Aberglaube', *RE*, 1.1 (1894), 29–93.

<sup>2</sup> Pliny, *HN*, 20.58; 29.83.

Typical of scholars of his day, and still of most ordinary people nowadays, Rieß took it for granted that superstition is an unproblematic, well-nigh universal descriptive category for a wide variety of sunken beliefs. The contents of the category can only be enumerated; it consists in particular instances of petrified usages. It has no theory. By contrast, however, if one looks up 'Aberglaube' in the modern replacement of Wissowa's encyclopaedia, *Der Neue Pauly*, compiled in the 1990s, one finds no entry at all. Instead there is a reference to the two ancient words, *deisidaimonia* and *superstitio*, which it is reckoned to translate. Superstition has ceased to appear to be a natural category. It is not simply that the mass of material collected by Rieß has been re-classified under other heads: the very notion that superstition might be a scientific term now, after the 'anthropological turn' inaugurated by the Annales school, appears laughable. Whereas the key interpretative metaphor used to be petrification, which legitimated the claim that history was the privileged mode of understanding such beliefs while characterizing *das Volk*, the Folk, as the Romantically-authentic carriers of such unchanging lore, 'superstition' now almost always wears inverted commas, and has become an actor's or positional word, demoted from the ineffable throne of Science down to the muddy fray of *parti pris*.

As Steve Smith's Introduction makes clear, the Wivenhoe conference invited participants to reflect on this relatively new, operational aspect of superstition, its situational, argumentative or vituperative use, and the problems arising: the nature of the anxieties expressed, the boundaries policed, the relation between superstition and other negative words, whether 'reason' or 'rationality' figure in the debate. At the same time it was suggested that it might be worth looking at the value of superstitious beliefs to those who hold them; whether they are always popular, of the Folk; how far they may be implicated in struggles over the legitimacy of religious innovation; what superstition may have to do with the ability of a religious system to maintain the very category of the sacred. This programme involves going beyond semantic enquiry in order to examine overt conflicts concerning the use of, or admission to, sacred symbols, conflicts which may in turn conceal differing attitudes towards a range of other issues.

In this contribution on Rome between c.100 BCE and 300 CE, I have chosen to concentrate on the self-understanding, and anxieties, of the socio-political group (essentially the members of the great families that dominated the Senate) that came to define an imagined, or ideal, community of right belief-and-practice in terms of *superstitio*. It was the struggle to maintain the imagined community in the wider context of the striking changes—political, military, ideological, and religious—brought about by Rome's acquisition of a Mediterranean empire that accounts for the word's semantic

vagaries. The underlying issue, however, as I see it, is relatively simple: the socio-political elite had a sharply different interest in the religious system from that of the mass of the population, day-labourers and peasant-farmers. Thanks to its domination of public rhetoric, it enjoyed the social power of representing 'Roman religion' as the engine of Roman imperial success. Although that religion was acknowledged to be a construction over time, created in its main lines by certain grand figures of the remote past—the legendary Romulus, Numa, and Servius Tullius—but constantly refined by famous experts in pontifical law such as P. Mucius Scaevola (elected *pontifex maximus* in 130 BCE), its drift was consistent. From the point of view of this elite, itself of course the real driving-force behind territorial expansion, the gods smiled on Rome because she was equipped with the best religious institutions.<sup>3</sup> As the poet Propertius put it, the Romans owed their empire not so much to their military prowess as to their religious observance.<sup>4</sup>

Since the Roman concept of *superstitio* is in my view so closely linked with the ideological interests of a competitive but non-hereditary elite, I here completely ignore an alternative view, developed by Hellenistic philosophers, and picked up by their Roman imitators (such as Cicero towards the end of his life, wearing his philosopher's hat), that understood superstition as the clean inverse of religion. Such an opposition depended upon a premise quite foreign to mainstream Greek and Roman religious discourse, namely that just because the gods are blessed and immortal they cannot also be angry or partial.<sup>5</sup> This account saw superstition as based upon a false view of the nature of the gods; but the only way of substantiating the claim was to redefine them as constituents of nature (Ceres = grain) or forms of a single Deity, who is inherently and solely beneficent.<sup>6</sup> In a polytheistic context, this was strong stuff: it was not for nothing that the Stoics chose to deal with theology at the very end of years of philosophical study. And in my view this theological account of superstition was both irrelevant and, indeed, incomprehensible both to elites and to masses in the period under discussion, at any rate until

<sup>3</sup> The clearest expression is Cotta's speech in Cicero, *Nat. deor.* 3.5f; cf. P. A. Brunt, 'Laus imperii', in P. D. A. Garnsey and C. R. Whittaker (eds), *Imperialism in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, 1978), 159–91 at 164–8.

<sup>4</sup> Propertius 3.22.21: *quantum ferro tantum pietate potentes stamus*.

<sup>5</sup> E.g. Cicero, *Nat. deor.* 1.45; 55f; 2.63; 71f.; *Div.* 2.149. This is the discourse that D. B. Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Cambridge, MA and London, 2004) sees as central; to my mind it is peripheral to the main problems (cf. my review in *Gnomon*, 78 (2006), 521–6).

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Cicero, *Nat. deor.* 2.63–70.

the rise of Christianity in the second half of the third century CE made the idea of a single truly beneficent god appear less outlandish.<sup>7</sup>

In the Roman case, then, it makes most sense to view the notion of superstition as a strategy for delimiting an imagined community by claiming the existence of consensual frontiers between traditional/sanctioned/proper and non-traditional/unsanctioned/improper/religious action.<sup>8</sup> The socio-political locus of the claim that a given religious expression or act is superstitious is thus of central importance. On that basis, we can discern at least four types of cognitive interest in asserting the existence of such boundaries.<sup>9</sup>

1. Self-definition: Tacitly or explicitly, the speaker claims to be a member of, indeed spokesman for, a community of sanctioned religious practice. To invoke superstition is to align oneself with an implied authority, whether 'traditional', legal or moral.
2. Drawing the boundaries: Use of the negative discrimination implies that the speaker has the right to determine where the boundary between sanctioned and unsanctioned practice is to be set. Each intervention is therefore at the same time an assertion of the speaker's authority or right to impose the discrimination at this point. Whatever the local criteria for superstition may be, the speaker affirms their validity as *the* appropriate criteria.
3. The right to judge: The use of the negative discrimination implies the superiority of the speaker's claimed point of reference, without his being

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the critique of the Stoic account of divinity put into the mouth of C. Aurelius Cotta at *Nat. deor.* 3.38ff. On the different forms of Hellenistic philosophical theology, see J. Mansfeld, 'Theology', in K. Algra et al. (eds), *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1999), 452–78.

