

The Religion of Rome

The Romans had a practical attitude to religion, which may explain why they had difficulty with the idea of a single omniscient, omnipotent god. Insofar as Romans had a religion of their own, it was not based on any central belief, but on a mixture of fragmented rituals, taboos, superstitions, and traditions collected over the centuries from various sources. To Romans, religion was less a spiritual experience than a contractual relationship between man and the forces believed to control people's existence.

This attitude toward religion resulted in 1) a state cult that had significant influence on political and military events and which outlasted the republic; 2) and private religious activity, in which the head of the family oversaw the domestic rituals and prayers in the same way as the priestly representatives of the people performed the public ceremonials. But as circumstances and people's views of the world changed, individuals whose personal religious needs remained unsatisfied turned increasingly during the first century AD to the mysteries, which were of Greek origin, and to the cults of the east.

Origins

Most of the Roman gods and goddesses were a blend of several religious influences. Many were introduced via the Greek colonies of southern Italy. Many also had their roots in old religions of the Etruscans or Latin tribes. Often the old Etruscan or Latin name survived but the deity over time came to be seen as the Greek god of equivalent or similar nature. So it is that the Greek and Roman pantheon look very similar, but with different names.

An example of such mixed origins is the goddess Diana to whom the Roman king Servius Tullius built the temple on the Aventine Hill. She was an old Latin goddess from the earliest of times. Before Servius Tullius moved the center of her worship to Rome, it was based at Aricia. There in Aricia it was always a runaway slave who would act as her priest. He would win the right to hold office by killing his predecessor. To challenge him to a fight he would first have to manage to break off a branch of a particular sacred tree, a tree on which the current priest naturally would keep a close eye. From such obscure beginnings Diana was moved to Rome, where she then gradually became identified with the Greek goddess Artemis.

It could even occur that a deity was worshipped for reasons no one really could remember. One example is the deity Furrina. A festival was held every year in her honor on July 25. But by the middle of the first century BC there was no one left who remembered what she was actually goddess of.

Festivals

There was not a month in the Roman calendar that did not have its religious festivals, and the very earliest festivals of the Roman state were already celebrated with games, athletic competitions with an often military flavor.

The *consualia* (celebrating the festival of Consus and the famous 'rape of the Sabine women'), which was held on August 21, also was the main event of the chariot-racing year. It can hardly be a coincidence that the underground granary and shrine of Consus, where the opening ceremonies of the festival were held, was accessed from the very center isle of the Circus Maximus. August, the sixth month of the old calendar, also had festivals in honor of the gods Hercules, Portunus, Vulcan, Voltumnus and Diana.

Festivals could be somber, dignified occasions, as well as joyful events. The *parentalia* in February was a period of nine days in which the families would worship their dead ancestors. During this time, no official business was conducted, all temples were closed and marriages were outlawed. But also in February were the *lupercalia*, a festival of fertility, most likely connected with the god Faunus. Its ancient ritual went back to the more mythical times of Roman origin. Ceremonies began in the cave in which the legendary twins Romulus and Remus were believed to have been suckled by the wolf. In that cave a number of goats and a dog were sacrificed and their blood was daubed onto the faces of two young boys of patrician families.

Dressed in goatskins and carrying strips of leather in their hands, the boys would then run a traditional course. Anyone along the way would be whipped with the leather strips. However, these lashings were said to increase fertility. Therefore women who sought to get pregnant would wait along the course, to be whipped by the boys as they passed.

The festival of Mars lasted from March 1-19. Two separate teams of a dozen men would dress up in armor and helmet of ancient design and would then jump, leap and bound through the streets, beating their shields with their swords, shouting and chanting. The men were known as the *salii*, the 'jumpers'. Apart from their noisy parade through the streets, they would spend every evening feasting in a different house in the city.

