In the popular film *Gladiator* (2000), the fictional Roman hero Maximus participates in a cult of the dead in which he treats his dead parents as gods, worships them as individuals by name, and prays to them for assistance in preserving his life. The film, of course, is not one that viewers usually cite for its historical fidelity. Indeed, it ends with a jaw-dropping resolution to the film’s political situation in which the Romans restore the Republican form of government (!) following the death of the emperor Commodus in the late second century AD. A number of other major historical errors are easy to spot. It is interesting, therefore, to note that the screenwriters were correct in their presentation of the cult of the dead, at least in some of its general features. The Romans did deify their dead, worship them as individual gods, and pray to them to extend their lives. This was the cult of the *manes*, Rome’s deified dead.

**A) THE AFTERLIFE: INTERPRETIVE ISSUES**

The book in your hands is the product of what is now over twenty years of my research into the *manes*, their worship, and their place in Roman conceptions of their society. Despite a reasonably large number of recent publications about “Roman death,” often conceived of primarily in archaeological terms as the study of graves, the *manes* have not received their fair share of attention in discussions of Roman ideas about death and the afterlife. Indeed, one can find remarkably blunt statements not only that the Romans lacked interest in the cult of the dead, but even that they were uninterested in any sort of afterlife. Thus, Walker claims that “the dead played no central role within organized religious belief.”1 Edwards notes that “there seems to have been little emphasis on the fate of the individual after death.” Dowden says
that the Romans were “unworried by souls and afterlives.” These generaliza-
tions are far from unusual.  
One should stress that the basis for these statements is not lack of evi-
dence, for far less documented aspects of Roman culture have received more
recent attention. A word search of Latin databases will show that the word
manes appears in the writings of almost every surviving Latin author from
the late Republic and early Empire and that the addition of other terms rele-
vant to the cult of the dead (e.g., parentare, umbræ) will increase the list of
citations significantly. Tombstones are also the most abundant surviving type
of Latin inscription, and a dedication “to the divine manes” (dis manibus)
appears on most epitaphs of Imperial date. There is also no shortage of evi-
dence of religious activity involving the manes. In later chapters, I will discuss
the evidence for Roman offerings to the manes at the funeral and festivals at
which private families (the Parentalia and Lemuria) or priests (the Mundus)
worshipped the dead. There were also shrines within the home, where the
manes had a place with other household gods, such as the lares.

Nevertheless, the manes receive little attention in the recent (and relatively
abundant) scholarly literature on Roman religion or even about Roman death
specifically, and they are frequently absent altogether from discussions of “the
Roman afterlife.” The distance between such conclusions and those advanced
in this study can be seen as a problem of categories. The difficulty comes when
scholars formulate categories such as “afterlife,” “gods,” “humans,” “spirits,” or
even “cult of the dead” in terms that are most familiar, for that tends to lead
the reader to conceptualize the categories through a modern Judeo-Christian
lens. Too often, doing so will translate into categories in which “humans” can-
not become “gods,” and humans becoming gods after death is not part of an
“afterlife,” perhaps not even part of a “cult of the dead.” The manes force us
to reexamine these categories and thereby move us away from what is most
familiar and most comfortable.

Deification is a form of afterlife that places the main emphasis on the role
that the dead play in the living world, rather than on where the dead reside.
It is not part of the usual framework of modern Judeo-Christian thought. The
Eastern Orthodox doctrine that is sometimes described with the term “deifi-
cation” is actually more like Muslim Sufism in advocating a mystical union
with a monotheistic deity. It does not involve the worship of dead Christians.
Likewise, modern Mormon ideas of becoming more “godlike” after death are
about the potential for personal spiritual development in the afterlife and, again,
do not involve the living worshipping the dead. The closest Christian
equivalent might be the Catholic “cult of the saints,” in which a handful
of special humans have posthumous influence over the living, but Catholic
theologians still distinguish between saints and the monotheistic category of “god.” The closest modern equivalents to Roman deification would be outside the Western religious tradition in “cults of the dead” or “ancestor cults” found in Asia and Africa, and even then sometimes with significant differences from the specific Roman practices this book will describe.

