Public priests and religious innovation in imperial Rome*

This paper is devoted to the ‘public’ priesthoods of imperial Rome and their contribution to the wider patterns of religious innovation. It focuses on two key areas of interaction: between priests and the wider public in the city of Rome, through a close reading of the evidence of Cassius Dio, and between priests and emperor, especially in the first decades of the Principate. In focusing on the impact of priesthoods ‘beyond duty’, and looking beyond the setting of priesthoods within the elite networks of Republican Rome, it focuses on two key issues: choice and power. What degree of choice could be exercised in testing and exceeding the remit of collectively-defined prerogatives? What range of options were open, both to agents who exceeded the remit of their duty and to those affected by their actions? What powers did religious experts dispose of, which allowed or enabled them to exceed the remit of their duty? What factors prompted them to seek to modify the tasks that they were expected to perform? Any decision to exceed the remit of one’s duty implied some degree of challenge to existing power arrangements or institutional frameworks.

1. Introduction

Whereas the role of religious specialists in furthering religious change during the Empire is widely acknowledged, that of the so-called ‘public priests’ is much less clear. Late Roman Republican thinkers acknowledged that this group – usually conceptualised as sacerdotes – was of great significance for the opposite of religious innovation, that is, the upholding of tradition. M. Tullius Cicero saw public priests as defending the ancestors’ religious practices against individual innovations; M. Terentius Varro understood them as resisting oblivion (neglegentia). Al-

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though Cicero’s short account of religion in his dialogue *On Laws* ignores many significant issues, it does include a complete list of all the main priesthoods.¹

The status of the religious knowledge of public priests might also be affirmed *e negativo*. In the early second century BCE, for example, the *senatus consultum* on the Bacchanalia imposed severe restrictions on their priests and similar functionaries.² The priesthoods of Venus Erycina and Cybele were limited to foreigners; astrologers, like other purveyors of technical knowledge, such as philosophers and rhetoricians, were occasionally banned from the city of Rome. In relation to change, however, the notion of ‘religious knowledge’ is thoroughly ambiguous. It may help to shore up genuinely traditional practice, but may also continue ‘tradition’ that turns out to be merely invented. The transformation of religious practices into knowledge is one of the most important innovations of the late Republican period.³

It is easy to find corroboration of the views of Cicero and Varro in other literary evidence for the Republican period. From the third century BCE onwards, the number of priestly positions was increased and their duties differentiated: important steps in that direction were the integration of plebeians in 300 BCE, the foundation of the *Epulones* in 196, and the enlargements of the colleges under Sulla, Caesar, and finally Augustus. The *decemuiiri* (later *quindecimuiiri*) *sacris faciundis*, who interpreted the Sibylline Books, introduced many new cults and ritual practices into Rome, as did the *pontifices* and the *haruspices*, albeit on a smaller scale. One of their major tasks and most visible activities was the identification, interpretation, and ritual treatment of the ‘prodigies’ that were deemed to have public relevance. Thus, a degree of change was institutionalised in the realm of publicly-financed cult, ritual practices, and the ritual infrastructure provided for the dominant political group, which we define, for the purposes of the present discussion, as the aristocracy.⁴ Public priests did not need to be ‘intellectuals’, but from their ranks there emerged several experts who wrote treatises dealing with problems arising within their specific ritual field. Cicero became an augur roughly at the same time as he was working on *On Laws*; Varro never held a priesthood, but represented priests as bearers of knowledge.

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² *CIL I* 581 = *ILS 18* = *ILLRP* 511: (10) *sacerdos nequis uir eset. magister neque uir neque mulier quisquam eset.* (11) *neue pecuniam quisquam eorum comoine[m h]abuisse uelit. neue magistratum,* (12) *neve pro magistratu[d], neque uirum [neque mul]ierem qui[s]fecisse uelit.*
³ Rüpke (2012b).
⁴ For an illuminating reassessment of the relevance of this concept to the study of ancient history see Fisher and van Wees (2015).
a view that was taken up and developed by authors like Valerius Maximus in the early Principate.5

Neither during the Republic nor during the imperial period did ‘public priests’ enjoy a monopoly on religious knowledge and innovation. At least in the second or third generation, the worship of the so-called Egyptian gods, including Isis and Sarapis, was often conducted by specialists with ritual and linguistic knowledge, who could claim the range of competences described by Apuleius in *Metamorphoses* Book 11. In many cases religious professionals were probably not instrumental in the spread of practices and symbols, but soon came to be involved in organising groups and developing distinctive practices. The same is surely true for Mithras or the god of Jerusalem.

The activities of these specialists, and especially their interaction with their clients, are generally invisible to us, if they did not produce individually ‘authored’ texts (like Manetho or Appian or Suetonius). On the other hand, texts permit us to reconstruct the actual communication with the auditors (or exceptionally readers) and their responses only to a very limited extent. Other forms of interaction, of which there must have been many, have left hardly any traces. Durable testimonies of such interaction survive only in exceptional cases: to mention just two notable instances, the treatment of patients by specialists in sanctuaries of Asclepius is sometimes documented in their dedicatory inscriptions; the ‘confession inscriptions’ from Lydia were set up after a consultation with a priest about one’s sin in cases of chronic ailment. The concept of ‘religious specialists’6 denotes individuals as different as small-time organisers of informal religious groups, prophets or seers, diviners, wonder-workers, magicians, ‘wise folk’, i.e. people who offered religious services and knowhow and might even earn their living by such means – in other words, religious entrepreneurs of one sort or another. For those individuals, ‘religion’ was not an occasional and interchangeable option or instrument,7 but a profession (in every sense of the term), a way of life and a means of making one’s living. Given the precariousness of the divine and its representations,8 and its problematic accessibility, such people were not in principle indispensable, but were frequently helpful and occasionally necessary. It is, however, not their theological reflection (known to us usually only if it was put into writing of some kind) in which we are interested,

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5 See Rüpke (2015a).
6 For the concept of ‘religious specialists’ see Rüpke (1996).
7 For a definition see Rüpke (2015b).
8 Cf. Rüpke (2010b).
but their role in mediating religion, in dealing with or producing religious change, and interacting with other people and their ‘lived religion’.

The stern caveat that Albert Henrichs has issued against the use of the word ‘priests’ in the study of Greek religion applies, in some measure, to the study of any polytheistic religion. The call for further differentiation is also relevant to the Roman context, where the complexity of cultic activity cannot be narrowed just to the *cultus publicus*. While it is important to recognise that the category of ‘religious specialists’ encompasses public priests, as well as other categories, the enduring presence of the priestly college remains a distinctive aspect of Roman religion. Speaking of ‘priests’ in Republican and Imperial Rome is a methodologically sound and historically accurate operation: they are a well-identified cluster of individuals, with clearly defined statuses. That does not amount to viewing them as a static *corps* in which new clusters of expertise have to be created and trained, and does not of course amount to denying that the situation becomes inevitably more complex when one turns to provincial contexts. There is even scope for surprising solutions: in first century CE Asia we find cities competing over the title of *neokoros*, effectively arguing for their entitlements to host and run the imperial cult as communal entities.

Against this background, our interest in the contribution of such ‘public priests’ concentrates on the ‘public’ priesthoods of imperial Rome. What was their contribution to the upkeep as well as to the alteration of religious practices that were appropriated by groups and individuals in the city of Rome under the specific conditions of the Principate? What was the impact of the advent of monarchy on the standing and influence of public priesthoods, and on the role that priestly expertise played in the religious life of Rome? If we start looking ‘beyond duty’, beyond the setting of priesthoods within the elite networks of Republican Rome, two issues readily present themselves: namely, choice and power. What degree of choice could be exercised in looking beyond the remit of collectively defined prerogatives? What range of options were open, both to agents who exceed the remit of their duty and to those affected by their actions? Or again, what powers did agents dispose of, that allowed or enabled them to exceed the bounds of their duty? Which factors prompted them to try to modify the tasks that they were expected to perform? Conversely, any decision to go beyond the remit of one’s duty implied some degree of challenge to an existing power-constellation or regime.

