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.