

HUI216

Italian Civilization

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8.1 The Roman poet Lucretius (99/94-55/51 BCE)

- The exact dates of his birth and death, reported differently by IV- and V-century Christian scholars, are not known
- He came from a wealthy Northern Italian family
- He went to study Greek philosophy in Naples, a city which had been a Greek colony (its ancient name, *Neapolis*, means "new city" in Greek), and had maintained through the centuries its status of cultural center of southern Italy, with a particular emphasis on the Greek roots of that area's culture

8.1 The life and death of Roman poet Lucretius

- According to Latin sources, he wrote his masterpiece poem, *On the Nature of Things*, "per intervalla insaniae" (=during the intermissions of his insanity)
- According to tradition, he became crazy after drinking a love potion (cf. [Tennyson's poem](#)): modern scholars have argued that he might have suffered from manic depression
- The great Cicero (lawyer, politician, intellectual and master of the art of rhetoric), edited and published the poem after Lucretius's death (it was suicide, according to tradition)

8.2 Lucretius: *On the Nature of Things*

- This poem was not written with the intention of entertaining the readers with a piece of aesthetically beautiful literature; it is a didactic poem, composed to teach about a particular vision of nature and the world
- Lucretius's poem shows the great influence that Greek culture (especially literature, philosophy and historiography) had on Roman civilization
- The poem was inspired by the ideas of Greek philosophers such as Democritus (460/70-370/61 BCE) and Epicurus
 - Democritus believed that everything in nature is the result of the combination of atoms (the smallest indivisible particles of matter) and void
 - He also believed that our five senses are stimulated by atoms: we see because small atoms travel from the object that we see to our eyes, we hear because atoms enter our ears, etc.

8.2 *On the Nature of Things*: atomism

- You may learn more about Lucretius' essential role in the preservation and the transmission of the ancient theories of atomism, and about the relevance that those theories had during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and into the 19th-century, when you read passages from chapter 1 of the 2001 book written by David Lindley, entitled *Boltzmann's Atom: The Great Debate That Launched A Revolution In Physics*, posted in the site of the *Washington Post*

8.2 Lucretius and Epicurus

- Epicurus (341-271 BCE), another Greek philosopher that Lucretius had studied in Naples, developed Democritus's ideas (especially in the field of ethics)
 - Epicurus believed that men should seek the maximum of pleasure (which is to be found through the use of moderation in all areas of life), the minimum of pain
 - He wanted to dispel fear of death, and the fear of the gods
 - He thought that gods might exist in the *intermundia*, spaces with rarefied matter found between the planets
 - Therefore the gods could not possibly care about humans, and had no interest in punishing or rewarding them
 - Avoidance of politics was considered to be a safe measure by Roman Epicureans, while members of the Roman elite who subscribed to the Stoic philosophy emphasized selflessness and the highest respect for morals and for social duties

8.3 The ancient Romans and religion

- The poet Lucretius's perspective on the traditional practices and beliefs of the pagan religion was not really unique
- Even some of the great Roman authors condemned and satirized widespread superstition in Roman society, and exposed the superficiality of a relationship with the supernatural based mostly on material exchanges: sacrifices in return for good health, happiness and prosperity
- The first Christians, and the "Fathers of the Church" later on finished the job, so to speak, attacking pagan religions with no mercy, to the point of losing perspective entirely
 - Roman religion may have been somewhat primitive, but it was a religion nonetheless, a legitimate attempt to fill up needs and answer questions that each individual may have

8.3 The religion of ancient Romans: sacrificial offerings

- Rituals such as those of the Romans, especially sacrificial offerings, can acquire a very deep meaning and value
- In the case of the Romans, though, their religious practices are often considered 'primitive' not because those practices involved sacrificing animals, which is common in many religions to this day
- The problem (if you want to call it that), in the case of Roman religion, is the almost completely mechanical approach to the sacrifice, the fact that the ritual itself could mean little or nothing to the person who performed it, and still be presumed to be 'effective': this undoubtedly is closer to superstition or magic (following the meaning of this term in popular fiction and fables), than to religion
- This lack of spiritual depth, of a more personal connection with their divinities, in the end, really contributed to the decline of Paganism and facilitated the success of Christian religion in many areas of the empire

8.3 Religion as a social practice in ancient Rome

- Religion, in Roman society, was for the most part a social or formal practice, rather than a personal, deep spiritual experience
- Private rituals were performed to thank or ingratiate the gods: their success and their value did not really depend on the personal beliefs or the faith of the individual who performed that ritual
- Rather it is the ritual itself that seems to have had a quasi-magical power
- Apotropaic formulae and gestures, in the private life of the Romans, were apparently more common than personal prayers
 - apotropaic is an adjective that designates a ritual, a formula or a gesture used to prevent bad luck or to defend from evil forces

