Writing and Individualization in Roman Religion

1. Individualization in public, and in private, cult

We too, often find it hard to know what it meant to be an individual, when it comes to ancient religion. This paper is very much a preliminary exploration of that theme, with special attention to how individualization might be manifested by religious writing of various kinds.

It is common ground that we do not envisage ancients cultivating personal, intimate and private relationships with a deity, of the kind idealised in some varieties of Protestantism. Yet cult was rarely a wholly collective act, if that means a set of rituals in which the individual was effaced. Most ceremonies were, in fact, represented as performed by individuals, individuals acting in concert to be sure and often on behalf of communities, but without surrendering their personal roles in the process. Consider the restoration in 70 CE of what was in some senses the central cult place of Rome, the temple of Jupiter on the Capitol following its destruction during the Flavian civil war. Tacitus narrates it thus
The work of restoring the Capitol was assigned by him [Vespasian] to Lucius Vestinius, a man of the Equestrian order, who, however, for high character and reputation ranked among the nobles. The *haruspices* whom he assembled directed that the remains of the old shrine should be removed to the marshes, and the new temple raised on the original site. The Gods, they said, forbade the old form to be changed. On the 21st of June, beneath a cloudless sky, the entire space devoted to the sacred enclosure was encompassed with chaplets and garlands. Soldiers, who bore auspicious names, entered the precincts with sacred boughs. Then the Vestals, with a troop of boys and girls, whose fathers and mothers were still living, sprinkled the whole space with water drawn from the fountains and rivers. After this, Helvidius Priscus, the praetor, as directed by Publius Aelianus the pontiff, first purified the spot with a *suovetaurilia*, and duly placed the entrails on turf; then, besought Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, and the tutelary deities of empire, to prosper the undertaking, and to lend their divine help to raise the abodes which the piety of men had founded for them. He then touched the wreaths, which were wound round the foundation stone and entwined with the ropes, while at the same moment the other Magistrates and Priests, the Senators, the Knights, and a great part of the People, with zeal and joy uniting their efforts, dragged the huge stone along. Contributions of gold and silver and virgin ores, never smelted in the furnace, but still in their natural state, were showered on the foundations. The *haruspices* had previously directed that no stone or gold which had been intended for any other purpose should profane the work. Additional height was given to the structure; this was the only variation which religion would permit, and the one feature which had been thought wanting in the splendour of the old temple.

Tacitus *Histories* 4.53
No textualization of an ancient ritual is innocent. Nor can it be extracted from the larger text of which it forms a part. It follows that Tacitus’ account is not “typical” – we have far too few descriptions of ancient rituals to establish clear norms – but the prominence of individuals in descriptions of cult could be illustrated from other texts. The Acta Arvalium for instance take great care to specify the individual fratres Arvales involved in each ritual act and their precise roles. Indeed, the same is true of most epigraphic records of sacrifices. I shall return to this later. For the moment, however, let me consider this one text a little more closely.

The restoration of the Capitol is a focal point in Tacitus’ narrative of recovery. Its destruction had been narrated as the nadir of Rome’s fortune in a chapter (Histories 3.72) that resumed the history of the temple from its foundation, and alluded to its previous destruction in the worst of the civil wars of the Republic. Its restoration forms the culmination of a series of debates in the senate narrated in the Histories in which the roles of Vespasian and Helvidius are highlighted. This was certainly an intended meaning of the original ceremony, one motivation for the considerable cost of the project to Vespasian, a project undertaken at a moment when he still had other serious concerns. Tacitus’ narrative raised doubts about the stability of that order. The rebuilding of the temple represents a brief collusion of interests between these two protagonists – Vespasian and Priscus - but the conflict between them will return. The following book will also represent the Flavians as temple sackers rather than restorers when the narrative moves to Jerusalem. The temple of Jupiter on the Capitol was also a focal point in Roman historiography. Livy (1.55-6) presents its original construction as the last and greatest act of Tarquin the Proud: his account makes clear the subject had been prominently treated in the histories of Fabius Pictor and of Piso. Livy emphasises both its
magnificence and the suffering of the people compelled to labour on it by the tyrant. What sort of emperor will Vespasian turn out to be? a new Tarquin? a new Sulla?

But I want to draw attention to the structure of the ritual, and of the record kept of it on which we must presume Tacitus drew. The initiative is attributed to one individual, the new emperor (in what capacity Tacitus, typically, does not say). Three further individuals are named, the equestrian charged with the construction, Helvidius Priscus as praetor and Publius Aelianus as pontiff. It was evidently important for those who recorded the ritual in the first place, as well as for Tacitus, to note the names of the individuals involved, as well as precisely which priests and magistrates were to play a part. As in other imperial rituals – the well documented consecrationes for example, or the various ceremonies described and prescribed in the new Tiberian epigraphic documents¹ - we are offered the spectacle of the state performed as a pageant, each of the ordines given its place. Yet some other participants were selected on the basis of characteristics that were essentially personal. No prior register will have existed of boys and girls whose parents were still alive. How were they selected? And what about all those soldiers named Felix, Fortunatus and so on, plucked from the ranks to make a lucky day.