<sup>8</sup> B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> 'Cognitive interest' is the conventional translation of the German *Erkenntnisinteresse*, a concept that has a central role in Max Weber's reflections on the methodology of the social sciences, e.g. 'All knowledge of cultural reality . . . is always knowledge from particular points of view': "'Objectivity" in Social Science', in M. Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. and ed. E. A. Shils and H. A. Finch (New York, 1949), 49–112 at 81 (= 'Die (Objektivität) sozialwissenschaftlicher und sozialpolitischer Erkenntnis', in Max Weber, *Soziologie, Universalgeschichtliche Analysen, Politik*, ed. J. Winckelmann (Stuttgart, 1992), 186–262 at 224; = *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. J. Winckelmann (Stuttgart, 1988), 148–214 (original published 1904)). The issue was generalized by Jürgen Habermas, *Erkenntnis und Interesse* (Frankfurt am Main, 1968), translated by J. J. Shapiro as *Knowledge and Human Interests* (Boston, 1971, repr. Cambridge, 1987).

required to show or specify the grounds or even the nature of that claim. Since the charge of superstition operates by arousing an essentially emotional response, the logical basis of the claim is protected from examination.

4. Safeguarding the imagined community: Accusations of superstition at the margin serve to distract attention away from areas of dispute, contradictions or anomalies within the claimed community of belief-and-practice. The implied or explicit centre can thus be defended as a whole, without reference to embarrassing detail. Just as vernacular nationalisms shore up archaic conceptions of power and privilege, so superstition maintains useful fictions, say the total adequacy of a world-view, or stability of belief within the imagined community, and legitimates the transfer of the impure reality of shifting needs and interpretations onto the outside.

It is difficult to judge whether, or how far, the Roman elite was aware of these functions of its concept of *superstitio*. We hardly need to be reminded of the world-constructing power of religious systems, and sub-systems. As I point out later, it is easy enough to find examples of individuals claiming the sufficiency of traditional Roman religion while at the same time acting to innovate within it, for example by introducing new deities or even entire cults, such as that of the Mater Magna; indeed there existed institutions, such as the reading of the Sibylline Books, intended to facilitate precisely that.<sup>10</sup> Double-thinking here merges with reality-principle. It would perhaps be best to appeal to the notion of social script: forms of religious behaviour that could loosely be described as ‘unmanly’ or ‘un-Roman’ were subsumed under a single script that both expressed and reinforced the exclusionary thinking of a society based on orders.<sup>11</sup> The implication that such unmanliness is inborn is simply an instance of the naturalization of its own arbitrariness practised by every established order.<sup>12</sup> Scripts, being stereotypes, resist reflection. *Superstitio* was thus understood not so much as a judgement of others’ behaviour as a label for a supposed weakness of the mind

<sup>10</sup> On the role of the Oracles in mediating the introduction of new cults, and their negotiating value, see M. Monaca, *La Sibilla a Roma: I libri sibillini fra religione e politica* (Cosenza, 2005), 197–278, with a useful collection of texts.

<sup>11</sup> I have adapted the notion of scripts from narratology, though it originally derives from cognitive psychology; cf. M. Kaiser, ‘Die Schematheorie des Verstehens fiktionaler Literatur’, *Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 56 (1982), Sonderheft, 226–48. The advantage of the narratologists’ version is that it starts from the reader’s perception of small units of described and implicitly evaluated behaviour, which can be grouped to form more complex units that carry ‘inherent’ meaning.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge, 1977), 164.

(*levitas animi*) that produced such behaviour; then as the behaviour itself and, by extension, entire religious traditions based upon such ‘weakness’.

Although the English words superstition and superstitious derive from the Latin *superstitio* and *superstitiosus*, their ranges only partly overlap. Nowadays, for example, it is not uncommon to find ‘superstitious’ used as a humorous self-deprecation. At Rome, however, no member of the politico-social elite would have dreamed of describing himself as *superstitiosus* in connection with religion. The adjective would only be used in connection with a personal enemy (even a ‘bad’ emperor); about those of inferior social or gender status, *de haut en bas*, within Roman society; or to depreciate the cult practices of foreigners or provincials, usually en masse. Again, *superstitio* never has the modern sense of a belief one can take or leave; nor did it imply a shallow, insincere, or opportunistic belief. Moreover, outside the philosophical discussion I have mentioned, at Rome *superstitio* did not imply an irrational belief or practice, one that science, ‘organized religion’, or some other authority has shown to be false, untrue or meaningless. The word had no, or virtually no, reference to intellectual claims.<sup>13</sup> It was rather a dismissive way of referring to what in the speaker’s opinion appeared excessive, dishonourable, unmanly, sometimes simply new and unfamiliar, sometimes actually wicked, forms of religious action or expression. In other words, the condemnation or distance it asserted was nicely calibrated with the self-image of the Roman politico-social elite in matters relating to religious practice. Roman *superstitio* can thus be defined as religious action producing the inverse of Bourdieu’s notion of distinction.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> It is therefore rather dismaying to find that the standard modern dictionary, the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, ed. P. W. Glare (Oxford, 1968–82), defines its first sense (1a) as ‘an attitude of irrational religious awe or credulity, superstition’. As I understand the matter, the Roman concept of *superstitio*, outside narrowly philosophical argument, involved neither rationality nor belief. It was focused on *ends* and the *style* appropriate to attaining those ends.

<sup>14</sup> ‘Because the appropriation of cultural products presupposes dispositions and competences which are not universally distributed (although they have the appearance of innateness), these products are subject to exclusive appropriation, material or symbolic, and, functioning as cultural capital (objectified or internalized), they yield a profit in distinction, proportionate to the rarity of the means required to appropriate them, and a profit in legitimacy, the profit par excellence, which consists in the fact of feeling justified in being (what one is), being what it is right to be’: P. Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. R. Nice (London, 1984), 228 (= *La distinction: critique sociale du jugement* (Paris, 1979), 252). The French is much easier to understand.

In the two sections of this paper, I first explore a little further the range of uses of Latin *superstitio*, and examine the nature of the categories and boundaries it sought to safeguard within the context of the expansion of the Roman Republican empire.<sup>15</sup> It is especially important here to observe its relation to the slippery word *religio*, whose meaning can range between the scrupulous attention to detail that links humankind to divinity by virtue of a code of conduct reciprocally binding on both sides, through the totality of actions conventionally regarded as appropriate in the worship of the gods, to being more or less synonymous with *superstitio*.<sup>16</sup> The second section explores how the imagined community that the Republican term was intended to protect, itself inherently imprecise and unstable, began to crumble under the disorderly pressures unleashed by the sheer success of territorial empire. The establishment of an autocratic regime in which the emperors and their interests came to dominate the forms and the ends of the traditional religious system meant that *superstitio* came to register new types of inappropriate behaviour, and indeed sometimes to become virtually synonymous with the terms that mark the negative pole of the continuum of religious belief-and-practice, impiety, atheism, and magic. These senses were not wholly new in the semantics of *superstitio*, but they now become far more prominent.

## I

Before embarking on a sketch of Latin usage, I should stress the extreme bias of the surviving literature in favour of the ‘classical’ literature of the Roman elite that seemed in the fifth to the eighth centuries CE worth preserving. In particular very little survives from the entire history of the Republic apart from Plautus (active c.218–186 BCE) and Terence (active c.170–60 BCE), and Cicero, Lucretius, Catullus, and Caesar in the first century BCE. The conclusions we draw about the range of reference that *superstitio* and its cognates might have had are to an unknowable extent influenced by the type of texts preserved and the social status of their authors.