The festival of Vesta took place in June and, lasting for a week, it was an altogether calmer affair. No official business took place and the temple of Vesta was opened to married women who could make sacrifices of food to the goddess. As a more bizarre part of this festival, all mill-donkeys were given a day of rest on June 9, as well as being decorated with garlands and loaves of bread. On June 15 the temple would be closed again, but for the vestal virgins and the Roman state would go about its normal affairs again.

Rural Festivals

The Romans saw natural things such as trees, rocks and such as possible hosts to spirits or bearers of some other religious significance, so the countryside bustled with spiritual haunts by gods, ghosts and spirits. There was also not a thing that wasn't somehow guarded by a deity. There were gods, as well as other vague forces (*numina*, the plural of *numen*) who watched over fields, groves, orchards, vineyards, springs, woods and any other matter. Jupiter for example watched over oak trees, which were sacred to him.

Country life was inevitably connected to agriculture, which was at the whim of nature; so religious life in the country therefore consisted primarily of appeasing the many gods, ensuring their favor and the harvest. The ancient calendar, before later changes by the Romans, began on what is now March 15. The first traditional festival of the country calendar was the *liberalia* on March 17. It was held to honor Liber, the god of fertile crops and vineyards. The *liberalia* was also the traditional date when a boy could become a man by being given his *toga virilis*.

On April 15 came the *fordicia* in honor of the earth goddess Tellus. For this pregnant cows were sacrificed and in Rome animal fetuses were burnt on altars. The *parilia* festival, which took place the week after the *fordicia*, saw sheep being herded and forced to jump across burning bales of straw, in order to be purified.

Another festival was that celebrating the goddess Ceres on April 19. Ceres was mainly connected with agriculture, the harvest and, especially, grain. So her festival was of great significance to farmers. There would be a ritual march around the boundaries of the land, the so called *lustration*, to purify it and to honor the goddess. In the earlier times of Rome the festival of Ceres would see foxes let loose with torches tied to their tails where later the grand arena of the Circus Maximus would stand.

After the festival of Ceres was the *vinalia rustica*, a wine feast to celebrate the end of winter. April also saw the strange ritual of a red dog being sacrifice to the god of mildew, Robigus, before it came to an end with the *floralia*, the festival of blossom. The *floralia* lasted from April 28 to May 3 and was perhaps the greatest party among the country festivals. As the year passed and the crops ripened, the *ambarvalia* took place. It didn't have a fixed date. This festival too saw a lustration march around the land and plentiful sacrifices. The harvest in August saw festivals for Ops, the goddess of the harvest, for the granary god Consus, and, alas, another *vinalia rustica*. The festival to celebrate the wine crop was held on October 11, the *meditrinalia*. The season for sowing was in December, which saw more festivals in honor of Ops and Consus, and the special sowing festival known as the *saturnalia* beginning on December 17. The *saturnalia*, having become a purely secular time of partying in the towns of the empire, would influence the Christian celebration of Christmas.

Religious Practice in the Home

For Romans being civilized very much meant living in a home. The very spiritual center of the home was the hearth. This will no doubt have gone back to ancient times, when the peasants on the hills of Rome lived in primitive round houses, huddling around the fire in the middle of their hut during cold and rainy days. But this was true in ancient Greece, as well, where the goddess of the hearth - Hestia, though not very prominent for any stories, was included in every sacrifice to every other god. The fire of the hearth was something the woman of the house was to guard over. Before the house retired to bed the fire would be stocked up, so it had fuel to burn alone during the night. In the morning it would be built up anew from what little fire was left. If the fire was to burn on forever, then it was only when the family moved away to another home that the fire would be put out with wine in a small ritual. It was at the hearth sacrifices were made to the gods and the spirits of the family's ancestors.

Household Gods: Janus, Vesta, Cardea, Forculus, Limentius

Two gods of the Roman state cult guarded the private homes of the Roman citizen. Janus, the god of doorways and beginnings, was the chief guardian of the home. His sphere of protection and influence was the passage through the door. He was both inside and outside the house at once; thus, its guardian. Yet he was not the only god in care of the door to the Roman home. There was also Cardea, the goddess of hinges, Forculus, god of the door leaves, and Limentius, the god of the threshold.