8.3 Superstition -- Ethics, religion and politics

- the Romans believed in the evil eye, as many Italians of today do (although this belief was later combined with Christian elements and symbols: oil, water, the time and place for the transmission of the apotropaic formulae etc.)
- archeological excavations have unearthed ancient Roman amulets shaped like a hand, making gestures that are exactly those used today in some areas of Italy
- Ethics in Roman society was supported largely by philosophy, by the social values and the law, rather than by religion alone
- Religion was often intertwined with politics
 - From a wall inscription in Pompeii (ca. 79 CE): "The worshipers of Isis as a body ask for the election of Gnaeus Helvius Sabinus as Aedile"

8.4 Seneca and the practice of self-examination, from his work *On anger*

- All our senses ought to be trained to endurance. They are naturally long-suffering, if only the mind desists from weakening them. This should be summoned to give an account of itself every day.
- Sextius had this habit, and when the day was over and he had retired to his nightly rest, he would put these questions to his soul: "What bad habit have you cured today? What fault have you resisted? In what respects are you better?"
- Anger will cease and become controllable if it finds that it must appear before a judge every day. Can anything be more excellent than this practice of thoroughly sifting the whole day?

8.4 Seneca and the practice of self-examination, from his work *On anger*

- And how delightful the sleep that follows this self-examination--how tranquil it is, how deep and untroubled, when the soul has either praised or admonished itself, and when this secret examiner and critic of self has given report of its own character!
- I avail myself of this privilege, and every day I plead my cause before the bar of self.
- When the light has been removed from sight, and my wife, long aware of my habit, has become silent, I scan the whole of my day and retrace all my deeds and words.

8.4 Seneca and the practice of self-examination, from his work *On anger*

- I conceal nothing from myself, I omit nothing. For why should I shrink from any of my mistakes, when I may commune thus with my self?
- "See what you never do that again; I will pardon you this time. In that dispute you spoke too offensively; after this don't have encounters with ignorant people; those who have never learned do not want to learn.
- You reprov'd that man more frankly than you ought, and consequently you have not so much mended him as offended him. In the future, consider not only the truth of what you say, but also whether the man to whom you are speaking can endure the truth. A good man accepts reproof gladly; the worse a man is the more bitterly he resents it"

8.4 Seneca and self-examination, from the philosophical dialogue *On the tranquillity of the soul*

- SERENUS: When I made examination of myself, it became evident, Seneca, that some of my vices are uncovered and displayed so openly that I can put my hand upon them, some are more hidden and lurk in a corner, some are not always present but recur at intervals; and I should say that the last are by far the most troublesome, being like roving enemies that spring upon one when the opportunity offers, and allow one neither to be ready as in war, nor to be off guard as in peace. Nevertheless the state in which I find myself most of all--for why should I not admit the truth to you as to a physician? --is that I have neither been honestly set free from the things I hated and feared, nor, on the other hand, am I in bondage to them; while the condition in which I am placed is not the worst, yet I am complaining and fretful--I am neither sick nor well.

8.5 Cato the Elder, The Harvest Ritual, circa 160 BCE

- Before the harvest the sacrifice of the pig must be offered in this manner
- Offer a sow... to Ceres before you harvest spelt, wheat, barley, beans, and turnip seed
- Offer a prayer, with incense and wine, to Janus, Jupiter and Juno, before offering the sow
- Offer a pile of cakes to Janus, saying, "Father Janus, in offering these cakes to you, I humbly pray that you will be propitious and merciful to me and my children, my house and my household."
- Then make an offering of cake to Jupiter with these words: "In offering you this cake, O Jupiter, I humbly pray that you, pleased with this offering, will be propitious and merciful to me and my children, my house and my household."

8.5 The prayer of Scipio Africanus (Livy, *History of Rome*, bk. XXIX, 27, 1-4)

- As a military expedition is about to set sail to attack Carthage in 204 BCE, the Roman general Scipio Africanus, offers to the Roman Gods the following prayer
 - Ye gods and goddesses, who inhabit the seas and the lands, I supplicate and beseech you that whatever has been done under my command, or is being done, or will later be done, may turn out to my advantage and to the advantage of the people and the commons of Rome, the allies, and the Latins who by land or sea or on rivers follow me, [accepting] the leadership, the authority, and the auspices of the Roman people; that you will support them and aid them with your help; that you will grant that, preserved in safety and victorious over the enemy, arrayed in booty and laden with spoils, you will bring them back with me in triumph to our homes; that you will grant us the power to take revenge upon our enemies and foes; and that you will grant to me and the Roman people the power to enforce upon the Carthaginians what they have planned to do against our city, as an example of [divine] punishment.

