Abstract: Aristocratic elites dominated political life in the Roman Republic. However, contrary to traditional scholarly analysis, religious power was diffused throughout Roman society; many actors, some non-elite, utilized religion to articulate and promote their own interests. This paper uses the sociological concept of heterarchy to provide the study of Roman religio-politics with a helpful organizing principle. Heterarchy postulates that a social system can be ordered in a number of different ways. When applied to Roman religio-political life, heterarchy reveals several actors, not only aristocratic elites, competing amongst each other for power and prestige.

INTRODUCTION

Polybius, the second century BCE Greek historian who lived as a captive in Rome, investigated the causes for Roman success throughout the Mediterranean world. Perhaps the most noteworthy factor in his analysis was the preeminent position the Romans gave to religion. He writes:

For I conceive that what in other nations is looked upon as a reproach, I mean a scrupulous fear of the gods, is the very thing which keeps the Roman commonwealth together. To such an extraordinary height is this carried among them, both in private and public business, that nothing could exceed it. Many people might think this unaccountable; but in my opinion their object is to use it as a check upon the common people.

Polybius’ statement suggests that the state religion of Rome was in the complete control of religious elites. His opinion has found a welcome audience in both the ancient period and the modern; at first glance, it aligns nicely with an ancient world in which social elites wielded tremendous cultural power. In this scheme, state religion served as an important, if manipulative, stabilizing link between the Roman aristocracy above and the Roman masses below. Religion

1 I thank David Blome, graduate student at Cornell University, for alerting me of the usefulness of heterarchy as an investigative tool. I would also like to thank Dr. Craige Champion of Syracuse University, who provided guidance, and Dr. Michael Fronda of McGill University for his insightful critique. All remaining shortcomings are my own. All dates are BCE unless otherwise noted.
2 Polyb. 6.56.6-10.
3 I define “state religion” as the collection of priesthoods, temples, rites and practices associated with the maintenance of the pax deorum, in Roman culture a precondition for military success. In using the term “religio-political system,” I include the state religion and the individuals who acted within it, but exclude religion in the “private sphere” (as we would call it), such as the veneration of the lares and penates, Roman household deities.
was merely an appendage of the state itself; those exercising religious authority acted, as George Szemler has put it, as “a permanent sub-committee of the Senate.”

Additionally, J.H. Liebeschuetz has written that public divination, perhaps the chief feature of the Roman state religion, “…bound [politicians] to the rules of a strict procedure and compelled them to submit to the superior authority first of the priestly diviners, and then of the senate which in this field as in others had the ultimate say. In this respect the effect of Roman divination might be compared to that of the procedure of the House of Commons.”

I aim to address an implied assumption that this interpretation entails – that Republican state religion was a part of some kind of religio-political hierarchy composed of the Senate at its apex and the rest of Roman society at its base. This model implies that the individuals in the upper ranks of the hierarchy monopolized activities that were contained within the framework of public religious life and exercised unrestricted power. In short, it removes agency from non-elite actors. Instead, I will present an alternative approach that provides a helpful organizing principle for the study of Republican state religion. In order to elucidate this, I will rely on the concept of heterarchy which contrasts with hierarchy by postulating that human activity is oftentimes ordered by many competing sources of power acting within the same space. When applied to the study of Roman religion and politics, this model reveals the tensions that existed across all levels of Roman society. Several scholars have more recently made particular note of the ways in which Roman religious belief and practice intersected with all areas of public life. Political power, as it relates to religious belief, was diffused to some degree across social barriers. This study hopes to infuse such work with a helpful theoretical model.