The second official deity of the home was Vesta, the goddess of the hearth. As the hearth was of practical importance (for cooking and warmth) and of spiritual significance (sacrifices) it is understandable that Vesta was seen to be of great importance to the Roman home. Every day prayers would be said to her, and during meals some food might be set aside and passed into the fire as an offering to the goddess.

Household Spirits: lares, penates and genius; larvae and lemures

The spirits of the household were the *lares* and *penates*. The *lares* were the spirits of the families ancestors. Represented by little figurines, they were kept in a special cupboard in the *atrium*. Among them was the *lar familiaris*, the family spirit, the most important. Short daily prayers and small offerings would be made to the *lares*. And on the more sacred days of the month - the kalends, ides and nones - or on special days like a wedding, birth or birthday, more elaborate rituals were held in their honor.

Meanwhile, the *penates* were the spirits of the larder (pantry). Thanks were given to them for keeping the family fed. Also represented by little figurines, they too had their own little cupboard they resided in. But they would tend to be taken out and placed on the table during mealtimes. If the family ever moved house, then its *lares* and *penates* invariably moved with them.

The third household spirit of note was the *genius*, usually represented in form of a snake. This *genius* was in a sense the 'manhood' of the family, which empowered the husband to father children. Naturally the place of its greatest influence within the house was in the marital bed. The *genius* of the household was particularly celebrated on the head of the family's birthday.

Apart from friendly spirits there were also ghostly spirits of the dead that might haunt a house. They were the *larvae* and *lemures*. These could be driven out of the house by ritual, performed by the head of the family, which involved spitting out black beans and noisily bashing together metal pots.

Births, Marriages and Deaths

Births, marriages and deaths were of great significance. Juno Lucina watched over the birth of a child. But from the moment of conception a fetus had a host of spirits watching over it. After a birth a meal would always be made for the gods Picumnus and Pilumnus in thanks for their services. After, numerous gods oversaw matters such as breast feeding, the growth of bones, drinking, eating - even talking.

The naming of a child (on the ninth day for a boy, the eighth for a girl) was watched over by the goddess Nundina. The child would then be given an amulet, the *bullā*, which a girl would wear until she married and a boy would wear until he reached manhood and was given his *toga virilis*, between 14 and 17.

Enacting a marriage could be done in several ways:

- 1 Simple consent of both sides, without any rituals or any festivities.
- 2 After a couple had cohabited a year, the woman not having been absent for more than three nights.
- 3 A symbolic purchase of the bride, with a holder of a pair of scales and five witnesses present.
- 4 With full religious ritual and elaborate ceremonies in the presence of the *pontifex maximus*. This was a legal requirement for patrician families.

The early forms of religious ritual for a marriage included prayers, sacrifice, the sharing and sacrificing of sacred bread and the taking of auspices, while the couple sat on chairs covered with lambskin and tied together. At an official betrothal ceremony the bride had a ring placed on her finger in front of the gathered guests. At the later wedding she would wear a bright red/orange veil, crowned by a wreath made of blossom. Animal sacrifice was made and the entrails of the animal were then examined for any omens. Thereafter the bride and groom would exchange vows and thus be married.

If all through a Roman's life spirits watched over him, then when he died, he died without any such guardians. Once the corpse was cremated or buried its spirit joined all the other spirits of the dead, which were known collectively as *manes*. Of course it now also became one of the family *lares*. If the funeral sought to honor the deceased, there were no spirits to be pleased to watch over him. And so the rituals of the funeral sought rather to help purify the living members of the surviving family. Family members were sprinkled with water and bid to step across the ceremonial fire. Thereafter there was a feast in honor of the deceased. To help cleanse the house of death a pig was sacrificed to the goddess Ceres and the house was thoroughly swept.

