

## Chapter Fifteen

### The Roman Empire at its Zenith (to 235 CE)

In retrospect we can see that a decline of the Roman empire began in the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180), when the Germanic barbarians along the Rhine and especially the Danube discovered that the Romans were not well equipped to fight wars on two fronts. When the emperor, that is, was preoccupied with a war against the Parthians in Mesopotamia, the Roman frontier along and beyond the Danube was poorly defended, and the barbarians could make raids deep into the Roman provinces. Despite the danger of wars on two fronts, the Roman empire was able to manage well enough from the 160s until 235, when the decline became precipitous, and brought with it radical economic, cultural and religious changes. This chapter, therefore, will look at the empire in its relatively golden period, from the first century until the death of Alexander Severus, the last of the Severi, in 235.

#### The classes

This was a stratified, hierarchical society in all ways. In civic status the top of the pyramid was the emperor, followed by Roman provincial governors, senators and other officials, then by the local gentry, and next by the rank and file of Roman citizens. Of all the free men in the empire, only about a third ranked as Roman citizens. Right behind the Romans were the Hellenes (in the Greek-speaking eastern provinces the Hellenes were enrolled as such in the municipal census), then came Judaeans, and finally the other barbarians. So in Alexandria an “Egyptian” had fewer privileges than Judaeans and Hellenes, and far fewer than Romans. This hierarchy was illustrated, as we have seen in Chapter Five, by the difficulties Pliny encountered in promoting his Egyptian physician to the “Roman” rank.<sup>1</sup> A significant change in the hierarchies occurred in 212, when the emperor Caracalla conferred Roman citizenship on all free men in the empire. This did not, however, make society egalitarian, because a new status was put into place. Henceforth, the governing elite - along with the soldiers - were known as *honestiores* (“more honorable”), and the rest of the free population were styled *humiliores* (“humbler”). About ninety per cent of free men and women would have been classified as *humiliores*.

The deepest class division was of course that between slave and free. Although they were no longer being procured by conquest, the Roman empire’s slaves were still numbered in the millions in the second century. Household slaves had relatively easy work, but slaves on a plantation (*latifundium*) had a very hard life. All slaves could be bought and sold, subjected to corporal punishment, and tortured by court officials to “extract the truth.” Most drastically, if a slave-owner was killed by one of his slaves, all of his slaves could be executed. In antiquity the institution of slavery was regarded as natural, part of the world-order, and no attempt was made to abolish it, even after the empire became Christian. Freed slaves (freedmen, or *libertini*) formed an intermediate group. The freedmen themselves were still subject to certain political and social restrictions, but their children were not.

Within the free population another great gulf separated the rich and the poor.

Property-classes were formally enrolled by a census. Because government positions were restricted to the wealthy, the top property-class was synonymous with “the governing class” or “the curial class” (in a Roman *municipium* the local council was called the *curia*). In modern times much has been made of “the middle class,” but in second-century cities there was neither a middle class nor an ideal of a middle class. The people of the governing class in a typical city were twenty or thirty times wealthier than the governed, and no effort was made to narrow the gap. As summarized by Ramsay MacMullen, “beginning at about the birth of Cicero, the tendency of the empire's socioeconomic development over five centuries can be compressed into three words: fewer have more.”<sup>2</sup> Land was the primary source of wealth, and members of the governing class invariably had slaves to manage the work. It is true that the wealthy were expected to provide services for their city. Service on the curia or as one of the city's executives was not only *gratis* but was also accompanied by a newly elected officer's gift to the city. This system of “liturgies” worked well in the second century, but the liturgies most often benefitted the city as a whole, and not the poor. The Judaeian and Christian ideal of charity was hardly known in classical Greece and Rome. In the Roman world the mass of poor citizens was the *vulgus*, and in Greece, *hoi polloi*. As individuals these people, at least ninety per cent of a city's free population, were of little concern to their “betters.”

Education or Culture coincided with economic privilege. A person of the upper class was recognizable by his language - diction, inflection, grammar - and by his familiarity with the texts taught in the grammarian's school. This was as mandatory in the Latin west as in the Greek east. In the western provinces the most important authors were Plautus and Terence, Vergil, Horace, Cicero, Caesar, Sallust and Livy, while in the Greek schools they were Homer and Hesiod, the Attic tragedians, Aristophanes, Thucydides, Xenophon and Demosthenes. Latin-speakers were also expected to know the Greek classics, but few Hellenes bothered to learn Latin. In the Greek east, while the upper classes tried to speak the Attic dialect the lower classes spoke a sub-standard form of the *koinē* Greek of the day, and many villagers spoke Coptic, Aramaic or one of the pre-Greek languages that still survived in Anatolia. In the Latin west the educated tried to speak a Latin not too far removed from the classical form in which Cicero and Vergil had written, but the many who could not afford to study in the school of the *grammaticus* spoke either the local variety of “vulgar Latin” or one of the pre-Roman languages (Punic, Berber, Keltic).

## **The Olympians and the Greco-Roman cultural establishment**

Although no longer serious religious institutions, some of the Hellenes' own civic cults were still very much alive, imbedded as they were in the very foundations of the communities that surrounded them. On great occasions the Olympian gods were still capable of inspiring religious transport among some of their worshipers, when the emotions could be touched by pomp, majesty and ancient ceremonies. Nevertheless, by the second century the Olympians, like many other traditions, depended mostly on the wealthy establishments, both local and imperial. In Greek and Roman cities the maintenance of the civic cults was the responsibility of the local governing class, sometimes with help from the Roman emperor. An ambitious and generous citizen still found it gratifying to endow a festival. This was an unusually expensive gift for a benefactor to bestow on his city, but it was rewarded by a statue, an inscription, and the

satisfaction of having set up an institution that would entertain his fellow citizens and glorify his name for generations.

An inscription discovered in the 1980s provides an excellent example of this kind of endowment, while at the same time illustrating how hellenized was a medium-sized city in the interior of southwest Anatolia, how important a city was for all the villages in the vicinity, how intertwined were religion and Culture, and how interdependent were the Hellenic governing class and the Roman emperors. The inscription, dating to 124 CE and found at the Lycian city of Oenoanda, records the endowment - by a wealthy citizen of Oenoanda named Demosthenes - of a quinquennial festival, to be called of course the *Demostheneia*. The festival was meant for the enjoyment of all Oenoandans, and also of the rural population from some thirty-five villages round about.<sup>3</sup> The *Demostheneia*, which ran for twenty-two days, included one day of gymnastic events, but otherwise was devoted to music, poetry and rhetoric: there were competitions for trumpet players, lyric poets, choruses, comic poets, tragic poets, orators, and cithara-singers (the first prize for the cithara competition - three hundred denarii - was the largest of all). The honorees of the festival were the emperor Hadrian and the god Apollo, and the inscription specifies that the likeness of each was to be carved in relief on a golden crown, which forever after was to be worn by the festival director on specified occasions. All of this cultural activity was to occur in a context of sacrificial religion: Demosthenes provided for the sacrifice, every five years, of no fewer than twenty-eight bulls, the sacrifices to be made to Zeus, Apollo, the emperor, and various other gods. Demosthenes in fact built a special altar to serve for these quinquennial sacrifices.

### **Atticism and the Hellenes' classical past**

In the Oenoanda and other competitions the local gentry could display their literary and rhetorical talents. By the second century educated Hellenes throughout the Roman empire affected an Attic dialect, imitating as best they could the way that Athenians such as Sophokles, Aristophanes and Plato had written and spoken five hundred years earlier. Although the villagers and lower classes of the cities spoke *koine* Greek fluently, they had neither the leisure nor the means to learn the Attic dialect, and some of them may have been hard put even to understand what their social superiors were saying. Linguistically "Atticism" paralleled the glorification of classical Athens: Athens in the period beginning with the Persian Wars and ending with Alexander the Great. The emperor Hadrian, with his beard and his young male lover, epitomized this nostalgia for the classical Greek past.

For Hellenes and Romans alike, Culture had become a rarefied and superficial accomplishment: a badge, as it were, for the privileged to acquire and display. The second century was a heyday for sophists, *sophistai*, erudite orators who toured the circuit of large and middle-sized cities, at each stop delivering in the theater a series of long speeches that educated Hellenes found entertaining. Dio Chrysostom, Lucian, Aelius Aristeides and Herodes Atticus were some of the most successful of these traveling orators, and a great many of their speeches sold so well as books that they have come down to us through manuscript traditions. In fact, we have more Greek literature from the second century than from any other, including the fifth and fourth centuries BC. In addition to the orations themselves, we have biographies of the orators:

Philostratos wrote his *Lives of the Sophists* in the 230s or 240s, and when he looked back upon the preceding century and a half of magnificent oratory he called it “the second sophistic” period (an earlier period dominated by touring sophists was in the middle of the fifth century BC).