It is not easy to be sure exactly how such rituals were devised. Some components might have been suggested by ways other temples had been dedicated, but it is clear from the involvement of the *haruspices* that planning the ritual was treated as the design of something new and unique, as the solution of a complex ritual problem. Tacitus’ silence makes it impossible to know whether or not the pontiffs or others consulted records about the rituals through which the Temple had been restored after its destruction in the Sullan civil war. His account is selective\(^2\). At some point, however, discussion of the rites must have given way to decisions about individual participants – why Helvidius of all the senior magistrates? Was it because of his leading role in the debates about restoration? It is very clear that it mattered who did what. So it is completely reasonable to write of individual participation and individual experience even in this great collective ritual through which the political classes of the City willed the recovery and restoration of the *res publica* through an extravagant and punctilious gesture towards *pax deorum*.

Were the children who took part, or the pontiff Aelianus, individualized by their starring roles? For that matter, what of the Vestals? Selection for two decades of ritual observance certainly altered the life-world of an individual aristocratic women, who might otherwise have looked forward to an early marriage and motherhood. As her life-course diverged from that of her sisters, cousins and friends, does it not make sense to speak of a process of individualization? And yet in this case almost all her ritual activity, however defined, will have taken place in the public sphere.

\(^2\) Compare Suetonius *Vespasian* 8 for a shorter account that stresses the personal individual engagement of the new emperor, actually participating in the manual work of clearing the rubble from the wreckage of the earlier temple.
Rome was a complex society. Like all complex societies it was characterised by a high level of role-differentiation, and not all of it was determined by birth and social standing. Not all this differentiation will have had very marked religious dimensions, but some of it did, especially for members of the higher social orders. Growing up to be a Roman aristocrat involved growing up to be a magistrate or a priest, or both, or neither. This differentiating process determined where one would stand, so to speak, at great ceremonies such as that described by Tacitus for the dedication of the new Temple of Jupiter. Those ceremonies were collective, to be sure, in the sense that they were performed by all and on behalf of all. But each participant had his or her own part to play. This was the religious expression of the organic solidarity of the community of the Romans.

Roman historians are not used to discussing individual participation – even if Roman writers clearly were interested in Who did what? More recently, our debate has focused on the slightly different issue of private cult versus public. Most often we begin from Festus’ second century CE *On the significance of words* and his entry under the heading ‘publica sacra’ which differentiates public cult, paid for by the state on behalf of the Roman people or its formal subdivisions, from private cult on behalf of individual humans, families and clans\(^3\). A definition in these terms probably goes back at least to the late Republic – it has been linked to the Augustan scholar Ateius Capito - and other ancient testimony can be shown to be not incompatible with a distinction of this kind, even if there were a range of meaning for *publicus* and *privatus*. Festus’ definition is a product of Roman scholarly reflection, and for that reason it should not be treated as something akin to canon law. Nor can it be taken for

\(^3\) Festus *de significatione verborum* 284L s.v. publica sacra publica sacra quae publico sumptu pro populo fiunt quaeque pro montibus pagis curiis sacellis; at privata quae pro singulis hominibus familiis gentibus fiunt
granted that it expresses the common opinion of the elite, nor Roman religious ideology, let alone a fundamental cultural principle. When, in any case, was the distinction an issue? One obvious context would be disputes over the financial responsibility for a given cult. Arguments over who should pay to restore a temple recur several times in other testimony. But a distinction evolved in this sort of context is a poor guide for a wide-ranging investigation of the Roman imagination. There were, after all, other ways of dividing up the cults of the Romans. Festus himself cites a contrast made by the jurist Labeo between *popularia sacra* – festivals like the Parilia celebrated by all the people – with others which were celebrated only by certain families. That distinction cuts across the public/private distinction: the Parilia, like the Saturnalia, was celebrated both publicly and privately. In yet another context the jurist Ulpian distinguishes public law, concerned with all *sacra*, with priests and with magistrates, from private law.

Much cult, especially under the empire, is in any case difficult to fit into a neat dichotomy between public and private. What, for instance, of the *sacra* performed by *collegia*? bodies that in some cases came to be treated as if they were subdivisions of the people, rather like *vici* or the archaic *montes*. The *sacra* of *collegia* have been deemed private as they fall outside Festus’ categories. What of cult paid to or for the emperors? Should we regard that paid by the *vici* of the city of Rome as public, but that by *collegia* or *Augustales* as private?

