

## Growing Up in the Cities of the Gods

The Roman Empire was full of gods in 310. Their temples, statues, and images filled its cities, towns, farms, and wildernesses. Whether they willed it or not, people living within the empire regularly experienced the sight, sound, smell, and taste of the gods' celebration. Traditional divinities also dominated the spiritual space of the empire as figures whose presence could not be sensed but whose actions many felt they could discern.<sup>1</sup> Although such a situation seems quite foreign to the modern Western mind, people of the time saw this as an unremarkable reality that had existed for millennia. Later Romans could draw on a long history of living in a world like this, and they had developed ever more sophisticated technologies and techniques for interacting with the gods around them. The gods belonged to the empire's natural environment, and Romans had spent centuries learning how to make use of this vital resource.

The religious infrastructure of the Roman Empire cannot be equated to the aqueducts, pipes, and fountains that enabled Romans to redirect the water of rivers and streams into their cities and homes, but both systems attempted to channel in productive ways forces that could either sustain life or unleash immense destruction. Indeed, while a water system dependent on aqueducts and pipes differed dramatically from a spiritual system dependent on temples and rituals, both also produced a sort of passive and unconscious acceptance of their necessity. Temples, statues, and festivals were so omnipresent that they mostly faded into

the sensory background as a sort of white noise or ambient odor that lurked without much acknowledgment within the empire's physical space.

#### RELIGIOUS INFRASTRUCTURE

A short fourth-century catalog of the types of buildings found in the city of Alexandria offers a window into this environment. It lists almost 2,500 temples in the city, nearly one for every twenty houses.<sup>2</sup> Some of these were massive structures, like the Serapeum described in the introduction. The Serapeum sat on the highest spot in the city, an augmented limestone ridge at the southwestern edge of Alexandria's walls. Alexandria was a densely populated city of perhaps five hundred thousand filled with multistory houses and apartment buildings, but the Serapeum mount was visible in much of the city, and the tall temple perched atop it would have been a landmark. The senses of those who visited the site would have been altogether overwhelmed by the abundant and extravagant decorations of Serapis's temple and the other buildings around it. The site was crowded with statues and adorned with fine marbles, precious metals, rare woods, and (probably) jeweled objects.<sup>3</sup> On most days, the indiscriminate rumblings of activity from worshippers and priests milling around the temple, scholars and students consulting the library, patrons and merchants doing business at the neighboring shops, and (on race days) the crowd of people filing into and out of the adjacent Hippodrome provided a wall of white noise that blocked out the regular cacophony of the city.<sup>4</sup> The pleasant odors of incense and other offerings further set the complex apart from the filthy, smelly city that seethed below it.

The sense of physical and sensory separation that an urban monumental temple complex created for its visitors was, however, a luxury that few Romans enjoyed on a regular basis. This was not for lack of piety. Instead, it reflected a far more mundane reality. Massive temples like the Alexandrian Serapeum, the Roman Capitoline temple, or those on the Athenian Acropolis dominated the city's skyline, but their heights, locations, and many stairs made it inconvenient to access them regularly. The Serapeum, for example, was perhaps a thirty-minute walk from the center of the city, a walk that would force one to dodge traffic while enduring dust, smoke, and the stench of all sorts of dung and rot. Once one reached the temple, a climb up nearly a hundred stairs still remained. This could not be a regular part of most people's daily routine.

Fortunately, Alexandrians did not have to go far to encounter a temple. Neighborhood temples filled the city. They likely took many forms and ranged from imposing structures like the Serapeum to structures so modest that a distracted passerby would not notice their presence (see fig. 3). The diversity of Hindu temples one sees in cities in modern India can perhaps help one to imagine this type of environment. If one takes the city of Mathura in Uttar Pradesh as an example, a driver along the main highway to the west of the town will see massive temples like the Jai Gurudev mixed in with temples like the small one dedicated to Hanuman just four-tenths of a mile to its southeast (fig. 4) and another of similar size two miles to its north. Within the cities, one sees even greater diversity. The area around the center of Jaipur, for example, houses major temples like the Birla Mandir (fig. 5) and much smaller ones that are barely larger than a full-grown man (fig. 6). The bigger temples in India tend to have more visitors and dedicated attendants, while smaller temples attract less traffic and are not regularly staffed, but temples of all sizes play an active role in the larger religious life of Hindu communities.

