INTRODUCTION

This book is concerned with the concept of ‘god’ in the city of Rome, as it was, by and large, confined within the Aurelian Walls. The book’s timeframe is the early Republic up to the era of Constantine, i.e. from ca. 500 B.C. to 350 A.D. I will sometimes draw on material that falls outside these local and chronological boundaries, most notably in the case of the cult of Dea Dia, which although situated at the fifth milestone of the Via Campana is immediately relevant to the situation in Rome.

The concept of ‘god’ forms an important part of the broader category of ‘Roman Religion’ but it is not identical with it. In other words, this book is limited to the single concept that was normally labeled ‘deus’ by the inhabitants of Rome. It refers to other concepts which belong to the sphere of ‘Roman Religion’ only as constituents of this concept of ‘god’. These constituent concepts could not be discussed in their own right due to the lack of space and in order not to blur the clarity of the main argument.

Before embarking on my own project I will attempt to sketch some main lines of interpretation in modern scholarship. These lines are not always clearly visible and straight. There were numerous intersections and revisions not only in the work of adherents of different schools, but often within the œuvre of a single scholar. Since it would be presumptuous to try to summarize here the tortuous path of scholarship on Roman religion in general I will concentrate on those aspects that are relevant to my own enterprise. Although the concept of ‘god’ cannot always be completely detached from the wider term ‘Roman religion,’ emphasis, as I have said above, will be laid on the former.

Twentieth-century scholarship on Roman Religion in general, and on the Roman concept of ‘god’ in particular, begins with Georg Wissowa’s two monumental editions of his ‘Religion und Kultus der Römer’, the first of which was published in 1902 followed by a second, enlarged and partly rewritten version in 1912. At a time when religious studies were often under the dazzling influence of Frazer’s comparative approach (couched in the Cambridge scholar’s powerful language), Wissowa explicitly followed his mentor Mommsen in insisting on the
uniqueness and individuality (one of his most favoured terms was ‘*Eigenart*’) of Roman religion.¹ He stated bluntly that, as far as Roman religion was concerned, he “could not gain anything substantial” from Fraser’s writings.²

Wissowa’s *Religion und Kultus* consisted of three parts: (a) a historical overview, (b) individual deities, and (c) forms of veneration. The book was unmistakably organized along the lines of the structure and terminology of Varro’s *Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum*.³ The middle section, on individual deities, was divided into subsections dealing with indigenous gods and various categories of foreign and newly created deities that had entered the Roman pantheon at some stage. This middle section was by far the most extensive part of the book, showing Wissowa’s emphasis on individual deities. Here he gave a masterly account of all material that could be reasonably connected with all those divine entities whose existence was somehow attested for the Roman pantheon, starting with Ianus and Iuppiter (the first two of the forty-one chapters of this section). Wissowa here arranged the archaeological and philological material in a Varronian fashion around stereotyped Latin categories, such as the names of individual gods, festivals, priesthoods etc. In other words, his method rested predominantly on the notion of individual, largely self-contained, and clearly labeled Varronian categories that formed the grid on which Roman religious life/society could be systematically reconstructed. Wissowa’s unique command of the material and the clarity of his argument remain unrivalled more than a century after the publication of *Religion und Kultus*. His importance has been duly acknowledged by modern scholars, even by those whose approaches differ substantially from his own. For instance, Dumézil wrote in 1966: “Wissowa’s manual needs to be brought up to date and, with regard to its doctrine, corrected in large part. Nevertheless it remains the best; it has not been replaced”. And in 1998 John Scheid labelled Wissowa’s *Religion und Kultus* “the greatest ever handbook on Roman religion”.⁴

Twenty years after Wissowa, Franz Altheim published his *Römische Religionsgeschichte* (1931–1933). Altheim explicitly acknowledged Wissowa

¹ Wissowa 1912, viii.
² Wissowa 1912, 248 n. 3. For Wissowa’s life and work cf. *FS* III, 1557–1566.
³ *FS* III, 1564–1566.
as his predecessor, stating that his own aim was merely “to assign to Roman religion its place in the historical development of Rome”. He claimed that “it [i.e. a history of Roman religion] can only be understood as a part of a coherent whole, which, regarded from another standpoint, presents itself to us as the history of Roman literature, of Roman art, of Roman law, and which, like every history, has its focus in the history of the state”. In fact, Altheim’s book only shifted the emphasis from the systematic to the historical dimension by remaining faithfully Wissowian in terms of method (taking as a starting point, once again, a number of preconceived Varronian categories). Besides this, its emphasis on the ‘history of the state’, as is apparent from the passage just quoted, completely failed to consider a fundamental aspect of ancient Rome: society.