Judeo-Christian scenarios of an afterlife are themselves diverse, involving both changes over time and rival sects or theologians putting forth multiple, competing models simultaneously. Allowing for variations in the details, some major features would include the idea of a “last judgment” in which the deity would judge those who are dead and assign them permanently to Heaven or Hell based on their previous conduct in life. In some versions, the place of reward would include the promise of a resurrection of the dead in new physical bodies. Christianity would also strongly emphasize the role of a savior, without whose intervention on one’s behalf gaining entry into the place of reward would be difficult or impossible. By contrast, Roman Pagan thought offers no resurrection of the body and no savior deity. Some scholars with an overtly Christian triumphalist agenda have presented the lack of these elements as proof of the inferiority of Pagan thought or even as the reason why Pagans converted to Christianity in large numbers.

To judge Pagans by Christian criteria is not satisfactory, much less to criticize them for not being more Christian than the Christians. If, for example, one is going to attach importance to the Pagan Romans lacking a “savior,” one also needs to acknowledge that the idea of needing a savior is itself a Christian concept, tied to ideas of original sin. It is not a universal of world religion that something bad happens after death unless a deity intervenes. Likewise, it is far from obvious that resurrection of the physical body ought to be the goal of every afterlife scenario. Is being reborn in human flesh better than becoming a god after death? Why would it be so? At the least, any such argument would need to discuss deification as an alternative option for posthumous existence in Roman thought, as the scholars in question have not as yet done.

Modern Christianity most often tends to define the concept of afterlife in terms of a morally segregated home for the dead, divided into zones of punishment and reward. As the film Gladiator also correctly portrayed, the Romans had such models of the afterlife, which divided posthumous existence into places of reward (Elysium) and punishment (Tartarus). These models of a morally segregated afterlife derive from Greek religion and appear at first glance to provide what modern readers often seem to want, an afterlife that is “Heaven-and-Hell-ish.” The resemblance is far from exact and the models far from monolithic. Greek underworld scenarios are themselves highly varied in both their details and their significance in Greek culture.
and Roman literary use of them is often more complex than just a simple Tartarus/Elysium dichotomy and may involve multiple other scenarios in combination with those two. Still, the general resemblance of Tartarus and Elysium to Christian thought seems to entice.

Over and over again, one finds in modern scholarship those who reduce “the Roman afterlife” to Tartarus and Elysium. Peter Brown wrote that “the leading pagans of the time took the ascent of the soul to heaven for granted,” which asserts not only the dominance of the Elysium scenario but the dominance of a relatively rare variant in which the place of reward is in the sky rather than the more traditional location for Elysium underground. It is not a minor point that Brown calls it “Heaven.” If Brown is primarily a historian of Christianity, the influence of Christian thought is also rarely far from the surface in the study of the Pagans. For example, Valerie Hope entitled her chapter on the Pagan Roman afterlife “Heaven and Hell.”

More subtly, to focus on Tartarus and Elysium because of their resemblance to the Judeo-Christian Heaven and Hell is to treat Judeo-Christian concepts as normative for all religions in ways that exclude other options not found in Christianity. Thus, Littlewood can describe Roman rites for the dead at the Lemuria as “black magic,” and Hope can dismiss the importance of the cult of the manes by suggesting that “superstition, duty, tradition” motivated the rites. The reference to duty and tradition calls to mind the discredited early twentieth-century theory of “empty cult acts,” in which the Pagans supposedly practiced empty ritualism in contrast to Christianity’s true religion. The use of the word “superstition” is simply pejorative, and one wonders when it would ever be appropriate to dismiss the religion of another culture with such a term. To the degree that Pagan thought had negatively defined concepts of superstition or magic, Pagans would not have applied them to worship of manes that the pontiffs mandated and which occupied multiple positions on the annual calendar of religious festivals. Only relative to the religious norms of modern Christianity would ritually interacting with the dead be a “superstition.”