**Hierarchy, Anarchy, and Heterarchy**

In all areas of Roman public life, the Senate exercised a disproportionate amount of power, and we must include the state religion in this judgment. However, generally classifying the Roman use of religious power in politics as hierarchical can be methodologically unsound, as it tends to portray religion as a stagnant and passive tool of the elite. Indeed, many examples illustrate religious change seemingly un-tethered to any notion of a structured religious hierarchy devoted to political expediency. Throughout pre-Christian Roman history, Roman religion was open to an anarchic and haphazard syncretic accretion through which new cults were introduced to the Roman pantheon. Such acculturation often resulted in the merging of a Roman deity with a provincial counterpart, such as Minerva with Sul or the Germanic twin deities Alci with the

---


Romans’ Castor and Pollux. While this kind of acculturation could find official sanction from the Roman state, the kind of organic cultural mixing that attends any expansion of political and military power was far more common. As Roman power grew over hundreds of years, this syncretic accretion resulted in an enormous and unwieldy mass of deities. No pre-modern organization such as the Roman Senate could have corralled such a system, as Polybius suggests, towards its own political ends, divergent as they were. Reacting to this seemingly random and unguided structure, some scholars have instead described the Roman religious system as one dominated by chaos. Alan Wardman reflects that the system itself appears “to be no more than an anarchy of traditions and novelties.” Richard Gordon has said that Late Republican religion was so confused that it resulted in anarchic syncretism: “Where all ideas are compossible, where anything goes and can be joined with anything else, no exchange, or replacement, no progress will arise: at best, an amorphous accretion, an unselective and uncritical syncretism.”

While a growing number of scholars have recognized many competing sources of power within the Roman religious system, there has also been a tendency to settle into one of two camps: one group that is content to see Roman religion primarily operating within a hierarchical ladder in which elite political advancement is the end goal, and another group which finds no unifying or ordering principle capable of unifying the seemingly disparate and unpredictable elements of religious life. The concept of heterarchy provides an alternative middle ground. First described in the realm of neurological science by Warren McCulloch in 1945, but given its first robust treatment in anthropology by Carole Crumley in her study of Burgundian iron age settlements, Crumley describes heterarchy as follows:

The relation of elements to one another when they are unranked, or when they possess the potential for being ranked in a number of different ways, depending on systemic requirements. Heterarchy is both a structure and a condition. Together these definitions call attention to the potential of the system for organizational diversity and change. In

---

8 For the acculturation of religion in the Early Empire, see Richard Gordon, “Religion in the Roman Empire: the Civic Compromise and its Limits” in Pagan Priests, eds. M. Beard and J. North (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 233-255. For the comparison between the Germanic Alci with Castor and Pollux, see Tac. Ger. 43.3. Religious practice was most likely more homogeneous the closer one was to Rome itself, with greater variety existing throughout the provinces; similarly, state control over religion was certainly more easily attained nearer the city, while the limitations of pre-modern communication would have resulted in a high degree of control over religious matters in the provinces being much more difficult.

9 A good example of the state acting to recognize new cults is the importation of the eastern goddess Cybele in 205 (Liv. 29.10.4-11.8; 14.5-14). Fearing that Hannibal was threatening Roman safety, the Senate sent a delegation to King Attalus of Pergamum in order to bring the goddess with great ceremony into Rome and thus assure Rome’s victory in the second Punic war. Similarly, formal action taken by a Roman official to add to the pantheon is shown through the process of evocatio, whereby a general invited a foreign god to abandon the people with whom Rome was at war (e.g. Liv. 5.21.1-7; with Vsevolod Basanoff, Evocatio: Étude d’un Rituel Militaire Romain (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947); Gabriella Gustafsson, Evocatio Deorum: Historical and Mythical Interpretations of Ritualised Conquests in the Expansion of Ancient Rome (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2000). It was evidently still in use in the last century BCE: L’Année Epigraphique 1981 (1977): 816).

10 Alan Wardman, Religion and Statecraft Among the Romans (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 4.

general, heterarchical relationships are implicated in the dynamic effect of difference, be it spatial, temporal, or cognitive.\textsuperscript{12}

If the best analogy for a hierarchy is a pyramid with a large base under the control or direction of a small summit, a suitable analogy for heterarchy is a fishnet: what is contained within can be any number of related items that are not necessarily rigidly ordered.\textsuperscript{13} Heterarchy is a sub-category of complexity theory, or “the study of dynamic nonlinear systems, that is, systems that are not in equilibrium and do not act in a predictable manner,” a statement that is quite appropriate for the study of Roman religion.\textsuperscript{14} In particular, heterarchy can allow us to view Roman religion as a flexible, yet coherent, construct. Rather than viewing Roman religion either as a static hierarchy with aristocratic elites positioned at its apex or as an anarchic conglomeration of accreting religious practices and offices, I propose that we view it as a system of dynamic interplay among corporate groups and individuals that are at times, but not always, in competition with one another.