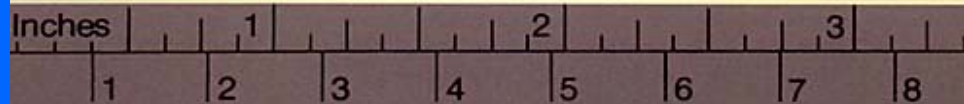
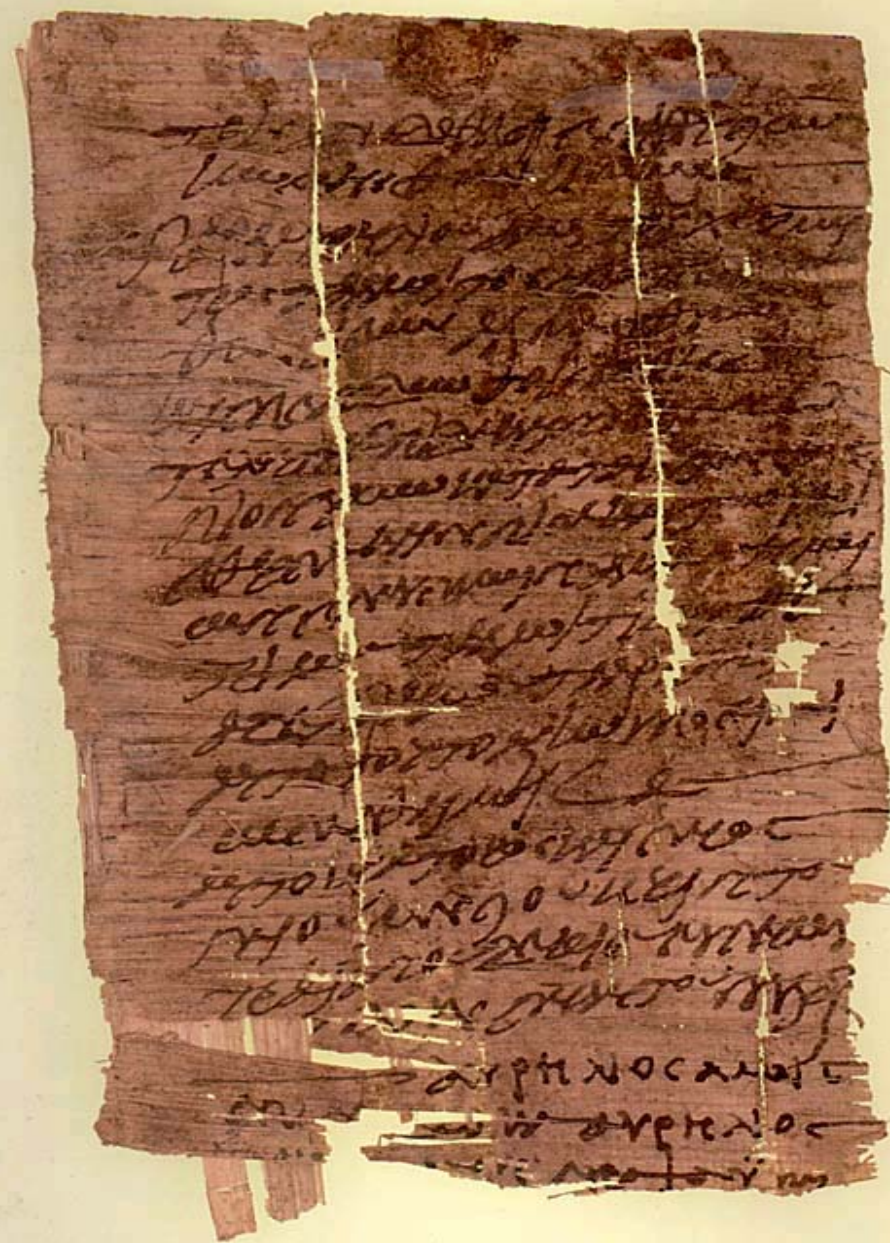
8.5 Actual inscriptions from Roman temples

- Thanks to Jupiter Leto, that my wife bore a child
- Thanks to Silvanus, from a vision, for freedom from slavery
- Thanks to Jupiter, that my taxes were lessened
- Am I to be sold?
- Shall I get the money?
- Is my lover who is away from home alive?
- Am I to profit by the transaction?
- Is my property to be put up at auction?
- Shall I be appointed as an ambassador?
- Am I to become a senator?
- Am I to be divorced from my wife?

