1
Introduction

When the three volumes of *Fasti sacerdotum* were published in 2005 (and two of the three volumes translated into English appearing in 2008) they summarised research conducted by a whole group of (then) young researchers, instigated by Hubert Cancik at the University of Tübingen and continued at the University of Potsdam and later the University of Erfurt. For the first time, about 3,600 biographies of religious specialists from the supreme pontiff of 300 BCE via Isis and Mithras priests and all attested cults to hundreds of Christian functionaries down to 499 CE – put together by Anne Glock on the same lines – and their later complete digitalization – allowed carrying out and going beyond the study of individual priesthoods and periods. As witnessed by hundreds of citations of both the German and the English versions, this has stimulated many scholars. Not least myself. Conferences, edited volumes, and obvious differences in comparative analyses of the data have led me to address several problems and to nuance and change the image of the political and religious role of those religious specialists that we often call 'Roman priests' or priests in the city of Rome (and the anonymous reviewer for Oxford University will be disappointed to find Augustine of Hippo again not included among them).

This volume brings together some of these studies, published during the last decade and presented here in revised and sometimes slightly shortened form. The selection is aiming at developing a general image of processes of religious specialisation in what is now discussed as 'urban religion' for ancient towns as well as cities.[1] Earlier, notions of public or civic religion have suggested to regard the growth and multiplication of priesthoods at Rome as ways to distribute and share religious authority within a growing nobility – and to observe tendencies of re-centralisation in the course of the imperial period. Building on the much larger remit of the earlier prosopographical study and reframing it as part of processes of religious actors coming to grips with the challenges and affordances of urbanisation and of a wide range of urban actors to shape religious practices according to their experiences and vision of the urban, now allows

1 Rüpke 2021b, see also Urciuoli and Rüpke 2018; Rüpke and Urciuoli 2023.

for new insights, which are relevant for urban history as much as history of religion. In continuation of the *Fasti sacerdotum,* the stress remains on historicisation, on religious change in a city that became the capital of an empire.[2] Yet, it is not imperial but local and glocalised religion that is at stake here.[3] Religious roles and their interactions react to and shape political institutions and social values.

Trained as a historian of religion, I regard comparison as part of the methodological DNA of research in religious change. The very term 'religion' is of central importance here. Such a vague term helps to group together phenomena as different as ritual actors, architecture like temples or synagogues, a huge number of symbols ('gods and goddesses') and narratives (myths), organisational forms like associations, episcopal administration, and foundations, and, not least, systematic, 'philosophical', reflection about all of this. The more recent use of the term grants that the relations between such phenomena might be highly variable, including the lack of some of them altogether. As has recently been pointed out, Latin-speaking Romans were not able to denote such a cluster, as they lacked a concept for it.[4] *Religio* was part of Latin language by the time of the late republic but did not convey such a meaning. The few systematic treatises about religion combined concepts like *sacra, caerimonia,* and *pietas,* or *pietas, sanctitas,* and *religio* (Cicero) to describe at least the nexus of belief and practices, implying priesthoods, (typically built-up) places, and times set aside, as typical consequences (Varro). For Varro, philosophy is an instrument of critical investigation of the practices and the meaning ascribed to such practices and not part of the nexus. Yet, it is the very aim of his handbook of sixteen volumes, the 'Antiquities of things divine', to supply a theoretical justification, historical and philosophical, for the inconsistencies observed.[5] In the historical processes understood as 'urban religion' at Rome (rather than 'Roman religion'), Brent Nongbri's 'before religion' is in fact incipient 'religion'. 'Imagine no religion', as suggested by Carlin Barton and Daniel Boyarin, must not be taken as a historical description but should be taken as a methodological admonition: Priesthoods and theology, ritual expertise and the running of temples, control of religious practice and the formulating of standards of morality should not be presupposed as being connected but need to be investigated with a view to whether and how they are connected. Further connections and embedment might be as important. 'Religion' is a tool to find out, not to predefine what should be regarded as relevant or not. Sociability and distinction, ritual competence and ritual practice, arrogating authority and acting as author, priesthood, and knowledge will all be matters of concern in the subsequent chapters.

