

# Roman Cults and Worship



# **Roman Cults and Worship**

Introduction: Roman Religion before Christianity

- **to understand the rise of Christianity, it's essential to examine the Romans' religious preferences during the early phases of its development**
  - **from that it's possible to see why the Romans ultimately came to prefer Christianity out of the many religions and cults they had to choose among**

# Roman Cults and Worship

Introduction: Roman Religion before Christianity

- the earliest known form of Roman religion is based on agricultural deities
  - like **Robigo** (“Averter of Plant Rust”)
  - very practical in an agricultural community
- but later the Romans shifted focus from farming to warfare
  - thus, their principal god **Mars** changed from a god of fertility to a war god



# Roman Cults and Worship

Introduction: Roman Religion before Christianity

- by the third century BCE, the Romans had begun equating their native deities with **Greek gods**
  - due to the popularity of Greek literature



A recently  
discovered  
mosaic  
of Venus:  
“Aphrodite  
of Galilee”

# Roman Cults and Worship

Introduction: Roman Religion before Christianity

- the equation of Greek and Roman gods:
  - e.g. **Jupiter/Zeus**, **Juno/Hera**, **Mars/Ares**, **Mercury/Hermes**, **Venus/Aphrodite**, etc.



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# Roman Cults and Worship

Introduction: Roman Religion before Christianity

- by the second century BCE, Rome had become a veritable thoroughfare for new religions and foreign belief systems
- Roman religion from early on had always relied on **patriotism**
  - i.e. defending Rome
    - cf. **Cincinnatus**
  - virtues: bravery, duty, reverence of tradition and ancestors

The Horatii triplets vowing to die for Rome



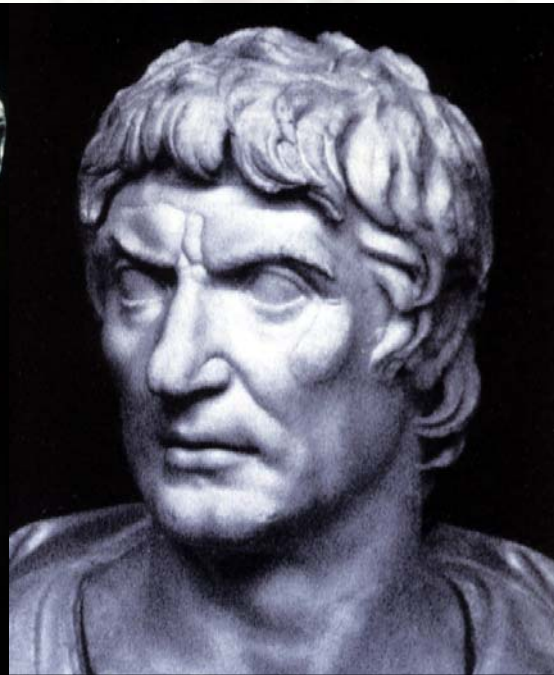
# Roman Cults and Worship

Introduction: Roman Religion before Christianity

- in the first century, the rise of generals
  - led to a loss of patriotic sentiment
  - and the earlier Romans' sober conservatism



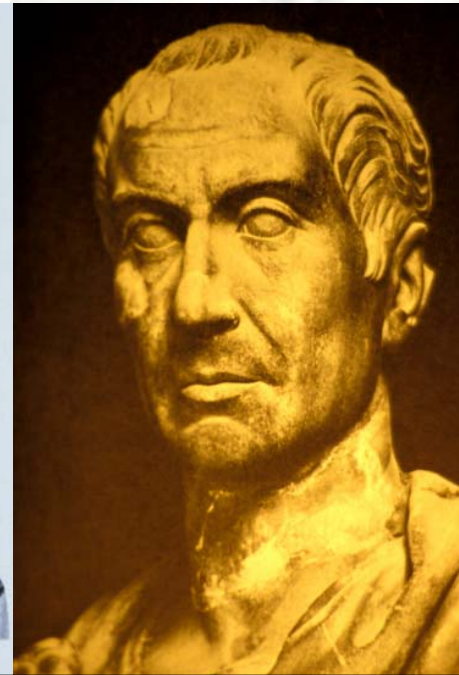
Marius



Sulla



Pompey



Caesar

# Roman Cults and Worship

Introduction: Roman Religion before Christianity

- **Romans responded in various ways**
  - debauchery: sex and gardens, etc.
  - philosophy: “logic-based religions”
  - and other indulgences in personal comforts
- **Rome had become culturally fragmented and steeped in escapist ideologies**
  - no longer one Rome, but Romes!





# Roman Cults and Worship

Introduction: Roman Religion before Christianity

- by the early Empire, there was a strong need to reunite the Romans culturally
  - political solution: **emperor-worship**
    - but emperors are transient
    - and many blamed the Empire and the generals for the decline in patriotism
    - moreover, emperor-worship was a form of taxation
      - and who wants to worship tax-collectors?