The earliest surviving example of the noun *superstitio* occurs in a lengthy legal document composed by Cicero as a youngish man (c.70 BCE), but never

actually delivered as a speech in a law-court. It is used to describe the mixture of horror, outrage, and religious apprehension felt by the Greek-speaking inhabitants of the Roman province of Sicily at the removal by the rapacious governor C. Verres of a famous cult-statue of Demeter from the temple at Enna.<sup>17</sup> Cicero is here doubtless translating the Greek word *deisidaimonia*, fear of god, awe, from the testimony of one of his Greek clients, but in doing so he gives it a slight twist: he chooses to emphasize the Sicilians’ anxiety lest the goddess return the Roman governor’s insult by sending them a succession of poor harvests—Demeter was the goddess of harvested grain, and Enna had been her main cult-centre on the island for more than three centuries. Implicit in the word here is the Roman aristocrat’s—in the young Cicero’s case, would-be Roman aristocrat’s—‘involuntary’ disdain for the subject peoples. And it requires no great penetration to see that, had he been defending Verres rather than prosecuting him, Cicero could have used the same word in a more openly negative sense to mean ‘unmanly panic prompted by fear of divine retribution’. Indeed, one of the most vituperative examples of *superstitio* in the extant literature occurs in another early speech, delivered only four years later, in defence of an evidently extremely unpleasant character accused of poisoning his own stepfather. Employing a smear-tactic common in Roman courts, Cicero depicts his client’s wealthy mother, who had instigated the prosecution, as a ghastly witch who would stop at nothing to fix his client, even including *nocturna sacrificia*, by implication necromantic human sacrifice or offerings to Hekate, the goddess of nefarious magic. These sacrifices to further her unspeakable crimes are described as *contaminata superstitio*, foul, polluted practice, the inverse of proper cult.<sup>18</sup>

The very earliest extant occurrences of the word *superstitio* thus reveal three features that remained central to its illocutionary force. Firstly, it refers to religious acts or practices, and the anxieties or fears that inspired them, but never to particular fixed, widespread, conventional beliefs that can be shown to be false. ‘Superstitious’ rituals are not necessarily ineffectual acts vis-à-vis the gods. Secondly, its antonyms are the key pro-words of religio-political discourse: *pietas* (due observance), *religio* (cult according to the traditional

<sup>17</sup> Cicero, 2 *Verr.* 4.113; cf. A. Vasaly, *Representations: Images of the World in Ciceronian Oratory* (Berkeley, 1993), 157–72.

<sup>18</sup> *Pro Cluentio* 194. For the associations of nocturnal sacrifices, see H.-G. Kippenberg, ‘Magic in Roman Civil Discourse: Why Rituals could be Illegal’, in idem and P. Schäfer (eds), *Envisioning Magic. A Princeton Seminar and Symposium* (Leiden, 1997), 137–163; on the moral, community-building, functions of invective, cf. Cicero, *Rep.* 5.6, *Philipp.* 9.13 etc. with A. Corbeil, ‘Invective,’ in J. M. May (ed.), *Brill’s Companion to Cicero: Oratory and Rhetoric* (Leiden, 2002), ch. 7.

<sup>15</sup> I cite just a small selection from the exhaustive trawl now made possible by the Latin database of the Packard Humanities Institute, CDRom #5.3.

<sup>16</sup> ‘The term *religiosus* was applied to people who allowed themselves to be taken over by an excessive, superstitious *religio*, and such behaviour was considered disgraceful’: Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 4.9.11f. (c.180 CE). On the senses of *religio*, see M. Sachot, ‘*Religio/superstitio*: Historique d’une subversion et d’un retournement’, *Revue de l’Histoire des Religions* 208.4 (1991), 355–94.

rules, written and unwritten), *iustae preces* (appointed or customary supplications).<sup>19</sup> All of these pro-words imply adherence both to a set of moral expectations and to tacit prescriptions relating to normative physical self-presentation, in French *tenue*. A key mark of *superstitio* is weeping, wailing, loss of dignity, the open expression of fear and distress in a religious, but non-funerary, context. Thirdly, it marginalizes a set of practices, definable only in concrete situations, and yet characteristic of certain kinds of person: *superstitio* is the behavioural correlate in the context of religion of the refusal or inability to live up to proper standards. The masses, Greek-speaking provincials, and women of all kinds are just the sort of people from whom such behaviour is to be expected. They may know how to behave, but one cannot bank on it.

These early Ciceronian usages imply an already-established semantic field covering both psychological attitudes and misuse of religious ritual. When the word *superstitio* emerged in this sense is unknown. Nothing can be achieved by appealing to etymology.<sup>20</sup> About a century earlier than these two speeches, the adjective *superstitiosus* seems to have meant 'inspired' or 'frenzied'.<sup>21</sup> It is generally believed that noun and adjective alike derive from *superstes*, relict, that is, 'remaining after the rest has been removed'. However the logic remains quite opaque.<sup>22</sup> In my view it is far more likely that the abstract noun *superstitio* is a back-formation from *superstitiosus* when that word began to be used to reflect the usual ambivalence towards low-level, unpretentious forms of divination with a high failure-rate.<sup>23</sup> Once the noun came into being, the adjective must quickly have lost its older sense

<sup>19</sup> As will become clear later, the relation between *superstitio* and *religio* is far from simple.

<sup>20</sup> Cicero, *Nat. deor.* 2.72 suggests that the word was developed from *superstes*, 'surviving': the adjective *superstitiosus* would then have been applied originally to parents who spent all day long praying and sacrificing in the hope of their children surviving them. The most elaborate discussion of the semantic development is L. F. Janssen, 'Die Bedeutungsentwicklung von *superstitio/superstes*', *Mnemosyne* NS 28 (1975), 135–88.

<sup>21</sup> Used of the prophetess Cassandra, doomed never to be believed (Pacuvius, frg. 216 Ribbeck), and of the Pythia at Delphi (*Trag. incert.* 19 Ribbeck).

<sup>22</sup> E. Benveniste suggested that the connection might be that the seer speaks of an event in the past 'as if it were before his eyes'; *superstitio* would then be the gift of second sight which allows one to know the past as if one had actually been present: *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes* (Paris, 1969), 2: 273–9, repeating an idea he had already published in 1938. However the passage of Plautus he cites in evidence only shows that *superstitiosus* might already have a negative connotation in the late third century BCE.

<sup>23</sup> As already in Plautus, *Amphitryo* 321–3, *Curculio* 397, *Rudens* 1139, all from the 190s, the decade after the end of the Second Punic War, a period of intense stress and uncertainty which had seen a number of outbreaks of *superstitio*.

of 'inspired'. This would imply that the noun *superstitio* came into existence already in the first half of the second century (which would explain Cicero's confidence in using it about a century later). It can, I think, be assumed that the word already then reflected the anxiety of the politico-social elite regarding the ability of the Senate, as the constituted authority in matters of legitimate religious practice, to control popular religious movements, prophetic outbreaks, moral scares. We shall see that this is the pattern implied by Livy's stereotyped account of the regal and early Republican periods, in which motifs from the second century BCE model alleged events in earliest Roman 'history'.<sup>24</sup>

The two primary areas in which the Latin term *superstitio* was applied are popular fears of divine anger, manifested in epidemic illness, strange untoward events and so on, and by extension 'unmanly' apprehensions by individuals, including even emperors, of magical attack, misfortune or murder; and the religions of foreign peoples.