2 This is informing the history presented in Rüpke 2016e, 2018a, see also Rüpke 2018c and Facchini and Rüpke 2020.

3 For the discussion of the notion of 'imperial religion' see Cancik and Rüpke 2009, Rüpke 2011b (published in English in Rüpke 2014a) and Rüpke, Pines and Biran 2024.

4 Nongbri 2013; Barton and Boyarin 2016.

5 Rüpke 2018a, 177–182; Rüpke 2012f, 172–185.

Yet, 'religion' is not the only conceptual concern. The use of terms like 'priests' (dangerous, as easily understood as the correct translation of Latin *sacerdotes*) or 'religious specialists' (clumsy, but clearly advocating a detached analytical approach) brought and brings together very different institutional developments and individual interpretation of roles. This does not advocate a 'flat' reading of these data. Instead, it allows one to appreciate the smaller and larger differences. It also allows detecting mutual observation and processes of institutional isomorphy. Occasionally, *pontifices* and *augures* were addressed as *sacerdotes* in Latin sources, and so were *episkopoi* and *presbyteroi*. At the same time, differences in text production were dramatic, considering bishops along the same lines as the specialists for the Sibylline books rather than as pontiffs. Roman noblemen could take religious roles as or even more seriously than their military obligations centuries before Christ-following draftees reflected about service in the Roman army. It is the complexity and the co-temporality of such different short- and long-*durées* that are at the centre of this book.

The first chapter acts as a general introduction to the subject of 'Roman priests' as traditionally defined. Yet quickly we move into the tensions of an 'urban heterarchy' of 'priests and magistrates'. Priestly and political careers, often by the same people, are not always nicely integrated into biographies of men and women from the upper echelons of the urban society. The critique of a systemic functional and bird-eye's view of roles, as much shaped by traditions and expectations as individual performances, is continued by the subsequent pair of chapters. These contrast two perspectives. The first focuses on the view from outside and addresses the question of the 'visibility of religion and religious specialists'. The findings point to a phenomenon of vicarious visibility. A specific invisibility of many priests within the context of higher magistrates is compensated by a pronounced and awkward visibility of very few individuals and their priestly roles. To this, a radical internal view is added. How do priests interact in priestly colleges with each other? It is the social and interactional rather than the religious and exterior that should be the focus here.

Differences take centre-stage in the subsequent pair of chapters, too. The labour put into dating the entrance into priestly offices and leaving them (typically by death) and the documentation of activities possibly but not necessarily related to priestly roles in the data base of *Fasti sacerdotum* allowed for quick statistical characterisations of different groups. Some results are presented in 'different colleges – never mind?' in order to justify the question mark. Individual differences in behaviour rather than statistical data are foregrounded for the *Flamines, Salii,* and the priestesses of Vesta. And yet, there are factors in the background that again are only visible due to the comprehensive prosopographical documentation and the latter's complete digital encoding. As a consequence, a factor is brought to light that has often been overlooked in recent research. This section and also the emphasis on the republican period is concluded by the experiment of a biographical sketch of one of the two most well-known Roman priests, C. Iulius Caesar, under the themes of priesthoods, gods, rituals, and stars. This

is also an answer to a question underlying all of the longer and (mostly) shorter prosopographical entries of *Fasti sacerdotum*: How to write a biography of a Roman priest?

'The role of priests in constructing the divine in ancient Rome' moves into the first century CE. Its point of departure is an element of the Catholic conception of priesthood, its role as a mediating instance between ordinary humans and their gods. This has often been generalised and used as an interpretation of religious specialists in ancient Rome. A closer look at relevant texts reduces confidence in such a hermeneutical lens considerably.