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9 See Rüpke (2012a); Rüpke (2014b); Raja and Rüpke (2015a, b); Rüpke (2016).
10 Henrichs (2008).
Our discussion focuses on two key areas of interaction. First, we examine interaction with the wider public during the imperial period. We then look more closely into interaction with the emperor, as it took shape during the first decades of the Principate.

2. Interaction between priests and people under the Principate

2.1. Public priests in Cassius Dio

Before we begin, a methodological clarification is in order: our first text is by a contemporary observer who has not hitherto figured prominently in the history of religion, but has been used extensively by students of imperial history, namely the Greek senator from Bithynia, Lucius Cassius Dio [Cocceianus?]. He spent large parts of the Severan period at Rome holding high office before withdrawing to his hometown, Nicea, after his second consulship in 229.¹² As an observer of religion, he is an important witness, since he began his literary activity with a work on that very topic, as he himself relates:

I had written and published a little book about the dreams and portents which gave Severus reason to hope for the imperial power; and he, after reading the copy I sent him, wrote me a long and complimentary acknowledgment. This letter I received about nightfall, and soon after fell asleep; and in my dreams the Divine Power (tò daimónion) commanded me to write history.¹³

Unfortunately, much of Dio’s account of the imperial period, namely Books 61 to 80 (with the exception of 78/79) from 47 CE onwards, is lost. We only glean an impression of it through the substantial summaries of two late-Byzantine excerptors, John Xiphilinos and John Zonaras (11/12th c.), who just occasionally added comments that reveal their Christian outlook.¹⁴ Our analysis of this material will be supplemented by adducing phenomena that fell below Dio’s radar, using prosopographical and anecdotal evidence.

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¹² On Dio see Millar (1964); Kolb (1972); Manuwald (1979); Bering-Staschewski (1981); Kemezis (2013, 90–149); Lange and Madsen (2016).
¹⁴ E.g. Cass. Dio 70.2.2 on Antoninus Pius’ relationship with the Christians. At 72.9.1 Xiphilinos adds an alternative account of the rain-miracle under Marcus Aurelius (in 174 CE); at 73.4.6 he adds the detail that a concubine favoured Christians.
Even the summaries betray Dio’s interest in prodigies and dreams. Time and again it is they that induce emperors-to-be to undertake a certain course of action, and it is they that announce or accompany catastrophes. The course of events frequently reveals that an utterance or quotation had a second, veiled, meaning. Rise and fall, life and death, victory and defeat, driven as they are by strategies and emotions, are thus thoroughly naturalised or, on the other hands, revealed as part of a divinely directed history. In itself, this does not make religion – in the sense of human religious action – particularly important. Indeed, religion is virtually absent from Dio’s famous general reflection on, and normative account of, imperial monarchy in the pair of speeches in Book 52 by Agrippa (ch. 1–13) and Maecenas (ch. 14–40), and priests do not figure at all. The topic only crops up in connection with the question of ruler worship (52.36.1–2), which Maecenas warns is not to be actively required (52.35.4–6).

Do you not only yourself worship the Divine Power (tò [...] theîon) everywhere and in every way in accordance with the traditions of our fathers (katà tà pâtria), but compel all others to honour it. Those who attempt to distort our religion with strange rites (toûs [...] xenizontás ti peri autô) you should abhor and punish, not merely for the sake of the gods (since if a man despises these he will not pay honour to any other being), but because such men, by bringing in new deities in place of the old, persuade many to adopt foreign practices, from which spring up conspiracies [...] 

From the point of view of the historian of the empire and its rulers, priesthoods come into view as one of the emperor’s many fields of activity, to which we now turn. According to Dio, among the privileges that were granted Caesar (Augustus) in 29 BCE was that of electing as many additional priests as he would like (51.20.3, prohaireîsthai). The same privilege, that of bestowing most of the priesthoods upon individuals of their choosing, was part of the general description of the monarchic power of Roman emperors as formulated in 53.17.8 (didónai). However, actual instances of that remain surprisingly rare.¹⁵ It is in the same context that the emperors’ membership of all priestly colleges (the supreme pontificate could, however, only be held by one of several co-reigning emperors) is given as the basis of his right to preside over all sacred matters (pántôn [...] tôn hierón kurieúousin). Once again, Dio never invokes this right in order to account for concrete cases.¹⁶

¹⁵ See Cass. Dio 55.9.4 (Augustus, for C. Iulius Caesar in 6 BCE); 58.7.5 (Tiberius for Sejanus; 58.8.1 (for C. Caesar Germanicus ['Caligula']) both in 31 CE. Compare Caligula’s lack of restraint (59.28.5, 41 CE).

¹⁶ Except in the case of Commodus, who loved having all his titles, including that of pontifex maximus, recited (73.15.5).
Dio’s information allows us to observe imperial strategies of self-sacralisation at work. Thus, after the death of Lepidus in 13 BCE, Augustus not only took up the office of pontifex maximus (54.27.2), but also turned some private land into the ‘public’ space of the pontiff’s official residence, thus avoiding having to move out of his Palatium (the future ‘palace’).¹ The merging of the former house of the rex sacrorum (which was public property) with the house of the Vestals, which was next to it in the Forum Romanum (54.27.3), links such self-sacralisation with regard to the Palatine to a wider strategy foreshadowed by an earlier incident. In 14 BCE, after a fire, the contents of the temple of Vesta were transferred to the Palatium, notably to the house of the Flamen Dialis, which was likewise a public space (54.24.2). Now (and this is our own reasoning and not Dio’s), this priesthood had been filled only very recently after a vacancy of nearly three quarters of a century.¹ It is highly unlikely that the original building (which, as far as we know, served no other ritual function) had been kept in good repair ever since L. Cornelius Merula’s death in 87 BCE. It is much more plausible to assume that Augustus put pressure on L. Cornelius Maluginensis to take up his residence on the Palatine.

Ritual behaviour offered another area of imperial self-sacralisation. To shield oneself behind a curtain, as Augustus did during the laying-out of Agrippa’s corpse, was, according to Dio, no part of the ritual requirements imposed either on a pontifex maximus or on a censor (54.28.3–4; cf. 54.35.4, on Octavia). But Augustus’ decision points to an attempt to devise a special status that might indeed require such precautions. This strategy of exceptionalism was continued: five years later, in 7 BCE, when, on the occasion of commemorative games for Agrippa, Augustus alone did not wear black clothing (55.8.5).

When we turn to consider priesthoods held by others and their religious actions, Dio only notes two further areas. The first concerns involvement in high-profile ritual action. The importance attached to one-off or repeated grand solemnities was underlined by requiring all-important priesthoods to take part in them. This was the case for the Actian Games (53.1.5), which were to be directed by pontiffs, augurs, VIIuiri epulonum, and XVuiri sacris faciundis in turn, and for the quadriennial celebration of Augustus’ reign, directed by the XVviri in 16 BCE (54.19.8). In 14 CE all the priests processed around Augustus’ pyre (56.42.2). In 31 a festival to celebrate the fall of Sejanus was inaugurated, to be conducted annually by the same four colleges and the Sodales Augustales (58.12.5).

¹ Cass. Dio 54.27.3; cf. Xiph. p. 103.19–28 Dindorf for a similar emphasis in a later instance.
¹¹ See Rüpke (2005, 916 no. 1349 = 2008, 637 no. 1349), following Bowersock (1990, 392–393) in dating the accession to 14 BCE; this episode is narrated by Dio only among other religious events in 12 BCE (54.36.1).
'All priests’ was not an unchanging concept. The deification of deceased emperors or other members of the imperial family demanded new ritual specialists. Dio provides many instances, starting in 14 CE with the creation of the *Sodales Augustales*, with Livia as *flaminica* (56.46.1). A *flamen* (if female, a *flaminica*) of a deified emperor (or empress) served the cult of the new deity and was integrated into the pontifical college. The *Sodales* continued to operate after the deification of Claudius under the (probably more precise) title of *Sodales Augustales Claudiae*. A new college was created only on the death of the first Flavian emperor, Vespasian (*sodales Flaviales*, later *Titiales*, later still *Sodales Hadrianales* and *sodales Antoniniani*). Dio reports the excesses of Caligula, who made members of his family and his friends priests of his own cult (59.28.5) and forced them to pay large entry fees (*summae honorariae*); some decades later, in 71 CE, Vespasian’ concubine Caenis earned money by selling the imperial favour of being appointed to offices and priesthoods (65.14.1). The emperor Claudius, on the other hand, gave an existing priesthood new ritual duties, by assigning the conduct of the worship of deified Livia in 41 CE to the Vestal Virgins (60.5.2).