One can see evidence that temples in the later Roman world functioned similarly. Rufinus's description of the Alexandrian Serapeum indicates the presence of a more or less permanent staff of priests and devotees of the god. In the neighboring city of Canopus, one hears about a philosopher who took up residence on the site of the large Serapis temple there and answered questions posed by visitors.<sup>5</sup> Smaller temples, by contrast, were likely not staffed regularly. Priests and priestesses were summoned when their expertise was needed or a sacrifice required.<sup>6</sup> Even without the constant presence of priests, however, these smaller temples could be used regularly. They often made cultic images visible to passers-by and permitted visitors to leave offerings in front of the building.<sup>7</sup> This provided a more flexible way to approach and honor the divine that enabled devotees to worship when and where it was most convenient.

The Roman countryside housed an even greater array of sacred sites. These included large temple complexes,<sup>8</sup> grottoes and other rustic sacred locations,<sup>9</sup> and a large category of rural structures that served, in effect, as temples run by the household that controlled the land. Here too a focus on the size of the temple buildings can obscure their ubiquity. Houses across the empire had their own household shrines that ranged from wall niches to entire rooms that served as the focal point of domestic rituals.<sup>10</sup> On estates, privately administered cult locations



FIGURE 3. Temples depicted on Roman coins. From top, hexastyle temple (*RIC* VI.258, A.D. 310–11), temple and sacred grove at Zeugma (*SNG Copenhagen* 35, A.D. 247–49), and temple in Rome (*RIC* III.290a, A.D. 159). All coins courtesy of the author.



FIGURE 4. Temple of Hanuman, Mathura, India. Photo by author.



FIGURE 5. The Birla Mandir, Jaipur, India. Photo by Zoe Watts.

would be even larger and possibly designed to visually resemble temple-market complexes. Religion played an intimate role in defining the rhythms of agricultural life, and, for this reason, landowners often erected freestanding temples on their estates that could serve as cultic centers for their laborers.<sup>11</sup> Many of these temples were placed where access points joined the estate to larger roads, a feature that made it



FIGURE 6. Rural temple, Jaipur, India. Photo by Nathaniel Watts.

possible for both travelers and workers to use them.<sup>12</sup> Although the temples were open to the public, the priesthoods associated with them tended to remain firmly within the family of the estate's owner.<sup>13</sup> The temples also could serve as the center for the family's funerary cult and the rituals associated with it.<sup>14</sup>

The many thousands of temples scattered across the Roman world collectively held millions of images. The Alexandrian Tychaion, one of the 2,500 shrines in that city, occupied most of a city block and was "completely adorned from floor to ceiling" with statues and images of the gods and quasi-divine historical figures like Alexander the Great and Ptolemy Soter.<sup>15</sup> The Tychaion was located across the street from a major bath complex and at a crossroads where two porticoed streets met. If one adds the statues found in the bathhouse and those likely housed in the niches of the porticoes to those housed in the Tychaion, there were probably upward of a hundred different images of gods in and around this one intersection. In the fourth century, the Tychaion was a medium-sized and middle-aged temple. Older and larger sacred precincts would have contained even more images of the gods. In Athens, for example,

recent reconstructions of the statuary decorating the late antique Athenian Acropolis show it absolutely packed with nearly one thousand years of dedicatory statues honoring both men and gods.<sup>16</sup> We even see in inventories from the island of Delos that temple precincts housed statues, vases, and other dedicated vessels in all conditions—including some that were broken but could not be discarded because of their cultic association.<sup>17</sup> This undoubtedly would have been the case in the precincts of most major cultic centers by the turn of the fourth century.

Even more numerous were statues of divine figures located elsewhere in the city. Images of the gods decorated later Roman streets in much the same way that they now adorn modern Indian cities. When Rufinus spoke about the destruction of the Serapeum, he mentioned that it was followed by Christian mobs tearing images of Serapis from every street corner in the city.<sup>18</sup> Despite this, an Alexandrian mob ninety-five years later was still able to find so many wooden statues of gods in and around the city that they could fuel a bonfire with them for an entire day.<sup>19</sup> Halfway across the empire, in Rome, each crossroad in the city contained shrines at which honey cakes were offered to the Lares Compitales and, after 12 BC, images representing the Genius of the emperor.<sup>20</sup>

Even more images were found in private homes. Every home in which a devotee of traditional religion lived likely housed representations of the gods. These took many forms. In the West, household shrines to guardian spirits (the *lararia*) contained representations of gods, either as statues or paintings.<sup>21</sup> In some homes (like the House of Menander in Pompeii) these seem to have been confined to the servants quarters, but shrines like these could be located in any room of a house, including the public reception areas of elite homes.<sup>22</sup> In the House of the Vettii in Pompeii, there were two *lararia*, one of which was hidden from view and the other of which was located amid a series of wall paintings.<sup>23</sup> Some of these images of the gods were devotional, but many others were simply decorative. Collections of small mythological statuettes found in a range of Gallic villas reveal that representations of the gods and their associates were an unremarkable part of home decor.<sup>24</sup> More intriguing is the case of Theophanes of Hermopolis, a traveler whose expense account has been preserved for us. In his ledger, he lists a tacky souvenir wine jug in the shape of Silenus among the purchases he made as he passed through Phoenicia in the 310s.<sup>25</sup> No one would mistake that particular object for something connected to religious practice, but even that piece of kitsch contributed to the sense that one shared domestic space with the divine.<sup>26</sup>