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4 Festus s.v. *popularia sacra* 298L
5 Dig.1.1.1.2. See discussion in Clifford Ando and Jörg Rüpke, eds., *Religion and Law in Classical and Christian Rome*, Potsdamer Altertumswissenschaftlicher Beiträge (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 2006), pp.7-8.
There is a potential for ambiguity in Festus’ double criterion – who pays and on whose behalf. Individual persons in some communities might well pay for sacra conducted on behalf of public bodies: this was the essence of religious euergetism. What of personal dedications for the emperor? Or what about supplicationes where all citizens seem, in time of crisis, to have been expected to perform cult?

There are two possible responses to these questions. We might try and ‘fix’ Festus (for example by allowing pro populo to ‘really mean’ pro re publica, and then to pragmatically include the emperors in that category, but if so what about sacra in which the emperor is the priest...) Or we might just accept that Festus’ was a definition that fitted some places and purposes at one point in history, but cannot be an axiom for the mapping all Roman religion. This latter solution is to be preferred.

Public/private then, does not correspond to collective/individual, not only because the two dichotomies do not coincide, but because neither dichotomy is very secure. Public/private was a distinction applied and meaningful only in certain kinds of situations and contexts. Collective cult entailed the co-ordination of multiple individual participations. That will have applied not only to great public festivals but just as much to ceremonies in the atrium before the lares and penates in which the paterfamilias officiated, and other familiares and domestici assisted, each according to their individual role.
2. Religious Individualization before Modernity

‘Individualization’ entered our collective vocabulary as a sociological term to denote some of the effects of the transition to modernity. Individuals, it is held, existed in traditional societies, but their roles were held to be largely circumscribed by custom. Modernisation broke down the bonds of community (Gemeinschaft) through economic growth, structural differentiation of the work-force, urbanization and latterly the growth of the state and of globalizing communications. Freed from our social cages, as individuals we now enjoy new freedoms and face new risks. A plurality of life-worlds are in principle open to us, even if in practice self-actualization in the fullest sense is often limited by our lack of economic or political freedoms. Individualization makes our failures and successes much more of an individual experience. It has not, naturally, decreased sociality, but as individuals we have more freedom to choose and modify the social networks in which we participate.7

The distinguishing character of modernity can naturally be summarised I many other ways too. I have deliberately emphasised the extent to which the individualization paradigm offers an account of how we became the kind of people we are, modern that is, and unlike our forebears. Arguably some formulations reflect a highly ideological view, one congruent with particular forms of public and civic ethics, and particular modes of economic organization. A social world imagined as a world of individuals is the terrain in which the disciplinary state

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meets the rights and duties of citizens; in which the family, community and religion is progressively marginalised; and in which the invisible hand of the free market unobtrusively organises the greatest good of the greatest number. Much of this is clearly inapplicable to the ancient world. This is important for us to remember given the powerful influence still exercised over our understandings of Roman society by the *Staatsrecht* tradition, itself a product of modernization. But antiquity, by definition, is pre-modern. The paradigms of individualization and modernization depend precisely on our constructing earlier social orders as traditional, community-based and relatively stable. Just as Marxists have to conceive of antiquity as pre-capitalism, even if it contained capitalist elements, so Weberians must regard ancient social orders and states as more patrimonial and less governed by those rational-legal systems that are the concomitant of the rise of the individual. By definition, then, antiquity should be under-individualized relative to our own social experience.

How then may we employ the concept of individualization to antiquity? There seem to me two main tactics possible.

The first is to engage in writing a long genealogy of modernity. This might set out to investigate the very early stages of processes that culminated only centuries later. This is not such an unusual procedure for Romanists or social scientists to employ. It is commonly applied, for example, to the issue of the Rise of the West, itself a key component of many versions of modernization. How far back should we go to see Europe taking a different path to China, India, the Islamic world and so on? Few writing of the rise of the West now look further back than the last two hundred years. Yet Weber narrated the rise of rational orders from the Reformation to his own day, Wallerstein and Wolf argued that European societies
had an unassailable comparative advantage before Columbus. Marx in the *Grundrisse* seems to have envisaged Europe escaping from the repetitive cycles of tyranny and collapse characteristic of the Asiatic Mode of Production as early as the fifth century BCE, while Gordon Childe argued that Europe had been ‘different’ since the Bronze Age. The difficulty such long schemas pose is also well known, that of teleology. The longer the span considered, the more the awkward diversions, false starts and temporary reverses that have to be explained away, the more violence that is done to the historical specificity of past societies. We risk creating a misleading and simplistic genealogy. This danger is of course compounded by the interested genealogical projects of modernizing societies: it is enough to mention the various uses made of classical Rome in the French and American revolutions. It would be easy enough to find “intimations of individuality among the ancient Greeks” (to paraphrase Simone Weil): but the historical value of such an exercise would be dubious.