When Kurt Latte published his Römische Religionsgeschichte in the series Handbuch der Altertumswissenschaft in 1960, it was intended to replace Wissowa’s work. However, by fusing Wissowa’s systematic description of Roman gods in the Varronian manner with Altheim’s historical account, Latte produced a hybrid with a rather bewildering structure. Thus one would find chapters on Bona Dea and Sol and Luna, next to a chapter on the cult of personifications, followed by chapters on lectisternia, supplications and Secular Games, all this under the heading of ‘new forms’.5 In other words, Latte’s approach, trying to be both systematic and historical at the same time, was found wanting on both accounts.

Before turning to reactions against the Wissowian and other approaches that depended on it, the work of Georges Dumézil must be mentioned. From the early 1940’s on, Dumézil developed a new structural approach to Indo-European religious institutions and mythologies, claiming the existence of a tripartite structure of sovereignty, warrior force and economic prosperity. This interpretation, most elaborately represented in the 1958 book L’idéologie tripartite des Indo-Européens, has found no lasting support. Its basic methodological problem is the assumption that linguistic affinity (as demonstrated by an Indo-European provenience) leads to conceptual affinity (i.e. a tripartite structure), while its fundamental heuristic deficit is the lack or (at any rate) dearth of convincing mutually comparable tripartite structures. However, it is all too easy to overlook the fact that many of Dumézil’s arguments operate independently

5 Latte 1960, 228–248.
of his main thesis. To take an example pertinent to the topic of this book, Dumézil’s excellent discussion of the difference between the two terms *deus* and *numen* and the conclusions drawn from it against Rose’s notion of predeism in early Rome is still fundamentally valid. Many of his source analyses are still unsurpassed and have influenced modern scholars such as Scheid much more profoundly than his contested theory of tripartite structures.

The views of Wissowa and his successors were never seriously challenged until the last quarter of the twentieth century, when they came under heavy attack from ‘new’ historians and social scientists alike.

Historians started to question Wissowa’s premise that whatever a flawed and arbitrary tradition may hide from us, a native contemporary Roman such as Varro would actually have known what Roman religion really looked like. A major exponent of these modern sceptics was John North. In his contribution to *CAH* published in 1989, he turned away from Varro, or any Varro for that matter, as an ‘objective’ source of Roman religion. He prefaced his contribution with the words: “The purpose of this introduction… is to challenge the validity of the ‘established’ versions of the ‘history’ of Roman religion and to show why any attempt at writing such a history would produce no more than another arbitrary synthesis”. Any knowledge about Roman religion earlier than the Republic, including, of course, the ‘knowledge’ found in Varro’s *Antiquitates*, was called into question by North, essentially for three reasons: 1. Varro himself would hardly have access to reliable information concerning the distant past, 2. we know about Varro mainly via mediating, and mostly biased, Christian sources, 3. any scholar, whether ancient or modern, would give only his personal account of Roman religion, even if he had (theoretically) all material available. True, all scholars since Wissowa had concerned themselves with the question of sources, but few, if any, up to then had called into question so vigorously the desirability (as opposed to the feasibility) of the reconstruction of a Varronian model.