While temples convey the overwhelming architectural presence of the divine in later Roman cities, and images show their physical ubiquity, festivals offered some of the most powerful ways to interact with the divine. These festivals literally dominated the Roman year. An illustrated calendar listing the holidays and festivals celebrated in Rome in the year 354 gives a sense of how frequently the gods and their servants appeared publicly.<sup>27</sup> The calendar classifies fully 177 days of the year as holidays or festivals.<sup>28</sup> Not all of these were given the same weight. Those that lasted for multiple days and involved circus races mandated, among other things, a day of rest and the closure of the law courts.<sup>29</sup> Less important were days whose festivals involved games or spectacles but no required closures. Days devoted to cultic ritual that involved neither races nor spectacles ranked the lowest.<sup>30</sup> Overall the calendar marks the public celebrations of the cults of thirty-three different gods and goddesses—and this does not account for the various commemorations of imperial birthdays and divinized emperors.<sup>31</sup> Some gods and goddesses had multiple days in their honor. So, for example, the calendar contains eleven festival days that involved the cult of the Egyptian god Isis.<sup>32</sup> Isis was neither native to the city of Rome nor among the most prominent goddesses in the Roman pantheon. This was a specialty cult from the provinces, but it still stood among the many, many others that claimed multiple spaces on the city's very full festal calendar.<sup>33</sup>

The large number of festivals and holidays did not mean, of course, that Romans spent half of the year on vacation or attending games. Many of these festivals were publicly funded, but participation in them was optional, and most people would have been too busy or disinterested to take part.<sup>34</sup> Festivals honoring gods and goddesses frequently filled all of one or more days. By the fourth century, some celebrations had even blended together to form long, multiday events with activities taking place both in the home and in public spaces.<sup>35</sup> Even those who attended part of the festivities need not have participated in all of them.<sup>36</sup> In traditional Roman religion, there was usually no problem with people using their time for something other than a religious festival.

The individuals who opted not to participate in a given festival could not expect to remain unaffected by it. The novelist Achilles Tatius, for example, describes what it was like to arrive in Alexandria during the celebration of a festival for the god Serapis. "It was," he writes, "the single greatest spectacle I have ever beheld. For it was late evening and the sun had gone down, but there was no sign of night—it was as though another sun had arisen, but one distributed into small parts in every



direction.”<sup>37</sup> This spectacle left the narrator so awestruck that he followed the procession until its end. For Alexandrians who chose not to participate, however, the Serapis parade represented a source of unwelcome but unavoidable traffic, noise, and light pollution. They could not escape it even if they wanted to do so.<sup>38</sup>

Smaller festivals also intruded on the peace and quiet of those who did not participate. In the second century, Apuleius provided an extensive account of an Isaic procession. As one would expect, the procession was heard long before it was seen.<sup>39</sup> When the parade came into view, costumed figures dressed as soldiers, huntsmen, philosophers, and magistrates led a motley crew of tamed bears, apes, shepherds, and women scattering flowers.<sup>40</sup> Apuleius then describes women who combed the hair of the goddess’s statue while sprinkling the street with scented unguents. They were followed by a parade of people carrying lanterns and torches, musicians playing pipes and flutes, and a choir of young boys singing a song that explained the origins of the festival.<sup>41</sup> Linen-clad initiates followed the musicians, the priests who presided over the ceremony came next, and the procession concluded with people holding images of other gods. When the group reached the temple, the priests and initiates returned the divine images to their proper places. The priest said a prayer on behalf of the emperor, the senate, and Roman seamen, and then dismissed the congregation.

As Apuleius explains, Isaic celebrations were visually impressive, extremely loud, and very fragrant affairs. While only the devotees of the gods or goddesses being celebrated could take part in everything, many people throughout the city were involved in some aspects of the event—even if only to watch, march in one of the processions, or attend a related spectacle.<sup>42</sup> In the same way that temples and sacred images helped form the early fourth-century visual background of Roman life, these festivals provided some of the noise common to all Roman cities in the period.

