

The Archaeology of Early Roman Religion

The religion of the people of Rome in the first centuries of the city's history has long been a topic of interest for scholars, but it has been investigated primarily through literary evidence recorded in the first century BC and later, many centuries after an urban community first began to develop in Rome in the eighth century BC. The contemporary archaeological data from the eighth, seventh, and sixth centuries BC have been taken into account only sporadically, with the result that most scholarship supposedly focused on early Roman religion instead reproduces later Roman ideas about the origins and development of Roman religion—ideas that were often colored by the standards and principles of later Romans, supported by their own conjecture rather than by factual evidence. A standard scholarly method of dealing with the later written evidence about early Roman religious practices is to attempt to strip away any later or false information in order to isolate the genuine characteristics of early Roman religion. This teleological approach, however, causes early Roman religion to seem destined from the beginning to result in the later version of Roman religion. The only changes over time that can then be identified are those that show early Roman religion moving toward the model of the better known Roman religion of the first century BC and after. This book is the first to investigate early Roman religion on the basis of archaeological evidence. The earliest archaeological levels of Rome have been excavated in a number of areas around the city but, because of disciplinary divides between Classical studies, ancient history, religious studies, and archaeology, the archaeological evidence has not been incorporated in any significant way into discussions about the religion of the first Romans. And yet archaeological data can provide us with the baseline of factual evidence that is lacking in the later written sources and, in particular, the archaeological record allows the study of change through time in the characteristics of Roman religion in the earliest centuries of its existence. This book uses the archaeological data to construct a new narrative about early Roman religious practices, examining the role and nature of sacred space; the religious calendar; gods, priests and worshippers; ritual and sacrifice; and death rites and ancestor cult in early Rome as they can be understood through the archaeological evidence. The result is a fuller and more accurate picture of changing early Roman religious practices that also provides the basis for a better understanding of the more widely attested religion of the Romans who lived during the period of the Roman republic and after.

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