8.5 Certificate of sacrifice to the traditional pagan gods (250 CE)

- To the Commissioners of Sacrifice of the Village of Alexander's Island [Egypt]
- From Aurelius Diogenes, the son of Satabus, of the Village of Alexander's Island, age 72....
- I have always sacrificed regularly to the gods, and now, in your presence, in accordance with the edict, I have done sacrifice, and poured the drink offering, and tasted of the sacrifices, and I request you to certify the same...
- Handed in by me, Aurelius Diogenes
- I certify that I saw him sacrificing... [signature]
- Done in the first year of the Emperor, Caesar Gaius Messius Quintus Trajanus Decius Pius Felix Augustus... [June 26, 250 CE]

8.5 Certificate of pagan sacrifice
ca. 250 CE



8.6 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

8.6 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.

8.6 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>

8.6 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

8.6 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

8.6 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

8.6 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....

8.7 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

8.7 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

8.8 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

8.8 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

8.8 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

8.8 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...

8.9 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

8.9 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...

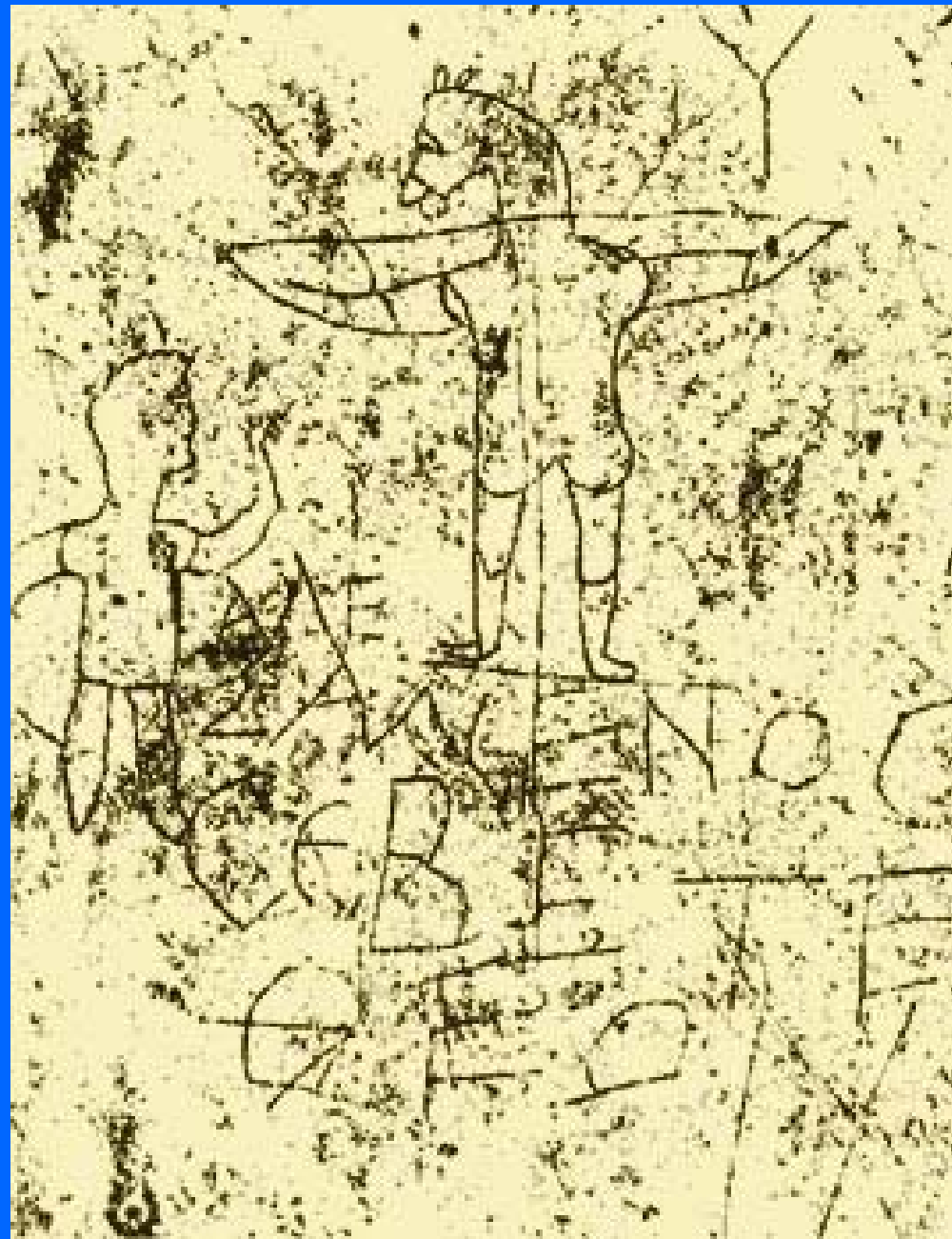
8.9 Pliny's letter to the Emperor Trajan

- 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

8.10 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) [3rd-4th century CE]



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

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

8.11 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

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



8.11 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>



8.12 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.

8.12 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.

8.12 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).

8.12 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.