For their speeches the orators of the Second Sophistic often chose historical topics. These regularly came from the classical or mythical period of Greece, because the four or five hundred years that had elapsed since Alexander the Great were of little interest to either the orators or their audiences. Of the many historical topics listed in *Lives of the Sophists* none is later than 326 BC.<sup>4</sup> Over a thousand ancient Hellenes are known to have written histories of one sort or another, but none of them wrote about what happened to the Hellenes since their conquest by the Romans. Symptomatic of the fascination with classical Greece to the exclusion of everything else was a universal history written during the reign of Hadrian by an otherwise unknown Cephalion. Intending to be another Herodotos, Cephalion wrote in the long-extinct Ionic dialect that Herodotos had used, divided his history into nine books, as Herodotos had done, and “completed” the history by bringing it down to Alexander the Great. There it stopped.<sup>5</sup>

### **The hellenism of the Roman emperors**

Throughout the Second Sophistic the Roman emperors were patrons and champions of the classical Greek past. Although Hadrian is especially famous for his philhellenism, his successors were also solicitous of Greek culture. Under Antoninus Pius (138-161) and Marcus Aurelius (161-180) most cities of the Roman empire continued to thrive, and so did their governing classes. Marcus had to contend with Germanic-speaking raiders who plundered Dacia and crossed the Danube to sack cities in the northern Balkans, but they were beaten back by the Roman legions and at the end of his reign the *pax Romana* had been more or less restored. Marcus wrote his *Meditations* as a private diary (the manuscripts are titled, “books written to himself”). He wrote them in Greek, and although they were not meant for publication they were published posthumously. The *Meditations* are philosophical ruminations on Marcus’ own life and on the world that he knew. A Stoic, Marcus Aurelius was struck by the grandeur of the cosmos, which so dwarfs all human accomplishments - even the Roman empire itself - that only a fool can be an egotist. Like other Stoics, Marcus imagined the cosmos to be governed by Providence, the “world-soul” from which the material world originated and into which it will at some time return. Although his vocabulary remained that of a polytheist, his “the gods” are merely a synonym for this impersonal Providence. He knew very well the old Greek myths, knew that they were not true, but treasured the cultural tradition that stretched from Homer to his own time.

Marcus Aurelius’ son, Commodus (180-192) had none of his father’s virtues, and degraded his office by appearing before the crowds in the Coliseum as a hunter of wild beasts. In his perverse way, Commodus remained as philhellenic as his predecessors: for his hunting displays he wore a lion-skin and carried a club, assuming the role of Herakles, the greatest Greek hero of them all. Commodus was followed by Septimius Severus (193-211), a native of Leptis Magna in North Africa. Septimius’ first language may have been Punic, but he had learned both Latin and Greek at an early age, and as a young man had been a student in the philosophical

schools at Athens. His wife, Julia Domna, whom he met when he was a young officer stationed in Syria, was the daughter of the hereditary priest of one of Syria's most venerable Baals. She had grown up speaking Greek, and although as the empire's First Lady she had to become fluent in Latin she and Severus mostly conversed in Greek. Perhaps because of her family's priestly heritage, Julia Domna and her sister had a serious interest in the Eastern gods. The Severan emperors built lavishly at Baalbek, the main shrine of "Baal of the Bek'a" (today in Lebanon), enlarging and refurbishing the temples of Baal and Atargatis, whom the Hellenes called Zeus and Aphrodite. The interests of Julia Mamaea, who was Julia Domna's niece and the mother of Alexander Severus (222-235), included Christianity. When she was the Imperial Mother, according to Eusebius, Julia Mamaea dispatched a military escort to bring Origen, the first Christian theologian, from Caesarea Maritima to Antioch in order to explain to her what Christianity was really about.<sup>6</sup> Despite - or perhaps because of - their interest in the Eastern cults, all of the Severan emperors and their women were careful to show themselves as exemplars of Greek culture. Hellenism therefore flourished until the end of the Severan dynasty in 235, when Alexander Severus and his mother were struck down in a military mutiny.

### **The cruel society**

Compassion was not one of the cardinal virtues in Greco-Roman civilization. Neither the Greek nor the Latin vocabulary had a word exactly equivalent to our "compassion." The Greek word *sympatheia* meant something quite different from the sentiment of sympathy. The Greek *eleos* and the Latin *miserordia* are sometimes translated as "compassion" but were closer to our words "pity" or "mercy." While the Judaeans and Christians believed that charity was pleasing to God, the Hellenes promoted self-sufficiency (*autarkeia*) and the Stoics convinced themselves that *eleos* was a weakness to which the sage should not yield.

It is arguable that compassion in the modern sense began with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and with the widespread recognition in nineteenth-century Europe that human suffering is often of our own making and that the human condition is therefore capable of improvement. In contrast to this progressive outlook, one popular opinion in antiquity was that bad things happened because the gods, demons, God, or Satan inflicted them upon humankind. Another explanation was provided by astrology: the varying forces of the stars, whether natural or supernatural, accounted for the variability in people's situations. Still another view was that Fortune, personified as a quasi-divinity (*Tychē* in Greek, *Fortuna* in Latin), in her inscrutable way distributed blessings and misfortunes. Greek rationalists protested against the tendency to assign supernatural causes to things. Polybius, for example, insisted that one should always look for natural causes, and should only as a last resort blame something on Tychē. The natural explanations that were put forward, however, were limited mostly to proximate causes, and little was said about underlying causes. An exception was heredity: it was widely agreed that a man's situation was a consequence of *ingenium*, of innate qualities that he inherited from his father (rarely, from his mother). Aristotle spent much effort arguing that some people are "naturally" slaves and others are "naturally" free.

What was not much recognized in antiquity or in the Middle Ages was that we are shaped just as much by environment and experience as by heredity, and that systemic and impersonal

factors determine much of what we are. Although the Hellenes pioneered philosophy, literature, military history, and politics, they were unaware of social and cultural evolution and did almost nothing with the social sciences of economics, psychology and sociology. Why was Casina a prostitute? Well, she was born under unfavorable stars. Or she had offended some divinity and was paying the price. Or she had a weak character, was constitutionally lustful, and morally defective. Few observers would have remarked that she had no means of support when her guardian unexpectedly died, and nobody would have proposed that the structure of the society and the economy limited a woman's career choices to prostitution. There is no ancient equivalent of Émile Zola's *Nana* or of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*.

If compassion was in short supply in Classical and Hellenistic Greek cities, it was even less apparent in the Roman empire. The brutality of Roman slavery led to three great slave rebellions in the second and first centuries BC. The last of them ended, in 70 BC, with the crucifixion of six thousand slaves along the Appian Way. These wretches hung on crosses that stood like telephone poles along the two hundred miles from Capua to Brundisium, an object lesson for other slaves who might be contemplating revolt. Even worse than slavery was the slaughter. From the beginning of Roman history a Roman commander looked forward to winning *gloria* on the battlefield by slaying "enemies." A Roman commander was not awarded a triumph by the senate unless his troops had killed a stipulated number of "enemies" (5000, in the early days) who had purportedly threatened the state or diminished the majesty of Rome. Through the centuries, therefore, the legions annually slaughtered Volscians, Etruscans, Samnites, Carthaginians, Iberians, Gauls, and Britons in order to demonstrate their own *virtus* and to provide Roman consuls and proconsuls with triumphs. The formula spurred the Romans to create the largest empire the world had ever seen, and in the process they killed millions of people (between 58 and 50 BC Julius Caesar's legions killed well over a million in Gaul, most of them women and children), enslaved hundreds of thousands, and reduced the rest to tribute-paying subjects.

For reasons of state the excesses of the Late Republic were to some extent checked by Caesar Augustus and his successors in the Principate. Under the emperors fewer people were slain or enslaved by the Roman legions, and the provincials were less often subject to extortion by Roman governors. Nevertheless, the Roman world was still a brutal place under the Julio-Claudians, the Flavians, and even the "five good emperors" who ruled in Gibbon's Golden Age, the years from 96 to 180 CE.

### **The gladiatorial *munera***

The most grisly aspect of the incompassionate society was the death-show. In the Early Republic, and supposedly already under the *rex* Tarquinius Priscus, the Roman citizens' primary entertainment was chariot racing in the Circus Maximus. These "circuses" (*circenses*) or "games" (*ludi*) maintained their popularity all through antiquity, but by the first century the death-shows had become an even more important form of entertainment. Initially the gladiatorial contest was part of the funeral ceremony for members of the Etruscan nobility: when a wealthy Etruscan died the funeral would include a fight to the death between two of the deceased's favorite male slaves, the idea being that the loser in the fight had the privilege of

accompanying his master or mistress to the underworld. The funeral contest was appropriated by the Roman nobility in the third century BC (the first such Roman contest was put on by the Junius Brutus family as a funeral game in 264 BC). Soon it became a public spectacle, in which condemned criminals fought each other.

By late in the second century BC the appetite for such spectacles, at least in central Italy, far outran the supply of condemned criminals. As a result, prisoners of war were forced into the arena. Putting on a gladiatorial contest became a *munus* or “service” that an elected official might choose to perform, at his own expense, for the city of Rome. When serving as an aedile in 65 BC Julius Caesar went into debt putting on extravagant gladiatorial *munera*, but the largesse won him immense popularity with the Roman plebs. By the Augustan Age such productions were a standard form of urban entertainment in most of Italy and a few of the western provinces. The Roman taste for blood was perhaps initially nurtured by the Romans’ long tradition of battlefield slaughter. Gladiatorial entertainment was especially popular in areas where legionary veterans were settled and from which - for a while, at least - legionaries were most often recruited. In the Greek East the death-shows were much less popular than in the Latin West. In the Imperial period gladiatorial games were held in an amphitheater, which in a typical city was large enough to accommodate most of the citizens. In Rome itself this was impossible, but the Coliseum (*Amphitheatrum Flavianum*, opened in 80 CE) could hold more than 50,000 spectators. The ruins of some two hundred amphitheaters have been found. Almost half of the known amphitheaters were in Italy, with Gaul, North Africa and Britain accounting for most of the rest.<sup>7</sup> Typically the amphitheater dominated a city architecturally, paralleling its social importance.