Another factor that contributes to the overemphasis on Tartarus and Elysium relative to the worship of manes is a general tendency to emphasize Greek elements in Roman religion as the only important elements, leading to scholars being somewhat dismissive of aspects of Roman religious practice that do not have clear Greek models. As the manes have no exact equivalent in Greek cults of the dead, scholars somewhat ironically neglect the manes because of their originality. When J. Gwyn Griffiths insisted that it was unnecessary for him to discuss Roman ideas about the afterlife at any length because he had
just discussed the Greeks, he of course meant that he had discussed *Tartarus* and *Elysium*, not the *manes*.14

The tendency to focus not just on *Tartarus* and *Elysium* but on the underlying Greek sources for their underworld topography sometimes reaches odd extremes in which scholars present Platonic philosophy or even book 11 of Homer’s *Odyssey*, a pre-Roman text from the eighth century BC, as the main sources to study to understand the Roman afterlife.15 Educated Romans would have been familiar with these texts, but they are not models of Roman religious practice. Homer’s dead, for example, are so detached from the world of the living that they do not know what is going on among the living and have to ask the visiting Odysseus for news. Such a scenario is incompatible with Roman ritual interaction with *manes*. Even in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, a text that borrows some of its overall structure from the *Odyssey*, the Roman author deviates from the Homeric model of an afterlife on a wide range of points.16 Likewise, *manes* had no place in the thought of the pre-Roman Greek world of the sixth to third centuries BC, and so they are going to be completely absent from the Greek philosophic traditions of Plato, Epicurus, Pythagoras, or the early Stoics. To draw conclusions about the interests of later Romans from the absence of *manes* from the writings of earlier non-Romans would therefore be a little strange.

Another approach in modern scholarship is to try to present the Romans, or at least educated Romans, as proto-Enlightenment rationalists. Christianity remains the focal point of such arguments as scholars attempt to find, and overemphasize, sources that appear to resemble later early modern or modern skepticism about Christianity.17 The desire to cast the Romans as skeptics often leads to an assumption that religious references in Roman texts are not intended seriously, without offering a clear justification for that assumption beyond implying that it is obvious. I will return to the subject of Ovid’s usefulness as a source in more detail in chapter 7.A.1, but I can say briefly here that no one is currently claiming that a text such as his *Fasti* is just a handbook on ritual procedures or denying that Ovid had a wide range of literary, political, social, and sexual interests beyond discussing Roman gods. Often, though, there is a modern assumption that goes much further and suggests that it is impossible for Ovid to be interested in worship and that this impossibility is self-evident from his texts. The implied argument seems to be that Ovid is too cynical, too interested in sexual matters, or too irreverent to have ever taken worship seriously. The implied standard for judging “irreverent” usually remains unarticulated, but it would appear to be a Christian standard of what “interest in religion” should look like, often implied
to be incompatible with sexual or other worldly concerns. Is this, though, a valid standard for a religion in which mainstream texts frequently present the king of the gods as pursuing love affairs? It is perfectly valid to debate Ovid’s position, but an *a priori* assumption that he or any other Roman author is a skeptic just begs the question.

The attempt to portray Romans as skeptics also tends to dismiss the cult of the dead, privileging much rarer skeptical statements instead. Thus, for example, several scholars cite the tombstone slogan “I was not, I was, I am not, I do not care” as if it were typical of Roman thought. In fact, it is quite rare, as are any other statements that one could take as skeptical on tombstones. All such sentiments are vastly outnumbered by the tens of thousands of epitaphs containing the words *dis manibus*, which overtly invoke the cult of the dead. Only a modern desire to see the Romans as skeptical would make the former appear more representative than the latter. One could of course dismiss the relevance of the *dis manibus* inscriptions on the grounds that it is impossible to know what the authors were thinking, but only if one applies the same caveat to Christian inscriptions and the references to an afterlife found there, which scholars regularly accept at face value without similar skepticism. The modern skeptical dismissal of the relevance of the cult of the *manes* then leads scholars back to *Tartarus* and *Elysium*, only this time with the main focus on statements that appear lukewarm in interest or overtly skeptical about these borrowed Greek scenarios. As the scholars have already eliminated the *manes* from consideration, this leads them to the conclusion that the Romans were just not interested in the afterlife at all. The most extreme statement of that position is probably that of Jon Davies, who presents the Roman view of death as thoroughly secular.