State Religion

Roman state religion was essentially much the same as the religion in the home, only on a much larger and more magnificent scale. State religion looked after the home of the Roman people. Just as the wife was supposed to guard the hearth at home, Rome had the Vestal Virgins to guard the eternal flame of Rome. And just as a family worshipped its *lares*, after the fall of the Republic, the Roman state had its deified past Caesars to whom it paid tribute. And as the *pater familias* presided over the rituals of the household, the *pontifex maximus* presided over the religion of state.

Although the *pontifex maximus* was the head of Roman state religion, much of its organization rested with four religious colleges, whose members were appointed for life and, with few exceptions, were selected from among distinguished politicians. The highest of these bodies was the Pontifical College, which consisted of the *rex sacrorum*, *pontifices*, *flamines* and the *vestales*.

Rex sacrorum, the king of rites, was an office created under the early republic as a substitute for royal authority over religious matters. Later he might still have been the highest dignitary at any ritual, even higher than the *pontifex maximus*, but it became a purely honorary post.

Sixteen *pontifices* (priests) oversaw the organization of religious events. They kept records of proper religious procedures and the dates of festivals and days of special religious significance.

The *flamines* acted as priests to individual gods: three for the major gods Jupiter, Mars and Quirinus, and twelve for the lesser ones. These individual experts specialized in the knowledge of prayers and rituals specific to their particular deity.

The *flamen dialis*, the priest of Jupiter, was the most senior of the *flamines*. On certain occasions his status was equal to those of the *pontifex maximus* and the *rex sacrorum*. The life of the *flamen dialis* was regulated by a whole host of strange rules.

Some of the rules surrounding the *flamen dialis* included.

He was not allowed to go out without his cap of office.

He was not allowed to ride a horse.

If a person was into the house of the *flamen dialis* in any form of fetters he was to be untied at once and the shackles pulled up through the skylight of the house's *atrium* on to the roof and then carried away.

Only a free man was allowed to cut the hair of the *flamen dialis*.

The *flamen dialis* would neither ever touch, nor mention a goat, uncooked meat, ivy, or beans.

For the *flamen dialis* divorce was not possible. His marriage could only be ended by death. Should his wife have died, he was obliged to resign.

The Vestal Virgins

There were six vestal virgins. All were traditionally chosen from old patrician families at a young age. They would serve ten years as novices, then ten performing the actual duties, followed by a final ten years of teaching the novices. They lived in a palatial building next to the small temple of Vesta at the Roman forum. Their foremost duty was to guard the sacred fire in the temple. Other duties included performing rituals and baking the sacred salt cake to be used at numerous ceremonies in the year.

Punishment for vestal virgins was harsh. If they let the flame go out, they would be whipped. And as they had to remain virgins, their punishment for breaking their vow of chastity was to be walled up alive underground. But the honor and privilege surrounding the vestal virgins were also enormous. In fact any criminal who was condemned to death and saw a vestal virgin was automatically pardoned.

The post of vestal virgin was highly sought after; the emperor Tiberius had to decide between two very evenly matched candidates in AD 19. He chose the daughter of one Domitius Pollio, instead of the daughter of a certain Fonteius Agrippa, explaining that he had decided so because the latter father was divorced.

However he assured the other girl of a dowry of no less than a million sesterces to console her.

Other Religious Offices

The college of Augurs consisted of fifteen members. Theirs was the tricky job of interpreting the manifold omens of public life (and no doubt of the private life of the powerful). No doubt these consultants in matters of omens must have been exceptionally diplomatic in the interpretations required from them. Each of them carried as his insignia a long, crooked staff. With this he would mark a square space on the ground from which he would look out for auspicious omens.