Less well recognized is the degree to which traditional religion also provided some of the olfactory backdrop to Roman life. Apuleius mentions two different moments in the Isaic procession when the devotees spread pleasant smelling things in front of the crowd.<sup>43</sup> The significance of this can be lost on a modern audience, but such actions had a practical effect in antiquity. Between the smells of animal waste, trash, sewage, and general rot, the streets of an ancient city reeked unbearably.<sup>44</sup> Unguents, flowers, burning incense, and roasting meat formed important components of a traditional religious festival precisely because they stood out

from the foul odors common to public spaces. When combined with the bright lights and cacophonous sounds of a procession, these fragrances helped to create a distinctive environment that indicated the special status of the god. But they were neither enclosed nor self-contained. The sights, sounds, and smells of traditional religion spilled freely out into cities and towns to be enjoyed or endured by devotees and nondevotees alike.<sup>45</sup>

While sacred processions tried to control the olfactory environment through which gods and their worshippers passed, they could have only modest success against a city's stench. People had far greater control over the smell of their homes. Romans felt that odors exercised incredible power. Foul air was thought to be a cause of disease, and odorous substances that masked it were used for pest control, fumigation, cleaning, and medicine.<sup>46</sup> Households took a range of steps to control bad smells and to replace them with more healthful and pleasant ones. Romans perfumed their baths and the walls of their homes, they wore fragrances on their bodies, they decorated the home with pleasant-smelling flowers and wreaths, and they burned incense to clean the air.<sup>47</sup> Most Roman households likely tried all of these remedies, but the ability to effectively control foul odors in the home came to be recognized as an indication of elite social status.<sup>48</sup> The large number of ingredients and the range of concoctions one could create from them made a full complement of aromatics quite expensive.<sup>49</sup>

The practical steps that later Romans took to control smells and cleanse the air of a house often mirrored those taken when they wished to honor the gods. While blood sacrifice occurred in the early fourth century, it was by no means the most popular way that people showed their devotion to traditional gods.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, it would almost never have been part of a household routine.<sup>51</sup> Offerings of incense or fragrant cakes at temples would have been much more numerous than blood sacrifices (fig. 7), and they would have been far and away the most common way of showing reverence for the divine in a domestic setting.<sup>52</sup> Fragrant offerings in the home included incense burned before statues of gods, laurel wreaths and scented lamps placed at doorways, and altar tables that glowed with offerings during dinner parties.<sup>53</sup>

The "offering of incense" to the gods actually covers a wide range of substances and practices. In the second century, for example, worshippers of Isis and Osiris offered different types of aromatics to the gods depending on the time of day and air conditions. In the morning, "they burn resin on their altars, revivifying and purifying the air by its dissemination, and fanning into fresh life the languished spirit in the



FIGURE 7. Sacrificial scenes depicted on coins. From top, incense sacrifice (*RIC* IV.263, A.D. 218–20), sacrifice of an ox (Sear *RCV* 2000 #296, a *denarius* of 81 B.C.), and libation offering (*RIC* VI.35, A.D. 307–8). Courtesy of the author.

body.”<sup>54</sup> In the middle of the day, “they burn myrrh on the altars; for the heat dissolves and scatters the murky and turbid elements in the surrounding atmosphere.”<sup>55</sup> At night, they offered cyphi, which doubled as a sleep aid, because some of its ingredients “thrive in cold winds and shadows and dews and dampness.”<sup>56</sup>

The home of a member of the Roman elite would contain a mix of smells. Many of these were simply pleasant or healthful, but some were connected to the worship of the gods. A visitor who smelled these things would not be able to decipher their source. For most Romans this would not have mattered very much. Beginning in the third century, however, some Christian authors started to express concern about how Christians should situate themselves in such an environment. Clement of Alexandria expressed a general suspicion about the soul being carried away by pleasant odors. He called for Christians to smell “not of perfume but of perfection,” while acknowledging that aromatic products could still be used because they were essential for health and hygiene.<sup>57</sup> The North African Tertullian took a stronger view, criticizing the prevalence of wreaths and flowers that could lead Christians astray.<sup>58</sup> He even argued against mixed marriages involving pagans and Christians because they would subject the spouse to the smell of burning offerings given to the gods.<sup>59</sup> Those odors were a part of life, and avoidance, while ideal, was often impractical. For most Christians, this avoidance was not even desirable.<sup>60</sup> They lived in a world where the structures, sights, sounds, and smells of the gods were everywhere—just as they had been for millennia.