A favorite event in the amphitheater was the “hunt” (*venatio*), featuring wild animals. Bulls, bears, lions and panthers, elephants and rhinoceroses, all served to amuse the crowds. The keepers withheld food from the carnivores for several days in order to make sure that they were hungry on the day of the “hunt.” Usually the beasts were sent against each other, sometimes having to be prodded or driven (a rhinoceros and a lion would otherwise have chosen to leave each other alone). A variation was to pit the animals against condemned criminals. The criminal “hunters” might be given offensive weapons in order to make the contest more interesting, but if the criminals were unlikely to fight back (Christian martyrs were in this category) they were sent into the arenas unarmed.

On extraordinary occasions the public at Rome was treated to a sea battle, a *naumachia*. The first *naumachia* was put on in 46 BC by Julius Caesar, who flooded the Campus Martius for what was staged as “a battle of the Tyrians against the Egyptians.” In 2 BC Caesar Augustus produced a miniature Battle of Salamis, with one side outfitted as Persians and the other side as Greeks. The Flavian emperors even rigged up the Coliseum to hold enough water for a *naumachia*. In these staged *naumachiai* the battle went on until all the men of one side or the other were dead.

The regular entertainment was the gladiatorial contest. The typical *munus* offered one pair of gladiators after another, to the roar of the crowds. To prevent boredom among the spectators, producers of the *munera* liked to include some variety of weapons and of contestants.

A wounded man could ask for mercy, and the decision was usually left to the crowd. In the smaller cities gladiatorial games might be infrequent, perhaps no more than two or three *munera* a month, but in Rome the number of game-days kept climbing. In the extravagant spectacles put on by Trajan to celebrate his victories in the Dacian war, he provided the citizenry with more than 10,000 gladiators and more than 10,000 animals. By the late second century the residents of Rome could count on at least 200 days a year in which to watch either gladiatorial games or “hunts.” The famous phrase, “bread and circuses” (*panem et circenses*) summarized the imperial officials’ understanding that the urban population’s two principal concerns were cheap grain and continuous entertainment.

Although bread was a practical necessity, the entertainment was very important in maintaining the citizenry’s morale. The spectators were a community of sorts, bonded together by the drama they were watching. In the old sacrificial cults the climax was the death of the victim, and the *munera* provided a similar experience, the victims here being men rather than oxen or sheep. The contests in Rome’s Coliseum had the added feature of the emperor’s attendance. This was the milieu in which the people and their master met, and the contests were marked by the emperor’s salutation to the crowd and its response to him. The spectators watched closely to see how the emperor deported himself, cheering when he showed his enthusiasm and complaining if he seemed to find less pleasure in the carnage than they did.

It is remarkable that so few people objected to the death-shows. Writers disapproved of the *munera*, but in the same way that they disapproved of the chariot races at the circus: these were things that the masses loved, but the educated man has other interests. So it was a matter of taste and style, and not of morality or humanity. Seneca was an exception, but in his criticism of the “sport” he stops far short of calling for its abolition. The Christians’ attitude toward the *munera* was mostly negative, and shows compassion for the gladiators, but even here we find some ambivalence. Writing his *De spectaculis* ca. 200 CE, Tertullian urges his Christian reader to avoid the gladiatorial contests, and condemns their brutality and cruelty. Even if the criminal in the arena deserves to die, “the innocent cannot take pleasure in the punishment of another.”<sup>8</sup> A few chapters later, however, Tertullian takes great pleasure in anticipating the scene on Judgement Day, when the enemies of the Christians will burn in hell. Mostly, Tertullian condemned the *munera* because of the idolatry that pervaded them, as it did all other forms of entertainment: the circus, the theater, and the gymnastic games.<sup>9</sup> The games were regularly dedicated to one god or another, and prayers and rituals were a part of the ceremony. Tertullian’s reason for writing the *De spectaculis* was to warn Christians against attending all these shows. Evidently many Christians found them appealing, and argued that nowhere in their holy scriptures was there any commandment forbidding attendance. Even after Constantine’s conversion, the imperial and local officials continued to provide *munera* for the people of Rome and the cities of the western provinces. It was not until after 400 CE that the emperor Honorius banned gladiatorial contests (the *venationes* went on for another fifty years, until the collapse of the western empire made it too difficult to obtain the necessary animals).

## **Sexuality**

Another striking aspect of Greco-Roman society in the early imperial period was its



blatant sexuality. From the paleolithic period onward sexual pleasure had been seen in the ancient world as one of the great goods that had been given to animals and to humans by the supernatural powers that created and controlled the world. This high valuation of sexuality was expressed in the creation of gods - usually female - whose primary responsibility was the maintenance of sexual desire: Astarte or Ishtar, Aphrodite, Venus, Atargatis and various "mother-goddesses" of Anatolia. The temples for these deities regularly employed hierodules, temple prostitutes on whose earnings the temples depended. The great majority of the hierodules were female, but at some of the temples male prostitutes were also available.

Islam, Christianity and Judaism are all agreed that God is male and eternally celibate, but in antiquity a celibate god of either sex was an oddity. Most ancient deities were sexually active. A few of the female gods were virgins, but many more had husbands and almost every male god had a female consort. For chronically philandering gods such as Zeus a wife was not enough, and the myths catalogued his endless extramarital affairs, usually with women but occasionally with boys. We may generalize that one of the main contrasts between ancient polytheism and the later scriptural religions was the sexuality of the former and the asexuality of the latter.

Because the gods themselves delighted in sex, there was no reason for people to deny themselves this pleasure. In all ancient societies about which we have reliable information wives were severely punished for adultery: the paternity of children born in legitimate marriages was not to be in doubt. Husbands, on the other hand, were free to have sexual affairs with their female slaves, with hierodules, or with prostitutes. In Greek civilization homosexual liaisons had been common since the eighth or seventh century BC. Although pederasty was not so celebrated in the second century CE and in the Roman west as it had been in Classical Sparta and Athens, neither was it seen as a vice or perversion. As has already been noted, Hadrian's one great love was the young man Antinous. When Antinous drowned in the Nile river, Hadrian built at the site a large city - Antinoöpolis - as a monument to his beloved.

The long process by which sexual intercourse became antithetical to religion began in Jerusalem in the seventh century BC. Until ca. 700 BC Yahweh had coexisted more or less amicably with other deities, including Asherah or Astarte, a goddess of love. In the early days his cult had included a bevy of sacred prostitutes, and at least some of his worshipers imagined him as consorting with his own Asherah. All of that changed in the reforms of Hezekiah at the beginning of the seventh century BC and of Josiah seventy years later. In 622 BC, under Josiah's royal protection, the priests of Yahweh banished all other deities from Judah, burned down the sacred groves and demolished the Asherah poles. Henceforth, any Judahite who dallied with a sacred prostitute was regarded as violating the covenant between Yahweh and Judah, thereby exposing the entire community to the god's wrath. In the later books of the Hebrew Bible fornication is almost a metaphor for apostasy from Yahweh. Because religious purity and sexual purity were closely related, as the zeal for religious purity increased so - in sectarian quarters of the Judaeen population - did a striving for sexual purity. The extreme was reached by the Essenes, among whom even marital sex was forbidden.

From the puritanical sects of Judaism this disgust with sex was transmitted by Paul to

New Covenant Christianity.<sup>10</sup> In the “spiritual awakening” that began in the second century a few eccentrics, whether Gnostic, New Covenant Christian, or Neopythagorean, committed themselves to celibacy (the Greek word was *enkrateia*, and the Latin word *continentia*). Although monasticism did not appear until the fourth century, Christians all along denounced fornication, prized celibacy, and believed that to remain a virgin was “to live like the angels.” Other Christians reluctantly endorsed marital sex, but counseled couples to engage in it solely for the purpose of producing children. This “procreationist” doctrine also held that the physical pleasure of sexual intercourse was either sinful or an enticement to sin.<sup>11</sup>

The contrast with Greco-Roman society could hardly have been starker. Sex and sexuality were encountered everywhere: on the stage, in literature, in the temple cults, and certainly on the street corners. Here the best evidence is archaeological: the heterosexual and homosexual scenes in paintings and mosaics, or sculpted on lamps and figurines.<sup>12</sup> The ruins of Pompeii, buried by Vesuvius’ eruption in 79 CE, are especially informative. This medium-sized city (its population at the time of its destruction may have been about 70,000) included at least twenty brothels and at least a dozen “cribs.”<sup>13</sup> There is no reason to suppose that sexual license at Pompeii was any greater than in other cities, whether in the Latin west or the Greek east.