Like the negative sense of Greek *deisidaimonia* in Theophrastus' *Characteres* 16 (late fourth century BCE) and Plutarch's *De superstitione* (c.70 CE), *superstitio* could mean 'excessive religious apprehensions or fears'. Thus Livy records that the third *lectisternium* (a Greek ritual of feasting the gods) in the history of Rome was performed in 364 BCE in order to put an end to a plague believed to be due to divine anger; and when that had no effect, and the people became even more frightened (*victis superstitione animis*), stage-plays were ordered to be performed as an additional placation of divinity.<sup>25</sup> Roughly contemporary with Livy, the funeral address in honour of an unnamed upper-class woman lists her domestic virtues of modesty, obedience, obligingness, her skills at weaving, and her ability to dress without ostentation; and adds her *religio sine superstitione*, her religious observance free of that excess—or emotionality—associated with female religiosity.<sup>26</sup> Pliny the Younger mentions an enemy of his, a well-known litigant and legacy-hunter named M. Aquilius Regulus (d. c.105 CE), who was so in the grip of anxieties when he spoke in court that he used to ward off magical spells

<sup>24</sup> E. T. Lansford, *Augustan Ideology in Livy's First Pentad* (Ann Arbor, 1994); G. B. Miles, *Livy: Reconstructing Early Rome* (Ithaca, 1995); G. Forsythe, *Livy and Early Rome: A Study in Historical Method and Judgement* (Stuttgart, 1999).

<sup>25</sup> Livy 7.2.3. On Livy's account of early Roman religion, cf. B. Liou-Gille, *Une lecture 'religieuse' de Tite-Live, 1: Cultes, rites, croyances de Rome archaïque* (Paris, 1998).

<sup>26</sup> *Laudatio 'Turiae'* (= Dessau, *ILS* no. 8393) 30f. By the mid-first century CE we find the rhetorician Quintilian using *superstitio* and the adverb *superstitiose* in a totally secular context to describe the behaviour of students who stick blindly to the rules instead of creatively learning from them, e.g. *Inst. or.* 4.2.85; 10.6.5; 12.10.14.

(designed to make him fall suddenly dumb, what we would call stagefright) by painting a line round one eye and placing a white patch alternately over one or other eyebrow; and ask *haruspices*, people who could divine the future, about how his cases would go.<sup>27</sup> ‘Extravagant superstition’ (*a nimia superstitione*), says Pliny gleefully, but I suppose one can say that he took his role in court seriously!<sup>28</sup> Suetonius, at about the same date, describes Nero, a ‘bad’ emperor, as ‘in the grip of superstition’ (*superstitione captus*), in the context of gossip that he actually used to sacrifice to a female statuette that had been sent him as a talisman against conspiracy.<sup>29</sup> A rescript of the emperor Marcus Aurelius, in the third quarter of the second century CE, decreed that anyone who acted in such a way as to excite people’s apprehensions in relation to a divinity (*quo leves hominum animi superstitionis numinis terrentur*), that is, as a religious prophet, was to be relegated to an island.<sup>30</sup>

In this context, the word is usually (though, as it happens, not in these cases) in the plural, and often linked to *religiones*, also in the plural, which means much the same, a tendency to have recourse to supposedly extravagant ritual through fear of divine anger. Thus Livy tells how the legendary early King Tullus, in a time of plague, himself became ill, and, from being a regular fire-eater, suddenly changed tack, ‘fell prey to all manner of religious fears great and small’, and filled his subjects with similar anxieties.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Similar fears are known among other Roman orators, proving that ‘superstition’ was not merely a matter of class and education. The forehead and eyebrows are specifically mentioned as targets in the two longest Latin curse-tablets listing body parts (*IDefixA* *udollent* 135; *CIL* I<sup>2</sup> 2530).

<sup>28</sup> Pliny, *Epist.* 6.2.2; cf. 2.20.3–5. By contrast, when Cicero (whose account of the derivation of *superstitiosus*, cited in n.16, was written at about the same time) lost his only daughter, aged 33, in 45 BCE and spent much of the rest of the year making and unmaking plans for building a temple to her as a kind of divinity at his country villa (*ad Atticum* 12.12.1; 36.1), his friend Atticus called his behaviour stupid, mistaken folly (*ineptiae, stultitia; error . . .*) but not *superstitio*.

<sup>29</sup> Suetonius, *Nero* 56; likewise Domitian, another ‘bad’ emperor, is said to have worshipped Minerva superstitiously (*superstitiose colebat*): *Domit.* 15.3; cf. J. Scheid, ‘Religion et superstition à l’époque de Tacite: quelques réflexions’, in *AA.VV., Religion, superstición y magia en el mundo romano* (Cádiz, 1985), 19–34.

<sup>30</sup> Modestinus, *de poenis*, ap. *Digest.* 48.19.30.

<sup>31</sup> *Omnibus magnis parvis superstitionibus obnoxius degeret . . . religionibus . . . populum impleret* (Livy 1.31.6); also 6.5.6 (after the sack of Rome by the Gauls in 390): *in civitate plena religionum, tunc etiam ab recenti clade superstitionis principibus . . .*, at Rome all kinds of religious anxieties were making the rounds, and the faith of the leading men in the efficacy of religion was shaken by the recent defeat.

The second area where we regularly find the word *superstitio* is as a term to describe non-Roman religions. No particular distinctions in time or distance can be discerned in this context, for we find the word used with reference to Italic tribes as well as about exotic peoples such as the Egyptians, the Chaldaeans (for astrology), the Gauls, and the Germans. But there is a tendency for *superstitio* to denote what we would call the religion of exotic peoples, whereas in the case of those more integrated into the Roman world-picture, it denotes particular practices or rituals.

Thus, while the Samnites were off ‘busy with their mumbo-jumbo’ (*operati superstitionibus*) in 293 BCE, the consul Sp. Carvilius Maximus seized the opportunity to capture the town of Amiternum and massacre about 2,800 men.<sup>32</sup> *Superstitio*, claims Cicero, is worshipping cats and dogs, as the Egyptians do.<sup>33</sup> In his concern to keep up indigenous Italic religious tradition, the emperor Claudius proposed in 47 CE to create an official college of Etruscan *haruspices* (diviners) at Rome; this knowledge, he explained, has suffered recently under public neglect ‘and the spread of foreign religions’.<sup>34</sup> Pliny the Elder would have liked to describe the Greek magico-medical incantations associated with Thracian Orpheus as *superstitio*, but he knew there was no magic in Thrace.<sup>35</sup> According to Tacitus, the Baltic tribe of the ‘Aestii’ [= Eistr/Esten] worshipped the Mother of the Gods, and therefore used the emblem of a boar ‘as a sign of their faith’.<sup>36</sup> The emperor Antoninus Pius (138–61 CE) permitted provincials to take oaths according to their local religious usage, described as *superstitio*.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Livy 10.39.1–2.