#### THE CHILDHOOD OF THE FINAL PAGAN GENERATION

Members of the final pagan generation spent their childhoods learning to navigate this world. Their childhoods differed from those of people in the modern West in very significant ways. Bearing and raising children were dangerous, difficult, and emotionally fraught activities in antiquity. The Roman world saw ghastly rates of death in childbirth; current estimates suggest that a Roman woman had a 17/1000 chance of dying each time she gave birth.<sup>61</sup> Despite this, women were expected to have many children. A woman who lived until age fifty would likely give birth to six children in her life, two or three of whom might live into adulthood.<sup>62</sup> Childbirth presented a major danger, but the simple reality of life in a major urban center posed even more significant health risks. Most of the Roman elite spent at least some of their time in cities. Roman cities, like all premodern urban areas, were death centers that

never came close to sustaining their populations. Some estimates suggest that the average Roman city may have lost nearly 3 percent of its people each year and required constant immigration from the countryside just to keep its population stable.<sup>63</sup> Overcrowding and terrible sanitation created a perfect storm in which contagious diseases (like cholera and tuberculosis) that thrive in highly concentrated populations competed as killers with water and food-borne pathogens.<sup>64</sup> The elite generally could flee the cities for rural estates during the times of year when regular disease outbreaks could be expected or when unexpected pandemics broke out, but they remained susceptible to random (sometimes fatal) illnesses that could arise at any time.<sup>65</sup> To this one must also add the very real risk of accidents that could be immediately fatal or could lead to death if the injuries they caused became infected.<sup>66</sup>

These high rates of mortality meant that the modern ideal of a nuclear family did not reflect the realities of Roman domestic life.<sup>67</sup> Composite families were instead the norm. First marriages typically joined a woman in her teens to a man in his late twenties and lasted for about fourteen years.<sup>68</sup> Many widowers remarried, and it was assumed that children of both marriages would live together in the father's home and be brought up as part of one family unit with him at its head.<sup>69</sup> Even so, child rearing remained extremely difficult. When a baby was born in antiquity, there was a strong chance that it would not live a week. Babies were not usually given names until they reached that milestone.<sup>70</sup> Once a baby was named, it then had to be registered with the Roman state within thirty days.<sup>71</sup> Even if a baby passed this second milestone, there remained a real likelihood that he or she would not make it to adulthood.

Ausonius's *Parentalia* shows that these demographic realities were not mere abstractions. The *Parentalia* provides short, individualized poems that celebrate the lives of thirty-one deceased relations.<sup>72</sup> A number of these highly stylized poems describe the unexpected or premature deaths of Ausonius's family members that occurred when he was young. Two in particular commemorate siblings who died prematurely. The twenty-ninth poem of the group commemorated his sister Aemilia Melania with whom he "shared one cradle when we were infants of almost one age" before she died in infancy.<sup>73</sup> His younger brother Avitianus also died young, in his case "without enjoying the pleasurable flower of youth or passing the bounds which mark the end of boyhood."<sup>74</sup>

We can perhaps identify with the emotions that Ausonius evokes in these poems, but the attachments family members had to one another developed in ways that often differed significantly from what one sees

in the modern West. In most elite households (and possibly most Roman households generally), the care of new children was outsourced to wet nurses.<sup>75</sup> In some ways, the selection of a wet nurse resembled the process today of selecting a nanny. The ideal wet nurse was supposed to be a young, chaste, abstemious, and healthy mother who had given birth a number of times.<sup>76</sup> Since she would be the one speaking the most to the child, she should be relatively eloquent, and, in the West, able to converse in both Greek and Latin.<sup>77</sup> She also needed to be patient. The child spent most of the first months of its life tightly swaddled, sometimes in a dark room.<sup>78</sup> The wet nurse often lived with the family and nursed the child until age two or three.<sup>79</sup> As the child grew, the wet nurse became responsible for more than just the child's feeding. There were no bedrooms for children and no specified play areas; they seem to have slept in the servants quarters alongside their wet nurses.<sup>80</sup> Wet nurses were expected to comfort the children, cradle them, and play with them. They also were the main disciplinarians, though they were expected to balance stern punishments with calming techniques. Whippings for misbehavior were sometimes followed by a comforting story or song.<sup>81</sup>

As one can imagine, wet nurses and their charges often developed very close bonds. The special relationship between them was legally recognized. The wet nurse was the only nonfamily member legally permitted to file charges of untrustworthiness against the guardian of a minor. Wet nurses were also the only slaves that a slave owner who had not yet reached the age of twenty was legally permitted to manumit.<sup>82</sup> Babies fed by wet nurses could be quite generous to them later in life. The Roman senator Pliny gave his wet nurse a farm, and there are many examples of epitaphs written for wet nurses by the grown-up infants for whom they once cared.<sup>83</sup> The wet nurses often seem to have reciprocated. So great was the devotion shown to the emperors Nero and Domitian by their wet nurses that it was only through their intervention that the disgraced emperors received proper funerals.<sup>84</sup>