A feature of Greco-Roman society related both to sexuality and to a lack of compassion was the exposure (*ekthesis*) of unwanted babies. Unlike the Christians, most Hellenes and Romans engaged in sexual intercourse for the sake of pleasure. For them, pregnancy was not the goal of intercourse but was instead a risk worth taking. When a family already included two or three children and the father was unable or unwilling to raise another child, it was his prerogative to “set out” a newborn baby. More baby girls than baby boys, and almost all infants with obvious birth defects were “set out.” Some of the exposed infants were picked up by strangers passing by, but more of them died of cold or heat, starvation, or attacks by scavengers. Because abortion was very hazardous and birth control was virtually unknown, in most Greek and Roman cities the exposure of infants was the normal method of population control. Judaeans, in contrast, raised all of their offspring and condemned the practice of the Greeks and Romans. Like the Judaeans, Christians regarded a baby as a gift from God (Theodore, Theodora, and Dorothea were favorite names), and parents were obliged to raise every baby they produced. Even infants with catastrophic birth defects were supposed to be God’s gifts to the stunned parents, given by God in order to test the parents and strengthen their faith.

## **The army**

It is a paradox that one of the dangers for the Roman empire was the very instrument by which it had been created: the legions. By the time of the Severan dynasty (193-235 CE) the Roman empire’s military forces were supplied mostly by the frontier provinces. The legions were stationed along the frontiers, especially the Rhine and Danube rivers but also in Britain and Syria. Recruitment in Italy itself had been discouraged by Vespasian, who hoped that provincial troops would be less likely than Italian troops to engage in the civil wars that had so bloodied the empire in 68-69 CE. Under the Flavians and Trajan legionaries were recruited primarily in the most Romanized and civilized provinces of the west, such as Gallia Narbonensis and the Spains (Trajan himself was from Spain). Under Hadrian, however, recruitment efforts were shifted

from the more civilized provinces to the frontier provinces. This was an understandable decision because the legionaries tended to settle, after their retirement, in the areas in which they had served. Their sons were predisposed to follow their fathers' careers, and to enlist for the twenty-year hitch in the legions. In addition, auxiliary units came almost entirely from the frontier provinces. The auxiliaries were drawn from non-citizens, and along the frontiers lived many non-citizens who still retained the warlike traditions of their ancestors.

Unfortunately for the Roman empire, its recruitment policies created a gulf between the army and the inhabitants of Italy and the interior provinces. The urbanites of Rome, Alexandria, Antioch and other large cities became increasingly indifferent to the military needs of the empire, assuming that the emperor would find all the volunteers he needed in those lands where men still enjoyed soldiering. This worked reasonably well until the 160s, when Germanic barbarians across the Danube began making deep incursions into the empire in search of plunder. These invasions ended the *pax Romana* and discouraged recruitment. Marcus Aurelius was hard pressed to keep the legions at full strength, and his son Commodus was compelled to raise the legionary's wages from 225 to 300 denarii a year. By the time of Alexander Severus (222-235 CE) a legionary's annual pay was 750 denarii a year.

Because the legionaries' calendar featured a full slate of sacrificial and rituals, including cult services to the many deified emperors, Judeans had never served in the legions. For a time Judean auxiliary units were enrolled alongside the legions, and in these units the only religious rituals were those performed for Adonai. After the war of 66-70 CE the emperors no longer recruited Judean auxiliaries. Most Christians too avoided military service, fearing that they would jeopardize their salvation by performing the required idolatrous acts. A few Christians did enlist, but had to compromise their convictions in order to escape notice. Tertullian recounted an episode that had recently occurred (perhaps in 204 CE, after Septimius Severus' victory over the Parthians). During the distribution of booty it was the custom for a legionary to wear a laurel crown or garland as he approached the officers making the distribution. Because the garland was the headpiece worn at the sacrifices for Dionysos, Saturn, Jupiter and other gods, one of the Christian soldiers refused to wear it and approached the officers bare-headed. When challenged he announced that he was a Christian and that the garland-gods were not gods at all, and he was thereupon put in chains. The other Christians in the unit were angry at the confessor for not accommodating military tradition and for causing them trouble, and they insisted that nowhere in their sacred texts was it forbidden to wear a garland. Tertullian, contrarily, concluded that the confessing soldier was the only real Christian in the legion.<sup>14</sup> As indicated above, the favorite god of many legionaries was Mithras. Although his cult seems to have begun no earlier than 70 CE, thirty years later he was being worshiped by troops as far north as Nida, near the Moselle-Rhine confluence, and at Carnuntum, on the middle Danube not far from Aquincum, where Budapest now stands. Legion XV Apollinaris, which in the 60s had served in Armenia before being transferred to Vespasian's army in Judaea, seems to have been especially influential in the spread of Mithraism.

In the first and second century legionaries were not permitted to marry. They often had liaisons with local women, and after retirement might formally marry them. Septimius Severus (193-211), who had more experience as an army commander than any emperor since Trajan,

ended the marriage prohibition. His purpose was to make military service more attractive, but an unintended result was to make a military career even more hereditary than it had been. In the later third century the Balkan and Danubian provinces would supply most of the empire's military manpower, along with most of its emperors. By that time neither the troops nor their commanders had much in common with the urbanites to the south.

## **The gods: Greek and Near Eastern**

Although the conversion of Gentiles to Christianity would eventually become a torrent, in the middle of the second century it was still a relatively small trickle. The Olympians of the Hellenes, and their counterparts in the Roman pantheon, had by now lost most of their credibility. Writing early in the second century, Plutarch was puzzled that the oracles at Delphi and other venerable centers had for the most part fallen silent. His younger contemporary, Pausanias the Periegete, toured the shrines and sanctuaries of Old Greece and was sad to find many of them abandoned. From the 150s through the 170s Lucian of Samosata (in eastern Syria) wrote many satirical pieces on Greek religion, gently mocking such religious practices as sacrifices, prayers, and funerals. As Lucian saw it, the priests who presided over the cults were necessarily charlatans. In his *Judgment of the Goddesses* Lucian imagined what Hera, Athena and Aphrodite were saying to each other when Paris of Troy was deciding who of the three goddesses was most beautiful.

Those Hellenes who were concerned about the Afterlife, and dubious that the big statues would be of any assistance on that score, usually joined one or more of the mystery cults that promised help to the souls of the dying. Christianity and Judaism promised at least as much as the cults of Isis, Dionysos or Mithras, but were at a disadvantage because they were absolutely exclusive: if you became a Judaeon or Christian, you would no longer participate in any of the festivals for the civic gods of your community, while worshipers of Isis or Mithras were under no such prohibition. As noted in Chapter Six, the cult of Isis reached its zenith in the second century CE, and seems to have been almost as popular in the Latin West as in the Greek East. Nevertheless, all of the gods were becoming less believable, while God was moving in the opposite direction.

In general, the Near Eastern gods had more vitality in the second century than had the gods of the Greeks and Romans. Here I am speaking not about Isis and Mithras, who were thoroughly revamped and became great favorites in the Greek and Roman world, but about those deities who remained dear to the native populations of the Near East. The literary evidence on these Near Eastern gods is sparse. Another of Lucian's essays, *The Syrian Goddess*, shows that Atargatis' cult was thriving, both in Syria itself and in other lands.<sup>15</sup> The Anatolian mother goddesses (the Romans adopted one of them as Cybele) were also doing well enough, thanks to the temple prostitutes that continued to bring in worshipers. The archaeological evidence is especially informative on the Egyptian cults. The great, royal Egyptian gods (Ptah, Re, Amon, Seth) had declined drastically, and their temples were becoming empty shells without the royal support that had once sustained them. The nome or local gods, however, continued to receive cult up and down the Nile valley. The peasants, some of whom were bilingual but all of whom spoke Egyptian (Coptic), mummified the animals - baboons, ibises, crocodiles - sacred to the

various gods, and archaeologists have found these mummies by the thousands. How convinced the Egyptians were about the value of the mummies and the divinity of the gods is unclear, but at least the rituals went on. The Hellenes, of course, regarded the Egyptian superstitions as ridiculous.

### **The Hellenes in the second century: spiritual awakening and an “Age of Anxiety”**

The second century CE was in some respects the highwater mark of Greek and Roman civilization. From Britain to the Tigris a thousand cities flourished, the larger ones boasting both architectural beauty and physical amenities such as theaters and amphitheaters, music-halls, gymnasiums, libraries, and public baths. The local aristocracies that paid for these things were steeped in Greek culture throughout the eastern provinces of the Roman empire, and in Greco-Roman culture in the Latin-speaking western provinces. In the most frequently quoted sentence from his massive *Decline and Fall* Edward Gibbon wrote,

If a man were called to fix the period in the history of the world, during which the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would, without hesitation, name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus.<sup>16</sup>

Gibbon’s point, however, was that the superficial well-being of the ancient world in the period between 96 and 180 concealed fundamental weaknesses that led to the decline and fall of the Roman empire.

Especially dangerous for Greco-Roman society was a growing perception that the world was not so important as it had once seemed. Ideas tentatively set forth in the *Achsenzeit* of the seventh to third centuries BC were by the second century CE beginning to spread in the Greco-Roman population, as well as among “barbarians.” To put it most simply, by the middle of the second century an increasing number of people - still a minority, but a significant one - were beginning to regard our world as of little consequence compared to a metaphysical “Other World.” A thousand years earlier, people had been quite certain that ours was the best of all possible worlds. The immortal gods themselves, so it had been thought, were part of this world: they had either inherited or created it, they lived in it, and their chief pleasures were to receive from their worshipers songs of praise, votive offerings, and above all animal sacrifices. The world was a *kosmos*, majestic and eternal, and humankind was fortunate to have so important a place in it. At death one descended to *hades* or *sheol* or *hell*, which was itself an inferior and undesirable part of the cosmos, although not necessarily a place of punishment. The underworld had its own gods, the *dei inferni*, but they were the poorest of the pantheon.