Jewish and Judaeo-Christian book production in the city of Rome from the second century CE onwards allows us to look at 'Flavian innovations in the concept of priesthood' from a position typically not taken into account in histories of what is called 'Roman religion'.[6] The chapter accepts the thesis of a Roman origin of the treatise 'To the Hebrews' around the end of the first century CE. This implies an educated audience that was raised in late Neronian or Flavian times and informed by Roman culture as expressed in public buildings, images and – even if we think about a Jewish family background – rituals. The priestly roles discussed for biblical figures are compared to the prominent role of the *Pontifex maximus* of the Roman emperors and to the developments of major public priesthoods during the second half of the first century CE. This focus on 'public priests and religious innovation in imperial Rome' is taken up and deepened in the subsequent chapter, covering the period up to the beginning of the third century CE and Cassius Dio.[7]

After these two chapters on innovation and partly dis-entanglement, the final pair of chapters pay attention to the dynamics of network building and connecting, from bottom-up as much as top-down. 'Individuals and networks' makes the implicit conceptual problem of the chapter on Caesar explicit and turns it into a historical question: Did religious institutions of the kind represented by priesthoods offer a framework for individual religious concerns? How, if at all, could they do so and how did this change the very institutions? The final chapter, explicitly taking up the concerns of the introductory chapter, addresses the problems of 'successions in Roman priesthoods'. Following the programme of comparison *and* historicisation, it is interested not in rules but in the performance and change of institutional norms and processes of convergence among different institutions. Inclusion of e. g. Jewish and Christian specialists into a comprehensive prosopography of Roman religious specialists is demanded by the concept of urban religion and its attempt to inquire into the relationship of all religious actions and ideas to the changing self-reflection of urbanites as people dwelling

6 For a discussion of the concept see Rüpke 2007a, 2007c, 2007b.

7 The original chapter was co-authored with Federico Santangelo and is here reduced to the passages originally written by me (Rüpke and Santangelo 2017). I nevertheless remain indebted to him, as even these passages bear the marks of his critique and suggestions.

in one city, that is, to the metamorphosis and many voices of Roman urbanity. At the same time, it is justified by the convergences of the imaginaries of religious agents.

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These chapters are a sequel to the original three volumes of *Fasti sacerdotum* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2005), respectively one volume in the English translation of the prosopographical material by the late David M. B. Richardson, to whom I still feel indebted (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). At the same time, as already hinted at, the chapters try to sketch a new image of religious specialists in the development of urban religion at Rome as inspired by recent collaborative research in an international research group consisting of fellows and a core-group at Erfurt, that is, a *Kolleg-Forschungsgruppe* financed by the German Science Foundation, on 'Religion and urbanity: Reciprocal formation'.[8] Evidently, over the course of the past fifteen years during which earlier versions of the chapters 2 to 13 of this book were written, my thinking was influenced not only by broadening the source base beyond the prosopographical material but also by many discussions about concepts within the wider fields of Classics and History of Religion and within the stimulating interdisciplinary exchange at the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies of the University of Erfurt. Thus, they are reflecting a variety of concerns and related research contexts over the past decade. The *Kolleg-Forschungsgruppe* 'Religious individualisation in historical perspective' and the ERC Advanced Grant project 'Lived ancient religion: Questioning cults and polis religion' have produced questions and insights reflected in several chapters.[9] I am grateful to the many local collaborators and fellows from afar that not only inspired me in so many respects but above all made it a pleasure to do research together even (and often, in particular) when they were addressing fields widely apart in geographical as much as chronological terms. Religious specialists are to be found everywhere. Clifford Ando, Marlis Arnhold, Eve-Marie Becker, Elisabeth Begemann, Nicole Belayche, Corinne Bonnet, Daniel Boyarin, Hubert Cancik, Christopher Degelmann, Giorgio Ferri, Martin Fuchs, Anne Glock, Richard Gordon, Nicole Hartmann, Hiroshi Ichikawa, Georgia Petridou, Francesca Prescendi Morresi, Maren Niehoff, Rubina Raja, Eric Rébillard, Anna-Katharina Rieger, the late Veit Rosenberger, Federico Santangelo, John Scheid, Wolfgang Spickermann, Julietta Steinhauer, Emiliano Rubens Urciuoli, Mar-

8 Kolleg-Forschungsgruppe 2779 at the Max Weber Centre of the University of Erfurt, financed by the German Science Foundation and co-directed with Susanne Rau, see Rau and Rüpke 2020a; Rüpke and Rau 2020; Rau and Rüpke 2020b; Rau and Rüpke 2022.