Once a male child reached the age of six or seven, he transitioned from the wet nurse to another surrogate caretaker, the pedagogue. The pedagogue was a male attendant (often but not always a slave) who initially tutored the child in language and moral conduct. As the student got older and moved from rudimentary instruction in letters to grammar and rhetoric, the pedagogue also played a role in choosing which teachers the student would patronize.<sup>85</sup> Once the child began school, the pedagogue walked him to class, pushed him to focus on his studies, and

tried to discourage misbehavior.<sup>86</sup> Libanius describes pedagogues as the ones who gave young men “the compulsion required by study and, far more important, the habit of self-control.”<sup>87</sup> They also served as “the guardians of youth in its flower, its protections, and its defense; they repel unsavory admirers, send them packing, and keep them at a distance.”<sup>88</sup> In times of illness, Libanius continues, “they either vie with the mothers or outdo them . . . for the attendants (pedagogues) sit at the bedside (and) give the patients what they need.”<sup>89</sup>

The pedagogue’s main job, however, was to ensure that the boy under his care did well academically. To this end, “the attendant brings himself and the lad to the light of the lamp, and first of all, wakes himself up, and then goes to the boy and outdoes the crowing roosters, for he rouses him with his hand.”<sup>90</sup> He also took it on himself to make sure that the student remembered what was taught in class that day. The method, Libanius says, “is for the attendant to apply pressure, shout at them, produce the cane and wield the strap, and drive the lesson into their memories.”<sup>91</sup> As Libanius indicates, the discipline a pedagogue meted out could range from verbal commands all the way up to beatings.<sup>92</sup>

Most of the time, the relationship between pedagogues and their charges was a good one. Libanius mentions a case where a father died and the pedagogue “became the rightful guardian to the boy,” and other cases where the pedagogue regularly visited the tombs of charges who had died.<sup>93</sup> These feelings were often reciprocated. The emperor Augustus honored his pedagogue with a public funeral, Nero awarded public positions to his pedagogue, and the *Digest* of Roman law compiled under the emperor Justinian mentions a case where a pedagogue received a substantial inheritance.<sup>94</sup>

This was not always the case, however. The pedagogue tended to have a less nurturing personality than a wet nurse, and when this was combined with the fact that he handled adolescents instead of infants, his charges occasionally rebelled in ways that younger children could not. Sometimes this took the form of passive resistance to the pedagogue’s calls to study. Augustine mentions a pedagogue who shouted for his charge to stop playing in the mud and start studying only to see the young man turn his head and ignore him.<sup>95</sup> Sometimes the resistance could take a more serious turn. Libanius, in a speech written in 390, writes about a pedagogue being “carpeted” by his students. This involved taking the man, placing him in a carpet, and using it to throw him up in the air repeatedly. Not surprisingly, the pedagogue eventually fell off the carpet and sustained serious injuries.<sup>96</sup> Libanius’s reaction to

the situation suggests that it was not unprecedented, but it was certainly not representative of the way that most pedagogues were treated either.

While pedagogues and wet nurses had specific roles to play at particular moments in a child's life, extended family played active roles in the acculturation and education of elite children throughout their lives. Ausonius makes plain in his *Parentalia* that his maternal uncle and grandmother played extremely influential roles in his upbringing. Ausonius saw his uncle Aemilius Magnus Arborius as a second father.<sup>97</sup> He writes that Arborius was "as my father and mother, who in my infancy, boyhood, youth, and manhood instructed me in the arts which it is a delight to have learned."<sup>98</sup> Ausonius felt a different sort of affection for his grandmother, Aemilia Corinthia Maura. She was called Maura because of her dark complexion and was a stern woman "not ready to overlook shameful indulgences."<sup>99</sup> While Ausonius certainly did not enjoy his interaction with Aemilia Maura in quite the same way as his experiences with Arborius, he definitely saw his relationship with his grandmother as a meaningful and important part of his life.

At the same time, the affection for Arborius and Maura that Ausonius expresses in *Parentalia* 3 contrasts strongly with the dry and unemotional profiles of Ausonius's parents in *Parentalia* 1 and 2. He comments about the medical skill and the long life of his father and describes his mother, Aemilia Aeonis, as chaste, sober, and with "hands busy spinning wool."<sup>100</sup> Combined, these two poems take up less space than that devoted to Arborius alone. This does not suggest that Ausonius did not love or respect his parents. It is quite clear that he felt the dutiful respect a son was expected to show toward his parents—and he may have felt far more genuine affection for them than these texts imply.<sup>101</sup> While parents exercised important influences on children, the extended family would often have been at least as important in framing children's understanding of the world around them.

