

# HUI216

# Italian Civilization

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# 18.0 Announcements

- <http://www.campo7.com/hui216/>
- The midterms will be returned after the Spring break
- A makeup midterm will be scheduled soon for those who have missed the exam and have contacted me

# 18.1 The ancient Romans, polytheism, and the gods of other religions

- Ancient Romans can be defined as eclectic and superstitious
- They would routinely accept and recognize gods from other religions, as the Greeks sometimes did
  - See St. Paul in Athens at the [Areopagus](#) (Acts 17.16-34): he makes a reference to an altar, with the inscription "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD" and proceeds to explain that Jesus is in fact that divinity, for a long time unknown to them
  - That altar was actually supposed to provide appropriate recognition and the required sacrifices for all divinities that might exist in the universe but were unknown to the Greeks or the Romans: clearly a superstitious practice
- The Romans moved from their original polytheism to an inordinate multiplication of deities
- Later on, the deification of emperors contributed significantly to this 'inflation' of the supernatural beings

# 18.1 St. Paul in Athens at the Areopagus (*Acts* 17.16-34)

- 18 Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans, and of the Stoics, encountered him. And some said, What will this babbler say?... because he preached unto them Jesus, and the resurrection.
- 19 And they took him, and brought him unto Areopagus, saying, May we know what this new doctrine, whereof thou speakest, is?
- 22 Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars' hill, and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious.
- 23 For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, him declare I unto you.
- 24 God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands;
- 32 And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter.

# 18.1 The deification of Roman emperors

- The process of deification was called "apotheosis"
- Usually deified Emperors did not have a specific divine task to accomplish, or a particular domain in nature to supervise: they were presumed to guard over Roman society (in life as well as in death), passing down their political and human virtues to their successors
- Temples were entitled to single deified Emperors or to all of them as a group, and priests were assigned to these temples (the following link shows the remnants of one of these temples -- with all probabilities --, which was situated in Ostia, not too far from Rome):
  - <http://www.ostia-antica.org/regio1/11/11-1.htm>

# 18.1 The apotheosis in Rome

(from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01650b.htm>)

- In Rome the way for the deification of the emperors was prepared by many historic causes, such as the cult of the *manes* or the souls of departed friends and ancestors, the worship of the legendary kings of Latium, the *Di Indigetes*, the myth that Romulus had been transported to heaven, and the deification of Roman soldiers and statesmen by some of the Greek cities
- The formal enrollment of the emperors among the gods began with Caesar, to whom the Senate decreed divine honours before his death
- Through politic motives Augustus, though tolerating the building of temples and the organization of priestly orders in his honour throughout the provinces and even in Italy, refused to permit himself to be worshipped in Rome itself

# 18.1 The apotheosis in Rome

(from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01650b.htm>)

- Though many of the early emperors refused to receive divine honours, and the senate, to whom the right of deification belonged, refused to confirm others, the great majority of the Roman rulers and many members of the imperial family, among whom were some women, were enrolled among the gods
- While the cultured classes regarded the deification of members of the imperial family and court favorites with boldly expressed scorn, emperor-worship, which was in reality political rather than personal, was a powerful element of unity in the empire, as it afforded the pagans a common religion in which it was a patriotic duty to participate

# 18.1 The apotheosis in Rome

(from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01650b.htm>)

- The Christians constantly refused to pay divine honours to the emperor, and their refusal to strew incense was the signal for the death of many martyrs
- The custom of decreeing divine honours to the emperors remained in existence until the time of Gratian, who was the first to refuse the *insignia* of the Summus Pontifex and the first whom the senate failed to place among the gods

# 18.1 The early Christians and the meat of the Pagans

- An ancient Roman usually would sacrifice small animals, bringing them to the temple, to thank the gods or in exchange for protection and favors
- The pagan priests would roast the animal, leave a portion for a banquet or to be burned completely inside the temple, and they would sell the rest of the meat in the local markets
- This explains the situation described by St. Paul in the New Testament (1st letter to the Corinthians, chap. 8; ca. 56 CE)
  - So about the eating of meat sacrificed to idols, we know that "there is no idol in the world," and that "there is no God but one." ... But not all have this knowledge. There are some who have been so used to idolatry up until now that, when they eat meat sacrificed to idols, their conscience, which is weak, is defiled....