The *quindecemviri sacris faciundis* were the fifteen members of a college for less clearly defined religious duties. Most notably they guarded the Sibylline Books and it was for them to consult these scriptures and interpret them when requested to do so by the senate. The Sibylline books being evidently understood as something foreign by the Romans, this college also was to oversee the worship of any foreign gods introduced to Rome.

Initially there were three members to the college of *epulones* (banqueting managers), though later their number was enlarged to seven. Their college was by far the newest, being founded only in 196 BC. The necessity for such a college obviously arose as the increasingly elaborate festivals required experts to oversee their organization.

Prayer and Sacrifice

In the Roman mind, there was a sort of contract between the gods and the mortals. As part of this agreement each side would provide as well as receive services. The role of the mortal in this partnership with the gods was to worship the mighty gods. For this there was prayer and sacrifice. And for both of these activities there were firmly defined rituals. To perform these rituals correctly was of paramount importance. One mistake and one would have to begin all over again.

The very nature of Roman religion itself, with its numerous gods, many of whom had multiple roles, was cause for problems, particularly as in some cases not even the sex of a deity was clear. Hence the phrase '*whether you be god or goddess*' was a widespread formula in the worship of certain deities. Some Roman gods also had an entire collection of additional names, according to what aspect of life they were a patron to. So, for example Juno was Juno Lucina in her role of goddess of childbirth. But as goddess of the mint she was known as Juno Moneta (this curious role came about because for a long time the Roman state mint was housed in her temple on the Capitoline hill).

There appear to have been few things for which there was not a special prayer. So, for example, there were prayers to bring bad luck upon another, or for the return of stolen property. Remember curse tablets (*defixiones*)? A prayer almost always will have been made together with a small offering to the deity. Such sacrifices did not always need to involve the killing of an animal, although this was very often the case. For the sacrifice had to be a symbol of life in some way or form. Milk, fruit, cheese, and wine were often used as less bloody offerings to the gods.

But naturally for the official rituals of the state gods it was animals which most of the time were sacrificed. And for each god there would be different animals. For Janus one sacrificed a ram. For Jupiter it was a heifer (a heifer is a young cow which has not yet had more than one calf). Ravenous Mars demanded an ox, a pig and a sheep, except for on October 15 when it had to be the winning race horse of the day (the near side horse of a chariot team).

Such animal sacrifices were by their nature elaborate and bloody affairs. The animal's head had wine and sacred bread (baked by the vestal virgins) sprinkled over it. The sacrificial animal was killed by having its throat cut. But before it was sacrificed it was disemboweled for inspection of its innards, to ensure that the god was not offered an animal bearing a bad omen. Should indeed something be found wanting about the animal's entrails then it was not only a bad sign, but a new animal would have to be sacrificed in its place. For this there must obviously have been other animals standing by. The most important organs of the dead beast would then be burnt on the altar. The rest of the animal was then either moved away, or later eaten as part of a feast. A priest would then say prayers, or better he would whisper them. This too was a closely guarded ritual, by which the priest himself would be wearing some form of mask or blindfold to protect his eyes from seeing any evil and a flute would be played to drown out any evil sounds. Should anything about the sacrifice go wrong, then it had to be repeated. But only after another, additional, sacrifice had been made to allay any anger of the god about the failure of the first one. For this purpose one would usually sacrifice a pig. Thereafter the real sacrifice would be repeated.

In order to avoid any embarrassment from ill-omened bowels, or slip-ups in ritual, it was usual to make a major sacrifice on the day before a grand occasion. Like this any possible errors during the big event would be excused in advance. The sacrifice of entire multitudes of animals was quite frequent. It was no coincidence that there was a Greek word for the sacrifice of a hundred oxen - a *hecatomb*. Roman religion did not as such really practice human sacrifice, although it was not totally unknown; in the third and second century BC it was the case that couples of slaves were walled up underground by demand of the Sibylline Books. Also the gladiatorial games had their origin in sacrifices to the dead.