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Apart from the ‘new’ historians, the Wissowian model has of late been contested by scholars employing the methods of social sciences. Émile Durkheim, one of the earliest and most influential sociologists dealing with the social dimension of ‘god’, may be singled out to illustrate my point. It is a strange irony that in the same year, in which the second edition of Wissowa’s *Religion und Kultus* appeared, Émile Durkheim published his last, and arguably most famous book, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. For it was presumably this book more than any other that irrevocably pushed the aspect of society into the spotlight of the study of religion and thus turned directly against Wissowa’s approach based on *Varronian categories*. A passage from Durkheim’s work dealing with the notion of ‘gods’ is worth quoting in full: “Indeed, in the first instance, a god is a being whom man imagines superior to himself in some respects and on whom he thinks he depends. Whether this involves a sentient personality, like Zeus or Yahweh, or a play of abstract forces like those in totemism, the faithful in either case believe they are held to certain kinds of behavior imposed by the nature of the sacred principle with which they are engaged. Now, society also arouses in us the sensation of perpetual dependence. Because it has its own nature separate from ours as individuals, it pursues ends that are equally its own: but because it can reach them only through us, it imperiously commands our cooperation. Society requires us to become its servants, forgetting our own interests, and compels us to endure all sorts of hardships, privations, and sacrifice without which social life would be impossible. Thus we are constantly forced to submit to rules of thought and behavior that we have neither devised nor desired, and that are sometimes even contrary to our most basic inclinations and instincts.” In his own words, Durkheim set out to show “something essentially social in religion”.

Whatever flaws scholars may have detected in Durkheim’s totemistic approach, his decision to view religion—and more relevant to our topic, the nature of deities—from the viewpoint of society, rather than viewing society from the viewpoint of certain postulated categories (such as, e.g., Wissowa’s Varronian terms), was shared by the mainstream of sociologists from Max Weber to Pierre Bourdieu and Jürgen Habermas.

In the field of Roman religion, the sociological approach did not gain momentum until the early 1990’s. Two monographs of Jörg Rüpke

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9 Durkheim 2001, 154f., 318 [first French 1912].
paved the way for its broader acceptance. Especially important for our context is his 1995 monograph on the Roman calendar, which is in many parts a study of the notion of time in Roman society. Since the concept of ‘time’ will be considered here as one of the constituent concepts of Roman ‘gods’, Rüpke’s sociological approach is highly relevant to the contents of this book.

Apart from more theory-oriented scholars such as the aforementioned, some, among them most prominently John Scheid, followed a more conservative path (without falling back upon Wissowa). Scheid preferred (and still prefers) detailed philological research (he himself edited the *Acta Arvalium* and recently translated Augustus’ *Memoirs*) to more theoretical approaches. Most relevant for the general outlook of this book is his *La religion des Romains*, originally published in 1998. In chapter 9 Scheid tried to describe the general outlook of Roman gods, dealing not with individual gods, but with concepts of ‘god’ in general (though he does not use the word ‘concept’).

Arguably the most important publication in the field of Roman religion in the post-Wissowian era is the first volume of *Religions of Rome* (here quoted as *RoR*) by Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, published in 1998. The book has the sub-title *A History*, as opposed to the second volume, *A Sourcebook*, which offers translations of the most important sources. Apart from its didactic virtues, the volume constitutes a landmark, because it attempts to take into account the new historical and sociological criticism of the preceding decades, as just outlined.

With regard to the new historical perspective, the book title of *RoR* speaks of “religions” in the plural. Thereby, the three authors intended to highlight two things: firstly, what was going on in the religious sphere was not to be perceived as a single set of concepts (i.e. a “religion”) of which the participant could activate certain facets according to context (so Wissowa); there were numerous such sets of concepts (i.e. “religions”), that circulated at the same time and differed according to social, historical and individual context. Secondly, ‘religions’ in the plural meant, as already set out in North’s magisterial contribution to *CAH*², that any interpreter of religious phenomena, whether Varro, Livy, Macrobius or a modern scholar, such as Wissowa, Altheim, Latte, or the authors of *RoR* themselves, would not just reconstruct his or her own version

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of an ‘originally’ single set of concepts, but different sets of concepts, again according to the contexts in which he or she wrote and lived. By questioning both the desirability and feasibility of a single, ‘accurate’ description of Roman religion the British authors essentially pulled the rug from under Wissowa’s approach.

With regard to the societal perspective of RoR, the shift of emphasis as compared to Wissowa, Altheim, Latte and others is made strikingly clear for instance by the fact that RoR dedicates a rather small section to Roman deities, and this section is programmatically called ‘Gods and goddesses in the life of Rome’. While Wissowa and his followers had paid excessive attention to individual deities and made them the backbone of their analysis in an unmistakably Varronian manner, RoR dealt with the issue briefly and in connection with the Roman lifeworld, i.e. social reality.\(^\text{12}\)

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Where does this labyrinth of partly intertwined, partly mutually contradicting approaches leave the present book?