By the second century CE, to some people things were beginning to seem very different. As the image gods lost their credibility, the world lost much of its glory: if the gods in their temples were not really gods, the material world was no longer the best imaginable. The stars were surely more important than the earth, and the celestial world far more godly than the terrestrial. The human body was all too connected with matter and death, but the soul was not so earthbound, and many mystics and worshipers in the mystery cults - Neopythagoreans,

Platonists, devotees of Isis, Dionysos and Mithras, many Judaeans and Christians - espoused a belief in the immortality of the soul. Many educated Hellenes, as Lucian shows, regarded that belief as unfounded and were skeptical of religion in general. Their numbers were dwindling, however, while the number of believers was growing, slowly but steadily.

A characteristic of the Roman empire during the second and early third centuries was the wide variety of its religious or superstitious subcultures. Of the old civic cults, which had once been attended by almost everyone in the community, most were moribund and some were already dead, and from their compost a variegated crop of private associations was beginning to arise. While a few people turned to one or another of the philosophical traditions, many more people gravitated toward one or another of the mystery cults and gathered themselves into intimate groups at the local level. Unlike a Classical Greek city-state or even Rome itself in the period of the Early Republic, the Roman empire by the second century was in no sense a cultural and religious community. Of the sixty or seventy million people who were protected by the Roman army, most were politically indifferent. Most of these people, even in the early third century, were still nominal worshipers of the old civic gods. But the future lay with the various mystery cults and especially with Judaism and Christianity.

## **Demons and the idea of evil**

By the second century CE the idea of Evil was gaining ground. Classical Hellenes and Romans had no such idea, nor was it known in Israel and Judah before the Babylonian Captivity. The idea of Evil seems to have come from Zarathushtra, and his polarizing of the Truth and the Lie, personified in Ahura Mazda and in Ahriman. In the regime of the old gods there of course had been evil or wicked people, and bad or tragic things, but there had been nothing *divinely* wicked or evil. In Zarathushtra's system evil was eventually deified and personified, first as Angra Mainyu and then as Ahriman, the polar opposite of Ahura Mazda. This dualistic notion has come down to us in Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Satan and the idea of Evil are a baleful legacy from ancient Iran.<sup>17</sup> An extreme disillusionment with the material world was characteristic of Gnosticism. According to this dualistic theosophy everything temporal and physical was evil, and good was reserved for the eternal and spiritual world. As we have seen, Gnosticism had its roots in first-century Judaism.<sup>18</sup>

In the Roman empire during the second century CE Satan was not yet much on the minds of anyone other than Judaeans and Christians, but most people in the empire believed or suspected that their lives were blighted by "demons." The *daimones* were spirits who delighted in injuring, sickening, or even killing people. Originally, the Greek word *daimones*, or sometimes the neuter *daimonia*, was used mostly for benign ghosts or spirits. In the eighth century BC Hesiod used the word for the paragons of the Golden Race, who had gone to the Underworld many centuries before the poet's time.<sup>19</sup> Although these *daimones* were supposed to be helpful, the *daimones* of Hesiod's Silver Race were less predictable and the Greek word eventually took on negative overtones in popular usage. It was thus available as an almost exact equivalent for the Iranian *daevas*, who were second-rate and frequently malevolent gods and posed a danger to worshipers of Ahura Mazda.

Demons were not yet of much consequence in the Hellenistic period. As polytheism began to give way to a vague monotheism, however, the question of evil became troublesome and the demons had a larger role to play. If one supreme god was in charge of the world, how was one to explain the terrible things that happen to individuals and to whole communities? Because it seemed inappropriate to hold the supreme deity responsible for such disasters, especially when they happened to good people, the tendency was to attribute them to a malevolent demon. Many Hellenes regarded the demons as autonomous trouble-makers, but in Iranian and then in Judaeans circles these demons, or “unclean spirits,” were usually thought of as serving a master who was variously called Ahriman, Belial, Beelzebub, Satan, or the Devil. In any case, protecting oneself from the many demons or unclean spirits became a major concern in the first and second centuries CE. In order to ward off their power, a person might carry an apotropaic amulet or might perform one of several actions that were deemed effective in neutralizing demons. Because the God of the Judaeans and Christians was known to be an implacable enemy of the demons, it was often in his name that exorcists cast out the demons from those who were afflicted by them (epilepsy was commonly regarded as the result of possession by a demon).

## **Magic**

If one did not turn to Adonai to ward off Evil, one turned to Ahura Mazda and his servants, the magi. Magic enjoyed its greatest popularity from the first century CE to the fourth.<sup>20</sup> The word itself - *magika*, or “things that the magi do” - seems to have entered the Greek vocabulary in the second century BC.<sup>21</sup> Many papyri with magical texts have been found in Egypt, most of them written in Greek and the rest in Demotic Egyptian or in Coptic. Although most of the papyri date to the third and fourth centuries CE, the texts inscribed on them seem to have been composed considerably earlier. The longest of all is a codex usually called the Great Magical Papyrus, now in Paris. The codex consists of thirty-six sheets, each covered with writing on back and front, for more than three thousand lines. The texts contain many spells, often in abracadabra gibberish, and many of the spells and the accompanying instructions were touted for their effectiveness in curing an illness, injuring an enemy, or attracting a desired person for sexual intercourse.

How widespread was the use of magic may be indicated by the story of Paul’s evangelizing in Ephesus, a city proud of its majestic temple of Artemis. After Paul had bested several other Judaeans exorcists in casting evil spirits out of afflicted persons, the crowds acknowledged Paul’s superior powers. Accordingly, so the story goes, when Paul instructed the Ephesians to bring together and burn all of their books of magic they did so, and the value of the books thrown into the flames was estimated at 50,000 pieces of silver (Acts 19:19). In his *Natural History* Pliny the Elder, who had one of the brighter minds of his generation (he was in charge of the Roman navy under Vespasian and Titus), shared with his readers his wide knowledge of magical potions and cures.

In the middle of the second century, as orators were declaiming in the Attic dialect to admiring audiences, and as sophists dazzled the public with displays of erudition on the mythical or classical past, many more people were fascinated with stories of the supernatural. The Latin

novel *Metamorphoses*, written by Apuleius in the 150s or 160s CE, thrusts us into a world of transformations from humans to animals and back, of demons, spells, and other forms of magic. The novel has a happy ending, as the great goddess Isis rescues the hero from his perilous adventures and grants him serenity. Apuleius, who had studied philosophy in Athens and fancied himself a philosopher as well as an orator and writer, was himself charged with being a magician. After he married a wealthy, middle-aged widow, his in-laws brought the accusation that the woman had agreed to marry Apuleius only because he had addled her mind with a magic spell. The speech Apuleius gave in his defense was subtitled *On Magic* and was delivered before the Roman governor of the province of Africa. The specific charges were that Apuleius bought and dissected exotic fish in order to obtain certain fish-innards that had magical powers, and that he arranged for young boys to practice lecanomancy (gazing into a reflective bowl of water) in order to divine the future for him. Apuleius' response to the charges illustrate how credulous were the participants in the trial: the plaintiffs certainly, but also Apuleius and perhaps even the governor.

### **The specter of Hell**

In the second century and the first decades of the third not many people in the Roman empire were concerned about Hell. The educated classes supposed that death is the end of things, and their motto continued to be, "Enjoy life while you still have it!" Writing his *Dialogues of the Dead* in the 170s, Lucian of Samosata surveyed opinions about the Afterlife, treating death with resignation and a dose of humor. In these thirty short dialogues Lucian employed the old Greek myths, which nobody any longer believed, to present death as the Great Leveler. Climbing aboard Charon's Ferry and crossing the River Styx are all sorts of people, from paupers to princes and from buffoons to philosophers. Across that river is no Hell and certainly no Paradise, as everyone is reduced to skull and bones. As summarized by Alan Bernstein, "Lucian employs no single model in depicting death. The *Dialogues of the Dead* mostly portray a land of Hades that brings no more suffering than life itself, except that it lacks life's pleasures. In this vast democratic grave, even Alexander the Great turns out to be mortal (12, 13), and all are reduced to skeletal equality (18)."<sup>22</sup> The purpose of philosophy, Lucian believed, was to remove the fear of death, and he ridiculed both those who feared punishments and those (here he mentioned Christian martyrs) who wasted their brief lives anticipating the joy that awaited them in Heaven.

Diametrically opposed to the view of death as the Great Leveler was the belief, held by a growing minority (including many Judaeans and all Christians), that death was the great dichotomizer. In this view, death was not the end but the beginning, and in the Afterlife people are grouped in two permanent and opposite camps: the good and the evil, or the saved and the damned. Although in this life the rain falls equally on the just and the unjust, in the Afterlife your fate was "either-or." If you were one of the righteous, or elect, you would in the Afterlife enjoy an eternity of bliss. The wicked person, on the other hand, was sent for everlasting punishment to the bowels of the earth. Hades ("Hell"), which had once been the dreary home of all the dead, was now understood by this growing minority as the destination for the unjust, whereas the souls of the just ascended to heaven. In Hades the wicked were punished in the bottomless pit of fire called Tartaros.