Omens and Superstition

Compared to modern society, the Romans seem extremely superstitious. But today's major religions have all throughout their past discouraged, even combatted, superstition. Also our sciences and our technological world allow little room for superstition. The Roman's world was full of unexplained phenomena, darkness and fear. Superstitions were a perfectly natural part of the relationship between gods and men.

The Roman habit of interpreting natural phenomena as signs from the beyond was inherited from the Etruscans, who developed a science of reading omens and auspices and who practiced different means of divination. The Etruscans believed such signs were sent to them by Tages, a mythical boy said to have been ploughed up from the earth. They would seek to read the future by examining the entrails of sacrificial animals, the liver being of special importance for that purpose. They would observe lightning and interpret its meanings. And they would try to put meaning to any unusual phenomena that occurred.

The belief that objects or living beings could possess special spiritual properties was widespread in primitive societies. The Romans were no strangers to this idea. Stones, trees, springs, caves, lakes, swamps, mountains - even animals and furniture - were all deemed to be hosts to spirits (*numina*). Stones in particular were often seen to contain spirits, especially if they were boundary stones, dividing one man's property from the other. It is very telling that the Latin word for such a boundary is *terminus* and that there actually was a Roman god called Terminus. This odd deity took the form of a huge piece of rock that rested in the temple of Jupiter on the Capitoline Hill. Apparently several attempts to move the bolder when constructing the temple had failed. And so it remained within the temple, because it had 'refused to move, even for Jupiter'.

But Roman superstitions didn't end there. Children were told stories of nasty creatures who'd come to eat them if they weren't good. From the Greeks they had *Mormo*, a terrifying woman with donkey legs, and the Roman *Lamia* who stalked around looking for children to eat. Children were by far not the only ones to fear such bogey-men. The ghosts of the dead (*lemures*) roamed in all kinds of dark places. The Romans believed that some houses were haunted, if perhaps the house had been the scene of a crime, worse still, a murder. Nobody dared live within such haunted walls; few would even go near the place.

Werewolves (*verspilles*), men who would turn into wolves and roam with the real wolves, perhaps attack herds at night, before turning back to human form, were also a belief known to the Romans. Further there was the belief that some old women knew the art of changing their form into birds. The stormy north seas were also said to be teeming with ghastly monsters, some being shaped half man, half beast. Witches and vampires would sneak into house of a dead man to rob and mutilate his corpse, for example; eating its nose. The bodies of the dead were hence well watched over during the time before they were buried. Many Roman also wore amulets and lucky charms, to avert the 'evil eye'.

Marriages were planned for certain days and certain months to prevent them from being overshadowed by bad omen. One was to take care to cross the threshold of a house with one's left foot. It was an omen of disaster to have a black cat enter the house, have a snake fall from the roof into the yard, or for a beam of the house to split. To spill wine, oil or even water could also be the sign that bad things were about to happen. Another prophecy of bad luck was to meet a mule in the street carrying an herb called *hipposelinum*, which was used to decorate tombs.

Another strange superstition was that one could stop oneself from having unpleasant thoughts by moistening a finger with saliva and rubbing it across the skin behind the ear. If a cock would crow during a party, either the correct magic spell to overcome the bad omen needed to be cast or nothing was eaten that day. To stumble over the doorstep when leaving one's house was considered a bad omen. Many would choose to read this as a sign and hence spend the day at home. Never should one mention fire at a banquet, but if one does, one could remedy it by pouring water on the table.

While the educated upper classes may have been generally more enlightened, they were anything but immune to widespread superstitions. Nightmares were generally seen as bad omens. A bad dream might be reason enough for a lawyer to ask that his case be adjourned. The Historian Pliny the Elder tells of a M. Servilius Nonianus, who was one of the leading men in Rome, and who was terribly worried about losing his sight. To prevent this from happening he wore a lucky charm around his neck consisting of the two Greek letters *alpha* and *rho*. Consul Mucianus, too, suffered from the same fear of losing his eyesight. He sought to prevent it by carrying with him a live fly in a white cloth. Pliny the Elder reports that both methods were very successful in preventing the men from going blind.