Religio-Political Actors and Counter-Poised Power

To demonstrate the usefulness of heterarchy in the study of Roman religion, I will focus on several categories of actors within the religio-political system: the Senate, the religious collegia or the formal organizations of individuals holding official Roman priesthoods, and the populus Romanus, or Roman people.\textsuperscript{15} As any historian will note, throughout Republican history the Senate was in a position of prominence. However, many examples from Roman history illustrate how this was not always the case. The concept of heterarchy allows for actors to re-order their positions within Roman civic life in reaction to different circumstances. By investigating these actors and their interplay with one other, we are able to see how each one could at times rely on different values and, as a result, increase its own prestige and influence.

The Senate

A thorough examination of this system must begin with an analysis of the role of the Senate in religious life. However, due to the need to be brief, I will only dwell on a single area in which the Senate exercised almost complete control: the management and expiation of religious prodigies, or portents that were meant to reflect the gods’ ill will. Prodigia were unnatural and seemingly unexplainable occurrences such as animals giving birth to abnormally large numbers of offspring, children born with extra limbs, earth falling from the sky, or cows speaking. After such an event was reported to the Senate, the prodigy was either accepted as genuine or was rejected. If accepted as relevant to public matters, the Senate then decided which religious body had the right and privilege of expiating it. At times they chose the pontifices, and at other times they chose the (quin)decemviri or the Etruscan haruspices. At other times, the Senate could act as a unified body and expiate the portent itself. Managing and expiating prodigia were of the utmost importance, and the Senate dealt with religious issues during their meetings prior to political business. While in many areas of Roman political life the Senate technically possessed informal and moral authority, the historical record consistently shows that the Senate maintained total control in dealing with the expiation of prodigia. In this instance it is accurate to describe the relationship between the Senate, the priestly colleges, and the rest of Roman society as hierarchical in nature, with the line of communication progressing vertically up to the Senate and their response traveling back down to the various collegia charged with expiation.

The Religious Collegia

In many areas, however, from the distribution of land to the lower classes to the awarding of military honors following victory in battle, the Senate often splintered off into rival factions, resulting in a diffusion of power throughout the Roman political system. The members of the various religious collegia, or the individuals who held the important priestly offices, comprise the second group of actors in this study. Religion was a common arena in which these elites, typically senators, articulated power against one other. The result of this intra-elite competition