These examples suggest that there was no lack of interest in such emoluments on the part of potential candidates. However, Dio also notes the reverse, a lack of candidates willing to be appointed as Vestal Virgins: such positions might have been prestigious, but they were also vulnerable to intrigue and to the accusation of being unchaste (*incestus*). He thus reports the introduction of a regulation in 5 CE that opened the priesthood even to the daughters of freedwomen (55.22.5), and does not fail to remark that no such candidates made themselves known; the resolution seems to have been merely *pro forma*.

Nowhere does Dio indicate that he thinks of such alterations and innovations as ‘history of religion’, nor does his concept of history seem to allow for such an idea. We, however, can use his observations and data for such a purpose. For Dio, public priests are not loci of innovation, nor do they warrant a free-standing account in their own right: they are discussed against the backdrop of wider themes, such as the activities of the emperors and the historical trajectory of the elite. He might obviously have classified nominations to priesthoods and premature deaths of their holders together with the establishment and abolition of festivals, a topic he quite often touches upon.¹⁹ But he does not.

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¹⁹ E.g. Cass. Dio 52.30.4–6; 54.8.5; 55.6.5; esp. 56.46.5 and 59.6.4.
2.2. Religious innovation in Dio

But where did Dio locate religious innovation? Bearing in mind that he did not entertain a comprehensive notion of ‘religion’ comparable to our own, we might single out three areas: prophets, architecture, and philosophy.

Against the backdrop of the start of Dio’s literary career and his interest in the divine direction of history, it is no surprise to find a specific interest in prophecy. For the imperial period, the extant text describes three instances of highly visible and, to an extent, actually effective interventions by prophets. The first case is reported for 7 CE:

And he [Augustus] made a vow with reference to the Megalensian Games, because some woman (γυνὴ тίς) had cut some letters on her arm and practised some sort of divination. He knew well, to be sure, that she had not been possessed by any divine power (οὐκ ἐκ θεοῦ κατέσχετο), but had done this thing deliberately; but inasmuch as the populace was terribly wrought up over both wars and the famine (which had now set in once more), he, too, affected to believe the common report and proceeded to do anything that would make the crowd cheerful, regarding such measures as necessary (55.31.2–3).

We do not learn about the contents of the prophecy, but the woman must have presented herself successfully as a medium of divine writing, possibly with reference to Cybele, since we know that other servants of that deity reported ecstatic experiences.

Another incident occurred right at the beginning of 38 CE, involving a slave whose name was still on record (59.9.3):

On the very first day of the new year one Machaon (Μαχαὼν τίς), a slave, climbed upon the couch of Jupiter Capitolinus, and after uttering from there many dire prophecies, killed a little dog which he had brought in with him, and then slew himself.

Again, the prophecy is accompanied by a Zeichenhandlung, involving the body of an animal as well as that of the prophet himself. Given that the situation at Rome in 7 CE was critical, we might assume that in this case too Machaon was acting in the context of similar tensions. Once again, the initiative lies with an individual from the margins of society, who attracts attention by his spectacular behaviour in a central venue. This time, however, Dio does not relate the incident to the further course of events, but presents the new emperor Gaius in positive terms.

The third instance is also part of Dio’s original text: an episode in 217 involving two diviners and concerning Caracalla (79.4.1–5):
It seems that a seer in Africa had declared, in such a manner that it became noised abroad, that both Macrinus, the prefect, and his son, Diadumenianus, were destined to hold the imperial power; and later this seer, upon being sent to Rome, had revealed this prophecy to Flavius Maternianus, who at the time commanded the soldiers in the city, and this man had at once written a letter to Antoninus [...] the message to the emperor was delayed, while the despatch to Macrinus was read by him in good season. And so Macrinus delayed no longer, fearing he would be put to death by Antoninus on this account, especially as a certain Egyptian Serapio, had told the emperor to his face a few days earlier that he would be short-lived and that Macrinus would succeed him. Serapio had at first been thrown to a lion for this, but when, as the result of his merely holding out his hand, as is reported, the animal did not touch him, he was slain; and he might have escaped even this fate – or so he declared – by invoking certain spirits (*daimônôn tinôn epiklêsei*), if he had lived one day longer.

Here Macrinus’ coup is represented by Dio, who was of course himself present in Rome at this time, as the direct result of these visions and prophecies, which are taken so seriously by Caracalla that he condemns a man to death. Shortly afterwards, the Sun God Elagabalus and his oracle turn out to be the driving force behind a new attempt at the throne (79.31.1–2, Dio’s original text). New or previously unknown ritual practices, surfacing in the context of visions and prophecies, prompt the interest of contemporaries and historiographers and have the power to shape history.

Surprisingly enough, architecture is yet another locus of religious innovation. Here we have to rely on a single instance, a comment made by a famous architect on Hadrian’s temple of Venus and Roma, one of the largest sanctuaries ever built at Rome – a remark that ultimately led to the execution of the architect (59.4.3–4, Xiph.):

He [Hadrian] sent him the plan of the temple of Venus and Roma by way of showing him that a great work could be accomplished without his aid, and asked Apollodorus whether the proposed structure was satisfactory. The architect in his reply stated, first, in regard to the temple, that it ought to have been built on high ground and that the earth should have been excavated beneath it, so that it might have stood out more conspicuously on the Sacred Way from its higher position, and might also have accommodated the machines in its basement, so that they could be put together unobserved and brought into the theatre without anyone’s being aware of them beforehand. Secondly, in regard to the statues, he said that they had been made too tall for the height of the *cella*. “For now,” he said, “if the goddesses wish to get up and go out, they will be unable to do so”.

If we take Apollodorus’ three comments together, they amount to the criticism that Hadrian has allowed a desire to impress through sheer monumentality to take precedence over aesthetic considerations, which are in fact closely connected to the religious value of respect for the deity.
Finally, philosophy. It is again the age of Hadrian which supplies the first indications that philosophy (or, better, philosophies) became an important field of competition. Hadrian himself is characterised right at the start of his reign by his envy of other philosophers, such as Favorinus (69.2.3). In 200 CE the empress Julia is looking for comfort in philosophy (76.15.7); the observation is repeated in stronger terms for c. 214 CE (78.18.3), when she instigates the building of a temple for Apollonius of Tyana – thus signalling the overlap of philosophy and religion. There is no parallel in Dio, although he does note the interest shown by several emperors in astrology. The importance of taking a stance towards philosophy and similar systems of knowledge is illustrated by Caracalla’s hatred of Aristotelian philosophy and his persecution of Aristotelians, motivated by his veneration of Alexander, whose death he attributed to the philosopher (78.7.1–3 Xiph., reported for 211).

2.3. Further evidence for interaction of public priests

Dio’s observations can be tested against other sources. The importance of visionaries and their texts and the significance of the institution of prophecy for the imperial period are beyond doubt, exemplified as they are by apocalyptic literature and visionary narratives – not only Eastern Mediterranean traditions of Sibylline Books and apocalypses, such as 4 Ezra, Enoch and the Johannine Book of Revelations, but similar texts produced in the city of Rome itself: we think here in the first place of the hundreds, if not thousands, of Sibylline books (screened by Augustus in 12 CE and again by Tiberius in 19 CE: see Dio 57.18.4–5), which Dio mentions in the context of the great fire of 64 CE (62.18.3). Attempts to validate prophetic claims at the risk of one’s freedom, or even life, became a hallmark of the Judeo-Christian discourse from the end of the second century CE onwards.²⁰

From its very beginning, religious architecture has aimed to evoke religious emotion by aesthetic means. However, a special interest in creating illusions of divine movement by technical means is attested by the treatise of Hiero of Alexandria, written around the middle of the first century CE, where he describes the use of mirrors, as well as mechanisms to cause doors and statues to move, apparently of their own will.