The Sibylline Books

The Sibylline Books were consulted on the order of the Senate at times of crisis and calamity, in order to learn how the wrath of the gods could be allayed. The story goes that a sibyl (a sibyl was a Greek propheticess) offered to Tarquinius Superbus a collection of prophecies and warnings in the form of nine books at a high price. When he refused, she threw three of them into the fire and offered him the remaining six at the original price of the nine. He refused again and she burned three more and offered him the surviving three, still at the same price. This time he bought them, at what he could have paid for all nine. The Sibylline Books were accidentally burned in 83 BC, and envoys were sent all round the known world to collect a set of similar utterances. Augustus had the new collection put in the temple of Apollo on the Palatine Hill, where it remained until it was finally destroyed in the fifth century.

Auspices and Omens

Disasters were regarded as manifestations of divine disapproval, and unusual phenomena as portents of catastrophe. To hear of such phenomena could create panic in a society riddled with superstition, particularly in times of crisis. The very power of the Sibylline Books in Roman society illustrates just how seriously the relationship between Roman and the spiritual world was taken. No official state business was ever really held without the taking of omens and/auspices. For this purpose an augur would be present. He would mark out a square on the ground with his staff, from where the omens should be observed. Significantly though, he was not the man who actually took the sighting. This was left to a state official. The augur acted as his advisor. So, if the official would make out some birds flying by, he would call the augur to help interpret the meaning. For this many things would be of importance. What type of birds were they, where had they been, how high were they flying, how fast were they flying and where were they flying to? Even the army resorted to taking auspices. They carried with them cages with sacred chickens. When cake was crumbled onto the floor before them, if the chickens ate them, the omens were good, but if not, they were bad.

At the sea battle of Drepanum in 249 BC, the consul Claudius Pulcher is said to have thrown the sacred chickens overboard, once they refused to eat their cake. He commented, that if they did not eat, they could at least drink. It was clear that his subsequent catastrophic defeat in battle by the Carthaginians was blamed on his having ignored the auspices.

State business was fraught with difficulties regarding omens. New laws might even have to be declared invalid if the omens hadn't been observed. If a bad omen had been observed then one could raise this matter at the beginning of the meeting of the senate or other political assembly, and the house might well decide to close for business for the day. In 59 BC, during Caesar's consulship, the other consul, Marcus Bibulus, tried to stop Caesar's laws from being passed on religious grounds. He announced he would be staying at home and looking out for omens. Bibulus' attempt succeeded in making the assembly nervous, but it did not manage to defeat Caesar's legislation. Caesar eventually won the day and his laws were passed; yet they were regarded with some suspicion.

Aware of the cynical way in which politicians might exploit omens, there was a clear distinction made between omens reported by others and such which revealed themselves to all suddenly. For example, a

sudden bolt of lighting in the sky, or an epileptic fit by someone in the assembly was readily accepted. These could indeed be seen as grave matters. If lighting was observed during the taking of the auspices, then it was in fact deemed a good sign. But thereafter it was seen as bad. Epileptic fits were always seen as serious, so much so that some members might actually pretend to have one in order to hinder political plans of their opposition during these meetings.

In 114 BC a vestal virgin was struck by lighting. It struck terror into the hearts of Romans that such a symbol Rome should be killed by the gods. A committee was formed to investigate what brought about the wrath of the gods. Predictably, the committee concluded that it had been the vestal virgins themselves who had brought about such ill omens. Naturally, it was decided that the one killed by lighting had broken her vow of chastity and so had been punished by the gods. But so too other vestals were also convicted of having broken these vows. So dire was this crisis deemed that the senate called for the reading of the Sibylline Books. The books advised that there was only one horrendous remedy. And so, to allay the anger of the gods, two couples, one Greek and one Gallic, were buried alive.