<sup>33</sup> Cicero, *De leg.* 1.32. The geographer Pomponius Mela specifies human sacrifice as a typical mark of superstition: *gentes superbae superstitiosae aliquando etiam immanes adeo, ut hominem optimam et gratissimam diis victimam crederent*, proud and superstitious peoples tend to be really brutal, inasmuch as they believe that a human being is the best sacrificial offering of all, and the most acceptable to the gods (*De chorogr.* 3.14, c.40 CE).

<sup>34</sup> *Et quia externae superstitiones valescant*: Tacitus, *Ann.* 11. 15. 1. Given the divinatory context, I assume he had astrology mainly in mind, though the cult of Egyptian Serapis encouraged dream-divination.

<sup>35</sup> Pliny, *HN* 30.7.

<sup>36</sup> *Insigne superstitionis*: Tacitus, *Germ.* 45.3. Presumably the deity was a form of the Germanic goddess Nerthus-Freyja, whose favourite, Ottarr, sometimes took the form of a boar with golden bristles. However, no such emblems are known in the archaeology of East Prussia/the Baltic lands.

<sup>37</sup> *Quod propria superstitione iuratum est, standum rescripsit*: Ulpian, *ad edictum praetoris*, ap. *Digest.* 12.2.5.1.

It is worth noting here that even among these few citations there is a range of implied attitudes, between Antoninus Pius' neutral distance (he is interested only in ensuring the maximum authority for oaths, given their crucial role in contracts and law-courts; it is thus improbable that *superstitio* here has a belittling sense); through Livy's implied judgement, that it served the Samnites right for being so preoccupied with religion when there was a war on;<sup>38</sup> to the outright hostility of Cicero's contempt for the Egyptians. So far as I know, and for what it is worth given the nature of our sources, the earliest extant example of this markedly negative usage occurs in a legal speech, also by Cicero, delivered in 59 BCE in relation to the requirement upon Jews to send money annually to Jerusalem.<sup>39</sup> It becomes more common, however, from the middle of the first century CE.<sup>40</sup>

These two usages are both expressions of the idea that there existed a traditional set of public and private practices, instituted by Romulus and Numa, that had unique authority as the *religio Romanorum*. In reality, of course, the institutions, rituals and inflections of Roman religion were subject to historical change over both the long and the short term. Some of the most typically 'Roman' gods, Mercury, Saturn, Hercules, Minerva, Diana, Ceres, Venus, for example, as well as many ritual practices and festivals, were, or were believed to be, Etruscan or Greek, absorbed into Roman cult during the early history of the city. Some changes, such as the building of new temples, the introduction of new deities, for example Venus Eryx from Sicily or Aesculapius from Epidaurus, or increases in the number of specialist roles ('priesthoods'), were indeed marked and recorded by the collective memory, inasmuch as they were related to competition between the members of the elite and the furtherance of their ends, personal and collective. For example, among the information recorded by the official Roman calendars, beginning in the late Republic, are the foundation dates of temples, many of them to abstract deities of great significance for the self-representation of the aristocracy, such as Salus, Victoria, Honos, Virtus, Fides, Fortuna huiusce diei

<sup>38</sup> Beyond that, of course, his choice of the word is intended to deflect the accusation that Maximus had broken the rules of war, quite apart from making a mockery of the Roman claim to particular *pietas*. The scheme is derived from a *topos* in Greek history familiar from the genre of *Strategems*, e.g. Peisistratus at Athens, Syloson at Samos (Polyaenus, *Strat.* 1.20; 6.45).

<sup>39</sup> *Huic barbarae superstitioni . . . severitatis*: Cicero, *pro Flacco* 67. Note that this attack has nothing to do with belief (in a single god, for example) but with a customary financial obligation.

<sup>40</sup> The classic account of the process of intensification, which I summarize at the end of this article, is D. Grodzynski, 'Superstitio', *Revue des Études Anciennes*, 76 (1974), 36–60.

(Security from Attack, Victory, Honour, Manliness, Keeping one's Word, Today's Good Fortune), that were erected and paid for 'privately' by individual consuls and generals with the proceeds of booty. But many, perhaps most, changes in the religious field occurred below this level, and so went unrecorded.<sup>41</sup>

This focus on political action is fully in keeping with the more general character of 'Roman religion'. In the traditional perception, inspired by Theodor Mommsen's reconstruction, or perhaps rather invention, of the system of Roman public law (*Staatsrecht*), there was a Roman 'state religion', contrasted with the 'private religion' of the family.<sup>42</sup> It is now considered mistaken to conceptualize the Roman Republican order as though it were even remotely comparable to the nineteenth-century national state; and, as a corollary, that Roman religion, likewise, cannot be thought of as a state religion, but should more properly be seen as the religion of the Roman elite, and especially that of the noble families represented in the Senate.<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, the territorial expansion of Rome, the direct consequence of the internal competition of the aristocracy for prestige, status, and wealth, brought with it suzerainty, exploitation and dominion over other peoples with non-Roman cults and beliefs. The temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline acted as a perpetual reminder of Rome's conquering mission, and was recognized as such by the subject peoples: when it burned down in 69 CE, during a skirmish between the soldiers of the reigning emperor Vitellius and those of the successful pretender Vespasian, the event was hailed by native prophets in Gaul as boding the end of the Roman empire and the beginning of a Celtic one.<sup>44</sup> This intimate association between Roman religion and

<sup>41</sup> J. Rüpke, *Religion of the Romans* (Cambridge, 2007), 39–61.

<sup>42</sup> The first volume was published in 1871; the standard, much enlarged, edition is T. Mommsen, *Römisches Staatsrecht* (3 vols. in 5, Leipzig, 1887–8); cf. the shorter version prepared by Mommsen himself: *Abriss des römischen Staatsrechts* (Leipzig 1907; first published 1893). On Mommsen's view of the Roman 'state' and its public law, see A. Giovannini, 'De Niebuhr à Mommsen: remarques sur le genèse du "Droit public"', *Cahiers du Centre Glotz*, 3 (1992), 167–76; W. Nippel and B. Seidensticker (eds), *Theodor Mommsens langer Schatten* (Göttingen 2005). Mommsen's counterpart in the field of Roman religion was Georg Wissowa, *Religion und Kultus der Römer* (Munich, 1912).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. K.-J. Hölkeskamp, *Senatus Populusque Romanus. Die politische Kultur der Republik. Dimensionen und Deutungen* (Stuttgart, 2004), 11–83; idem, 'Rekonstruktion einer Republik: Die politische Kultur des antiken Rom und die Forschung der letzten Jahrzehnte'. *Historische Zeitschrift*, Beihefte NS 38 (Munich, 2004), 19–56; Rüpke, *ibid.* (see n. 41) 24–29.

<sup>44</sup> Tacitus, *Hist.* 3.71–2; 4.54.



Roman imperial success made it inevitable that the former be used as one of the boundary-markers in mapping the differences between Rome and her subjects. The extension of territorial control, out into Italy, then into Sicily and the Gaulish Po valley, then into Gallia Narbonensis, Hispania, Macedonia, and the organized Hellenistic monarchies of Asia Minor, the Near East and North Africa, to say nothing of trade with the eastern Mediterranean through the island of Delos, created a variety of contacts with other religious systems, deities, and rituals; and of course with differing conceptions of the proper nature and ends of religious practice.