A second, and alternative, tactic is to dehistoricize the term ‘individualization’ and transform it into a generalisable analytical category. That way, episodes of individualization might be identified and studied in many different historical and cultural contexts. This is, I take it, broadly the project on which we are engaged.

There are, however, costs and risks associated with this tactic too. One is that we incompletely dehistoricize the concept, and thereby import anachronism into our studies of the ancient world. Romanists are familiar with the phenomenon of modernizing fantasies about Rome. Consider Mauri’s interpretation of Pompeian society undergoing a social revolution in which proto-bourgeois traders took advantage of the earthquake of 62 CE to challenge the authority of an older land-holding elite. Studies of the ancient economy since
Rostovtzeff are so prone to this tendency that many feel the need to consider why the Roman empire ‘failed’ to have an industrial revolution, or to achieve ‘take-off’. The same issue besets the linked issue of the history of technology. It is not surprising that key moments of western history have offered apparent parallels for narratives about antiquity, especially given how much less we know about antiquity than modernity. Antiquity has been attributed with scientific, cultural, and consumer revolutions, with a few Enlightenments and with frequent - even repetitive - inventions of sexuality. The resemblances in most cases are real, but anachronism is very difficult to avoid. Worse, behind these parallelisms, lie more noxious genealogical agenda. Through the Renaissance through Enlightenment to the rise of modern European states, Greco-Roman antiquity (always in highly selective versions) has been familiarised, in order to be appropriated as models for new orders. That process entailed a concomitant rejection of mediaeval and ‘oriental’ anti-types. We will not have proceeded very far if we construct an elegant retelling of how antiquity almost attained rational and individualized selves, before being plunged back into primitivism in the Dark Ages by barbarian invasion and Christianization.

If the concept of individualization is to be heuristically powerful in relation to antiquity, it must lose a good many of the features that have made it a powerful tool for understanding modernity. For social scientists, this may be a very high price to pay. For Romanists it means exploring ways in which ancient Romans might have become more individualized, without at the same time becoming more modern.
3. Ritual and individualization, Ritual and socialization

One possible approach would be through the rituals by which Romans became differentiated over their life-courses. Because Rome offered a plethora of social roles, some of them optional, these differentiations are plausibly considered individualizations. I have already suggested that participation in complex religious ceremonies was one way in which this might happen. One reason to think so, is that considerable care was taken to record these ceremonies in detail. Tacitus probably relied on written acta for his account of the dedication of the Capitol in 70 CE. Other ceremonies were often memorialised epigraphically. Consider, for example, this inscription from an altar found at the colony of Lyon.

In the *taurobolium* of the Great Idaean Mother of the Gods, which was performed on the instruction of the Mother of the Gods, for the well-being of the emperor Caesar Titus Aelius Hadrianus Antoninus Pius, father of his country and of his children and of the condition of the *colonia* of Lugdunum, Lucius Aemilius Carpus, *sevir Augustalis* and at the same time *dendrophorus* received the ‘powers’ and transferred them from the Vaticanum, and consecrated an altar adorned with an ox-head at his own expense. The officiating priest, Quintus Sammius Secundus, was honoured with an armlet and garland by the *quindecimviri*, and the most holy town-council of Lugdunum decreed him a lifelong priesthood. In the consulship of Appius Annius Atilius Bradua and Titus Clodius Vibius Varus. Ground was given for this monument by decree of the town council.

CIL XIII 1751 translation Beard, North, Price *Religions of Rome* II p.162 adapted
Much is obscure about this particular ceremony. But it is clear that the epigraphic text was designed to monumentalise a set of rituals that wove a web of relationships between a number of participating parties. These parties included two individuals, Carpus who was both *augustalis* and *dendrophorus*, and Secundus the *sacerdos*; two civic bodies – the *decuriones* of Lyon and the *quindecimviri*; two cities, Rome and Lyon; a god, Magna Mater Deorum and the emperor Antoninus Pius. The rituals changed the relationships between the participants and thereby their identities. This is the reason why a monument is needed.

The most obvious change of status is that undergone by Secundus to whom the *ordo* of the *colonia* decreed a perpetual priesthood. But the inscription takes care to name all the other participants are involved, and to document the distribution of gifts by which these changed relationships were marked. Carpus paid for an altar and brought the bull’s *vires* from the Vatican; the *quindecimviri* granted *ornamenta* to Secundus; the *ordo* confirmed the perpetuity of his priesthood and gave a place for the monument, and the goddess commanded the ritual take place. When these exchanges – concluding with the setting up of our inscriptions – were concluded, the social world had been slightly changed. Those changes included an individualization of some of the human actors. Carpus, Secundus and the rest were not left unchanged by these events.