## 18.2 The Roman way of life: ancient Romans and other cultures

- The Roman way of life was based on moderate acceptance and tolerance of/by other cultures
- Assimilation of other cultures was achieved through the following:
  - The official language of the administrators
    - Latin and/or Greek
  - The economy, and social practices
    - currencies, taxes
    - rules and practices of trade (the institution of an ancient version of the 'global' market)
    - consumerism

# 18.2 The Roman way of life: ancient Romans and other cultures

- The unity of the Mediterranean (roads, ports and shipyards, public markets maintained and supported by the central government)
  - peace and stability was provided by the political system and by the military (*pax romana* [Roman peace])
- Roman citizenship (with legal/political rights) was gradually extended to all people living within the empire
  - The case of St. Paul: while St. Peter died on the cross, the apostle Paul was beheaded, a much less painful death, because he was a Roman citizen
  - The Roman emperors came from all areas of the empire, not just from Italy

# 18.3 The ancient Romans, the Jews, and the Christians

- The Romans apparently had a hard time getting along with Jews and Christians, probably because those two groups in turn appeared not to be willing to recognize and honor the gods and rituals/social practices of the Romans
  - Romans often were not able to distinguish between the two religions
  - The first Christians and the Jews had a lot in common (sacred texts, the practice of circumcision, later abandoned, as well as many rituals and prayers)
  - Christians (*Christianoi*, *Christiani*) were initially seen just as a sect of the Jews
    - Their pacifism was exaggerated by English historian Gibbon (in fact early on the Christian communities developed a modern position, according to which defensive wars are acceptable)
    - Their position on social reforms (such as the abolition of slavery and of private property) was relatively moderate: those reforms were sometimes encouraged and realized, not systematically enacted

# 18.3 The ancient Romans, the Jews, and the Christians: Messianism and politics

- Monotheism and Messianism were not compatible with the adoration of Roman emperors
  - Before Jesus and during his time, there was a strong political component inside to the idea of the new Kingdom of God
  - The Messiah was presumed to become a King, and to act as a revolutionary and military leader, not dissimilar from Moses and David
- The ancient Romans in the Holy Land
  - The military presence of pagans/gentiles in the sacred land of the Jews was hard to accept, and was perceived as a form of sacrilege

## 18.4 Tacitus on the Christians in Rome (64 CE): one of the oldest non-Christian sources on Jesus and his followers

- Nero... inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace
- Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilate, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular

## 18.4 Tacitus on the Christians in Rome (64 CE)

- An arrest was first made of all who pleaded guilty
- Then, upon their information, an immense multitude was convicted, not so much of the crime of firing the city, as of hatred against mankind
- Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt...

## 18.5 Pliny's letter to Trajan (circa 112 CE)

- ...this is the approach I have taken with everyone brought before me on the charge of being Christian
- I have asked them in person if they are Christians; and if they admit it, I repeat the question... with a warning of the sanction awaiting them
- If they persist, I order them to be led away for execution
- For, whatever the nature of their admission, I am convinced that their stubbornness and unshakeable obstinacy should not go unpunished
- Others as fanatical who are citizens of Rome I have listed to be remanded to the City for trial

# 18.5 Pliny's letter to the Emperor Trajan

- I considered dismissing any who denied that they were or ever had been Christians when they had recited after me an invocation of the gods and made offerings of wine and incense to your statue...
- They... declared that the totality of their guilt or error amounted to... this: they had met regularly before dawn on a certain day to chant verses... in honor of Christ as if to a god, and also to bind themselves with an oath, not in a criminal conspiracy, but to abstain from fraud, banditry, and adultery, to commit no breach of trust...
- After completing this foolishness, it was their custom to disperse and reassemble later to take food of a common and innocuous type...