Finally, philosophy not only provided a model for religious confessionalisation by representing the various schools as different ‘choices’, that is to say, ‘her-

²⁰ See Waldner (2017).
esies’ (*hairesei*)[^21], but can also be seen as part of a process in which religious practices, explicit world views, and ways of life coalesced to form enduring religious groups, a process characteristic of the history of religion in the imperial period.[^22]

But, given all this, what about priests? Dio’s observation of the dialectics of proliferation and centralisation can be supported by prosopographical data. The *Sodales* offer a particularly good example. Apart from the establishment of a flaminiate and the incorporation of the emperor’s name into the hymn of the *Salii* (*carmen saliare*), another aspect of the deification of an emperor or a member of the ruling family was the founding of a *sodalitas*, whose membership corresponded in social rank to that of the great colleges (members of the imperial family itself may even have been over-represented, contributing to a distortion of the putative power of these institutions). Membership of such a sodality was frequently combined with other priestly offices. The institution began, as we have seen, with the founding of the *sodales Augustales* on the death of Augustus in 14 CE. Unlike the case of the flaminiate, the aim here was to establish a dynastic cult, as is made clear by the cult site and meeting-centre at Bovillae.[^23] As a result, the cults of dead emperors belonging to a particular dynasty were merged, and after the divinisation of Claudius the *sodales Augustales* continued to operate under the (probably more precise) title of *sodales Augustales Claudiales*. The extent to which such combinations were original or secondary, that is to say established retrospectively, remains unclear. Thus for a long time the *sodales Augustales Claudiales*, the *sodales Flaviales Titiales*,[^24] the *sodales Hadrianales*, and the *sodales Antoniniani* (for the deified emperors from Antoninus Pius onwards, including those of the Severan dynasty) existed side by side, even if it can be shown that many members of the newly-founded priesthood of the *Antoniniani* had already been *Sodales Hadrianales*. Many more might have been, but documentation fails.

The institution of the *Sacerdotes domus Augustae (Palatinae)* is even more interesting. This large and carefully structured priestly body is known primarily

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[^21]: See Rüpke (2010a).
[^22]: North (2003) and (2010); Rüpke (2014a).
[^23]: The accumulation of finds, especially succession lists, means that we dispose of many, albeit fragmentary, documents, but the names are often incomplete. The interpretation of inscriptions such as *CIL* XIV 2398 – 2399 = *VI* 1997, 2000 as succession lists of *sodales* in the compilation of Marcillet-Jaubert (1968, nos. 96 – 99) is not tenable: the fragmentary text does not permit either safe interpretation as a succession list or attribution in respect of co-optations or dates.
[^24]: See Scott (1936), with a list of personnel (79 – 80).
from an *album* that appears to date to 182 CE. The *album* is headed by a group of three names, probably to be interpreted as *magistri*; the first two names also appear in the list of *decem primi* alongside. There follows a list of the *ordo*, comprising at least eighteen individuals, several of them *egregii uiri*, i.e. of equestrian rank, to which must be added – set out in the leftmost of the two columns, i.e. underneath the *magistri* – the separately-listed members (fifteen in number) of the clarissimate (*clarissimi uiri*), who are thus of senatorial rank. The physical layout, with the names in the left-hand column commencing only after the last of the X *primi* in the right-hand column, shows that the *clarissimi uiri* were not patrons standing outside the college – as the usual interpretation has it – but belonged to the *ordo*, and in the hierarchy of the group ranked below the leadership (in which they do not appear to participate) while remaining socially superior to it. A few inscriptions, probably of a later date, speak in abbreviated form of the *ordo sacerdotum* or the *sacerdotes sacrae urbis de X primis* (*CIL* VI 86 and 2137). This could indicate a development whereby the original focus on the ruler cult, concentrated on the Palatine, was re-directed towards the city and the Vesta complex, possibly also incorporating the Hadrianic *duodecim uiri sacrae urbis*.

But how did all these priesthoods interact with the general public, apart from their appearance at public rituals, especially processions, where many people could catch sight of them, and by means of which they could act as models that individuals could use to pattern their own ritual behaviour? Our knowledge of their day-to-day business is modest. Meetings of the prestigious priestly colleges could be held in the spacious villas of the senatorial order; on occasions meals were a matter of competition, and of course not subject to the restrictions imposed by the limited funds available to a college of common people, let alone of slaves. In most cases, membership numbers were restricted. Twelve (plus a few honorary seats) was a common size, and colleges would usually not exceed fifteen to twenty (as is the case with the *sodalitates*). The pontifical college was

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25 *CIL* VI 2010. A small number of the names can be identified with people known and datable from other sources: the *consul iterum* for 176 CE (Vitrasius Pollio: Rüpke 2005, 1224 no. 2784 = 2008, 850 no. 2784) features very close to the top of the (partial) list (which is probably arranged chronologically by date of admission, as is generally the case in these lists); others include the founder of the Mithraeum of *Castra peregrinorum* (A. Caecidius Priscianus: Rüpke 2005, 835 no. 998 = 2008, 582 no. 998) and one Aelius Saoterus (Rüpke 2005, 732 no. 481 = 2008, 511 no. 481), who since Borghesi has been identified with Saoterus of Nicomedia (Cass. Dio 73.12; Hist. Alex. Comm. 4.5), the *cubicularius* of Commodus, who was assassinated in 183/4.

26 The following paragraphs summarise the findings discussed at greater length in Rüpke (2011b).
larger and something of a medley, including pontiffs, minor pontiffs, flamines, and Vestal Virgins, and would have comprised more than thirty people. However, in these echelons of society, many members would be absent on imperial service in administrative or military positions for much of the time.

One should be cautious about speaking of priests as ‘religious infrastructure’, as service personnel easily available to everybody. First, it would have been difficult to find them. Of course, everybody would have known that the Vestal Virgins lived in a building adjacent to the aedes Vestae, namely the atrium Vestae, including the domus publica of the rex sacrorum that was given to them by Augustus in 12 BCE,²⁷ when the residence of the supreme pontiff was transferred to the Palatine (Cass. Dio 54.27.3).²⁸ Whereas the Vestals were hardly addressed by the general public (unless you decided to deposit your will with them as a form of political insurance), in the Republican period the pontifex maximus T. Coruncanius even set up an ‘open for consultation’ sign (consulere licet) during the first half of the third century BCE, indicating the legal services offered by the pontiffs (iur. 1). They did not enjoy a monopoly of competence as advocates, but they could answer questions regarding the status of burial places and the prospective permanency of tombs. Here, a certain public demand was to be expected, even if we have no indication of how often the threat of pontifical sanctions on tombstones far away from Rome actually led to an action being brought before the Roman college. If we can speak of any priesthood being part of a permanent religious infrastructure, the pontiffs must have been it. But it must be admitted that in the case of the only known interaction documented for the imperial period in 155 CE (ILS 8380),²⁹ the person addressed himself to the emperor, despite being personally acquainted with a pontiff.

The same holds true for other public priesthoods. Even the splendid structure of the grove of Dea Dia used for the cult of the Arval Brethren, which by the third century CE included a bath,³⁰ did not accommodate a permanent office – and in fact there would have been no need for such a thing. However, professional services that were in frequent demand were available: haruspices (i.e. practitioners of Etruscan divination: the most distinguished among them were given a permanent official status in the early Principate) as well as astrologers were known to be available for consultation in the city, for example around the Circus Maximus (Cic. div. 1.132).

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²⁷ Haselberger (2008, 60).
Judging by the *commentarii fratrum Arualium*, the religious activity of college members was concentrated on a few occasions in the year; in the event of absence – and, as we have already pointed out, high functionaries were frequently absent from Rome for long periods – it lapsed entirely. This made the political and social functions of such membership all the more important. The colleges that were reserved for senators offered prestigious positions, regarded as heralding or crowning a successful political career, and pursued as such. Membership did not just entail the obligation to participate in a few cult activities: it was also associated with lavish meals and celebrations in members’ private houses, opportunities to discuss politically sensitive subjects, personal affairs, and the like. Joining a college was associated with offering an expensive and unforgettable meal. The colleges were circles of communication within the political elite, and their significance as informal venues for the establishment of consensus among senators should not be underestimated. The mechanisms of co-optation constituted a bond between old members, the senate, and the Emperor. Members had the right to nominate candidates for vacant positions, and at the end of the process they were the ones who formally co-opted the persons chosen. At least for the *pontifices* and *augures*, and probably also for the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis* and *septemviri epulonum*, it was the Senate that implemented the election. The emperor himself could act in his function as a member of the college, naturally as the most powerful and influential member, whose recommendations could not be disregarded. But he could also be the one who influenced the Senate’s decisions.