#### LEARNING TO LIVE IN THE CITIES OF THE GODS

Young children began to learn how to interact with the divine almost immediately. Families held a naming ceremony on either the eighth or ninth day after a child's birth.<sup>102</sup> The ceremony included sacrifices, a procession around the home, two different moments in which family members used a broom to clear the home of evil spirits, and a sequence of other rituals that culminated in a banquet.<sup>103</sup> This was such a crucial rite of passage that even touchy Christians like Tertullian saw it as essential.<sup>104</sup>



Tertullian was less forgiving of Christian participation in annual holidays that celebrated domestic and family relationships. Here he was in a distinct minority, probably even among Christians.<sup>105</sup> Children would have grown up observing these important and regular commemorations of family life.<sup>106</sup> The Roman Parentalia, for example, spanned nine days and involved a public sacrifice by the Vestal Virgins as well as family activities that showed *pietas* (like traveling to a necropolis to offer dead ancestors tiles covered in wreaths and corn sprinkled with salt).<sup>107</sup> Almost immediately following the conclusion of the Parentalia in the festival calendar was the Caristia, another festival that involved the family honoring its gods collectively. Ovid makes clear that the Caristia shifted activities from the tombs back to the homes and involved giving the family gods incense and plates of food.<sup>108</sup> A family banquet would then follow, to which all family members (and even some nonfamily members) were invited.<sup>109</sup>

These festivals and family celebrations linked a young Roman's regular veneration of the gods to the rhythms of the year. They signified membership in the family, loyalty to its particular hierarchy, and the evolution of a child's role within it. In these contexts children would learn what to do by observing how others behaved. Young children likely did not think very much about why a ritual was done in a specific way or what particular meaning was attached to it. These were simply regular adult behaviors that members of their family exhibited. Pagans and Christians who grew up in these households would have seen participation in the meals, processions, and rituals associated with a holiday as perfectly normal behavior. The Christian Ausonius, for example, prefaces his *Parentalia* by linking it to the "solemn day so called in ancient times that was appointed as long ago as the time of Numa for offerings to departed relatives."<sup>110</sup> He knew the holiday and seems to have understood it as a celebration that had familial but not confessional meaning.

The stories told by wet nurses and the early instruction that children received under the supervision of pedagogues similarly helped children learn about the gods. As we saw above, wet nurses were known for the stories that they told to calm children and control their behavior. Some authors thought that these tales caused children to become infatuated with undesirable things like chariot racing,<sup>111</sup> but the geographer Strabo writes that these stories could create a living awareness of the gods that could regulate children's behavior.<sup>112</sup> The pedagogue further expanded this knowledge. The beginning stages of literary education explained how honors for the gods fit into one's daily routine and helped to determine

the rhythms of the year. One of the most common exercises that students saw in school encouraged them to practice their writing by going through an account of daily activities. These colloquia often formed part of larger collections of *hermeneumata*, schoolbooks that could also contain dictionaries (organized both alphabetically and topically) as well as short texts.<sup>113</sup> The works are, in the words of a modern editor, “thoroughly pagan,” with the gods, sacred buildings (*de aedibus sacris*), sacrifices (*de sacrificiis*), festival days (*de diebus festis*), and pagan priesthods (under the heading *de magistribus*) all featured.<sup>114</sup>

An exercise contained in one of the most extensive such manuscripts can give a sense of how such texts worked. After a short preface explaining that the text will describe things essential for the appropriate behavior of boys and girls, the exercise outlines an elite child’s typical day. It begins with a summons for the nurse to wake the child up before day-break, call the slave to get his clothes, and help him dress.<sup>115</sup> He was then to be washed so that he could “go out in public to school.”<sup>116</sup> The next step was for “us to worship all the gods and ask them to grant a good path through and success during the entire day.”<sup>117</sup> The young man left the house for school with his pedagogue and greeted his parents, relatives, and the household staff as he passed them on his way out the door. The student then went to school, greeted his teacher and friends, and did classwork.<sup>118</sup> He came home for lunch, observed the preparations for dinner, headed to the baths, and then got ready for bed.<sup>119</sup>

These exercises outline the daily life of young people in the later Roman Empire, but for our purposes it is important to recognize how casually the *Hermeneumata* present the young person’s interaction with the divine. The prayers to “all the gods” are just one mundane aspect of a typical day. It was expected that a boy would offer them routinely in much the same way that he gave regular orders to his nurse, spoke with his pedagogue, or socialized with his friends. By the 370s, however, Ausonius felt strongly enough about the subtle effects of these aspects of the *Hermeneumata* that he penned the *Ephemeris*, his own, Christian adaptation of these colloquia.<sup>120</sup> The *Ephemeris* follows the same basic pattern as the *Hermeneumata* described above except that it “does not call for incense to be burnt nor for any slice of honey-cake.” Instead, Ausonius forcefully says, “I must pray to God and the son of God most high, co-equal.”<sup>121</sup> The *Ephemeris*, however, is a later work written after the emperor Julian’s attempt to make education serve as a tool to promote traditional religious identification.<sup>122</sup> While it does show that Ausonius later appreciated the potential implications of including elements

of traditional religion in school exercises designed for young children, there is no evidence that he or his peers thought much about these things as children in the 310s and early 320s.