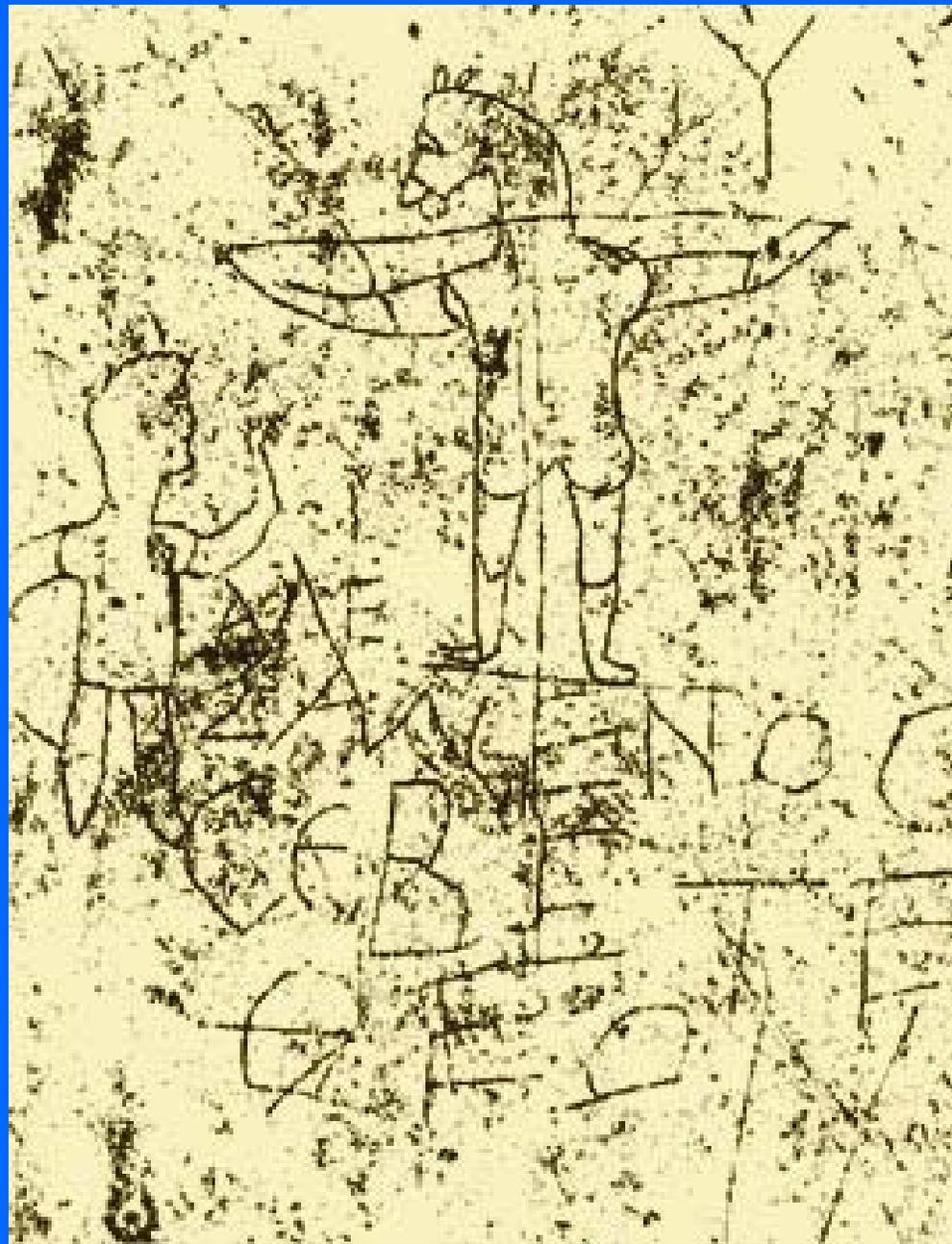
# 18.5 Pliny's letter to the Emperor Trajan

- It is not only the town, but villages and countryside as well which are infected through contact with this perverse superstition
- I think that it is still possible for it to be checked and directed to better ends...
- The sacred rites which had been allowed to lapse are again being performed, and the flesh of sacrificial meat is on sale everywhere, though until recently hardly anyone was buying it
  - [St. Paul, 1 Cor. 8.1-13](#)
  - The word *Pagan* derives from the Latin *paganus*, which is connected to the stem of the word *pagus* = village
  - As Pliny's report confirms, the new Christian religion spread first through the major cities of the empire, while the countryside remained loyal to the old religion for a longer time, in some cases even during the first centuries of the Middle Ages

## 18.6 Alexamenos and his god



"ALEXAMENOS WORSHIPS  
GOD" (transl. from Greek):  
graffiti from a room of the  
*Paedagogium* (school for  
servants of the Imperial  
Palace), on the Palatine Hill  
(Rome) [3<sup>rd</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century CE]



## 18.7 Excerpt from "Cocullo Snake charmers, A pagan and Christian tradition" by Elena Foresti

[http://www.abruzzoheritage.com/magazine/2001\\_04/0104\\_c.htm](http://www.abruzzoheritage.com/magazine/2001_04/0104_c.htm)