9 Kolleg-Forschungsgruppe 1013, 'Religious Individualisation in historical perspective', financed by the German Science Foundation, see Rüpke and Spickermann 2012; Rüpke 2013a; Rüpke and Woolf 2013; Fuchs et al. 2020; cf. the critique in Scheid 2016; for the concept of 'lived ancient religion' see Rüpke 2012c; Raja and Rüpke 2015b; Rüpke 2016a; Albrecht et al. 2018; Gasparini et al. 2020.

kus Vinzent, Katharina Waldner, Lara Weiss, and Greg Woolf must be mentioned here by name, the anonymous reviewers are to be thanked without.

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Jörg Rüpke Erfurt, May 2025

2
Roman priests: Sources and limits of religious authority

1 Characteristics of Roman *sacerdotes*

In the process of state formation preceding the Second Punic War, a cultural technique that we might fruitfully call 'religion' had assumed an ever more powerful role. Such 'religion' consisted in references to, and the construction of powerful agents conceptualised as divinities, *dei* and *deae*, powers with an independent will, only occasionally directly visible, but typically represented in anthropomorphic or aniconic images placed in architecturally elaborated spaces or seen as embodied in natural phenomena (or employing such phenomena to make themselves heard or seen). Being seemingly independent of human volition, invoking them and listening to their commands created an authority that could be used to overrule particular interests of the families or clans that contended for domination. The stakeholders of the *res publica*, of the commonwealth or 'common cause', that is, the *magistratus*, employed this technique on a large scale. It was the very independence and even arbitrariness of the gods that made them powerful vis-à-vis the humans, even the economic and social elites of Rome, and this independence was stressed by roles that cared for the gods and knew more about them, by religious specialists called *sacerdotes* in Latin, 'priests'.[1] Such 'religious specialists' are known in many societies and have many different tasks; at Rome, they ranged from women who knew how to bake a certain type of cake for rituals[2] up to (mostly male) priests who were intimately related to the political and military power holders. It is on that group that this chapter focuses. Yet the very source of their power was the general principle just explained.

1 For Roman priests in general see Scheid 1984 (= 2001); Richardson and Santangelo 2011; Scheid 2013; DiLuzio 2016; Petridou, Gordon and Rüpke 2017; J. G. Mueller 2018; for Greece see Dignas and Trampedach 2008; Horster and Klöckner 2012; Dignas, Parker and Stroumsa 2013; Horster and Klöckner 2013; Eidinow 2017, demonstrating the growing phenomenological reach of the concept.

2 Rüpke 2018a, 302–3.

From the point of view of the magistrates involved in political decisions, in a particular sphere religious action was bound up with political action. Their own activities involved elements of religious communication, while at the same time referring to expert knowledge that was imputed or even publicized as such, but which manifested itself in practice in the persons of specialists who were themselves distinguished by intensive religious activity. The explicit cooperation in rituals or the parallels in ritual action between priests and magistrates[3] created a complex system of references between religious and electoral legitimation which endowed the process of state formation with the possibilities of religious communication.[4] Practices and experiences of domestic or gentilician religion or religious traditions of ethnic or commercial networks could be projected on the common 'republic' without losing their own rights. Thus, the shared space of religious practices could be used by different groups to deal with their own problems (like health, wealth, or decisions in situations of uncertainty) as much as to articulate their interests in a form of communication with the gods and goddesses that was witnessed by other groups or layers of the urban society. The latter formed a, religiously spoken secondary, but politically spoken, primary audience. As Dan-El Padilla Peralta has demonstrated, it was this massive increase in 'divine institutions' that kept a quickly growing society full of tensions together.[5] Investing in a large number of small temples, financed by different persons and mostly booty from different military expeditions, the production of a large religious infrastructure through such 'costly signalling'[6] indicated seriousness and altruism on the part of those who combined leadership in terms of status, political power, and military command.[7]