16 On the Senate’s role in expiating prodigia, see Liv. 10.23.1, 22.1.14, and 35.21.2-4. D.S. Levene notes that Livy’s narrative goal sometimes resulted in the exclusion of prodigia from his narrative; that is to say, the Roman state likely recognized a far greater number of prodigia than we have knowledge of in Livy’s writing, a fact which understates the centrality of the Senate’s role in religious life. See D.S. Levene, Religion in Livy (Leiden: Brill Press, 1993).
17 Aristocratic Roman families often used religion as a competitive tool against one another. A good example of this is the rivalry between the families of Q. Fabius Maximus Verrucosus and M. Claudius Marcellus. Following victory over the Ligurians in Northern Italy, Fabius dedicated a temple to Honos in 233 (Cic. ND 2.61). A little over a decade later, at the battle of Clastidium in 222, Marcellus matched and surpassed Fabius’ dedication by promising a dual temple to both Honos and Virtus (Val. Max. 1.1.8; Cic. ND 2.61). By dedicating a similar temple to Honos and Virtus, Marcellus hoped to usurp the Fabii’s connection to these gods and increase his own prestige. Marcellus’ actions, however, caused a great deal of animosity towards him from Fabius, which may have led to an unusually long delay before the Marcelli finally built the temple in 208 in the midst of opposition from the pontifices, of which group Fabius was pontifex maximus. See Miles McDonnell, Roman Manliness (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 215-227, 237.
18 One key point should be noted. There is significant overlap in identity with this group and the Senate; after all, the same men who filled the ranks of the major Roman priesthoods were the same men who attended meetings of the
within the colleges would not result, as it might in a hierarchical interpretation, in the control of lower class interests. The Romans maintained no official method of ranking the prestige of each college; co-optation or election into one of them was typically a great achievement for any politician and as such the esteem of each college was high. Evidence suggests that membership in two of the colleges, the pontifices and the augures, was considered more prestigious and was thus highly sought. David Hahm has argued that politicians were co-opted into the augures at a younger age, meaning that membership in this college was the first choice among political elites, perhaps due to the increased ability for an augur to affect the political process. Members in other priestly colleges, Hahm finds, were typically older and had already served in more magistracies than augurs, implying that a politician would seek membership in the pontifices or (quin)decemviri only as a last resort after failure to join the augures. Hahm’s findings disagree with several ancient sources which place primary emphasis on the pontifices. For example, in Festus’ description of the most prestigious priesthoods, he mentions only members of the pontifical college. Other sources similarly portrayed the pontifices in an elevated position, although Cicero at times portrays the augur as the most powerful priest. The discrepancy between Hahm’s findings and the ancient literary sources is a perfect illustration of the usefulness of taking a heterarchic approach. If one relies on the traditional way to rank the importance of the priestly offices, one is sure to emphasize the pontifices. Many priests in this group, such as the rex sacrorum and flamines maiores, were still required to be of patrician status, even after the opening of other priesthoods to the plebeians in the fourth century. Some of these priesthoods, such as the flamen dialis, inhibited their holders’ political power by restricting their ability to leave the city and command armies. The patricians’ continued domination of them indicates that despite these political shortcomings they still offered the holder significant cultural prestige. On the other hand, if one focuses on the political benefits an elite received through membership in the collegia, it is clear that individual augures possessed a tremendous amount of power to bring political assemblies to a halt on religious grounds, something no pontiff was able to do. Therefore the relative importance of each college changes based on the lens of analysis, and looking at this system through these different lenses allows us to see it as multivalent. Additionally, the different ways of ranking the colleges show that elites were first and foremost concerned with their positions in relation to other elites and not, as our introductory Polybian quote implies, as a means of control or suppression of the lower classes.

---

19 David Hahm, “Roman Nobility and the Three Major Priesthoods 218-167 B.C.” TAPA 94 (1963), 75.
20 The rex sacrorum, the flamines Dialis, Martialis, and Quirinalis, and the pontifex maximus (Festus pg. 198 L). Jyri Vaahtera has suggested that this ranking reflects the fact that these positions (other than the pontifex) remained the exclusive purview of the patricians. See Jyri Vaahtera, “Roman Religion and the Polybian politeia” in The Roman Middle Republic: Politics, Religion, and Historiography c. 400–133 B.C., ed. Christer Bruun (Rome: Institutum Romanum Finlandiae, 2000), 254.
21 On Cicero’s fondness for the augurate: Cic. Leg. 2.31. Other passages which seem to elevate the prestige of the pontifices above other collegia: Cic. Har. 18; Dio 53.1.5.
The populus Romanus

As the various collegia could be ranked in different ways amongst themselves, Roman religious life frequently saw power counter-poised between even larger groups as well. Perhaps the two that were most frequently set against one other throughout the life of the Republic are the Senate and the populus Romanus. Dating back to the beginning of the Republic, religion played a recurrent role in the interaction between senatorial elites and the Roman People. What is most noteworthy here, and most damaging to the hierarchical analysis of the study of the Roman religious system, is that popular control often succeeded against the attempts by the Senate, the collegia, and individual elite politicians to increase and maintain power.