Although most Hellenes, with Lucian, still scoffed at these hopes and fears about the Afterlife, it is true that the skeptics were declining while the believers were growing in numbers. When ca. 200 CE Tertullian described the horrors of Hell he was not introducing a new and specifically Christian doctrine. By that time not only Judaeans and Christians but also many pagan barbarians and even some Romans and Hellenes were anxious to avoid dreadful punishment in the Afterlife. Tertullian and his fellow Christians capitalized on the anxiety by providing detailed information on the terror of Hell and how to avoid it. Nevertheless, despite growing anxiety about Hell, in the early third century the majority of the Roman empire's population took the Christian and Jewish warnings with a large grain of salt. Many people who had little or no education took comfort from the fact that most of their "betters" - those for whom Lucian had written - seemed to dismiss reports about Hell as foolishness. After Constantine's conversion that would change, as even the *honestiores* began to undergo Christian baptism.

## **Astrology**

By the second century CE most people in the Roman empire - from illiterate villagers to the highly educated, including most of the emperors themselves - suspected that the stars controlled human destiny. A few people flatly denied this possibility, many more believed it firmly, and the majority seem to have been not entirely sure about the astrologers' claims but thought that there must be some truth in them. The sun, moon and the five known planets (in their eventual sequence, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn) were the seven heavenly bodies, and gave to the number seven its sacred significance. In Mithraism especially, but occasionally also in Judaism and Christianity, believers thought in terms of "seven heavens," or seven ascending tiers of heaven. The sun, moon and five planets were honored in an endless cycle, giving rise to the seven-day week. The location of the celestial seven was charted against the backdrop of the fixed stars: in the course of a year the planets moved through the twelve constellations known as the zodiacal signs. Each of the seven luminaries and each of the twelve zodiacal signs had its peculiar powers, and together they determined what happened on earth.

In most polytheistic societies the heavenly bodies had always seemed divine. To a world of birth, death and impermanence, the sun, moon and stars were in sharpest contrast, never changing and evidently immortal. Although the sun and moon had been venerated in most parts of the ancient world since the paleolithic period, in Mesopotamia the five known planets or "wandering stars" were also regarded as divine, and each was associated with one of the gods in the Mesopotamian or Chaldaean pantheon. Our name "Venus" for the second planet, for example, is the Roman equivalent of the Mesopotamian "Ishtar," and our "Jupiter" is a Latin translation of "Marduk," whom Mesopotamians associated with the great planet. Astrology began after ca. 750 BC, when Babylonian star-gazers discovered that the "wandering" stars were in fact not wanderers at all, but followed a regular and predictable cycle through the skies. Late in the fourth century BC the first personal horoscopes were produced by Chaldaean "scholars." Alexander's conquest of Babylon helped to spread an interest in astrology to the Greek world, a development aided considerably ca. 275 BC by the publication in Greek of astrological works by Berossos, a priest of Bel Marduk. By the end of the first century BC astrologers - usually called

“Chaldaeans” or *mathematici* - were in demand throughout much of the Parthian and Roman empires. The impact of astrology on the ancient world was profound and long, subsiding only with the triumph of the scriptural religions. Some forty horoscopes in Greek have been found on papyri in Egypt, the earliest dating to the first century BC and the last ones to the fifth century CE.

Whereas today most people regard astrology as a superstition, two thousand years ago it was a science. Unlike magic, which many educated people in the second century still disdained, astrology attracted the best minds of the time. Out of what the Hellenes learned from Berossos and from other “Chaldaeans” they soon began to construct astronomical theories. In the Greek-speaking world astrology was therefore indistinguishable from astronomy, and in fact Hellenic scholars used the words *astronomia* and *astrologia* interchangeably for what they regarded as a single science: the observation of celestial phenomena and the study of how those phenomena affected earth and humankind. The blatantly religious aspects of Mesopotamian astrology were in Greek hands replaced by pseudo-science: for most Greeks the stars and planets were not gods, but had varying qualities - hot, cold, wet, dry - that affected earth and its inhabitants through a process known as *sympatheia*. Hipparchus of Nicaea in the second century BC brought this “science” of the stars to a high level among the Hellenes, but it was not until the second century CE that it reached its zenith. This came with Ptolemy, Claudius Ptolemaeus (the cognomen may have been given him because he was born in Ptolemais, in Upper Egypt). Ptolemy lived from ca. 85 to ca. 165 CE and spent his adult life at Alexandria. He was an indefatigable scholar, and in addition to his astronomical work he wrote a comprehensive *Geography*, two works on optics and the refraction of light, a chronography and several other treatises.

Ptolemy’s *magnum opus* was his massive *Mathematikē syntaxis* (*Mathematical Composition*). In the first part of this thirteen-book study he mapped the skies, using triangulation or trigonometric calculations to establish the location of more than a thousand stars in all the visible constellations. These stars, he supposed, were fixed on a sphere that daily rotated around the earth. Then Ptolemy calculated the seven spheres in which moved the sun, moon and five planets. The observations on which the system was based were made from the latitude of Alexandria and Canopus between 121 and 147 CE. The earth, round and stationary, was in the center of Ptolemy’s world. Above the earth in ascending spheres orbited the planets, the moon, the sun, and last of all the sphere of the fixed stars, which by its rotation drew the lesser celestial bodies with it.

In his later years Ptolemy wrote brief summaries of his astronomical system, and both the longer and shorter works found many readers. The full version of the *Mathematikē syntaxis* came to be known as the *megistē* (“greatest”) and when it was translated into Arabic it circulated simply as *al-magest*. Among both Muslim and Christian scholars Ptolemy’s *Almagest* remained definitive until Copernicus’ *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* displaced it. Although Copernicus published his work in 1543 it was not until the seventeenth century - when Galileo’s telescopes left little room for doubt - that Europeans generally abandoned the Ptolemaic system.

Ptolemy’s astrological companion to the astronomy of the *Almagest* was his *Tetrabiblos*. In these four books he explained how the stars and the seven inferior heavenly bodies affect

individuals and all humankind. All of this again had the appearance of precise science. The sun, moon and planets are each - so the star scientists concluded - characterized by a different mixture of cold, warm, dry and wet. Jupiter, Venus and the moon were beneficent because they contained a high proportion of the warm and wet. In contrast, Saturn and Mars, being mostly cold and dry, were maleficent (Mercury and the sun were balanced and therefore neutral).<sup>23</sup> One by one Ptolemy characterized each of the zodiacal constellations, and indeed each star in these twelve constellations, the mixture of each star making it either propitious or injurious. All of this nonsense determined how long you would live (where were each of the planets at the moment of your conception, and of your birth?), whether you would have children and how they would turn out, how successful you would be in your profession, and everything else about your life and death. The following passage comes from Ptolemy's explanation of injuries and diseases:

The parts of the individual signs of the zodiac which surround the afflicted portion of the horizon will indicate the part of the body which the portent will concern, and whether the part indicated can suffer an injury or a disease or both, and the natures of the planets produce the kinds and causes of the events that are to occur. For, of the most important parts of the human body, Saturn (Kronos) is lord of the right ear, the spleen, the bladder, the phlegm, and the bones; Jupiter (Zeus) is lord of the touch, the lungs, arteries, and semen; Mars (Ares) of the left ear, kidneys, veins, and genitals; the sun of the sight, the brain, heart, sinews and all the right-hand parts; Venus (Aphrodite) of smell, the liver, and the flesh; Mercury (Hermes) of speech and thought, the tongue, the bile, and the buttocks; the moon of taste and drinking, the stomach, belly, womb, and all the left-hand parts.<sup>24</sup>

Much less scientific looking than Ptolemy's studies were the popular *Anthologies* of Vettius Valens: these nine books - in Greek - "proved" the validity of astrology by matching up the horoscopes of men and women in the past with their individual horoscopes. Those who preferred a still lighter touch could read the *Astronomica* of Marcus Manilius: five books of Latin hexameters that set forth the powers of the stars in our lives.

The long dominion of astrology had enormous consequences for the ancient world. Those who took it seriously were confirmed in their perception that the image gods were of little consequence. For some who resisted it, astrology must have added greatly to the appeal of a transcendent god, whether called Mithras, Isis, or - simply - God. In Ptolemy's system God was superfluous, and we may see monotheism and quasi-monotheism as a way to trump astrology. In a crowded pantheon no single god transcended the sun, moon and stars, but God could do just that.

## **The vogue of Mithraism**

As noted in Chapter Six, Mithraism as a mystery cult seems to have originated in Rome in the 70s CE. Although we have very few texts relevant to Mithraism (those few are indirect and - in the case of Christian writers - hostile), iconographic evidence is relatively plentiful. This comes mostly from Mithraea, the underground "caves" in which the initiates of Mithras

worshiped. The typical Mithraeum was long and narrow, its long sides lined with benches cut from the stone. From these benches twenty or thirty worshipers could view the tauroctony (“slaying of the bull”), the scene - usually carved in relief overhead and then painted - that dominates every Mithraeum. Other images in reliefs, statuary, or paintings also tend to be standard from one Mithraeum to another, although the meaning of some of the iconography remains obscure.