Over time, however, the emperor’s direct interaction with his colleagues tapered off. Under these circumstances the enforced collegiality of the *collegia sacerdotum*, with its rotating *magister* and *promagister* posts, could be – with the exception of the pontificate – neither attractive nor helpful. After the *ludi saeculares* of 204 CE, there are no recorded instances of personal participation by the reigning emperor in the periodic meetings and ritual activity of any college, and this seems to have already been the case for long stretches of the second century. Even earlier, as shown by the *commentarii* of the Arval Brethren, communication by letter (*litterae*) may have been the normal form of participation, enabling the Emperor to avoid personal interaction and the perils of being obliged to argue

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31 This applies at least from the second century onwards; see e.g. Hoffman Lewis (1955); Szemler (1972); Scheid (1975); Alföldy (1977, 106–107); Schumacher (1978).
34 According to the *Acta* of the Arval Brethren (78, ed. Scheid) of 145 CE, M. Aelius Aurelius Caesar took part in a meeting as *magister*. 
face to face, and replacing that with a much more asymmetrical form of communication.³⁵

2.4. **Apparitores: mediating between the priests and the public**

Communication between ordinary people and public priests must have taken another form. We have at least two indications of how such communication might be effected. The first concerns the Vestals. These priestesses already had a personal lictor in the Republican period, but for the Empire a number of fictores, ‘bakers’, are also attested for them. Being a fìctor to the Vestals was an attractive task to many members of the senatorial order. Here, a realm of religious communication opened up. Rita Lizzi Testa has shown that the Vestals continued to attract donations down to the end of the fourth century, and thus prompted Gratian to pay closer attention to their fortunes and inheritances even as late as 382 CE. ³⁶

Moreover the existence of a range of secondary religious specialists, apparitores and serui publici, opened up possibilities of indirect interaction. We can see this most clearly in the case of the pontifical college and its calatores, who were proud servants, usually of libertine status, personally attached to the individual members. In 1788 a dedication by this college to Trajan, dated 101 CE, was found near the temple of Castor in the Forum, listing thirty-six names in total (*CIL VI* 2184). No doubt it had originally been attached to one of the walls of the *scola* of this college, in the immediate vicinity of the Regia: thus, it represents an official document. In 1887 C. L. Visconti found a fragmentary inscription near the temple of Bel outside the Porta Portuensis, i.e. in the vicinity of the modern Stazione Trastevere, which proved that a list of the same *calatores*, found nearby in 1860 (VI 2185), had been included in his private dedicatory inscription by one Iulius Anicetus, which is dated in the following year, 102 CE (*CIL VI* 31034 [includes VI 2185]). Anicetus announces that he was able to restore a portico of a cult-building of Sol (at his own expense) by permission of the *calatores* – *(perm)issu kal[l]atorum*. By chance we also know that one C. Iulius Anicetus, presumably the same man, erected a marble altar to the ‘divine Sun’ (*Soli divino*),

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³⁵ Rüpke should like to thank Claudia Moatti (Paris and Los Angeles) for discussion of this point.

³⁶ Lizzi Testa (2007); see Conti (2003) for the last Vestals. Iara (2015) extends these observations to all priesthoods (see 170–179 on the public ones).
probably *trans Tiberim*, in fulfilment of a pledge.\(^{37}\) And in 1859 Visconti had found yet another inscription by C. Iulius Anicetus, again outside the Porta Portuensis (thus also *trans Tiberim*).\(^{38}\) This inscription once again relates to a cult of the Sun, but is even more interesting from a Media Studies standpoint:

\[
\begin{align*}
C. \text{ Iulius Anicetus} \\
\text{ex imperio Solis} \\
\text{rogat nequis velit} \\
\text{parietes aut triclias} \\
\text{(5) inscribere aut} \\
\text{scariphare.}
\end{align*}
\]

Gaius Iulius Anicetus, on orders of the Sun, requests that nobody should write or scratch *graffiti* on the walls or couches.

The interesting point here is not that ancient graffiti artists were requested to desist in the name of the Sun God: that would be too superficial an anachronism. Much more interesting with respect to historical anthropology and to a psychological profile of Anicetus is his awareness of the effect of graffiti and inscriptions on the surfaces of buildings. For it was he who hit upon the idea of attaching a large-format list of *calatores* to the cult building *trans Tiberim* that was maintained by him. Why he asked the permission of the *calatores pontificum et flaminum* to do so we cannot tell, but part of his aim must have been to be able to put up a substantial list of names in the form of an inscription.

If no legal requirement may be invoked for the inclusion of the *calatores* in the dedication, the connection must be sought at another level. The epigraphic record may reveal a religious motivation. The patron of the *calator* Ti. Claudius Heronas, the *flamen Carmentalis* Ti. Claudius Pollio, who gave Heronas his praenomen and nomen, was also a sun-worshipper. The inscription that affords him the opportunity of representing himself epigraphically as *flamen Carmentalis* is dedicated to Sol, Luna, Apollo, and Diana – the cosmic divinities in duplicate form, as it were.\(^{39}\) Such shared interests might have connected one of the *flamines* and *calatores flaminum* with Anicetus. In pragmatic terms, they could easily have come to an agreement: why should the *calatores* refuse their approval, when it would bring them inclusion in an inscription at no cost to themselves, and when in any case nobody else would ask them for such approval? Sol

\(^{37}\) *CIL* VI 709. Cyriacus of Ancona gives no provenance, but the Venetian antiquarian Giovanni Marcanova (†1467) places it ‘*trans Tiberim*’. The altar was later in S. Cecilia in Trastevere.

\(^{38}\) *CIL* VI 52, whose provenance is roughly the same as that of the two fragments of VI 31034.

\(^{39}\) *CIL* VI 3720 = 31032 = *ILS* 1418.
was an ancient deity revered in the *Circus maximus*, and so here too there was nothing for them to find objectionable.\(^{95}\)

A dedication *permissu calatorum* is not an isolated phenomenon. *CIL* VI 40684 is addressed to Iulia Mamaea as *mater Augusti* and *mater castrorum*. This inscription was found in the vicinity of the via Aurelia Saffi in Trastevere, and is thus associated with Anicetus’ sanctuary outside the Porta Portuense. The inscription must date from the latter part of the reign of Alexander Severus,\(^{40}\) and thus fits precisely into the phase of the cult of the Sun marking the new orientation after the death of Elagabalus and the *sacerdos Solis Alagabalis Iulius Balbillus* (who may actually have been related to Elagabalus and his family). In view of the previous close association of the cult establishment with the ruling house and – judging by the associated honorific statues\(^{41}\) – with the *Vestales maximae*, it perhaps seemed appropriate to explicitly refer to the legal character of the undertaking (possibly a building or a renovation project).

### 2.5. Summary: interaction and its limits

Given the exceptional nature of the instances discussed in the previous section, any generalisation would be highly problematic. Nevertheless, these uses do attest to the possibility that, at least in indirect form, public priests interacted with the people, though admittedly only in the higher echelons of society. In the end, however, such interactions did not really matter: far more important services were provided by temples and other types of religious specialists. We do not find other groups or religious entrepreneurs imitating the specific forms of priestly organisation beyond the mere use of the term *sacerdos*. Indeed, from the mid-third century CE onwards we observe the public priesthoods themselves looking for forms of personal piety and religious action, a development that went hand in hand with a growing distance between priesthoods and emperors.\(^{42}\) It is to that relationship that we now turn.

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\(^{40}\) According to Alföldy, in his commentary on the inscription, between 227 or 232 and 235 CE.

\(^{41}\) *CIL* VI 2129–2130.