A useful illustration of the powerful role played by the populus Romanus in religious affairs is the changing method of adding new priests into the collegia from the middle of the second century to the early first century. The conventional method was through priestly co-optation, whereby upon the death of a priest the college itself would appoint his successor.22 This procedure had been in place since the foundation of the Republic and had undergone little change. In 145, however, C. Licinius Crassus proposed that future vacancies in the major priestly colleges should be filled through popular vote. C. Laelius, an augur, successfully opposed the measure, keeping it the prerogative of the colleges themselves.23 The matter lay dormant until 104, when a similar bill was introduced by Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus. This bill did pass, and while the collegia still had the right to nominate the man whom they wished to see co-opted, the decision formally lay with a special assembly of 17 out of the 35 Roman tribes, made up of citizens.24 Control over the election of priests was still not firmly settled, though, as Sulla re-instituted co-optation by the collegia in 81. Popular control over the selection of major priesthoods was finally secured for the short remainder of the Republic’s life in 63 when a supporter of Caesar’s, the tribune T. Labienus, overturned Sulla’s legislation.25 The ongoing struggle over the co-optation of incumbents of the major priesthoods illustrates how power frequently could be balanced not just between two groups such as the Senate and People, but amongst several, as this issue pertained to the interests of not only the populus Romanus and the Senate, but also of each individual collegium which was no doubt anxious over how popular control of the selection of its members could influence its overall power and prestige.

Due to the multi-dimensional interplay amongst actors, it would be foolish to present any of them as monolithic, unified entities who always spoke with one voice on any given issue. Indeed, each group could find itself fractured by competing interests. The populus Romanus, though always a potent political force and regularly treated as a unified entity by ancient

---

22 See, for example, Liv. 40.42.6-13.
24 This was the procedure already used for the selection of the pontifex maximus, perhaps the most prestigious priesthood. Beard et al., Religions of Rome, 136, state that each individual collegium had the right to nominate individuals for their own vacancies, but Szemler states that the augures exercised this right for all the collegia, relying on Auct. ad Her. 1.12.20: lex iubet augurem in demortui locum qui petat in contione nominare (a law commands an augur to name in the Assembly the man who he wishes to take the place of a deceased man). See George Szemler, The Priests of the Roman Republic, 30.
25 Dio 37.37.1.
rhetoricians eager to capitalize on its symbolic support, was characterized by its own heterarchical segments capable of leveraging power against one other. It is not surprising that these fractures often manifested themselves in religious events. One example of this is the development of the Aventine Triad of the deities Ceres, Liber, and Libera as a plebeian balance to the patrician-dominated Capitoline Triad of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva. The conventional account of the foundation of this cult dates to 493 when the consul Sp. Cassius dedicated a temple to these deities outside the city of Rome, symbolically placing it outside the control of the patricians. At numerous times throughout the life of the Republic, the temple would be tied to plebeian interests, serving as a place of asylum for the poor, a frequent site of sacrifice for plebeian magistrates, and most likely a kind of depository for the records of the plebeian council. Additionally, the property of any individual who violated the law concerning the inviolability of the plebeian tribunes’ bodies had their possessions sold in front of the temple. Moreover, the cult seems purposefully to have served as a foil to the triad of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva which, though possessing religious importance for all Romans, had especial value for patrician families. The temple to Jupiter Best and Greatest, Juno Regina, and Minerva was located inside the boundaries of the city on the Capitoline hill. Both cults were centered on two female deities and one male; Henri Le Bonniec has called the Aventine triad the “copy and antithesis” of the Capitoline one. Much as the Senate found itself fractured depending on the religious or political issue at hand, fault lines existed within the populus Romanus, and religion often proved a powerful tool as various groups within the Roman population sought to articulate their own positions against one another.

While the previous example shows how power could be counterpoised within the populus Romanus between the patricians and plebeians, further religious divisions can be found within the lower classes throughout Italy, specifically between the urban poor in Rome itself and the poor Italians who had long served as the backbone of Rome’s legions as allies without receiving citizenship or land in return. In 100 tribune and champion of the Italians, L. Apuleius Saturninus, introduced a law providing for the distribution of land seized from the Cimbri, a northern Italian people. Saturninus sought to insure that the law would not be overturned if passed, and included in the law a peculiar detail requiring all senators to swear an oath to obey it once it was passed.