The earliest evidence for a Mithraeum dates ca. 80 CE.<sup>25</sup> In the second century Mithraea proliferated widely, showing up at many sites, especially in the Roman empire’s western provinces. Hellenes, by and large, had little interest in the new cult, but a few Mithraea were constructed in Syria and Palestine. Mithraism continued to attract many initiates in the third century and for much of the fourth. Certainly the Roman legions were an important medium through which Mithraism spread. Women were excluded from the worship of Mithras, and the initiates included a disproportionate number of soldiers. As a result, Mithraea have been excavated at military posts along the Rhine and in Britain, as well as in the more civilized parts of the empire. The heaviest concentration, however, is at Rome itself and at Ostia: eight Mithraea have been found in Rome and eighteen in Ostia (in contrast, in the entire Roman empire archaeologists have found only one Christian church dating from before the fourth century, although the reason for the scarcity of churches is certainly that Christianity remained nominally illegal until 311 CE).

Mithraism incorporated a vast amount of star science but subordinated the heavens to a savior-religion. Mithras himself became a sun-god. The seven heavens that astrologers had described were assumed in Mithraism, but Mithras was lord of each, and could escort the initiate’s soul through the spheres to its blissful destination. Origen thus summarized the doctrine of the heavens in what he calls “the old Persian mysteries associated with the cult of Mithras”:<sup>26</sup>

In that system there is an orbit for the fixed stars, another for the planets, and a diagram for the passage of the soul through the latter. They picture this as a ladder with seven gates; and at the very top an eighth gate; the first gate is lead, the second tin, the third bronze, the fourth iron, the fifth an alloy, the sixth silver, and the seventh gold. And they associate the metals with the gods as follows: the lead with Kronos, taking lead to symbolize his slowness; the second with Aphrodite, comparing the tin with her brightness and softness; the third with Zeus - the bronze symbolizing the firmness of the god; the fourth with Hermes, for both iron and Hermes are reliable and hard-working; the fifth with Ares - the gate which as a result of mixture is uneven in quality; the sixth with the moon; and the seventh with the sun - the last two being symbolized by the colors of the metals.

The new religion was almost, but not quite, monotheistic. Worshipers of Mithras honored Ahura Mazda - more often called Ormasdes or Oromazes - as the highest god, and acknowledged Ahriman as Ormasdes’ evil counterpart. But Ahura Mazda was relatively inactive, and it therefore fell to Mithras, the “Messenger of Light,” to fight the cosmic battle against Ahriman. In the myth elaborated for Mithras the god was born from a rock on December 25, a date

eventually appropriated by Christians for their own savior's birthday. With his sword Mithras slew the primeval bull, from whose blood he formed the world. By the tauroctony, Mithras was "the creator and father of all."<sup>27</sup>

Like the cult of Isis, and unlike Christianity, Mithraism coexisted peacefully with traditional polytheism. Although an initiate of Mithras felt no need to worship the civic gods, he was not barred from worshiping as many of them as he wished. The legionaries who found Mithraism so attractive participated in all of their legion's sacrificial rituals, many of which were devoted to the cult of the deified emperors. In fact several of the emperors themselves, Commodus and the Severans quite certainly, were Mithraic initiates, perhaps as a way of demonstrating their solidarity with the armies on which they depended.

Mithraism also differed sharply from Judaism and Christianity in that it had no sacred texts. Initially the lack of sacred texts was not a liability. Although it seems to have been put together in first-century Rome, Mithraism was regarded by its initiates and evidently by the wider public as "the religion of the ancient Persians."<sup>28</sup> Many supposed, vaguely, that Mithraism had been revealed to the world by Zoroaster, who by the first century was credited with a great many sacred secrets.<sup>29</sup> Having been preserved through the ages by its devotees in the East, so it was supposed, the mysteries had finally been brought to Rome. Eventually, however, the oral character of the Mithraic religion became a liability. By the fourth century, as people increasingly sought to validate their beliefs through what they regarded as ancient revelations, the lack of sacred texts put Mithraism at a disadvantage in its competition with the scriptural religions.

## **The beginnings of Neoplatonism**

The spiritual and anti-materialist doctrines of Gnosticism and other dualist systems would loom larger in the third century but they were already important in the second, the beginning of what E. R. Dodds called "the Age of Anxiety." A few philosophers moderated this anti-cosmos tendency, although while so doing they appropriated much of it. The philosophers had never set much store by the Olympians and so were not discomfited as belief in the gods began to give way to monotheism. In fact, as monotheism emerged, natural theology played the role of midwife. Philosophers who emphasized the grandeur and order of the material world, from the stars to humankind itself, and argued that it was the work of Providence, found educated Hellenes and Romans eager to listen. Whether they called themselves Stoics, Pythagoreans or Platonists, the philosophical schools were tending toward monotheism, and to support their beliefs in the philosophers' God they increasingly turned to Plato. Neoplatonism is a term that historians have applied to a range of philosophical systems that were first set forward in the last half of the second century and that remained influential until the sixth. Most of these systems held that the physical world is an emanation (although in a very imperfect form) from The One, or The Absolute, and it is the human condition to be a part of the physical world while aspiring toward a divinity that is beyond our reach.<sup>30</sup> The most important of the Neoplatonists was Plotinus in the third century but the doctrines began to take shape much earlier. Indicative of this is Justin Martyr's focus on Plato and especially on the *Timaeus*, and the frequent appeals by other Christian apologists to the natural theology of the philosophers.

Although Neoplatonism evolved mostly in Alexandria, under the auspices of Hellenized Egyptians, its origins may have been in the Syrian city of Apamea. Numenius of Apamea, who wrote in the middle decades of the second century, was called a Pythagorean and may have belonged to a Neopythagorean community. He seems, however, to have been more interested in Plato than in Pythagoras, and certainly made Plato a conduit for what were understood to be the teachings of the earlier philosopher. Numenius wrote treatises on the Platonic dialogues and also a manual explaining how Plato's dialogues were to be understood in a Pythagorean sense.<sup>31</sup> None of Numenius' books is extant, but lengthy extracts from them have been preserved. What he stressed and grossly inflated seem to have been Plato's cosmology, his "theology," and his myths about the Afterlife, while ignoring the Forms and other aspects of Platonism that by the second century CE were no longer of much interest. Although Numenius was not quite a monotheist his theology was far from polytheistic: the divine ground of reality, which he called "the Father," had much in common with some Jewish and Christian concepts of God. This perfect "Father" in Numenius' system, however, was not the active, vigilant and anthropopathic personal God of the revealed religions. Instead, Numenius' deity was an unmoved and unmoving divine "source," a new version of the philosophers' God. Proceeding from the Father was a creator god, the divine *logos* or *demiourgos*, who because of his role as an active power was necessarily imperfect. This Demiurge then created the cosmos, which was itself something of a god, although still less perfect than its creator.

For some of his teachings Numenius seems to have been indebted to Philo the Judaeon, who in the first century had tried to meld Judaism with Platonism, or Adonai with the philosophers' God. At any rate, it was probably through Philo's writings that Numenius learned about Judaism, toward which he must have been complimentary. In their arguments with Greek philosophers, later Christian apologists attributed to Numenius the surprising remark that Plato was little more than a translator of Moses: "What else is Plato but Moses speaking Attic Greek?"<sup>32</sup> That Numenius actually made so absurd a statement is uncertain, but if he did it must have been in an unguarded moment. The *bon mot* does not appear in any of the lengthy quotations from Numenius that are preserved in Christian sources, nor does anything there suggest that he was directly familiar with the Septuagint. It is nevertheless clear that Numenius' recasting of Platonism along potentially monotheistic lines was welcomed by some educated people - Christians certainly, and very likely also Judaeans in the Greek Diaspora - for whom the Septuagint was sacred scripture.

The next step in the formulation of Neoplatonism was taken by Ammonius Saccas of Alexandria. Ammonius was raised as a Christian, but on reaching maturity was converted to "the wisdom of Plato." Although he seems to have written nothing, Ammonius Saccas was enormously influential as a teacher. For the first three decades of the third century he met with small groups (*synousiai*) of students in his rooms at Alexandria, and some evidence suggests that notes taken by the students may have been copied and transmitted for two hundred years.<sup>33</sup> Among his early students was that Origen who was to become the first Christian theologian. Ammonius' later students included another Origen - who would become a Neoplatonist philosopher - and Plotinus. In his teachings Ammonius seems to have incorporated much from Aristotle, which Plotinus eventually felt compelled to reject as incompatible with "pure"

Platonism.

## **The decline of rationalism**

In the classical and the Hellenistic periods of Greek civilization philosophy had usually been a foil to the religious enthusiasm of the masses. During the Roman imperial period, however, the place in philosophy occupied by Pythagoras and Plato increased while the schools of Aristotle and Epicurus shrank. In the second and early third century many philosophers became accustomed to making pronouncements on things about which neither they nor anyone else could know anything. The physical was less important than the metaphysical, and philosophers obliged listeners and readers eager to know something about what lay beyond the perceptible world.

