

The Priests of Jupiter. The septemviri epulones college in Roman public religion

Roman religion is a very important research field for the history of Ancient Rome. The Ancient concept of religion was completely different from that to which Christianity has habituated us. In the centre of Roman religion were to be found not so much the emotions felt towards the gods, or thoughts about them within a stiff theological framework, but rather the performance of religious acts, correctly and in accordance with the customs of the ancestors, and the most important of these acts was the making of offerings. The most important god in the Roman pantheon was Jupiter, honoured in the centre of the life of the citizens, that is in the temple on the Capitol, but also during ceremonies which were not only religious, e.g. during the *ludi*, that is the games held in honour of the gods.

Roman religion was a part of the social reality experienced by the inhabitants of Rome. Jupiter presented the best picture of its citizenship aspect. A special priestly body – *septemviri epulones* was founded in order to make offerings in his honour, *epulum Iovis*. *Epulum* was a kind of ritual feast organised twice a year, in September and November, during the Roman games dedicated to Jupiter (*ludi Romani*) and the Plebian games (*ludi Plebeii*). Romans on the Capitol 'entertained' three gods who were honoured in the temple, placing a couch there for Jupiter and chairs for Juno and Minerva. The bloodless nature of this ritual – important with regard to the heroes and the location in which it took place – enables us to put forward the theory that sacrifice in itself was at the centre of Roman religion, not blood offerings. This inconsequential, it would seem, shift in emphasis seems to bring significant consequences along with it, as it values the individual religious experiences of Romans, returning to every sacrificial ritual its important place. This entails the necessity to research Latin ritual terms and to create a dictionary. Emphasis on the analysis of ritual feasts in honour of Jupiter also enables a renewed emphasis on the role of this god, who in the latest literature has been pushed into the background. This is the second aim of the project.

A fresh look at the issue of sacrifices and the role of Jupiter leads to the third aim laid down in the project, that is an analysis of the activities of the college *septemviri epulones*. In Ancient Rome the priests did not constitute a separate social group, they were taken from the elite circles. This is why it seems correct to describe them as 'cult functionaries'. Research on the priests is always research on the elite of the most powerful imperium of the Ancient world, which forms a significant reference point for today's world, too. This is why one of the results of the project will be the preparation of a list of the members of the college, along with information which will enable the tracing of their career paths.

Roman religion was a public religion, which played out within the space of the city. Hence the activities of the *epulones* and the celebration of Jupiter's feasts within the context of the Roman and Plebian games surpassed by far the purely religious aspect, which was by its very nature limited to the framework of the citizen's religion. The *epulones* worked on the scale of the whole community, just as Jupiter was the god who took care of the whole nation. Hence this project enables a full picture of the activities of the college to be presented, without limiting it to the purely ritual aspects alone, but also as part of the building of a new cultural identity for the whole imperium. It must however be mentioned that the college was founded in 196 BC., that is directly after the II Punic war, which was a significant event for the Italic peoples.

This project attempts to go beyond the two currently reigning models of research on Roman religion. The first of them involves treating religion as a state function, while the second, valuing individual approaches to religion, lifts it out of the social framework, which it fitted into, by functioning as a public and domestic cult.

A project designed in this way needs to perform research with the help of traditional methods, suitable for the toolbox of those researching the history of the Ancient world, mainly philological methods. However the planned sphere of the research in a sense forces us to reach for methods which have been worked out by other fields in the humanities, mainly cultural anthropology and religious studies. The planned dictionary of ritual terms is an example of the emic perspective, that is, looking at the Roman religious experience through the eyes of the Romans themselves.