How far can this example be generalised? The Roman ritual system was composed of a great number of rituals of different kinds. Those I have been discussing were not part of the common experience of all Romans. It is much more difficult to make a case for

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8 *cui santissimus ordo lugdunens perpetuatem sacerdoti decrevit*
individualization as a product of some other attested rituals. What of the carnival atmosphere of the Saturnalia of the Parilia? What about festivals focuses on the dead like the Lemuria and Parentalia? The rituals associated with those four festivals were repeated each year, at different scales of association. On the face of it they seem likely to promoted social solidarity and a sense of continuity with the past and future. Joining or leaving a group that customarily celebrated one of these together conceivably marked some change of social identity. Gellius has an anecdote recalling Roman ‘students’ celebrating the Saturnalia together at one of Herodes’ villas outside Athens. Perhaps the accumulation of such experiences contributed to a sense of personal identity. Is this enough to qualify as individualization?

Collective experience recurs in other contexts. In many ethnographically described societies the key outcome of many rituals, is a sense of common, rather than individual, experience. I am thinking of the shared initiations of age-sets and the like. Roman religion certainly did included rituals that operated more to socialise than to individualize. Rites of passage existed, not just those associated with birth, marriage and death, but also various coming of age rituals. The fact that putting on the *toga virilis* for boys/young men and the dedication of dolls by girls/young women took place individually, rather than for cohorts of young people undergoing the ritual simultaneously is one index of individualization at Rome. But we should be wary of over-emphasising this aspect. Marriage today has been sufficiently commoditised and romanticised that weddings are often treated (and experienced) as sites of heightened individualization. But in earlier periods there would have been much more emphasis on the new social obligations acquired by the various parties, on the rehearsal of social norms about marriage, and on how the wedding changed the web of social relationships. Most likely rituals such as putting on the *toga virilis* were pretty much the same
for all Roman boys of equivalent status. The key dimensions of variability will have been who was present and the location of the ceremony, which will have operated most effectively to insert the new adult *civis* into his immediate social world, and assert his new civic rites and obligations, not his personalised style of becoming a citizen. The apparent use of the Forum Augustum for senatorial versions of this ceremony represents an enhanced emphasis on the public roles of senatorial adults under the principate.

One obvious response is to assert that one’s evolving individuality is in some senses a product of the groups into which one is socialised. The nature of those groups varies from one society to another, but there is no essential difference between the kind of identity generated by becoming bonded to other members of an age-cohort, and that generated by being formally enrolled into an aristocratic familia and with it an *ordo* and a *civitas*. This seems a good argument, but the price is that either all societies have individualization processes, or else what I have been treating as individualization is simply the normal socialization processes of pre-modern societies. The seems especially an issue when we consider rituals that recur frequently, rather than the much rarer rituals that are created for a single occasion – such as the Lyon *taurobolium* of the dedication of the Temple of Jupiter.
4. Normative rituals and the antiquarian’s individualization

Ancient accounts of religion, as opposed to narratives or monumental inscriptions that describe particular ceremonies, naturally stress the normativity of Roman rituals.

So Plutarch’s *Roman Questions* begin with the following list of queries

1. Why do they bid the bride touch fire and water?
2. Why in the marriage rites do they light five torches?
3. Why may men not enter the shrine of Diana in the Vicus Patricius
4. Why do they nail up cattle horns in the shrine of Diana on the Aventine
5. Why when men return after having been falsely reported dead in a foreign country are they let into their houses through the roof?
6. Why do the women kiss their kinsmen on the lips?
7. Why is it forbidden to give and receive gifts from one’s spouse?
8. Why is it forbidden to receive a gift from a son-in-law or a father-in-law?

and so on until

113. Why were these priests not allowed to hold office nor to solicit it, yet they have the service of a lictor and the right to a curule chair?

Plutarch *Roman Questions* 1-12 (translation Loeb)

Although these headings read at first sight like an ethnographic check list, Plutarch’s book has complex cultural-political agenda and a different intellectual lineage to what we usually
term ancient ethnography. The investigation of obscure prohibitions and prescriptions draws on Varronian aetiology, itself highly Hellenistic in style. We may regard the insistence on orthopraxy and the obscurity of precised procedures a sign that we really are dealing with important rituals: ritual is by definition separated from the everyday\(^9\). But Plutarch’s culmination of questions without clear answers has an Othering effect, especially when read against Plutarch’s rather different *Greek Questions*\(^{10}\). Through the questions, Romans are also homogeneised and their practices normalised. Why do *they* (always) do things this (uniform) way? Plutarch’s investigation is framed so that there are no overtly loaded questions, and there is at least a presumption that each custom might have an explanation. But he is drawn to the puzzling and exotic, not to the familiar. ‘Why do they have priests, temples and altars?’ is not a question worth asking, because Greeks too have priests, temples and altars. The sum total of the Roman answers might form an account of Roman culture as a comprehensible and coherent whole, one capable of translation into terms in which Greeks might recognise it as an alternative to their own. But Plutarch’s enquiries produce inconclusive and multiple answers, so Roman culture is revealed as incoherent and exotic. Even Roman writers – mostly Varro and Juba but Cato the Elder, Cicero, Livy, Cluvius Rufus, Antistius Labeo and are also cited - themselves often seem to have no good plausible explanation.