\(^{42}\) See Rüpke (2011b) and the discussion in Cameron (2011) for details.
3. Interaction between priests and emperor

3.1. A new role for the pontifex maximus

A preliminary caveat is called for as we switch our focus to the heart of political interaction. Public priests in Rome were not the only group of religious specialists within the political elite. The Senate routinely debated matters of religious significance, and provided authoritative rulings on them. Moreover, its members included a number of former magistrates, who also performed important ritual duties during their tenure in office. Many senators will have therefore been in a position to make competent and effective statements on matters of religious significance. The Roman Senate was, under the Republic as well as for much of the Imperial period, a hub of religious knowledge, which was not the exclusive prerogative of the senators who also held a priesthood.⁴³

The early phase of the Augustan period offers a remarkable example of this. L. Munatius Plancus’ contribution to the sacra of the city was arguably the dedication of the temple of Saturn that he carried out in 42 BCE. However, he also played a leading role in steering the process that led to the bestowal upon Octavian of the name Augustus. ‘Romulus’ was also considered as a potential option.⁴⁴ Suetonius records the argument that Plancus made in favour of ‘Augustus’ on the Senate floor, fully expounding the highly desirable connection between that proposed name and augury.⁴⁵ Plancus spoke as a distinguished consularis, who had switched sides from Antony to Octavian not long before the beginning of the Civil War. He could certainly make a reasonable claim to religious expertise, but the knowledge that he offered to the debate was not of the priestly kind: he was not a member of the augural college, and the only priesthood that he is known to have held is the post of septemuir epulonum.⁴⁶

Other solutions were of course possible, even in the circle of men that were closest to the princeps. M. Vipsanius Agrippa, for instance, made a substantial contribution to the codification of the position of Augustus in the Roman religious landscape by expressing a ruling on the layout of the Pantheon. He proposed to install a statue of Augustus within the temple; the proposal was rejected by the emperor himself, and Agrippa put forward a different option, whereby a statue of Caesar was placed in the Pantheon, and statues of himself and Augus-

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tus were placed in the vestibule.\textsuperscript{47} Agrippa was not just personally close to the\textit{ princeps}; he was also a member of several priestly sodalities (Vell. 2.127), and had been playing a major role in the quindecemviral college since the early Twenties. Agrippa’s position is a strong indication of the enduring significance of priestly offices, especially in a context where religious and ritual expertise were widely distributed across the elite. Indeed, much emphasis has been laid on the apparent attempt of the\textit{ princeps} to secure control over the main priestly colleges by promoting the recruitment of some of his close associates. Moreover, the\textit{ princeps} was usually a member of these colleges, even though his direct involvement with their work was at best occasional. The cumulation of a number of priesthoods is one of the markers of the exceptional status of the\textit{ princeps}, according to a trend that already takes shape under Caesar – who after Pharsalus was\textit{ pontifex maximus}, augur, and\textit{ XVvir s.f.} – an accumulation of key religious offices on a scale that would have been unthinkable in the Republican period.

It is noteworthy that Augustus decided not to alter the remit of the priesthoods, for instance by expanding the powers of the chief pontificate at the expense of other priesthoods. Broadly speaking, the priestly offices of the Republican period retained their traditional tasks and prerogatives; the\textit{ princeps} asserted his supremacy in the religious domain through his ubiquity, both in the presence of the colleges, and in their ritual activity – the prayers that were routinely made on his behalf being a prominent case in point. Moreover, the membership of a priesthood was a reliable indicator of one’s proximity to the monarch. The frankest expression of this principle is to be found in a letter of Pliny the Younger, and may confidently be applied more widely to the first century CE. In replying to the letter of congratulations that his friend Arrianus Matrus had sent him after he joined the augural college, in 103/104, Pliny singles out the reasons that make that position worthwhile, and his summary is opened by the argument that earning the appreciation of such a considerate\textit{ princeps} like Trajan, ‘even in the more trivial matters’, is a very fine thing indeed.\textsuperscript{48}

Such proximity was of course not immune from serious difficulties, whether real or potential. Concerns over the impact of the\textit{ princeps} on religious and ritual practice are apparent in an anecdote told by Suetonius (\textit{Tib.} 25.8). A few weeks

\textsuperscript{47} Cass. Dio 53.27.3–4.

\textsuperscript{48} Plin. \textit{Epist.} 4.8; cf. also his letter to Trajan on his ambition to hold a priesthood in 10.13. See Gibson and Morello (2012, 89–91) for a detailed reading of 4.8 and references to Cicero and his augurate. Várhelyi (2010, 58) understands this passage differently: “it is a fine thing to follow the view of the venerable\textit{ princeps} even in smaller matters”. The translation of Zehnacker and Méthy in the 2001 CUF edition seems preferable: “c’est un honneur d’obtenir l’estime d’un si digne prince, même dans des domaines de faible importance”.

after his accession to power, in September 14 CE, Tiberius was alarmed by the actions of M. Scribonius Drusus Libo, and suspected that an attack on his life might come from within the pontifical college. He therefore gave instructions that the blades of the *secespitae*, the knives with which sacrifices were performed, be replaced with lead.\textsuperscript{49} It is unclear whether the measure was taken openly and how it was received, but its implications are very clear: Tiberius has no qualms about altering a time-honoured ritual device in order to allay his own fears over his own survival, and has the power to bring about such a startling change.\textsuperscript{50} We may contrast this behaviour with the shrewd, if ruthless handling of pontifical affairs that Augustus proved capable of: he patiently waited until the death of Lepidus, in 13 BCE, before assuming the office of *pontifex maximus* on 6 March 12 BCE, even though his former ally had been confined at Circeii for decades. He thus affirmed in the clearest possible terms the need to secure a visible degree of continuity with the Republican past – whatever political price that might entail in the short term. After taking up the priesthood, Augustus routinely (and emphatically) used the title *pontifex maximus*, but the operation that he carried out in the *Res Gestae* (10.2) is even more significant. On the one hand, he emphasised the restraint that he had shown in allowing Lepidus to retain his priesthood, while at the same time casting doubts on his entitlement to it. On the other, he stressed that his election to the chief pontificate was not just a development that brought order in the *sacra* of Rome: it gave the whole of Italy the opportunity to stress its gratitude and admiration for the *princeps*. The size of the crowd that gathered in Rome to take part in the vote was, by his account, unprecedented.\textsuperscript{51}

Far from being an office that might be lightly tampered with, let alone overlooked, the highest pontificate was a central feature in the settlement devised by Augustus, and in the discourse that he developed around and about it. The domain of religious practice offers an even more complex and nuanced picture. John Scheid has drawn attention to the elaborate arrangements that the *princeps* appears to have made between 36 and 13 BCE in order to secure the viability of a number of features of Roman public religion without having to involve the ab-

\textsuperscript{49} On this tool see Siebert (1999, 249–250 no. 56). Van Haeperen (2002, 422–423) stresses the significance of the episode as evidence for the emperor’s involvement in public sacrifices.

\textsuperscript{50} For an instance of apparently orderly interaction between Tiberius and the pontiffs cf. Cass. Dio 57.10.1 (on the dedication of statues and shrines in honour of *Divus Augustus*), with the remarks of Van Haeperen (2002, 397) on the legal implications of that act.

sent *pontifex maximus.*\(^5\)⁴ Imperial control over the actions of a college could be exercised in remarkably subtle forms. Cassius Dio – an intelligent observer of matters religious, as has been shown above – records the scruples that Octavian manifested when he was about to marry Livia, who was pregnant with his child, in 39 BCE. He sought advice from the pontiffs on the propriety of the timing of the envisaged marriage.\(^5\)³ They purportedly looked the problem up in the records of the college and stated that there was no evidence for a prohibition. Dio then offers a sharp remark: the pontiffs would have given the same ruling even if they had been unable to find any corroborating opinion in their books. He does not even need to pursue the argument any further. The episode is sufficiently clear for him to convey an effective picture of the climate of that period. The readers are urged to draw the appropriate conclusions.\(^5\)⁴

### 3.2. Debating religious matters

Even if we grant, with Dio, that under the Empire senatorial debate on religious problems often involved people not saying what they thought, it does not follow that such debate was regarded as worthless. The episode itself strongly suggests that the need to address religious and ritual problems in a thorough and open manner was widely felt, at least in some quarters. Tiberius’ decision not to consult the Sibylline Books after the flood of the Tiber in 15 CE is singled out by Tacitus as an instance of the preference for secrecy that the despotic emperor often displays. It is remarkable to see that in that case the authoritative view of a member of the quindecemviral college, Asinius Gallus, who was in favour of consulting the Books, was effectively overruled (1.76.1). The literary and historiographical concerns of the only surviving source for this episode prevent us from saying more. Tacitus is keen to make a point about Tiberius’ style of rule, and fails to mention that both Asinius Gallus and Tiberius were members of the quindecemviral college, and will have therefore been able to debate the problem not just for its political implications.