**B) THE PRIMACY OF THE MANES**

I cannot myself claim personal immunity from the seductive lure of *Tartarus* and *Elysium*. In my long ago 1998 dissertation on the Roman afterlife, I did not turn my focus primarily to the *manes* until the second half of the sixth chapter (out of nine chapters total). In the book that follows here, I will pursue the opposite approach and discuss *Tartarus* and *Elysium* only in places where they relate to the subject of the *manes*. I do this not merely because past neglect has made the *manes* more in need of a new study—but that is true—but also to make a more basic point: the cult of the *manes* was the dominant approach to the afterlife in Roman culture. In making that claim, I am not denying that afterlife scenarios such as *Tartarus* and *Elysium* were
important to some Romans, for I have argued so myself elsewhere and hope to do so again in a future publication, nor would I deny the literary influence of Greek afterlife scenarios to the composition of texts such as the Aeneid. I will also discuss interactions between such models and the manes in chapter 5. Still, if one is going to ask, which scenario has more of a role in Roman religious practice, the manes or Tartarus and Elysium, then one must answer that it is the manes. The borrowed Greek scenarios of Tartarus and Elysium functioned as add-on elements, which Romans could combine with the cult of the manes if they wished but which were ultimately nonessential. It was the rites toward the manes that were the focus of day-to-day religious activity in relation to death.

Let us return to the aforementioned attempts to present the Romans as predominantly skeptical concerning the afterlife, for such arguments also assume the dominance of Tartarus and Elysium over the manes. What is interesting about the texts that scholars have cited to present the Romans as rejecting the afterlife is that they show nothing of the sort. They show skepticism only about the borrowed Greek models of Tartarus and Elysium but not about an afterlife that involves manes, whose worship the same authors often endorse.

For example, when Tacitus (Agr., 46) expressed hope that his dead father-in-law would reach a favorable home in the afterlife, he phrased it tentatively, “If any place exists for the manes of the pious” (si quis piorum manibus locus). Tacitus expresses doubt, but the doubt is about whether there is a special place for dead people who possess greater virtue than others, such as Elysium. He does not, however, challenge the existence of manes. The evidence for his lack of rejection of manes is not simply his silence here. There are a number of passages where he shows Romans praying to manes, swearing vows by manes, or attempting in some way to propitiate manes. The same tone of doubt is absent from those passages (Ann., 1.49, 3.2, 13.14; Hist., 3.25, 4.40). Tacitus takes the existence of manes for granted; Elysium, he challenges.

When Ovid offers a model of the underworld in the Metamorphoses, he does not suggest a general judgment of the dead and a segregation into Tartarus and Elysium. He seems instead to prefer a city of the dead that imitates the cities of the living world. Elsewhere too, he seems reluctant to commit himself to Elysium’s existence. When discussing the death of the poet Tibullus, Ovid (Am., 3.9.59–60) says that Tibullus will be in Elysium “if ... something besides name and shade survives” (si ... aliquid nisi nomen et umbra restat). This is not blanket skepticism about the afterlife, for even his phrasing concedes that the “shade” (umbra) will survive. Umbra is a word that Ovid uses as a synonym for the manes when he is explicitly describing the worship of the dead at the Parentalia and Lemuria (Fasti, 2.541, 5.439; see chapters 2
and 7), and he also does the same in other contexts (Met., 8.488–496). Thus, there is no rejection of manes in his comment about Tibullus. Ovid also uses the word manes to describe himself when looking ahead to his own death (Ibis, 139–162; Trist., 3.63–64), and he does the same for his wife (Trist., 5.14. 1–14). He also describes offerings at the Parentalia as if from his personal experience, stressing the value of maintaining pietas with the manes (Fasti, 2.535–542). As a matter of self-presentation, he thus consistently depicts himself as a participant in the cult of the manes. Like Tacitus, Ovid offers overt statements of skepticism only in relation to Elysium.

Another example is Cicero. In one work, Cicero claimed that the idea of punishment in Tartarus was so ridiculous that it was unnecessary even to argue against it (Tusc., 1.10–11 and again at 1.48). One cannot take Cicero’s comment entirely at face value, for he repeatedly undercuts his own position, making the same sort of critique that he claims is unnecessary, invoking the threat of Tartarus in political speeches and putting forth his own afterlife scenario that includes an idea of a negative fate for the unworthy. To the degree that he is rejecting Tartarus, though, he is rejecting only one particular scenario for posthumous punishment. What he does not do is to reject the idea of manes, whose worship he endorses strongly in De Legibus (2.22), insisting that one should never neglect rites to honor manes.