- The cult of San Domenico in Cocullo, one of the most pagan among Christian traditions, is of great ethnographic and historical interest
- San Domenico stayed in Cocullo only a short time, leaving to the village church one molar tooth and the iron shoe of his female mule, which are still jealously kept as precious relics
  - the horse shoe has healing power on the bites of animals, while the teeth heal the bite of poisonous snakes
- Scholars have shown how the figure of the Saint was superimposed to ancient rites and customs of pagan origin
- In Abruzzo snakes are common, and in old times their bites were frequent cause of death

## 18.7 Excerpt from "Cocullo Snake charmers, A pagan and Christian tradition" by Elena Foresti

- The Marsi, shepherds and fishermen who lived on the mountains and the coast of Lake Fucino, worshipped goddess Angitia, protector of snakes
- Near Luco dei Marsi there was a forest called "lucus Angitiae", sacred to the goddess, and to her in early spring snakes used to be sacrificed
- In the ancient world the Marsi were renowned for their power on poisonous snakes and in the 1st and 2nd century are recorded as healers and street fortune tellers in Rome
- In the course of the Middle Ages the Marsian religion disappeared, but the belief of magical powers on poisonous snakes and for analogy on rabid dogs were transferred in the popular culture to healing figures, who were called "ciarauli", who knew the secrets to capture snakes and heal from their bite

18.7 Cocullo's snake festival: for more pictures go to <http://digilander.libero.it/casoli/webcam/cocullo1.htm>



# 18.7 St. Anthony's feast in Capena

- BBC articles on the kids smoking in Capena
  - <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3409859.stm>
  - <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/4174431.stm>
- An article from the *Washington Times*
  - <http://washingtontimes.com/world/20040119-121424-3714r.htm>



## 18.8 Excerpts from Michael Carroll, *Madonnas that Maim. Popular Catholicism in Italy* -- Chapter 4, "The Dark Side of Holiness" (pp. 67-68)

- Ignazio Silone, *Pane e vino* (Bread and Wine), 1937
- *Pane e vino* tells the story of Pietro Spina, a political activist who returns to Italy after years of exile in order to foment revolution... Disguised as a priest, he lives for a few months in the country.
- Early in the novel, Spina finds himself in a donkey cart taking him toward the village where he will reside. The driver, a local, associates each feature of the landscape with some terrible event in the past: here is where a usurer was murdered, here is where a husband lay in wait to murder his wife's lover, there is where the Devil appeared to the driver's own brother, frightening his mule and causing it to plunge over the cliff, killing the brother.

## 18.8 Excerpts from Michael Carroll, *Madonnas that Maim* -- Chapter 4, "The Dark Side of Holiness"

- They also pass the chapel dedicated to Mary, under the title Our Lady of the Roses. The chapel commemorates an ancient miracle: roses had blossomed in January.
- But the miracle had not been welcomed either local population. On the contrary, it had caused panic, since the people believed the miracle presaged disaster. Sure enough, that summer the cholera struck.
- And why, Spina asks, did the people build the chapel? The driver responds that it was done to calm the Madonna down. The implication, in other words, is that Mary herself was responsible for the cholera and that she had stopped the epidemic only because she had been mollified by the building of the chapel...
- Silone has thus created a fictional incident that suggests that Italian Catholics see the Madonna herself to be a source of danger and that, in asking for the Madonna's protection, they are asking only that the Madonna not send calamities.

## 18.8 Excerpts from Michael Carroll, *Madonnas that Maim* -- Chapter 4, "The Dark Side of Holiness"

- Silone is not the only author to suggest that Mezzogiorno madonnas were seen in this way. Carlo Levi (1902-75) would later make the same point in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (Christ Stopped at Eboli).
- The novel was based upon Levi's experiences during his exile to an isolated village in Basilicata in 1935-36.
- In describing the festa of the Black Madonna of Viggiano as it was practiced in that village, Levi (1963) writes: "Homage was paid to her in abundance, but it was rather the homage due to power than that offered to charity. The Black Madonna was like the earth; it was in her power to raise up and destroy... To the peasants the Black Madonna was beyond good and evil. She dried up the crops and let them wither away, but at the same time she dispensed food and protection and demanded worship" (121).

## 18.8 Excerpts from Michael Carroll, *Madonnas that Maim* -- Chapter 4, "The Dark Side of Holiness"

- This Mary, like the one who appears in Silone's work, is hardly the Mary so favored by the Universal Church, the Virgin-Mother to whom saints and sinners turn for warmth and nurturance.
- Nor is she a representation of the feminine side of a loving God, which is how many liberal Catholic commentators now interpret Mary.
- Rather, the Mary who appears in these works is a powerful goddess, who demands worship and who is willing to use her immense power over nature to coerce human beings into honoring her.