Children had a similar attitude toward teaching about the festival calendar. Students were required to memorize the calendar, but some later Romans thought that any educated person needed a fuller knowledge of festivals and their origins than a simple list would provide. In the early fifth century, the Christian Macrobius composed the *Saturnalia*, a fictional dialogue set in the home of Praetextatus that discussed traditional religion, its festivals and holidays, and their characteristics.<sup>123</sup> Macrobius aimed for the text to serve as a repository of knowledge that could teach and guide his son. It would be, he felt, “a pleasure to read, an education to have read, and of use to remember” because “everything in it is calculated to quicken your understanding, strengthen your memory, to give more dexterity to your discourse, and make your speech more correct.”<sup>124</sup> Macrobius was not alone in thinking that knowledge of traditional religion and its festivals helped mark one as cultured. The pagan senator Symmachus, writing in 395, impatiently informs his brother that he should stop reminding him of religious obligations because, as his brother surely knew, Symmachus is “knowledgeable concerning the ceremonies of the gods and festivities of the divinity that have been commanded.”<sup>125</sup> Symmachus could respond in this way because, as the Christian Macrobius suggests, the education of elite men and women ensured that they would know about the dates, origins, and customs of festivals and holidays. If they did not, this reflected their lack of cultivation more than their lack of piety.

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The final pagan generation was born into a world that contained a vast sacred infrastructure that had been built up over the past three millennia. The size, age, and pervasiveness of this infrastructure likely would have made it difficult for anyone to appreciate fully all of the ways in which traditional religious practice influenced the rhythms of public, domestic, and family life. Children needed to learn how this world functioned and what parts of it merited their attention. The authoritative figures with whom they interacted early in life helped provide that instruction. These figures modeled religious behaviors by performing rituals and attending festivals. They told stories that informed a child’s understanding of the sacred world, and they encouraged children to regularly honor the divine. Many of these behaviors involved religious

activities, but their meaning was often much more complicated. The Parentalia, for example, honored the family dead at a time of the year when many people were sick and dying.<sup>126</sup> The sacrifices and prayers were part of an activity that celebrated the living family and its obligation to its deceased members. In cases like this, the lines between “idolatry” and normal participation in family and community life could be difficult for even adults to see.

Writing nearly a lifetime before the final pagan generation was born, the Christian author Tertullian acknowledged this difficulty. His *On Idolatry* (*De idolatria*) tried to show Christians how to recognize the traditional religious elements in daily life and separate them from normal social, commercial, and familial activities. Idolatry, he claims, is “a crime so widespread, . . . [that] it subverts the servants of God.”<sup>127</sup> While most people simply “regard idolatry as interpreted by the senses alone, as for example, if one burns incense,” Tertullian warns that Christians must be “fore-fortified against the abundance of idolatry” and not just its obvious manifestations.<sup>128</sup> He then walks the readers through all of the unnoticed places where idolatry exists. He points to those who make and sell idols, the astrologers and teachers who practice in the presence of idols, and the other trades that tainted Christians by bringing them into contact with idols.<sup>129</sup> Tertullian then considers the various aspects of daily life that one must avoid in order not to be tainted by “idolatry.” This comprehensive list includes festivals and holidays, military service, the swearing of oaths, the acceptance of blessings in the name of the gods, and even certain types of clothing.<sup>130</sup>

At the center of the work, however, Tertullian pauses to try to answer an interesting rhetorical question. If all of this is prohibited, he asks, “How is one to live?”<sup>131</sup> Tertullian evidently struggled to find an answer. He initially ducks the question and returns to it only in his conclusion. Then he states, “Nothing can be easier than caution against idolatry, if the fear of it be our leading fear; any necessity whatever is too trifling compared to such a peril.”<sup>132</sup> He is, of course, exaggerating. In truth, Tertullian’s text shows just how daunting a prospect it was to try to disentangle one’s daily activities from the gods and their presence. He wrote in order to point out all the places where the gods lurked because most people, both pagan and Christian, likely did not notice them. Their children and grandchildren would not either. This was simply a natural consequence of growing up in a world that was full of gods, had always been full of gods, and always would be full of gods, at least as far as anyone could tell in 310.