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Plutarch’s Latin sources were - unsurprisingly - more optimistic about the possibility of making coherent sense of Roman religion. Cicero’s much quoted praise of Varro’s researches in the *Academica* presents his work (especially perhaps the *Antiquitates*) as comprising a comprehensive and authoritative account of Roman culture, one in which the gods, sacred laws and rituals occupied a large place. It is this form of enquiry – etymological, philological, archaeological and anthropological - that leads, via Verrius Flaccus, Ateius Capito and others, to Festus, whose own lexical taxonomies of *sacra* I discussed earlier. Taken together, writers in this tradition represent a developing tradition of scholarship that had established religious signs and ritual as an objects of specialised study and debate\(^\text{11}\). What we call antiquarianism represented a complement to conventional religious practice, rather than an alternative. There is no real sign it was accompanied by creative theology. It was certainly not associated with non-participation in cult, with scepticism or with atheism. For these reasons alone we need to be careful before associating it with the modernizing processes that for many twentieth century thinkers has been understood as a road leading from the Enlightenment via secularization to scientific rationalism.

Yet ancient antiquarianism *did* represent a different viewpoint on cult, one that sought to classify and explain the meaning and origins of religious rites and terminology, rather than provide a guide for practice or establish an alternative form of expertise or authority that might be opposed to that of the *haruspices* or the college of Pontiffs. This alternative

viewpoint on cult was optional. Involving oneself in it constituted, then, another mode of religious individualization. A few texts actually dramatised this potential by appropriating to religious speculation the dialogue form developed originally in philosophical texts mimetic of actual debate and pedagogy. Cicero’s dialogue *On Divination* and Plutarch’s *On the decline of oracles* offer Latin and Greek examples of this form, in which interlocutors differentiated themselves in part by their views on religious matters12. Readers too, it may be, are offered the chance to form an individualized position on the matters discussed, given the relative lack of closure of the dialogue form.

It is important not to exaggerate. Without mass literary or printing, these texts never had the same potential for religious change of the founding works of the Reformation. Nor were any directed to challenging existing religious authority. The applications made by Varro and Verrius Flaccus of their research to practical cult were apparently conceived of by them, and by their patrons, as restorations, nor reformations, of traditional religion. The texts that emerged from this movement were available primarily to members of the same social classes from which priests and magistrates were drawn. Their authors - Cicero, Pliny the Younger and Plutarch for example – were often themselves the holders of traditional priesthoods. Scholarly reflection on cults did offer a different engagement with religion, and in this sense it reflected some kind of individualization, but it was a supplement to traditional wisdom, not a replacement of it.

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5. Individualization and epigraphy

Where, beyond the subtle interplays of voices within texts and the readers outside them, should we look for individualization in Roman antiquity?

Individualization today is usually taken to advance with westernization at the expense of more traditional societies. Key factors promoting it are the expansion of a capitalist labour market, Christian (especially Protestant) mission, universal education, forms of governmental action that demand individual rather than communal engagement, laws that presume the existence of property rights, criminal culpability and civil liability, personal citizen rights and statuses. Liberal democracy has been conceived of as encompassing and encroaching on ‘traditional’ societies, while within liberal democracies the expansion of the rights of women and children, and the diminishing legal recognition of the family marks the ongoing rise of the individual.

There were no liberal democracies and no Protestant mission in antiquity. But some of the processes described above were, in a much milder form, present. Education was not universal, but for those who underwent it offered some space for individualization, notably in the exercises of the rhetorical schools in which pupils practiced putting on personae. The Roman notion of citizen has sometimes been claimed as a key stage in the creation of a legal individuality. Children had few rights, and much of what has been claimed as women’s emancipation was in fact the protection of the interests of fathers and agnatic kin against those of husbands and affines. Yet Augustan ‘social legislation’ did in some areas extend the reach of the state into areas that had by custom been governed by the family, and some rights were eventually extended even to slaves. The law of property and of contract did presuppose
legal individuals, and if it was not strictly possible to alienate one’s labour, Roman civil law instruments allowed a sort of irrational capitalism to emerge.

