

How to Invoke the Gods in the Roman World: Examples from the Arval Brethren

The purpose of this paper is to identify and examine the different techniques Roman priests used to invoke the gods in order to draw conclusions about the knowledge base of priests, the functions of ritual and religion, and Roman conceptions of the gods. Specifically, the Arval Brethren, and by extension Roman priests, would tailor their invocations to the given ritual circumstances. They would do so by either focusing their invocation on only a particular aspect of a deity's power or they would deliberately invoke a deity in its entirety. This permitted the Roman priests a high degree of flexibility in calling down the god, or aspect of a god, best suited to the ritual circumstances.

The functional mechanics behind priestly invocation has not been meaningfully studied for a century since Georg Wissowa (Wissowa, 1912). Recent theoretical developments in the fields of sociology, anthropology, and religious studies suggest that a reevaluation of the core principles of Roman religion would yield new insights into the role and importance of Roman religion in the ancient world. Other modern studies reassessing the theological and practical underpinnings of Roman religion, such as the relationship between the gods and Roman society, and the practice of Roman religion (Ando, 2008; Scheid, 1999), have yielded beneficial results.

Though this paper includes examples from multiple priestly colleges, including the Pontifices (*CIL* 11.4172), Augures (*CIL* 14.2580), and Salii (*Carmen Saliare*), the *Acta* of the Arval Brethren remains by far the largest surviving source of recorded ritual among the Romans. For this reason this study focuses heavily on the *Acta*.

In the *Acta*, the Arval Brethren use three different techniques to invoke the gods. The first technique is the invocation of a deity in its entirety, that is to say they call upon a god using only the gods name without singling out any one of possibly several spheres of influence the

deity might have. In broad-based gods, such as Jupiter, who overlooks everything from lightning to oath-swearing to old leather shoes, this has the effect of attracting the god in every aspect of its power. The Brethren would use this technique when the particular ritual circumstances called for all, or many, of the various powers of the deity to be present. In one example of several, on September 23, 45 CE the Arvals invoked Jupiter in celebration of the birthday of Divine Augustus (*Act. Arv.* 18.7-8). Such an acknowledgement of Augustus' birthday has implications at the private, public, and even personal levels, so it comes as no surprise that the Brethren would consider it necessary to invoke Jupiter in his entirety.

The Arvals also used this technique to summon more minor deities, but in these cases the deities are so narrowly focused that they only possess one specific aspect of power so there is no option but to summon them in their entirety. Examples from the *Acta* are frequent and include deities like Fons, Flora, and Clementia.

The second and third techniques invoke not the full deity, but a targeted piece of a god, singling out one specific aspect of that deity's power. The second technique accomplishes this through the use of epithet labels such as Jupiter Optimus Maximus for targeting Jupiter's role in the official state (used dozens of times throughout the *Acta*), Fortuna Redux as the aspect of good fortune on the journey home (*Act. Arv.* 99a.22-29), or Mars Victor as the aspect of victory in war (*Act. Arv.* 62a.51). There are many more examples. The third technique targets a specific aspect without an epithet label, relying instead on ritual context to identify it. The most obvious example of this is when the Capitoline Triad is invoked on many occasions without its normal epithets, simply as Jupiter, Juno, Minerva (for example: *Act. Arv.* 40.I.1-7.62-67).

When taken together, these three techniques show that Roman priests viewed the gods not only as whole entities, but also as summonable fragments with which they could treat. This

granted them a remarkable degree of flexibility in invocation allowing them to summon the best deity, or piece of a deity, for the occasion. Such a view of the gods, however, would have required an extensive knowledge base and understanding of the Roman deities and how they functioned.

Works Cited

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