In principle polytheistic systems, such as the Roman, are extremely open to new modes of religious action, whether in the form of individual cults or new modes of ritual expression; and, as I have mentioned, the Roman elite did indeed develop several institutions for admitting new cults and knowledge-practices into the system. Nevertheless the sheer scale of these territorial acquisitions, which occurred largely between 300 and 50 BCE, and increasingly rapidly in the century between 150 and 50, together with the displacements of populations (slaves; long-serving legions; colonists) that they involved, made it increasingly difficult to maintain a balance between an ideal-typical 'Roman religion', largely in the service of an imperialist ideology, and the concerns of the rest of the Roman population, to say nothing of the subject provincial populations. In this situation, the notion of *superstitio* neatly accommodated polytheistic openness to the exorbitant variety of actually worshipped divinities with sound, non-theological, reasons for retaining a commitment to an ill-defined, essentially pragmatic, concept of 'our ancestral religion', the religion of the Roman elite persuasively identified with that of the people of Rome.

## II

In ancient societies, the ideal form of religious knowledge-practice was encoded in the performance of civic sacrifice, which in turn was imbricated in the sets of norms governing perceptions and judgements of civilized versus savage life. Civic sacrifice itself was embedded in the calendar of civic festivals (themselves the meeting-point of formal laws or rules of organization and of aetiological myth) and in the sacred topography of the city and its surrounding territory. All claims to religious knowledge outside or beyond this normative core were more or less problematic, but could be tolerated, even incorporated into 'tradition', so long as their challenge to the norms inscribed in civic sacrifice remained indistinct. The inverse of legitimate religious knowledge-practice took three quite different forms: rejection of some part of established religious knowledge, or the rules that express it, which is impiety; denial of the very possibility of religious knowledge,

which is atheism;<sup>45</sup> and malign sorcery, the reversal of the norms contained in legitimate knowledge. All ancient states had institutionalized means, consisting usually in the death penalty, or at the least exile, of sanctioning such extreme forms of illegitimacy. Both in Greece and in Republican Rome, however, superstition represented a form of religious practice some way away from that pole. It marked a boundary, not a total exclusion from the civilized order.

The problem lay rather in the type of exclusions the concept of superstition attempted to impose. At Rome, one way of marking the illegitimacy of the religious knowledge connoted by the term was to note its 'vacancy', its absence of force or authority. 'This annual ritual of ours that you are witnessing is no *vana superstitio*, no empty show', explains the exiled Arcadian King Evander to Aeneas on the future site of Rome, 'it commemorates Hercules' defeat of the monster Cacus'.<sup>46</sup> Sanctioned practice was thus conceptually 'full'. The stereotypical carriers of 'empty' religious knowledge were the classificatory marginals, first women, then strangers. Trying to explain why people indulge in mourning, Cicero suggests that one reason is that men adopt 'a sort of female excess (*muliebris superstitio quaedam*), imagining that, having been dealt a blow by the gods, they are more likely to pacify them by ostentatiously showing themselves humbled and crushed'.<sup>47</sup> Still more specifically, the ideal-typical superstitious person is an old woman (Lat. *anus*, adj. *anilis*), the folly of her beliefs and practices rehearsing her prescriptive social marginality. Indeed, *anilis superstitio* was a cant expression. Listing the Academic arguments against divination, for example, Cicero claims: 'The very notion of fate is just an old wives' tale, utterly superstitious'.<sup>48</sup> Old women are the type of the superstitious because they lack courage, moderation and steadiness, they have 'light' or 'weak' minds, tremble, weep, worry. Some people, says Cicero to his brother Quintus in the same dialogue, believe that dreams foretell the future, but how many more are there who 'despise them and think that such a belief is the superstition of a feeble, old woman's spirit?'<sup>49</sup> According to Livy, it was the Senate's refusal to reveal when Africa was to be invaded towards the end of the Second Punic War, that made people anxiously ready to claim to have seen portents: two suns in the sky at the same time, a comet, city gates struck by lightning. 'All this filled people's minds with fears (*impleverat ea res superstitionum animos*), and they

<sup>45</sup> Plutarch defines atheism as 'imperviousness to the divine' (*de superst.* 6, 167e7f.).

<sup>46</sup> Vergil, *Aen.* 8.187f.

<sup>47</sup> Cicero, *Disp. Tusc.* 3.72.

<sup>48</sup> *Anile sane et plenum superstitionis fati nomen ipsum*: Cicero, *De divin.* 2.19.

<sup>49</sup> *Superstitionem imbecilli animi et anilis* (ibid. 2.125).

were all the more ready to spread gossip about prodigies and to believe in them'.<sup>50</sup> As we saw earlier, Marcus Aurelius' rescript relegating religious agitators likewise linked their success to the *animi leves* of their adherents, the 'lightness' of their minds, their inability to resist fear or anxiety about the gods.

In this context, the overt objection to *superstitio* was that, even when demonstrated by men, it was a form of religious knowledge typical of that half-other, woman, and most especially old women. By definition, such persons did not belong to the imagined community of courageous, moderate and steadfast adult males, the community of sanctioned practice. Old womanliness was thus an apt metaphor for the inadequacy or 'vacancy' of the religious knowledge summarized in the notion of *superstitio*. But a completely different criterion of exclusion might also be applied. It was not merely 'light minds' that bothered the ideological centre, it was the rituals they appealed to. The Senate, or rather, the politico-social elite of Rome, desired a folk whose religion they could dominate inasmuch as it mirrored or imitated their own; what they got, especially at times of war, epidemic, natural disaster, was superstition. This desire for an obedient, manageable community that looks to the elite for its sanctioned practice is mostly occluded. It becomes explicit only in the invented history of the early Republic that I mentioned earlier. The best example is a report by Livy of the supposed events of 429 BCE. A prolonged drought caused cattle and sheep to expire in the dried-up water-courses. The country people were forced into the towns. At the same time, an outbreak of 'mange' (*scabies*) spread from the animals to human beings. 'Not only were their bodies seized by the affliction, but their minds; all manner of superstitious fears (*multiplex religio*), mostly foreign, overcame them; people's imaginations were overwhelmed by religious dread (*sunt capti superstitione animi*) spread by individuals who, in order to make themselves rich, introduced novel forms of sacrifice and of divination into private houses, until the collapse of public morale (*publicus pudor*) reached the ears of the government.' In this mythical version of early Roman history, when Roman men were still manly, courageous, moderate and steadfast, all the government needs to do is send in the Aediles, who issue a proclamation that only Roman gods may be worshipped, and only in a Roman manner (*ne qui nisi Romani di neu quo alio more quam patrio colerentur*).<sup>51</sup> In this limning of the Bacchanalian affair of 186 BCE, when the Senate savagely repressed the adherents of Bacchic cult, which had for years been peacefully practised in Italy and

<sup>50</sup> Livy 29.14.3, referring to 204 BCE.