Where this complex of institutions was extended over conquered territory where nothing similar had previously existed – for example in Rome’s northern and western provinces – it is easy to see such societies as being ‘encompassed’ rather like the last traditional societies today. As today, there was an expansion of social scale and social complexity Analogies have often been drawn between colonialism and Roman expansion. Roman imperialism has often been compared to the emergence of world systems, or more recently to globalization. Among the consequences were greater levels of personal mobility and greater structural differentiation. Both offered opportunities for some members of society to escape the social caging of their natal communities. Again the background of a mosaic of peasant societies it is possible to discern the tracks made by tiny numbers of traders and missionar, the involuntary migrations of slaves and conscripts, and the social mobility – mostly lateral, sometimes upward – through the many new social roles available. A choice of roles offers a choice of life-worlds, and perhaps a sense of self detached from customary role and ascribed status? More on this below.

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On these grounds, then, I suggest there are a number of social contexts in which we might expect to observe some forms of individualization. These will be locations where individuals from different backgrounds come together, and also locations in which they were more than usually likely to evade the social caging of their natal societies. We will be looking as well for environments in which some individuals had a certain amount of disposable wealth, since the individuality of the truly poor leaves little trace. In short we will be tracing the contours of cosmopolitanism and of diasporic settlement across the Roman empire: this will take us to cities and army camps, ports and colonies, and the sanctuaries located along the routes that connected such locales.

This world, as it happens, is also the world most clearly illuminated by Latin epigraphy. This is no co-incidence. Epigraphy, most of it, emerged from the will of people of moderate wealth to monumentalise significant acts or moments. The vast majority of those moments were funerary, the second largest category being dedications to the gods, very often in fulfilment of a vow. What gave these moments and significance was their importance in webs of social relationships. Just as the Lyon Taurobolium Altar connected various civic dignities and associations with the emperor and the goddess, so epitaphs monumentalise relations between the deceased and the commemorators. Moreover they marked and advertised the moment at which social roles changed, through testation, inheritance and the redistribution of authority in the family and property rights. Likewise, votive altars and the like commemorated significant transactions between the human and the divine, transactions that

again confirmed or modified social relationships between dedicator and deity\textsuperscript{16}. Alongside the overt sets of relationships described, inscriptions worked in more subtle ways to create identities. It has long been known that upwardly mobile people - former slaves, auxiliary soldiers who have won citizenship etc – are disproportionately represented in the record\textsuperscript{17}. Future publics were offered the spectacle of social success as well as the power of the divine. It is also the case that inscriptions occur in clusters, not only in graveyards, but also in sanctuaries, and that some of these sites were used for inscriptions over a very long period\textsuperscript{18}. Setting up a monumental inscription alongside others was in effect inscribing oneself into a particular social as well as geographical location. Epigraphy, \textit{sensu stricto}, was not the only means of doing this. Recent readings of Pliny the Younger’s famous description of the source of the Clitumnus have emphasised how writing was used there as a way of asserting the adherence of worshippers to the cult\textsuperscript{19}. Archaeological evidence for writing in non-


monumental contexts finds that the simple inscription of a personal name is one of its commonest uses\textsuperscript{20}.

What I am suggesting, is that at a rather high level of abstraction we may regard the epigraphic habit as one index of individualization. Inscriptions, most of them, were set up as voluntary acts and almost all were paid for by a single dedicator. The act marked a transformation of social relationships, and – to the joy of prosopographers – many offer a tiny map of the key social relationships both overtly as when a dedicator declares him or her-self to comiles or coliberta or the dedicated, or implicitly in names that point to fathers, grandfathers or ex-masters and so on. Put otherwise, they monumentalise identities conceived of largely in relational terms.

6. Implications

What is to be gained from treating epigraphy as an index of individualization? I want to conclude by suggesting two (linked) implications of this argument.

The first concerns the nature and limits of individualization in Roman antiquity. Put bluntly, individualization as it commonly appears on inscriptions is less like the fashioning of new

subjectivities, the sign of autonomous and unique selves, and more like a decision about what new badge to put on, a badge selected from a rather limited set of choices. Something like this points emerged from my discussion of socialization rituals like the putting on of the toga of manhood. Many rituals facilitate the transformation of selves from one category to another. This is a real transformation, and when it is optional rather than the result of normalizing prescriptions, it is a real kind of individualization. But it is individualization of a limited type, adherence to a group rather than the elaboration of a private and personal self.