That this was indeed possible is shown by a far better-documented debate: that on the prerogatives of the *flamen Dialis* in 22 CE, when the holder of that time-honoured priesthood, Ser. Cornelius Lentulus Maluginensis (whose position

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\(^5\)³ Cass. Dio. 48.44.2–3.
\(^5\)⁴ Cf. Van Haeperen (2002, 335–336), who points out that the response given by the pontiffs is in keeping with the tradition of the *sententiae* produced by the college in a crucial respect: it provides two alternative scenarios and frames two clear prescriptions around them.
in the history of his time and in the sacred landscape of the city has been discussed from a different angle above), asked to be assigned the governorship of Asia. An ancient prohibition prevented the flamen from leaving Italy: limitations of such kind had made it so hard to find suitable candidates from the senatorial order. Maluginensis made the case for a concession before the Senate, in the presence of the emperor. He developed what appears to be, in Tacitus’ summary, a carefully constructed argument, mainly based on the skilful use of antiquarian material where relevant precedents were listed. Far from denying the importance of backing up his claim with appropriate references to the past, he constructed his own account of the problem, whereby the prerogatives of the flamen Dialis are assimilated to those of the flamen Martialis, and the running of the pontifical college does not require the presence and direct involvement of the flamen Dialis. The argument put forward by Maluginensis is chiefly intended to address and persuade the emperor, but is made in the Senate and does not fail to prompt a lively debate. A number of senators took issue with it: Tacitus does not report their arguments in any detail, but does note that one of the speakers was Cn. Cornelius Lentulus, a member of the augural college. That a debate took place at all is a symptom of a reasonably widespread interest in priestly matters within the senatorial order. The outcome was to entrust the pontifex maximus – i.e. the emperor – with a decision on the matter: even Maluginensis can have had no reason to object to his involvement on a matter of ius divinum. Tiberius took some time to announce his ruling – other pressing matters, most notably the Silanus affair, took his attention. When he did, he based his decision not to meet Maluginensis’ request with a reasonably complex argument, in which he invoked the clear rules on the circumstances in which the absence of the flamen was excused, some of which went back to the Augustan period. He made the decision in his priestly capacity, although the pontifical college was not consulted on the point. There were no doubt weighty political and personal considerations behind Maluginensis’ intention to leave Rome and Tiberius’ reluctance to let him depart. However, the choice of both parties to use a series of competing arguments on points of sacral law is not fortuitous and is not a detail that may be easily dismissed.

Moreover, it is not an isolated instance. Upon Maluginensis’ death, in 23 CE, Tiberius took the chance to present a rather complex argument to the Senate on the status of the flamen and the flaminica, which was intended to ease some of

55 Tac. Ann. 3.58–59, 71.
the restrictions that had made the priesthoods so difficult to fill in the past. The
problem raised by the princeps led to a new piece of legislation in which the po-
sition of the flaminica was assimilated to that of any other woman, while the sta-
tus of the flamen was left unchanged. J. Scheid has recently stressed the ingenu-
ity of this solution, in which a solution to the wider problem of the flaminate
was devised without directly affecting the religious tasks of the priest. On
the other hand, it is important not to lose sight of the fundamental nature of
the political game at the time. The Principate was an intrinsically autocratic re-
gime, in which the princeps had the power and influence to sway the balance in
his favour whenever he wished. On many occasions he could steer the decisions
of a college just by setting out his views in a letter, without having to turn up in
person. In other cases, he would use his status as member of a priestly body to
convey messages to the wider elite. When the pontiffs decided to include Nero
and Drusus in the prayers that were routinely offered for the health of the emper-
or, Tiberius reacted by summoning the pontiffs. Instead of berating them,
though, he criticised their conduct with restraint (modice). As Tacitus points
out, Tiberius did not want to antagonise beyond necessity an audience that con-
sisted of young members of families that were close to him or very distinguished;
when he reported about the matter to the Senate, he commented on the youth
and lack of experience of the members of the college.

His meeting with the pontiffs brought home two fundamental points: that he
could instruct the pontifical college to revisit its earlier decisions; and that being
less tactful with the members of the college than he decided to be was within the
range of options available to him. At the same time, it is noteworthy that Tiberius
chose to use a degree of restraint (modus) in his dealings with the pontiffs, and
wanted to be seen to be doing that. As argued above, the priestly colleges, which
included some of the most distinguished and influential figures in Rome, were
also invaluable venues of communication and information exchange within
the elite. That was all the more the case in a world where political communica-
tion might entail serious personal risks. Tacitus is very keen to depict a context in
which calculated dissimulation is a major feature of political life, and that surely
also applies to the debate between Tiberius and Maluginensis. That does not
detract in any way from the seriousness and complexity of the arguments that
were deployed in these exchanges over ius diuinum.

57 Scheid (2012, 227).
58 Tac. Ann. 4.17.
59 Cf., from a different angle, the perceptive discussion in Schulz (2015).
3.3. Direct interaction

Evidence for direct interaction between emperors and the pontifical college is very sparse: we know of just four consultations between 44 BCE and the end of the Julio-Claudian period.\(^{60}\) Oddly enough, the emperor for whom the relatively largest body of evidence survives is Domitian, who in his capacity as *pontifex maximus* dealt with *incestum* cases involving Vestal Virgins in 83 and 90 CE, and involved the pontifical college, at least in the implementation of the ruling that he reached. The tradition on these episodes is unreservedly hostile, and the Younger Pliny does not miss the opportunity to remark that Domitian conducted himself like a tyrant even in his dealings with the pontiffs: the aspect of his conduct that appears to be most controversial, however, is the decision to summon the pontiffs to his villa at Albanum, rather than in the official residence of the *pontifex maximus*, the Regia.\(^{61}\)

The entire account of the events in connection with these trials is a narrative of priestly expertise being put into question. The interrogations carried out in 83 during the investigations initiated by Domitian were so repulsive that a member of the pontifical college who attended them was overwhelmed by shock and died – itself a comment on the wickedness of the proceedings. The most damning hint, however, is to be found in Pliny. As the Vestal Cornelia was being dragged to her execution, she pointed out that she could not be possibly be guilty of *incestum*, because the emperor who had sentenced her to death had conquered and celebrated a triumph after she had performed the required rituals.\(^{62}\) That fundamental inability to grasp the illogical nature of the charge is both revealing of Domitian’s priestly incompetence and of the despotic nature of his rule. Recognising the deep bias of the literary sources does not of course amount to rehabilitating Domitian. What is known about the initiatives taken by this emperor, however, strongly suggests that he tried to construct a very different account of his conduct, and that the way in which he conducted his action against the Vestals was based on a careful reflection on points of sacral law.

Much of what we know about the activity of priesthoods in the Julio-Claudian and Flavian periods derives from Tacitus, whose interest in public religion is

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\(^{60}\) Notably the consultation on Livia’s pregnancy in 39 BCE (on which see above); the removal of the body of the proscribed M. Oppius from the Campus Martius (Cass. Dio 48.53.4–6); expiatory sacrifices on the day of the wedding between Claudius and Agrippina (Tac. *Ann.* 12.8); and the consultation on the running of the haruspical *ordo* under Claudius (on which see below). See Hoffman Lewis (1955, 17); Malloch (2013, 238).


far less strong than the quality and range of information at his disposal, of which we get occasional glimpses from what survives of his work. Once Tacitus’ narrative ends, our information on the role of priestly expertise becomes very meagre indeed. As has been shown in the preceding section of this contribution, the evidence of Cassius Dio is valuable for what is reveals about religious innovation in a number of areas, but shows a consistent lack of interest in the role of priests as agents of change or creativity: they are merely acknowledged as background figures in the routine running of public religion.