<sup>51</sup> Livy 4.30.8–11.

Rome, authentic salvation is to be found only in the *cultus patrius*, traditional Roman religion. That cult alone is the locus of 'full' religious knowledge.

The unstable contours of the Senate's imagined community will by now be sufficiently clear. However, the deeper difficulty had nothing to do with manly minds or old-womanly fears, but with fundamentally different interests in the religious system. Whatever the origins and complex earlier history of Roman religion, by the second century BCE, as I have sketched, it had become a system whose main function was to legitimate the imperial expansion driven by the competition of the aristocracy. It thus offered a classic Weberian theodicy of good fortune (*Theodizee des Glücks*), confirming the legitimacy of 'the internal and external interests of all rulers, property owners, victors, and physically healthy people'.<sup>52</sup> The successful and healthy owed their success and their health to their piety; thanks to the religious institutions created by the early kings, and maintained by the Senate, Rome itself was the most pious polity imaginable. The mass of the population however had a mainly instrumental attitude towards religion: for them, its function was the 'magical' (again in Weber's sense) guarantee of agrarian productivity and protection from evils, above all serious illness. On this view, collective suffering is the result of divine anger, individual illness evidence of attack by a spirit (or by a witch). Such instrumentalism positively requires new ritual forms of protection, which makes specialization in this area exceptionally attractive to the charismatic as a means of upward mobility; and tends to be brutal towards failed divinities.<sup>53</sup> The expansion of the Roman state into Italy, especially the Greek areas of Southern Italy and Sicily, and later into the eastern Mediterranean, provided ample means of culture-contact and so access to new modes of religious action, grist to the mill of instrumental needs.

The basic issue therefore was the extent to which a public religious system primarily orientated towards justifying the good fortune of the socio-political elite could control and channel the demand for 'magical' protection. As I

<sup>52</sup> The citation is from M. Weber, 'Einleitung in die Wirtschaftsethik der Weltreligionen', in *Max Weber, Soziologie* (see n.9 above), 398–440 at 403 = *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, ed. Marianne Weber (Tübingen, 1920–1), 1: 237–75 (= 'The Social Psychology of the World Religions', in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and eds H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (London, 1948), 267–301 at 271. First published in 1916). (The essay is oddly omitted from the standard collection in English: Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, tr. E. Fischoff, intro. T. Parsons (London, 1966)). Weber here uses 'theodicy' in a sociological, not theological, sense to mean 'legitimation (of good fortune) by representing it as a result of divine approval', and contrasts it with the more familiar 'Theodizee des Leidens', theodicy of misfortune.

<sup>53</sup> Weber, 'Einleitung', 403–8 (= 'Social Psychology', 271–6).

have mentioned, some efforts were made; numerous healing cults are known from the Republican period. But the sum of human misery is always greater than such efforts can channel. Sociologically speaking, the concept of *superstitio* negotiated the gap between a theodicy of good fortune and religious instrumentalism. It admitted that there were other religious ends than the legitimation of good fortune, but sought to minimize the threat of such claims to effective religious knowledge by identifying them with the stereotype of the foolish old woman, the slave, and the foreigner, people who don't count, thus underlining their marginality to what really mattered, 'our religion', 'our values'.

The safeguard function of Roman *superstitio* is thus clear. Moreover, the case of Cicero's daughter Tullia, who died in 45 BCE aged 33, reminds us that the limits of a theodicy of good fortune are everywhere visible; Cicero's constant public projection of himself as a member of the imagined community of the justified rubs uneasily against his project of erecting a temple to Tullia, a project that his own closest friend is too polite to call *superstitio*. Moreover, by the late Republic at any rate the educated elite (perhaps not a large number of men) was familiar with the thought that public religion is merely an instrument of domination, a means of fooling the people. But they were forced to the same conclusion as Cicero at the end of *On divination*, where, after spending the second book reworking the Academic demolition of the possibility of divination, he lamely concludes that the Roman elite cannot cut off the branch it sits on: the public religious system depends absolutely on the assumption that its means of discovering the will of the gods is effective. Whatever we may believe privately, we have no alternative but to maintain the traditional system of worship, of which divination is part.<sup>54</sup> Here again, *superstitio* provided welcome paper for the cracks down the centre of the imagined community.

With the crisis of the Late Republic and the protracted civil war which gave birth to the Principate in 29 BCE, the theodicy of good fortune naturally received a fair number of knocks; the literature of the period is full of lamentations about how Rome has been abandoned by the gods, how the altars are empty of offerings, and only *superstitio* abounds.<sup>55</sup> In religious terms, the Principate effected a restoration of both the imagined community and the theodicy of good fortune by forging a direct link between Jupiter Optimus

Maximus, the high god of the state, and the Princeps, whose personal status fluctuated perpetually between Here and There, depending on context, and whose dead predecessors, with some exceptions, were lumped together to form a new type of collective godhead, the *divi*.<sup>56</sup> Images, votives, and prayers to Jupiter Optimus Maximus and the Princeps/*divi* outnumbered those to all other divinities put together. In this context, the instrumentalism of popular religion ceased to threaten the validity of traditional cult, guaranteed as it was by the person of the Emperor. The old-woman model of *superstitio*, without disappearing, thus lost much of its value.

In this situation, it was the second aspect of the Republican notion, the notion of foreigners as *superstitiosi*, that came to the fore. In the early first century BCE, the peoples of Italy had forced Rome to grant them admission to the 35 tribes and other rights of Roman citizens. With the continuing vast territorial expansion of the empire, the demand to redefine the imagined community beyond Rome, even beyond Italy, grew further, culminating in the extension of Roman citizenship to all free inhabitants by the emperor Caracalla in 212 CE. We have already noted some examples of depreciatory attitudes towards provincials and foreigners; but there are many others. Aulus Gellius, for example, describing how the renegade Roman pro-praetor Q. Sertorius (d.72 BCE) had used a tame hind to impress the Lusitanians with his magical powers, remarks, 'Thus was the barbarians' well-known credulity of great value to Sertorius in high matters'.<sup>57</sup> This assumption of credulousness encouraged the belief that foreign peoples were superstitious. Prominent among these foreigners were the Jews, whose innumerable 'food restrictions... circumcisions and excisions'<sup>58</sup> forced a second connection to Roman *superstitio*, the sense of over-scrupulous observance of religious rules as an end in themselves. Moreover, alone of all the populations within the Roman Empire, the Jews were able, and determined, to use their religion as a bargaining counter with the Romans; with the result that when, in 66–70 CE (and again in 133–5) the internal conflicts within Judaism could only be resolved

<sup>54</sup> M. Schofield, 'Cicero for and against divination', *Journal of Roman Studies*, 76 (1986) 47–65.

<sup>55</sup> P. Jal, *La guerre civile à Rome: Étude littéraire et morale* (Paris, 1963), 231–54; 360–488; A.W. Lintott, 'Imperial Expansion and Moral Decline in the Roman Republic', *Historia*, 21 (1972), 626–32.