If rather than badge I had written mask, it would be clear that we have come into the well researched territory of the *persona*. *Persona* represents in Latin a social role, a temporary but essential component of one’s identity, outward facing but helping constitute the social reality of an individual, not concealing it. The concept has been much discussed\(^\text{21}\). The identities projected via Latin epigraphy do seem mostly to fall into this category. That is to say they are highly formal and fairly regular in type. The relationship between the dedicator and the commemorated on funerary inscriptions *does* sometimes include affective elements. But the deceased is rarely described wholly or mostly in terms of personal qualities. Typically *tria nomina* may be supplemented by filiation, tribe, *origo* (often expressed as a local citizenship such a *civic Trever*) and/or military unit. Ranks and *honores* may be added. The layout and abbreviations were not completely standardised, but follow regular patterns in each region, and *formulae* are sufficiently common in any one period to be usable as dating formulae. All this is, naturally, well known. But the significance is rarely discussed. After all, the great majority of the funerary and votive inscriptions - those categories that together make up the

bulk of what has survived – are private dedications. No official format constrained the content, at least not directly. Nor were most placed in official contexts. A certain level of conformity was presumably generated by production processes, but it would have been easy for individuals to ask for variants in wording, as they occasionally did.

What does this mean for religious individualization? I suspect it means that when individuals shopped around in what has been called the “marketplace of religions”\(^\text{22}\) they tended to buy ready-made products. This certainly is different from unreflective participation in ancestral rites, but it is quite different from what we understand today by a personal religious view, experience or confession. Religious individualization meant a transition from wearing one’s ancestor’s mask to choosing a new one (or conceivably a determined decision to go on wearing the old, even in the absence of social pressure). It did not usually mean developing brilliant new conceptions of the world from a mixture of eclectic reading intense conversation and private speculation like the sixteenth century heretic Menocchio\(^\text{23}\).

My second point follows on from this. The kind of selves we see produced epigraphically may well be personal, and represent identities created in social movement through a complex and differentiated world, but they are not modern selves. This is not the place, and I am in any case not qualified, to attempt a summary of current debates among philosophers about


Hellenistic and Roman ideas of the self\textsuperscript{24}. The most recent discussions seem, however, quite sceptical about the emergence in the Roman period of quasi-modern subjectivities centred on a self-conscious and unique individuality. \textit{Persona} was, it seems, an important but not a permanent aspect of the self, and one clearly anchored to externally defined roles, such as ‘senator’, ‘father’ or ‘judge’: who one was depended to a great extent on one’s (current) \textit{statio} in life. There is no real sign of an ethic of individualism, certainly not in a positive sense. Nor is there a sense that one’s internal self is in some sense the real defining core. Seneca, Pliny the Younger and Epictetus all devote a good deal of attention to the production of the self, but always viewed as a being in action, defined relationally.

From a wider perspective this is not at all surprising. The notion of the self as category that has undergone successive transformations – or is understood in very different ways at different periods and in different societies – is well known to anthropologists for whom personhood has been a major subject of debate\textsuperscript{25}. Generalizing models of the pre-modern self are now treated with considerable scepticism: too many are simply inversions of modern individualist ideologies. But a set of nuanced understandings have been generated of local understanding of self from the Americas to Africa, South and East Asia and most recently Melanesia. Something like an ideal type of a socio-centric or holistic person has been developed in opposition to the ego-centric person of modernity, and the most compelling

\textsuperscript{24} I have found particularly helpful Frede, "A Notion of a Person in Epictetus.", Christopher Gill, \textit{The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought} (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), especially pp. 328-244.

studies suggest most societies have a sense of both poles. Traditional societies such as the Melanesian ones on which much recent work has focused often treat personhood entirely relationally and contextually. What we would regard as individualiztic behaviour is liable to be categorised as sorcery or madness. When Melanesians speak of themselves they portray each individual as a node in a web of relations, exchanges and mutual obligations, that same web articulated and explored in terms of gift exchange. The term ‘dividual’ has been coined to describe this lay concept, which has been applied by some prehistorians to societies much earlier than the ones we are concerned with at this conference. I want to suggest that this idea does help make sense of some epigraphic representations. That was in fact my reason for discussing gift exchange in the context of the Lyon taurobolium.

Romans were not, of course, just like Melanesians...any more than they are just like us. Melanesians are in any case enough like us, for them to understand western ideas and communicate their own rather different traditions and for us to understand them. Besides, in recent years their ideas about personhood have changed, moved sensibly in the direction of more individualized behaviour and away from an extreme conception of the self as socialised, relational, perhaps even distributed among kin, gift partners and the objects of

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those exchanges. That sort of movement, towards the ideal type of the western individual, is one that we might hope to capture when we consider ancient individualization. But it might take an effort of imagination to reconstruct the relational and sociocentric dimensions of ancient personhood, especially given the energy that has been devoted over the last two centuries into familiarising the Greeks and the Romans so as to make them suitable models for the states of mind and politics in which we live.

**Works Cited**


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