# Roman Cults and Worship

Introduction: Roman Religion before Christianity

- thus, Christianity entered a Rome that was spiritually bankrupt and fractured, chasing a million different dreams
  - tolerant but in moral chaos
  - polytheistic, not exclusive
  - embracing a “cafeteria” approach to religion



# **Roman Cults and Worship**

## The Cultic Backdrop: Cybele and Isis

- **because of all this, a number of cults made their way into Rome prior to Christianity, e.g. Cybele and Isis**
- **by studying the nature of these cults, it's possible to gain insight into the reasons Christianity succeeded where all the others failed in the long run**

# Roman Cults and Worship

The Cultic Backdrop: Cybele and Isis

- the cult of **Cybele**
  - one of the oldest cults imported into Rome, ca. 205-204 BCE
  - Cybele was credited with the Romans' victory in the Second Punic War
    - the goddess Cybele is the protectress of the besieged



# Roman Cults and Worship

## The Cultic Backdrop: Cybele and Isis

- the cult of Cybele
  - also tied to agriculture, like the Romans
  - cf. her consort **Attis** who dies and is reborn each year
- form of Cybele worship: **ecstasy**
  - “act of standing outside yourself”
  - by dancing or self-mutilation



# **Roman Cults and Worship**

## The Cultic Backdrop: Cybele and Isis

- **most Romans naturally disliked the sort of excessive behavior seen in this cult**
  - especially as it became ever more licentious over time in order to attract followers
- **but Cybele thrived for other reasons**
  - the promise of life after death with Cybele
  - appealed especially to those with little hope of finding satisfaction in this life
    - e.g. women and slaves

# Roman Cults and Worship

## The Cultic Backdrop: Cybele and Isis

- the cult of **Isis**
  - very ancient Egyptian goddess
    - wife and sister of **Osiris** (the prototype of the dead pharaoh)
  - by Roman times, Isis had already changed forms many times over history
    - hymn to Isis: “invoked with innumerable names”
    - especially, the version of Isis created by Greek sailors



# Roman Cults and Worship

## The Cultic Backdrop: Cybele and Isis

- the cult of Isis
  - practiced as a **mystery** or **mystery cult**
    - the appeal of mysteries: belonging to a club with secret truths
    - but also mysterious to us today!
  - but cf. depiction of Isis worship discovered at Pompeii
    - chorus singing
    - cistern of Nile water
    - in general, pageantry





# Roman Cults and Worship

## The Cultic Backdrop: Cybele and Isis

- **all in all, Isis worship was just as popular as Cybele worship but conducted in a more decorous manner**
  - **the Isis cult appealed to those Romans who wanted a more dignified and traditional way to worship a foreign deity**
  - **also, provided the celebrant with the promise of eternal salvation and a personal union with the divine in the afterlife**
    - **n.b. the importance of the individual**

# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

- another foreign deity to infiltrate Rome was **Mithras**, also a mystery cult
- originally, THREE “Mithrases” in antiquity
  1. Indo-Aryan: ca. 2000 BCE
  2. Zoroastrian: in the 6<sup>th</sup> cent. BCE
  3. imported into Rome: 60’s BCE



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

- connecting all these Mithrases has proven very challenging
- best-attested Mithras is the Roman deity
  - Pompey's soldiers brought the cult to Rome from Asia Minor
  - from there, it spread quickly
  - but no women!



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

- Mithraism appealed especially to men in the working classes
  - records show very few aristocrats joined
- n.b. location of **Mithraea** (**Mithraeum**)
  - called “caves”
  - place for baptism (in bull’s blood?)
  - consistent image of Mithras



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

- **tauroctony**: “bull slaughter”
  - Mithras always above bull, slitting its throat
  - often, there’s a little dog lapping up blood
  - also scorpion on back leg, and snake nearby