<sup>56</sup> P. Herz, 'Der römische Kaiser und der Kaiserkult: Gott oder primus inter pares?', in D. Zeller (ed.), *Menschenwerdung Gottes—Vergöttlichung von Menschen*. *Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus 7* (Fribourg/Suisse and Göttingen, 1988), 115–40; M. Clauss, *Kaiser und Gott: Herrscherkult im römischen Reich* (Stuttgart and Leipzig, 1999); I. Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Oxford, 2002).

<sup>57</sup> Aulus Gellius, *Noct. att.* 15.22.9. *Credulitas* however has nothing to do with religious belief; it is rather a virtual synonym of *levitas animi*.

<sup>58</sup> Strabo, *Geogr.* 16.2.37, 761C; cf. Apuleius, *Florida* 6: *Iudaeos superstitiosos*; the word refers here not to their monotheism but to their dietary rules and observance of the Sabbath.

by rebellion, the Romans responded by abolishing the official Temple cult and selling thousands of Jews into slavery. A fictional speech of dramatic date 69 CE, but written in c.220, declares: 'The Jews rebelled long ago not only against Rome but against all mankind; people who have devised an unsociable way of life, with no food, libations, prayers or sacrifices in common with other men are further away from us than Susa, Bactria, and the Indians beyond that . . .'.<sup>59</sup> Already at the time of the first revolt, the handful of early Christians in Rome, closely connected with Judaism, were likewise branded *superstitiosi*. Nevertheless the criteria remained essentially the same, focused upon the practice of civic sacrifice, and its constituent parts, prayer, libation, the communal eating of sacrificial meat: that is the point of Apollonius' complaint against the Jews. In just the same way, the guilt of the Christians lay in their refusal to sacrifice, their refusal to act as members of the imagined community should—they might sing and pray and be as morally good as they liked, but the fact that they would not sacrifice meant that they wilfully refused membership in that community. The reasons for this refusal, including their belief in a different sort of god to whom sacrifice was unacceptable, were not at issue.

It was therefore the need for a new version of the imagined community in the altered conditions of the Principate, and especially from the early second century CE, that made it plausible to emphasize the second meaning of *superstitio*, that of 'foreign credulity/religion'. This new community, at least from 212 CE, encompassed all the free population of the Empire throughout the provinces, from Armenia to Britannia, from Lower Germany to Upper Egypt. By this time it was clear that traditional Roman religion as Varro had understood it in the mid-first century BCE existed only as a citation, its partial reproduction in each Roman colony a mere mark of privileged status. Roman religion outside the city of Rome now meant in practice the cult of the emperor, of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, and any Roman or 'Roman' divinity whose cult local elites and groups of private worshippers cared to institutionalize. *Superstitio* came to connote religious practice outside this flexible, not to say muddy, notion of 'our religion', and thus tended to shift its dominant meaning towards the extreme pole of impiety, atheism, and malign magic.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Philostratus, *Vit. Apollon. Tyan.* 5.33.

<sup>60</sup> Atheism here is not the claim that there are no gods (a claim limited in antiquity to a handful of philosophers, mainly Cynics) but not accepting the ordinary civic gods. Euhemerus, for example, was widely considered an atheist, although he simply argued that the gods had once been important human benefactors of humankind, thus preparing acceptance of Hellenistic kings as gods. Christians too were denounced as atheists, because they refused to sacrifice.

The later notion of *superstitio* was thus a response to the pragmatic impossibility of defining the religion of the Roman empire in anything but the vaguest terms focused upon the one common denominator, the practice of animal sacrifice.

Two developments gave a particular pregnancy to this use. First, the Roman habit of identifying their own Empire with the scope of *humanitas*, ambiguous between humane and human; it was for example Roman *humanitas* that suppressed the Druids, who practised human sacrifice.<sup>61</sup> The slide towards equating those who rejected this *humanitas* with 'non-humans' was easy. Second, as Marie-Theres Fögen has argued, the vulnerability of the individual *Princeps* to conspiracy rendered the institution intensely suspicious of divination directed towards the outcome of an imperial illness or the date of the emperor's death. Illicit religious knowledge (we are not talking about belief, but knowledge) therefore tended to be identified with divination, especially astrology and magic, relating to the *Princeps* and so the security of the realm.<sup>62</sup> Under these conditions, the connotations of *superstitio* shifted, above all from the period of the Severans (first quarter, third century), from 'foreign credulity' towards 'hostility to human-kind', and justified the persecution of the Christians by Decius (249–51 CE) and by Diocletian (Great Persecution, 303–5 CE), and the violent rhetoric of the latter's law against the Manichaeans (297, 298 or 302 CE). The place of *superstitio* on the notional continuum of religious knowledge-practices thus shifted in the later Principate decisively towards the negative pole of total illegitimacy. The Christians, in their turn, simply inverted the same language to describe non-Christian worship. Constantius II's law of late 341 against pagan sacrifice begins: 'Let superstition cease, let the madness of sacrifice be abolished'.<sup>63</sup>

The final transformation of *superstitio* worth noting here, however, was not this justification for mutual persecution but a formulation by Lactantius, written soon after the end of the Great Persecution. After dismissing

<sup>61</sup> Pliny, *HN* 30.13; cf. É. Aubrion, 'Humanitas et superstitio dans la littérature latine du début de l'époque antonine', in J. Dion (ed.), *Culture antique et fanatisme. Études anciennes* 13 (Nancy and Paris, 1996), 77–94.

<sup>62</sup> M.-Th. Fögen, *Die Enteignung der Wahrsager: Studien zum kaiserlichen Wissensmonopol in der Spätantike* (Frankfurt, 1993), 254–321.

<sup>63</sup> *Cesset superstitio, sacrificiorum aboleatur insania*: Cod. Theod. 16.10.2.; cf. *absque ullo sacrificio atque ulla superstitione damnabili exhiberi populo voluptates . . . decernimus*, (we command that public entertainments be mounted without performing sacrifice or any (other) execrable pagan ritual): *Cod. Just.* 1.11.4 (399 CE).

Cicero's etymology, the Christian professor of rhetoric makes short work of the distinction between *religio* and *superstitio*:

Religion is of course the worship of what is true, and superstition is the worship of what is false . . . . 'Superstitious' is the word for those who worship quantities of false gods, and 'religious' is for us who pray to the one true God.<sup>64</sup>

Even the Hellenistic philosophers could never have hit upon such an opposition, based on the ontological status of the object of worship: for them, after all, the pagan gods were real enough, albeit mere aspects of a higher deity who sustained the cosmos. Lactantius' solution shifted the criterion of difference decisively away from the issue of performance of specific rituals, above all animal sacrifice, to that of the truth-content of claims about divinity. From that perspective, Augustine was wholly justified in claiming that the Roman state never was a *res populi*, a true commonwealth, as Cicero makes Scipio claim in the *Republic*. For a *res populi* must be based on justice, and there can be no justice if those who live in it do not serve God but sacrifice to evil and impure demons, *malis et impuris daemonibus*.<sup>65</sup> What is *De civitate Dei* but the laborious effort to create a new imagined community amid the desolation wrought by Alaric's Goths in 410 CE?

<sup>64</sup> *Inst. div.* 4.29.11; 16.

<sup>65</sup> Cicero, *De repub.* 3.43; Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 19.21.