A word search will show that virtually every gold- and silver-age Latin author mentions the manes, as do most Latin tombstones of the Imperial era. It is nevertheless difficult to find authors directing overt skepticism at either the existence or the worship of manes. A few Roman authors who were influenced by Epicurean philosophy challenged the value of worshipping the dead along with also rejecting Tartarus and Elysium, notably Lucretius (3.41–54) and Pliny (HN., 7.55.188–190). The Epicureans, though, rejected divine causation of events altogether; thus they saw little value in appealing to the aid of any god, and so they were not simply rejecting the afterlife. It is difficult, however, to see how one could treat this particular philosophical strand of thought as normative for Roman culture as whole. Both Pliny and Lucretius admit that they are arguing against positions that their fellow Romans hold. Lucretius (3.41–54) notably complained that his fellow intellectuals, who claimed to be skeptical of Tartarus, would nevertheless pray to the manes when they felt in danger of death.

In contrast to the very large number of tombstones with the heading dis manibus (“For the divine manes”), there is no similar widespread endorsement of Elysium on tombstones. Although they do occur (e.g., CIL, 6.7578, 6.23295), overt epitaph references to Elysium are rare. If one were to try to argue that the traditions about Tartarus and Elysium were more important to
the Romans than the manes, then one would need to explain that absence. Tombstones do not have to invoke the afterlife at all, but the epitaphs are not silent on the subject. Over and over again they are invoking—and thereby endorsing the existence of—the manes. There is no reason why Romans could not have mentioned Elysium on tombstones, if they were so inclined. It would have been easy to invent some phrase like In Elysio Felix Habitet (“May he/she reside happy in Elysium”) or something in that vein, which engravers could reduce to a familiar acronym (IEFH) just as they often reduce Dis Manibus to DM. No such inscriptions appear. The manes and not the hope of Elysium was the afterlife scenario that Romans wanted on their tombstones.

What then about Rome’s rituals? Which scenario did Rome’s ceremonial practices and religious festival calendar endorse, the deification of the dead as manes or the sending of the dead to Tartarus or Elysium? Ritual reinforcement in Rome for Greek scenarios of Tartarus and Elysium is minimal. Ceremonies to honor Dis and Proserpina, the rulers of the underworld, were rare, like the infrequent pre-Augustan form of the ludi saeculares (Val. Max., 2.4.5; Festus 479L). There was an annual rite that commemorated the story of Proserpina being carried off to the underworld, but Ceres, her mother, was the main focus of the ritual.26 If these rites, to some extent, endorsed the identification of the Roman gods with the Greek Hades and Persephone, they still did not necessarily involve any endorsement of the idea of posthumous judgment, which is essential to the scenario of an underworld divided into Tartarus and Elysium. Likewise, the ceremony of the opening of the Mundus (about which, see chapter 5.A.2.a) involved opening a door to contact the manes in their underground home. If it endorsed the idea of an underworld, it did not require endorsing any of the specifics of Tartarus or Elysium or the idea of posthumous judgment. Moreover, since the rite invoked the power of the manes to help the Roman people, one can hardly treat it as an alternative to the existence and worship of manes.

Some Romans do seem to have taken seriously the idea that there was a better or worse location to which the dead could go. There are occasional prayers to gods to assist the newly dead find a positive berth. The gods that some of these prayers invoke, though, are the manes, again making it difficult to use the prayers as an alternative scenario to the cult of the dead (see chapter 5.C). Roman rituals either do not endorse Greek-style afterlife scenarios like Elysium, or they do so in a way that includes a role for the indigenous Roman cult of the manes.

In contrast to the poor support that Rome’s rituals offer for Elysium, the manes are well represented in Roman worship and on Rome’s festival calendar. In addition to the aforementioned opening of the Mundus, there was also
the Parentalia, a nine-day festival for the manes in February, and the Lemuria, a three-day festival in May (see chapter 7). There were also home shrines that Romans used to worship manes, like those that Statius describes (Silv., 2.7.120–131, 3.3.195–216). A wide range of texts refer to prayers to the manes or oaths sworn by the power of the manes (chapter 5). Even at the funeral itself, a major part of the ritual involves making the grave into a sacred space for the new manes, including the sacrifice of a pig to the dead person (chapter 6.D.2). Unlike Elysium, the manes and their power were central to the Roman rites that concerned death.