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

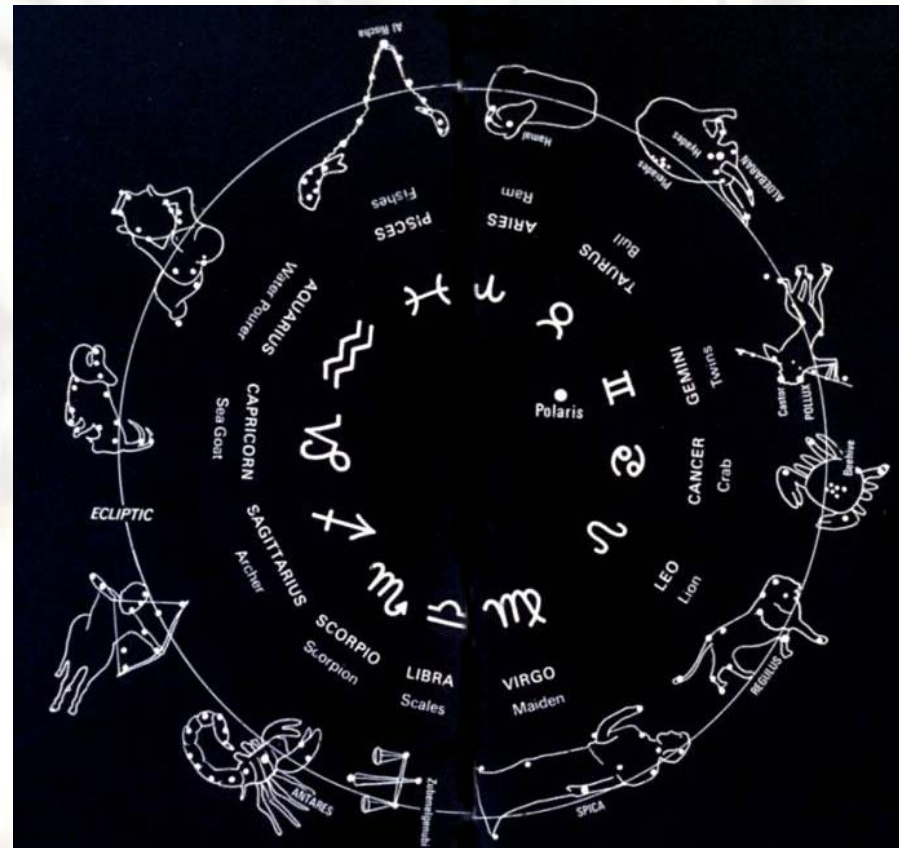
- what does the tauroctony signify?
  - n.b. all these symbols are astrological
    - bull (Taurus), scorpion (Scorpio), dog (Canis minor), snake (Draco)
  - cf. painting of Mithras with stars in his cape
    - another shows him dining with the Sun



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

- significance of astrological symbolism
  - **astrology** is a popular form of divination
    - “reading” the movements of stars and planets can predict the future
    - it’s the gods’ way of telling us what’s to come
    - why else would the heavens move?



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

- astrology originated in Mesopotamia
  - then spread to Egypt, later Greece
- part of a major revolution in religion
  - e.g. dead souls are now seen to ascend into heaven
  - also, **planets** are given names of gods: Jupiter, Venus, Mars, etc.



8 An astronomical almanac for the year 61/62 AD. BM 40084.



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

- **fatalism**: no personal responsibility
  - seen most often in times when people have felt out of control of their lives and world
    - e.g., after Alexander's campaigns in Greece
    - also, in Rome in the first century BCE, as the Republic was slowly collapsing

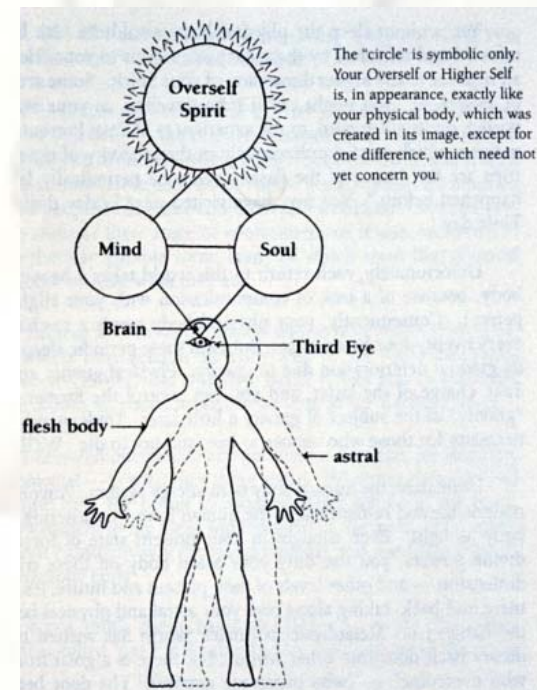


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# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

- astrology was popular with all social classes
  - e.g. Roman law against preparing the emperor's horoscope
  - horoscopes in today's world
  - the basic appeal is to the individual
    - the stars (gods) care about what happens to each person