## 18.9 St. Augustine (354-430)

- He was born in Thagaste (now Suk Arras, Algeria), and died in Hippo (South of the modern Bona)
  - Was he a berber?
  - St. Monica was St. Augustine's mother. She was a Christian, while St. Augustine's father was a pagan
  - In Chapt. 11-12 of book 9 of St. Augustine's *Confessions*, we can read about the circumstances of her death, in Milan, in the year 387, and we learn more about the relationship between mother and son. You can read the passage, if you want, at this web address:
    - <http://www.ccel.org/pager.cgi?&file=a/augustine/confessions/confessions-bod.html&from=12.7&up=a/augustine/confessions/confessions.html>

# 18.9 St. Augustine (354-430): the Manicheans, St. Ambrose

- Augustine was influenced by the Manichean heresy
- Manicheans emphasized the battle of good vs. evil, considered two almost equal powers
  - The temptation to embrace a dualistic vision of the universe, where everything is so reassuringly black and white, where two powerful forces such as Good and Evil fight over the control of human history, has always been very strong
  - That simplification presupposes reasons to be Christian that appear easier to understand and, most importantly, easier to represent in the routines of daily life. It is less complicated to think of oneself as a soldier fighting a constant battle against sin and sinners, in life and in society, than it is to find God's call and also meaningful, creative ways to infuse one's faith in the diverse fields and activities of life
- Augustine taught grammar and rhetoric in Thagaste, Carthage, Rome, then Milan (385)
- In Milan he met Ambrose, the city's bishop. From him he learned about the allegorical interpretation of the Bible and of life in general

# 18.9 St. Ambrose and the allegorical interpretation of the Bible

- The allegorical interpretation is based on the assumption that the Bible was directed by God to the Church in general, not just to a single group in a specific place, or to a community that lived during a certain time
- Everything in it has always meaning, and nothing is ever out of date or inapplicable to the present
  - God is constantly speaking to his creatures through his book (and through reality (nature and history))
  - The Christian has simply to uncover the hidden truth that is relevant for his/her own individual experience
- In the explanation of the Bible, Ambrose and the Fathers of the Church move constantly from the literal and historical interpretation of the text to a variety of allegorical interpretations

# 18.9 St. Ambrose and the allegorical interpretation of faith and life

- Both the Bible and human life are seen as having multiple layers of signification: through the Bible and through all kinds of events God is communicating with each individual
- "In allegorical exegesis the sacred text is treated as a mere symbol, or allegory, of spiritual truths. The literal, historical sense, if it is regarded at all, plays a relatively minor role, and the aim of the exegete is to elicit the moral, theological or mystical meaning which each passage, indeed each verse and even each word, is presumed to contain" (J.N.D. Kelly)
  - An example from the Old Testament: the allegorical interpretation of the episode of Jonah in the belly of the whale does not take away from the reality of Jonah's experience, and yet at the same time that story is read also as a prophecy of Jesus' death and resurrection, the belly symbolizing the tomb in which his body rested for three days

## 18.9 St. Augustine: the conversion

- 386: after a friend's visit, St. Augustine goes into his garden. He hears a child's voice repeating "*Tolle, lege*" ["Take up and read"]. He picks up St. Paul's epistles, and opens it at [Rom. 13](#)
  - In line with the allegorical interpretation of reality, we have to assume that the child's voice is really that of the neighbor's son, and yet those words are also spoken to Augustine by God, indirectly, because nothing ever happens by chance
  - Reality is in itself a book with multiple meanings, multiple levels of signification: everything has a literal and a historical meaning, but also speaks of something else
  - Of course this view is somewhat distant from our modern reasoning, and medieval literature, where allegory is present everywhere, can be difficult to read and easy to misunderstand or to oversimplify

## 18.9 St. Augustine: after the conversion

- St. Augustine's *Confessions*
  - Contains autobiographical chapters, which constitute probably the first modern autobiography (as a history of the heart, not just a journal of material events)
- Easter of 387: he is baptized by Ambrose
- Back in Africa he becomes a priest, then the Bishop of Hippo



18.9 Benozzo  
Gozzoli, San  
Gimignano  
(Tuscany): "Take up  
and read" (1465)

18.9 Benozzo  
Gozzoli, San  
Gimignano  
(Tuscany): "The  
baptism of St.  
Augustine" (1464)