It should be said right at the outset that the book is written on the premise that there is no exact correlation between words (such as god, deus) and concepts. Rather, I hold that underlying concepts frequently develop in various directions, while the actual linguistic terms used for these concepts remain unaltered. This insight is not new. For instance, the authors of RoR are careful to point out that “the paradox is that some of the biggest changes in Roman religion lurk behind the most striking examples of outward continuity, behind exactly the same phrases repeated in wildly different contexts.”\(^\text{13}\) In our specific case, this means that the Latin deus does denote different concepts according to context, and also that other Latin terms (such as numen or divus) can take its place. I am thus concerned with clusters of concepts that would normally be addressed as ‘deus’, but I will not limit myself to Latin terminology in the Varronian manner.

This book attempts a descriptive approach to historical evidence. As a consequence of its descriptive nature and limitation to the historical material, it will completely ignore (outdated) evolutionary theories of Roman religion that are predominantly concerned with Roman

\(^{12}\) RoR 1, 30–40.

\(^{13}\) RoR 1, xii.
prehistory or the development from the prehistorical to the historical age (Frazer, Mannhardt etc.). In other words, its aim is to set out the conceptual boundaries of the term ‘god’ in a systematic fashion, which can be verified by historical and archaeological data, without actually trying to establish under what circumstances and in what historical sequence these boundaries came to pass or were violated in turn. It may be noted, though, that all too often these boundaries (and their violation) seem to me to be arbitrary and subject to unpredictable contingencies rather than following a certain rule (as postulated by the theories just mentioned). Still, the boundaries, I believe, are there and can be located as such with precision.

I propose to analyze the concept of ‘god’ by looking into the constituent concepts from which it is formed. I single out six: space, time, personnel, function, iconography and ritual. Of course, there may be others, but these six seem to me to be the most important. It is a working assumption (which I intend to prove in the course of the book) that whatever changes the concept of ‘god’ acquires in the course of time, these changes manifest themselves in its constituent concepts. So when we speak of a transformation of the concept of ‘god’/‘deus’, we actually mean a change in one or more of its constituent concepts.

While the first section of the book (‘Constituent Concepts’) is thus concerned with an analysis of the concept of ‘god’ in terms of the six constituent concepts, the second part (‘Conceptualization’) will describe the reverse process, i.e. the formation of the concept of ‘god’ from the constituent concepts and its dissolution. The third part (‘A Test Case: The Secular Games of 17 B.C.’) will attempt to apply the conceptual approach to a specific and well attested historical event. Finally, the last chapter (‘Concepts and Society’) endeavours to relate the concept of ‘god’ to various groups of Roman society.

There are already numerous studies on individual gods, more often than not employing the six constituent categories of concepts of this book in one way or another in order to highlight the individual traits of a specific deity. Such studies tend to throw into high relief the nature(s) and development of the specific deity and its differences from other deities in the pantheon. As far as the more general concept of ‘god’ is concerned, it seems to have been considered more or less unproblematic by modern scholarship. For instance, most scholars would not hesitate to count the so-called ‘functional gods’ among the category of ‘gods’, although the latter may often have much less in common with the greater gods than, say, a semi-divine figure such as Aeneas (who
however, is normally dealt with under the rubric of ‘heroes’). Only in those relatively rare instances in which the concept of ‘god’ patently overlaps with other concepts (such as that of ‘human being’, ‘demon’, ‘fetish’ etc.), do scholars appear eager to define the meaning of each of these concepts more accurately. This book attempts to remedy this lack of eagerness. Its ambition is to fill a gap that appears to have existed already in Wissowa’s seminal work (which took for granted the meaning of the concept of ‘god’) and was from there bequeathed to the modern approaches of ‘new historians’ and ‘sociologists’ alike.

As for the structure of this book, it should be said that the idea of six constituent concepts was inspired by Scheid’s analysis of Roman religion in his La religion des Romains.14 Those who consult the latter’s table of contents will realize that its central chapters 4–9 deal with what I will here call ‘constituent concepts’. Our differences lie in the fact that I restrict myself to the single concept of ‘god’, not the much broader concept of ‘Roman religion’, and that I add ‘functions’ and ‘iconography’ as new constituent concepts.

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14 Scheid 2003a.