This dual structure of reference or relevance also permitted religious actors to present innovations in the context of traditionally legitimized activity and the next chapter will focus on the cracks and incoherencies produced by this duality. Success did not, however, reside in the pragmatic flexibility or traditionally maintained rigidity of these religious practices in the public sphere. 'Civic religion', as this category of religious practices is often called, was precisely not the smallest common denominator binding for everybody, but the largest common multiple that covered the fragility of compromises with the vision of an additional level of religious communication, while not questioning the religious practices of individuals, families, or clans, or networks based on trade, commerce, ethnicity, or gender. Such networks were appropriated rather than controlled,[8] unless their interaction was judged to be fully intransparent.[9] On the other hand, the new festivals of the imperial period (for instance, the victory games

3 Scheid 2001.
4 Smith 2011a; Terrenato 2011; Rüpke 2015c.
5 Padilla Peralta 2020, 26–7.
6 On the concept, McAndrew 2019.
7 See Padilla Peralta 2020, 77.
8 See Harrison 2006, 139–40.
9 Thus the conclusion of Blank 2024, 514.

for Augustus) frequently involved many a priesthood without any known functional necessity. Thus, they were important elements of the fabric of actions that could be called 'public religion', financed by allotted funds or gifts from the magistrates who were responsible for the organisation of the 'games', competitions or scenic performances for large audiences. This was a continuation of the mid-republican principles. Temples were not just built but enlivened and turned into communicative spaces that were frequented by a parallel growth in the number of festive rituals, from the temples' *dies natales* to multi-day rituals featuring races or dramatic performances.[10] Rome's construction of trunk roads during this period was not only for the military domination of a growing hinterland and land trade. It also made the religious infrastructure of Roman ritual buildings and festivals from the late 4th century BCE a meeting place for the population of the core area of Roman rule over Italy, which created trust for precisely these trade relations and political-military cooperation between 'allies' (*socii*).[11]

The massive institutionalisation of public offices from the time of the Second Punic War onwards did not render priests useless. In fact, the importance of institutionalized religious roles increased with the proliferation of 'common' institutions and a common administration: the formation of statehood. The increase in the personnel of the existing colleges, and the extension of the college model to the interpreters of the collection of Greek oracles called the Sibylline Books (*duoviri sacris faciundis*), initially ad hoc appointments, was thus to be expected, as the phase of enormous state growth reached early and significant high points with the *lex Licinia Sextia* on plebeian consuls and victory in the Latin Wars. The same law (dated 367 BCE) of the people's tribunes Lucius Sextus Lateranus and Gaius Licinius Stolo extended the committee overseeing the oracle to ten members. In about 300 BCE, the membership of both the pontifical and augural colleges was increased to nine priests by the additional election of plebeians.[12] With the increasing consolidation of group interests, the election of additional priests to these colleges (and to the initially three-, then seven-strong *epulones*, aides to the pontiffs) became contentious. Initiatives to carry out the appointments by popular vote failed, they were nevertheless implemented, they were revoked, and reactivated; the choice was assigned to the Senate in the Imperial Age. Only the *pontifex maximus* had acquired such a substantial bundle of competences after the reforms of the fourth century BCE that his appointment was made subject to consensus from the second half of the third century onwards. And yet, priests were not treated in the same way as magistrates. Of the 35 tribes, only 17 chosen by lot were able to participate in the vote, so to speak a negative quorum of *less* than one half.[13] Privileged communication with

10 See Padilla Peralta 2020, 131–177.
11 Ibid., 178–229, and Padilla Peralta and Bernard 2022.
12 On the problem of the numbers in Livy 10.6.3–8 see Rüpke 2005c, 1621–2.
13 Thus Cicero, *On the agrarian law* 2.16–18; see *ibid*, 1623–50. Augustus: *Res gestae* 10.

the gods was not a matter for majority decision. We will need to come back to the mechanisms of recruitment later.