What survives in Tacitus is highly selective, and not immune from shortcomings. As the cases discussed so far show, the handling of religious matters is revealing of some fundamental aspects of Tiberius’ character – his liking for secrecy, his skill at dissimulation, and the way in which he responded to threats (real or perceived) to his power. A similar tendency to duplicity and deviousness is apparent in Tiberius’ handling of another religious controversy.⁶³ In 32 CE a tribune of the plebs, Ser. Nonius Quinctilianus, proposed to introduce a new book into the Sibylline corpus; he had been encouraged to promote this initiative by a member of the college, L. Caninius Gallus, and had received the endorsement of the Senate. Tiberius was not prepared to endorse that innovation. He was by then no longer in Rome and he expressed his views in a letter that Tacitus summarises at some length. The main target of his polemic was the priest who had promoted the inclusion of the text in the collection: Caninius was experienced in sacral matters and had deliberately tampered with the process by failing to consult the quindecemviral college. The emperor – who was also a XVuir – therefore took the opportunity to assert his role as that of the guardian of the traditional prerogatives of priestly college and as someone who based his position on a thoughtful engagement with tradition and relevant precedents.

The longevity of the religious institutions of the res publica is the unspoken assumption on which the debate is predicated. The consequence of Tiberius’ intervention is that the matter is not closed by the Senate’s endorsement. The issue is referred back to the quindecemviral college, which would eventually produce a ruling on the inclusion of the new book in the corpus. As was the case in the controversy on the issue raised by Maluginensis, the outcome is formally sound: from a procedural standpoint it was perfectly acceptable to refer the matter to a priestly body. At the same time, it is not far-fetched to argue that Tiberius could hope to have far closer control over the college than he could expect to do with the Senate. Yet, it is important not to lose sight of the potential for innovation, and of the emergence of a plausible alternative: a tribune, a member of a priestly

college, and the Senate co-operate to put forward innovation on a significant ritual matter with long-term implications. Its apparent failure in 24 CE does not mean that similar efforts may not have been successful on other occasions. Speaking of an episode of religious resistance is surely excessive, but it is apparent enough that an attempt was made to establish an alternative to the agenda set by the *princeps*.

### 3.4. Routinisation and discontinuity

Caninius’ course of action and the ensuing controversy are at first glance surprising, because they are not paralleled anywhere in the surviving evidence. This is yet another reminder of the gaps in our information. Nowhere in the surviving literary evidence do we get a full account of how a priestly college, whether large or small, worked: the *quotidien sacerdotal* (to play on the title of the collaborative research project on municipal government in the Western provinces led by Mireille Cébeillac) is virtually beyond reach. That is why the records of a relatively minor, if prestigious, fraternity, the *Commentarii fratrum Arvalium*, are so valuable to our understanding of Roman religion in practice. The literary tradition for the early Principate is even less informative than the sources for the Republican period. Only a few instances of the work of the main priestly colleges receive a mention, and they tend to shed light on moments that reflect exceptional states of affairs. What has been termed ‘routinisation’ in the fulfilment of priestly duties in this period is hardly acknowledged in the literary record; the same applies to the actual functioning of the colleges. We have no way of finding out, for example, how the transmission of ritual knowledge within a college operated, and how the individual members learned to play their part in conducting a given ritual.

Speaking of routinisation does not involve overlooking the possibility of moments in which significant discontinuity intervened. A striking case in point is provided by the campaign on which Claudius embarked during his censorship to promote the re-organisation of the college of the haruspices, which he claimed had fallen into neglect, although it had in the past played a significant role in handling the expiation of a number of public prodigies. The *senatus consultum* implementing the programme set out by Claudius included instructions for the revival of the *ordo*, and entrusted the pontiffs with the task of putting these

64 Cf. Várhelyi (2010, 53).
Tacitus shows no interest in the details of the matter, and there is no reference to the unfolding of the process or the debate that accompanied it. The pontifical college follows up on the guidance offered by the Senate; it is conceivable that the pontiffs’ subsequent recommendations were reported to the Senate, rather than being implemented directly. The college receives another cursory mention in the following book, when Claudius instructs it – no doubt in his capacity as pontifex maximus – to carry out expiatory rituals after the suicide of Silanus at the grove of Diana. Again, Tacitus is elusive on matters of detail: he just notes that the prospect of devising sanctions for the crime of incest was widely regarded as ludicrous (inridentibus cunctis). This reaction, however, does not reflect as much on the pontifical college as it does on the princeps who gave instructions to carry it out. It is revealing of a wider issue, though: irony or sarcasm about forms of religious practice perceived as improper imply that the versions regarded appropriate were viewed as something that could be taken very seriously.

Models require careful testing against their concrete applications. It is hard to avoid the impression, however, that the extant evidence conveys a highly incomplete view of the range of priestly duties and of the forms of priestly expertise that were relevant during the first century of the Principate. To be sure, the epigraphic habit conveys a considerably more detailed picture of priests and priesthoods across the Empire; conversely, achieving a full appreciation of the role that priesthoods had within the res publica is an increasingly difficult task. The evidence that does survive warns against the assumption that debate was sharply curtailed. As we have seen, there are instances, especially in Tacitus, of complex discussions over technical religious matters involving the Senate as a corporate body, individual senators, priests, and the emperor. As Quintilian notes, being able to debate on augural matters, oracles, and religious issues of all kinds is a crucial feature in the training of an orator of senatorial standing.

The relevance of religio abides, quite apart from the priestly duties that a senator might fulfil, and possibly quite apart from any impact that the debates in which he takes part might have.

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65 Tac. Ann. 11.15.3.
66 Malloch (2013, 238).
69 Cf. Parker (2012, 470) on sarcasm about seers in societies that rely on divination.
70 Quint. 12.2.21: de auguriis, responsis, religione denique omni.
4. Conclusion

It is uncontroversial that Roman priesthoods were deeply embedded in the political domain. Under the early Principate such embeddedness became even more marked than had previously been the case. It is not helpful to view the position of Roman priesthoods and their holders in terms of resistance or irrelevance. The Principate was of course a deeply authoritarian regime, but public priesthoods retained the role of prominent and significant centres of religious knowledge and action. Engaging thoughtfully with the complexity of their lore and their significance was an important part of the craft of a capable princeps – both in the performance of priestly duties and beyond it. The ways in which priestly authority and expertise are deployed in such a system can shed light on the wider political climate and some of its fault lines. Reading the developments of the early Principate through the familiar categories of negligence or manipulation is equally uncalled for. The only proper critical method is close engagement with specific instances.

The evidence for the impact of priestly knowledge on political developments in this period is admittedly far from satisfactory, and worsens considerably once Tacitus’ narrative breaks off. Our discussion points to an important conclusion, however. Half a century ago, in his splendid overview of the historical development of Roman religion between Republic and Principate, Carl Koch argued that “der Prinzeps es sozusagen zum ungeschriebenen Gesetze erhoben hatte, in Sachen der erhebten Religion nicht zu debattieren, sonder zu handeln: nulla ratione reddita”. The instances we have discussed make an important corrective necessary. The expectation that reasoned arguments be offered, which had been developed above all in the last century of the Republic, was still widely held in the early Principate, albeit in a political situation that had changed beyond recognition since the period in which Cicero set the debate in De natura deorum between Balbus, Cotta and Velleius about the tension between ancestral tradition and philosophical reflection on religious matters. With the advent of the Principate, the relevant knowledge came to be firmly vested in public priests. That was accepted by the emperor, by members of the senatorial class (who also might be active as authors), and by a wider public. This new role did not turn public priests into agents of innovation on a larger scale: neither imperial initiative

71 Koch (1960, 204). Cf. the English translation in Ando (2000, 328): ‘the princeps had elevated to an undeclared law the principle that one should not discuss details of traditional religion, but accept them nulla ratione reddita’). The allusion is to Cic. Nat. D. 3.5.
nor investments into new religious practices by groups or individuals depended on priestly approval.

References