26 Ancient writers and speakers frequently refer to the populus Romanus as a unified group, making no distinctions among them, nor taking into account one’s geographic proximity to Rome and therefore one’s ability to influence the political process. This kind of totum pro parte synecdoche is noted by Henrik Mouritsen to have been an important way elite politicians justified their proposals. See Henrik Mouritsen, Plebs and Politics in the Late Roman Republic (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14-17.
28 Dion. Hal. Ant. Rom. 6.94.3; see Spaeth, The Roman Goddess Ceres, 83 for discussion of its location.
29 Varro Non. 63; Liv. 10.23.13; 27.36.9; 33.25.3; Pompon. Dig. 1.2.2.21.
30 Dion. Hal. Ant. Rom. 6.89.3; Livy 3.55.7. For the previous examples, cf. Spaeth, The Roman Goddess Ceres, 82-102 for discussion.
32 The “patrician-plebeian” divide, however, lost much of its force after around 300 when passage of the lex Ogulnia opened up many priesthoods to plebeians. After this point, the highest offices and priesthoods were held by nobles, men of both patrician and plebeian status, The old divide between patrician and plebeian still re-emerged at key points of political strife, for example in 121 when C. Sempronius Gracchus withdrew with his followers to the Aventine hill, a place culturally significant to the plebeians, in the face of senatorial opposition (App. BCiv 1.26).
by the populus, “and that anyone who should refuse to do so should be expelled from the Senate and should pay a fine of twenty talents for the benefit of the people.” Additionally, he hoped to rely on heavy support from country-dwellers, as a significant part of the Cimbrian land was to go to rural Italian allies. The city poor, however, were upset at their share of the pie. When the day for voting arrived,

A disturbance broke out in the comitia (assembly grounds). Those who attempted to prevent the passage of the laws proposed by the tribunes were assaulted by Saturninus and driven away from the rostra (speaker’s platform). The city crowd exclaimed that thunder was heard in the assembly, in which case it is not permitted by Roman custom to finish the business that day. As the adherents of Saturninus nevertheless persisted, the city people girded themselves, seized whatever clubs they could lay their hands on, and dispersed the rustics. The latter were rallied by Saturninus; they attacked the city folks with clubs, overcame them, and passed the law.

In this episode, one can see two things: first, far from acting as a monolithic mass, it was quite possible for the lower classes, even groups with different citizenship classifications, to be divided amongst themselves. Second, religious principles, here shown through the oath promising that the law would not be overturned if passed and the city plebs’ announcement that thunder prohibited any public business from being performed, could be utilized by different segments to support their own political agenda. Additionally, here perhaps more than anywhere else the lower classes were anything but passive players in some kind of religio-political hierarchical scheme dominated by the Senate.

This study has emphasized how various bodies of actors within the Roman Republic could appropriate religion to their own ends. While the Senate remained the dominant political body throughout the Republic’s history, and while this dominance also applied to religious affairs, we have seen that the Senate in no way possessed a monopoly over religious action. When the concept of heterarchy is applied to the Roman religio-political system, one can see several different actors actively articulating their own role in society. The hierarchical nature of Roman society in general frequently allowed the Senate and political elites to wield a disproportionately large share of power. Yet, at many times elites and non-elites alike appropriated religious language to advance their own political agenda. I have thus suggested that while hierarchy at times does good work in the analysis of Roman society, it fails to appreciate the complexity of religious life. As we take stock of the religio-political system as a whole, I suggest that we interpret it within heterarchy’s parent field, that of complexity studies. Social scientists John Miller and Scott page note,

Social agents, whether they are bees or people or robots, find themselves enmeshed in a web of connections with one another and, through a variety of adaptive processes, they must successfully navigate through their world. … The remarkable thing about social worlds is how quickly such connections and change can lead to complexity. Social agents must predict and react to the actions and predictions of other agents. The various connections inherent in social systems exacerbate these actions as agents become closely

33 App. BCiv 1.28-31.
34 App. BCiv 1.30.
coupled to one another. The result of such a system is that agent interactions become highly nonlinear, the system becomes difficult to decompose, and complexity ensues.\textsuperscript{35}

In light of this study of the Roman religious system, heterarchy provides a synthetic approach between the strict hierarchical model and its antithesis rooted in unselective anarchy. The traditional view that the Senate dominated religio-political life should not be overthrown, but perhaps it deserves to be de-centered.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