The concept of authority describes a relation rather than an internal quality. Regarding Roman priests, close interaction is focused on magistrates and their 'plenary meeting', the Senate. From a prosopographical point of view, considering the many priests stemming from senatorial families or being themselves actual or former holders of political offices and thereby qualifying for membership in the Senate, some priesthoods have been called 'committees of the Senate'.[14]

Citizens beyond the magistrates could approach them, too. And yet, it would have been difficult to find them.[15] Most of them were not attached to any specific religious locale, or would be there only on a few specific days during the year. With regard to their temporal investment in the role, they were 'spare time officials'.[16] They did not receive any income from this activity but had to spend money on it. Being *sacerdos publicus* was a *honos*, an honorary post, involving expenses rather than income. Only the major colleges seem to have sought at least a monthly meeting combined with a banquet. Many ritual tasks and probably also the contact with petitioners from the population lay in the hands of slaves of the colleges or their own freedmen. The hierarchy was only weakly pronounced: the chairmanship, the position of the *magister*, rotated annually in most colleges. There were exceptions, and these were of high symbolic significance for all *sacerdotes*. Of course, everybody would have known that the Vestal virgins lived in a building adjacent to the *aedes Vestae*, namely the *atrium Vestae*, including the *domus publica* of the *rex sacrorum* given to them by Augustus in 12 BCE, when the residence of the supreme pontiff was transferred to the Palatine.[17] Whereas the Vestals were hardly addressed by the general public, the pontiffs might have been, at least in individual cases. The *pontifex maximus* T. Coruncanius was the first pontiff to publicly offer legal advice.[18] The republican pontiffs did not enjoy a monopoly of competence as advocates, but they could answer questions regarding the status of burial places and the prospective permanency of tombs. Here, a certain public demand was to be expected, even if we have no indication of how often the threatening of pontifical sanctions on tombstones far away from Rome led to action brought before the Roman college.

The same might be said about the priesthood that contained the specialists for divination, the augurs, whose service was frequently demanded by magistrates for support before major political or military procedures. For others, they were much more difficult to contact; we do not know about any permanent seat of the augurs. The same

14 Schumacher 1978, 1982.
15 Rüpke and Santangelo 2017, 28.
16 Rüpke 1996a; Horster 2007.
17 Dio Cass. 54.27.3.
18 *Dig.* 1.2.2.35.

holds true for many other public priesthoods. Even the splendid structure of the grove of Dea Dia used for the cult of the Arval brethren, which included a bath by the third century CE,[19] did not accommodate a permanent office – and in fact there would have been no need for this. Those professional services, however, that were frequently on general demand, could be found. Haruspices, that is, Etruscan diviners whose top ranked members were given a permanent official status in the early Empire, were known to be found around the Circus Maximus, as were astrologers.[20]

2 Overview

It is one of the characteristics of the Roman priests that they appeared in many different roles, typically organised as *collegia*, 'colleges'. Religious authority was compartmentalized and shared among a wide range of individuals and partitioned by the many different colleges By the Augustan period, the most important priesthoods at Rome included the following:[21]

The *collegium pontificale*:

– The positions of *rex* and *regina sacrorum,* 'king' and 'queen of cults', were held, as most of Roman priesthoods (unless otherwise indicated), for life. In the Republican period these roles were restricted to patricians. The positions were important for some of the routine rituals connected to the calendar but seem to have declined during the imperial period.
– The *pontifex maximus* functioned as the permanent 'chairman' of the pontifical college, which comprised sixteen members from Caesar onwards. During the Imperial period the college (like others) was further enlarged by *supernumerarii* from the imperial family; the emperor took on the role of *pontifex maximus*. As in other colleges, the basis for membership was a process of co-optation comprising nomination by members of the college, popular election, and actual co-optation within the college itself. Originally mere aids to the *pontifices*, at the turn of the third and second centuries BCE the *scribae pontificum* developed into a group of priests called *pontifices minores* that would, in the Imperial period, be filled from the ranks of the equestrians.
– Under the particular supervision of the *pontifex maximus,* six Vestal Virgins served in the *Aedes Vestae* complex in the Forum, each for a minimum period of thirty years. The longest-serving *virgo Vestalis maxima* had particular authority as the Vestals could be 'seized' at the age of six years.

19 Broise and Scheid 1987, Scheid 1990b.
20 Cic. *Div*. 1.132 and 2.9.
21 Pace Rüpke 2008.