Of course, there are literary texts that present characters visiting Tartarus and Elysium, as in Virgil’s Aeneid or Silius Italicus’ Punica. Such texts adopt conventions of Greek epic poetry that include, as in Homer’s Odyssey, the hero visiting the land of the dead. That Roman use of a Greek epic convention would play out using Greek-derived models of the land of the dead should probably not surprise. The manes, however, are also present. I am unaware of any substantive description of a Greek derived underworld from a Roman author who does not also mention manes. In the Aeneid, for example, the hero Aeneas can worship his dead father as manes in book 5, and then visit him in book 6, when he goes to Elysium. There is thus nothing to prevent Romans from combining Greek traditions with the manes. A Roman author could, for example, present the manes as operating from a base in Elysium near doors that lead to the living (a somewhat simplified version of Virgil’s scenario).

Still, we should consider some implications. As the above discussion illustrates, there are Roman texts that combine the manes with Tartarus and Elysium. There are also texts that reject or doubt Tartarus and Elysium while endorsing the worship of manes. What is hard to find are texts that present models of Tartarus and Elysium without any mention of manes. Completely absent are texts that endorse Tartarus and Elysium while specifically rejecting or doubting the manes. The deification of the dead as manes was the dominant Roman view of the afterlife. The manes, not the borrowed traditions of Tartarus and Elysium, ran through Roman death rituals, received worship at Roman festivals, and were overwhelmingly the choice of the Romans to put on their tombstones in preference to any mention of Elysium.

What the borrowed tradition of Tartarus and Elysium seems to be for the Romans was an option. As I will discuss at greater length in chapter 4, the structure of Roman religion allowed the coexistence of variant beliefs without conflict, so that Romans could accept or reject additional traditions overlaid upon the cult of the manes as suited their individual preferences. For those interested in Greek literary traditions, attracted to the idea of an area of special reward for the meritorious, or perhaps frightened of the possibility of an
area of punishment for the wicked, the idea of combining Greek traditions with the *manes* might be appealing. One could pray to the *manes* not just for help in the living world but also for help in securing a favorable postmortem domicile (chapter 5.C). Other Romans, though, might see little attraction in such add-ons and could focus on the *manes* without reference to *Tartarus* or *Elysium* or even overtly reject *Tartarus* and *Elysium*. For them, the cult of the dead would more strongly emphasize the posthumous role of the dead in the world of the living. The common element at the core of this cluster of variations was the presence of the *manes*. *Tartarus* and *Elysium* were relatively marginal to Roman thought outside the literary context of Greek poetic epic conventions.

A study of the Roman afterlife should, therefore, place its main emphasis on the *manes* and the deification of the dead and treat *Tartarus* and *Elysium* as one of several possible variants that Romans could combine with the *manes*. My focus here will be on the cult of the *manes* in mainstream Roman Paganism in the late Republic and early Empire, roughly first century BC through the second century AD. I will also be looking primarily at the culture of the city of Rome itself. Inscriptions mentioning *manes* exist throughout the Latin-speaking parts of the Empire, but there is a significant possibility of regional and provincial variations that are beyond my scope here, and so I have limited my use of that material. Even allowing for these caveats, the subject is a broad one, as the cult of the *manes* touches upon a number of aspects of Roman society. Potentially controversial, perhaps, will be my exclusion of the so-called mystery cults, some of which put forth their own versions of an afterlife. I am not denying the possibility that the mystery cults might have influenced the worship of *manes* or, as seems more plausible to me, that the widely distributed cult of the *manes* influenced the much smaller mystery cults. These are worthy subjects for future study. My concern here is not to put the cart before the horse. To assess the relationship between the cult of the *manes* and any other set of ideas requires first having a study of the cult of the *manes*. It is to fill the need for such a study that I am engaged here.
THE ANCIENT ROMAN AFTERLIFE