More popular than metaphysical philosophers were outright charlatans. Like Numenius, the Chaldaean Oracles seem to have originated in Apamea. One of the city's main attractions was the sanctuary of the Syrian god Bel Adad (Baal Hadad), and a good case has been made that it was at this sanctuary that the so-called Chaldaean Oracles were composed and promulgated. These "Chaldaean Oracles" enjoyed a great vogue from the late second century to the sixth and became almost a sacred text for Neoplatonists.<sup>34</sup> The oracles were in Greek hexameters, and were produced during the reign of Marcus Aurelius by an adolescent named Julian the Theurgist. The theurgist's father, Julian the Chaldaean, wrote down the verses as his son delivered them. The superstition promoted by the father was that the theurgist had an "archangelic soul" that was in direct contact with Plato's soul, and that the oracles were therefore the voice of Plato himself. No manuscript tradition of the Chaldaean Oracles has come down to us, and they must be reconstructed from citations by Iamblichos, Proklos and other Neoplatonist writers in Late Antiquity. It appears that the oracles presented a total *gnosis*. That is, they explained the whole of reality: the physical world (earth, sun, moon, and especially the planets and fixed stars), the metaphysical world, and the relationship of both to the philosophers' God. It is very likely that the inspiration for the "oracles" uttered by Julian the Theurgist were the books that Numenius had written a few years earlier (the two Julians may have done little more than put into hexametric poetry what Numenius had stated in prose). It is symptomatic of the times, however, that because of their "supernatural" origin the oracles made a far deeper impression than Numenius' prosaic treatises. As the old gods faded, what people wanted were not philosophers' speculations but divine revelations.

Exceptions were the few Hellenes who still labeled themselves as Skeptics. In his *Pyrrhonist Outlines* Sextus Empiricus, who was a physician in the late second or early third century, summarized the Skeptical philosophy that had been elaborated more than four hundred years earlier by Pyrrhon of Elis. Like Pyrrhon, Sextus argued that dogma of any kind was fallacious and urged suspension of judgment. Sextus developed the argument further in the eleven short books of his *Against the Mathematikoi* (the term *Mathematikos* meant something like "professor," a person supposed to know a subject and to be able to teach it). In the first six books he tried to show that the professors of grammar, rhetoric, geometry, arithmetic, astrology and music could not know what they were talking about, and in the last five books he chastised the practitioners of logic, physics and ethics for dogmatizing.

It is remarkable how cloistered was the intellectual tradition that stretched from Pyrrhon to Sextus. Sextus spoke for the Skeptical school, and addressed the philosophically-minded who were wavering between the Skeptics and one or another of the dogmatic schools. For the great majority of his contemporaries, who were not interested in philosophy of any kind, his books must have meant nothing. Nor did Sextus seem to concern himself about *hoi polloi*, the worshipers at the civic cults, the mystery cults, or at synagogues and churches. Uninterested in the changes that were taking place around him, Sextus could as well have written in 200 BC as in 200 CE. His books were soon forgotten and were not “reborn” until the sixteenth century, when a Latin translation brought the *Pyrrhonist Outlines* to the attention of philosophers and scholars in western Christendom.<sup>35</sup>

Epicureanism too was losing adherents in the second century, although it enjoyed one last and spectacular outburst. A few decades after Demosthenes of Oenoanda endowed his lavish festival, complete with sacrificial offerings to Apollo and Hadrian, another wealthy citizen of the same city spent part of his fortune in setting up one of the most conspicuous inscriptions that survive from antiquity. Diogenes of Oenoanda had found peace of mind in the teachings of Epicurus, and in order to provide all the townspeople of Oenoanda with the same solace Diogenes commissioned stone-cutters to inscribe the Epicurean doctrines on a wall (the large letters were painted and so were legible from a distance). The materialism of Epicurus assured people that they had nothing to fear in the Afterlife, for the simple reason that there is no Afterlife: death is the end of us, because the only reality is physical reality, the endless combinations, dissolutions, and recombinations of atoms and void. This cold comfort was perhaps welcomed by some Oenoandans, but more were looking for something else.

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1. Pliny, *Epist.* Bk. 10, letters 5, 6, 7 and 10.

2. MacMullen 1974, p. 38; MacMullen’s chapter from which the quotation comes is entitled “Rural-Urban,” and brings out the stark contrast between the well-to-do, who lived in cities, and the poor and ignorant rural population. Things became even more unbalanced in the fourth century, when a Roman senator’s income might be 120,000 gold pieces a year, while a peasant’s was five. Peter Brown thus summarized the Roman economy in Late Antiquity: “prosperity... drained to the top” (Brown 1971, p. 34).

3. For an exploration of this endowment see Guy M. Rogers, “Demosthenes of Oenoanda and Models of Euergetism,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 81 (1991), pp. 91 ff.

4. Bowie 1970, p. 8.

5. Bowie 1970, p. 12. Cephalion’s history is known only from a few references by later authors.



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6. Eusebius, *HE* 6.21.

7. For distribution of known amphitheaters see Chris Scarre, *Historical Atlas of Ancient Rome*, pp. 82-83.

8. Tertullian, *De spectaculis* 19 (T. R. Glover, trans.).

9. This is a main theme in the *De spectaculis*. See also *Apologeticus* 38.4.

10. Paul's teachings were an extension of the abhorrence with which many Judean overachievers viewed fornication (*porneia*, or "intercourse with whores"). Although James and the Jerusalem *ekklesia* were worried about the freedom that Paul was preaching to his Gentile converts, they allowed Paul to do as he wished about circumcision, unclean meats, and the Sabbath, provided that he enforce four prohibitions: Gentile followers of Jesus the Christ were to have nothing to do with idolatry, fornication, the meat of strangled animals, and the meat of animals that had been sacrificed to idols. See Acts 15:20.

11. On the entire topic see Gaca 2003.

12. For the archaeological evidence see Clarke 1998.

13. See especially McGinn 2004. See also Antonio Varone, *Eroticism in Pompeii* (translated from the Italian by Maureen Fant. Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2001).

14. Tertullian, *De corona*.

15. Unusually, this essay does not mock the goddess. Lucian was a Syrian (his parents perhaps spoke Aramaic as often as they spoke Greek) and may have taken some pride in the cult of Atargatis, even though he hardly believed in the goddess. Although a superb Atticist, he wrote this essay in Herodotean Ionic, perhaps in order to assume some of the old historian's naivete and religious reverence.

16. The quotation comes from near the end of Chapter III in Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. In my edition (London: Ball, Arnold and Co., 1840), it appears at p. 31.

17. On the origins of Satan see Pagels 1995. On Angra Mainyu in Zarathushtra's system see Boyce 1979, pp. 20-21.

18. On Gnosticism as a Christian "heresy" see above, Chapter 13.

19. Hesiod, *Works and Days* 122.

20. For an introduction and a good sampling of texts see Georg Luck, *Arcana Mundi: Magic and the Occult in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1985), pp. 3-131; and Matthew Dickie, *Magic and Magicians in the Greco-Roman World* (New York and London: Routledge, 2001). The standard edition is Karl Preisendanz, *et al.*, eds., *Papyri Graecae*

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*Magicae*, 3 volumes (2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Stuttgart: Teubner, 1973). For English translation of these and other Greek, Demotic and Coptic texts see Hans Dieter Betz, editor, *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation, including the Demotic Spells* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986).

21. Although practitioners of the art sometimes called themselves *magi* (less often “Chaldaean”) the terms should not be taken literally. The magic practiced in the Roman empire was mostly homegrown, and owed little to Iranian magi.

22. Bernstein 1993, p. 86.

23. Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 1.5 (19).

24. Ptolemy, *Tetrabiblos* 3.12 (148), F. E. Robbins translation, Loeb Library.

25. See Beck 1998.

26. Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.22, R. J. Hoffman translation. Origen gave his description because, so he thought, it supported the Christian idea of heaven and of the soul’s journey at death: in ridiculing Christian eschatology Celsus was also making fun of Mithraism.

27. Porphyry, *De Antro Nympharum* 6.24.

28. This was still the view through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Franz Cumont’s influential study having presented Roman Mithraism as essentially an inheritance from pre-Achaemenid Iran. See Cumont, *The Mysteries of Mithra* translated from the second revised French edition by Thomas J. McCormack. (New York: 1956; the first edition, in French, was published in 1902).

29. No “genuine” Zoroastrian texts were yet available in the first century. The Avestan language texts that we know as “the Avesta” were not written down until the fifth century, and until the 220s or 230s CE even their oral precursors were known only to a small number of Iranian *magi*.

30. See Lloyd Gerson, *God and Greek Philosophy* (Routledge, 1990), and John Kenney, *Mystical Monotheism: A Study in Ancient Platonic Theology* (Hanover: New England Univ. Press, 1991).

31. For the fragments see the collection of Édouard des Places: *Numénius: Fragments. Texte établi et traduit par Édouard des Places* (Paris: Société d’Édition Les Belles Lettres, 1973).

32. Eusebius, *Praep. Evan.* Bk 11, chapter 10 (Gifford translation). The whole of Book 11 of the *Praeparatio* is an argument that the Hebrew prophets say the same thing as the Greek philosophers. In Book 10 Eusebius had proved to his own satisfaction that Greek philosophy was “stolen” from the Old Testament. Neither Eusebius nor any other Patristic writer had any desire to engage in honest *Quellenforschungen*. When Porphyry did so, his books were burned.

33. Peters 1970, pp. 584-85.

34. On the Chaldaean Oracles see the fine article, “The Chaldaean Oracles: Theology and

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Theurgy,” by Polymnia Athanassiadi in Athanassiadi-Frede 1999.

35. On the revival of Pyrrhonism see Popkin 2003.