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

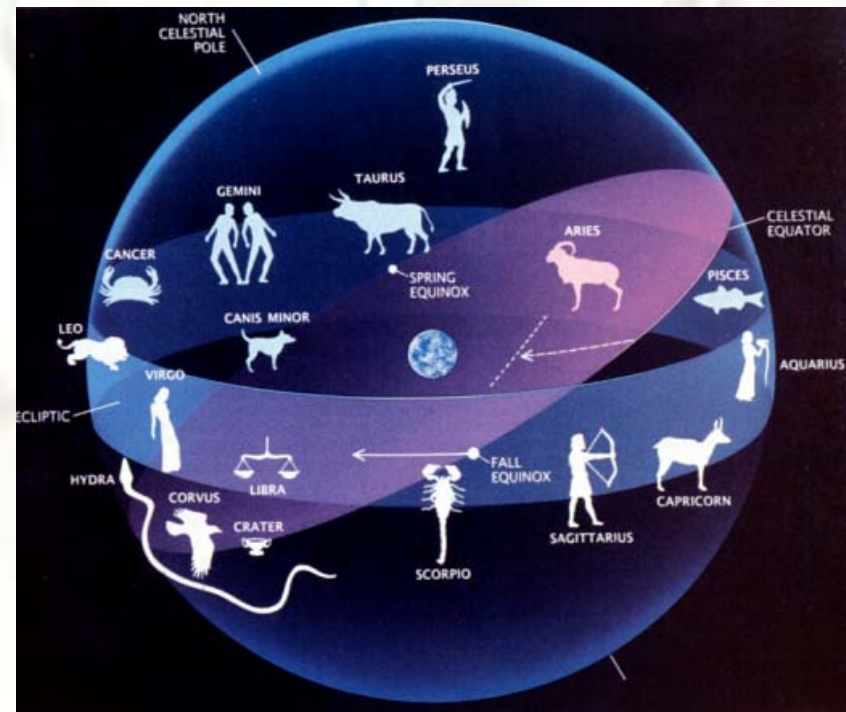
- **David Ulansey:** Mithraism was connected with astrology
  - the answer to the “mystery” of Mithras?
- no link between Roman Mithras and earlier gods
  - the Roman cult simply re-used an old name
  - to make it look old



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

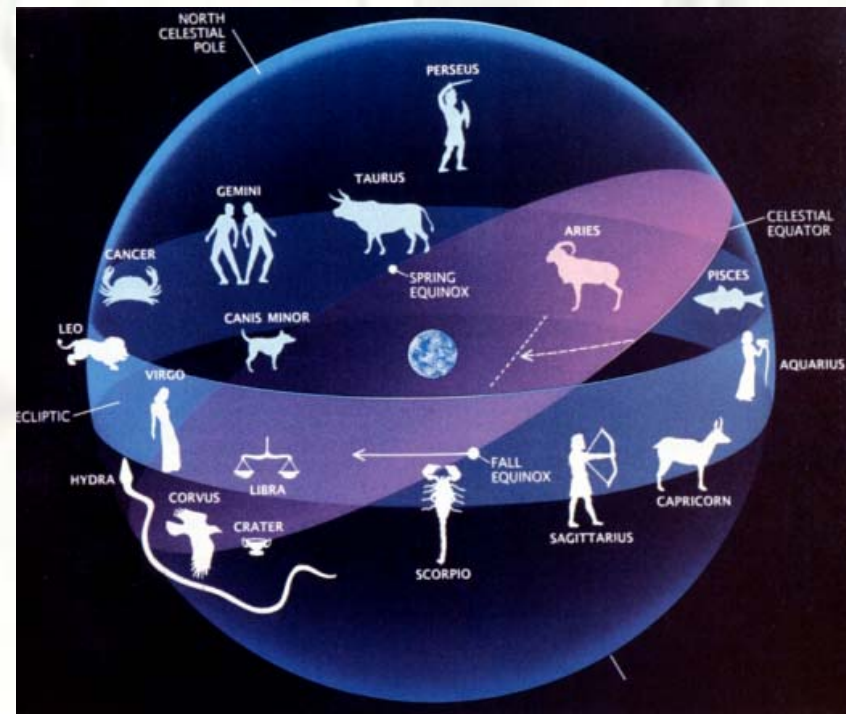
- instead, the cult imported into Rome was based on astrology
  - and current advances in astronomy
- **precession**
  - apparent movement of the sun backwards through the heavens
    - or through the **zodiac**
  - actually, the earth wobbling on its axis



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

- precession happens very slowly
  - one full cycle takes 25,920 years
    - one-twelfth (a zodiacal “house”) = 2160 years
  - discovered by the Greek astronomer Hipparchus in about 125 BCE
    - n.b. just before the spread of Mithraism to Rome



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

- **precession is not all that interesting to us: the Earth is wobbling like a top**
  - but to geocentrists, the heavens seem to be lurching backwards
  - cf. Ulansey:

“From the geocentric perspective, the precession (a movement of the earth) appears to be a movement of the entire cosmic sphere. For people who held both a geocentric worldview and the belief that the movements of the stars influenced human fates, the discovery of the precession would have been literally world-shaking: . . .

# Roman Cults and Worship

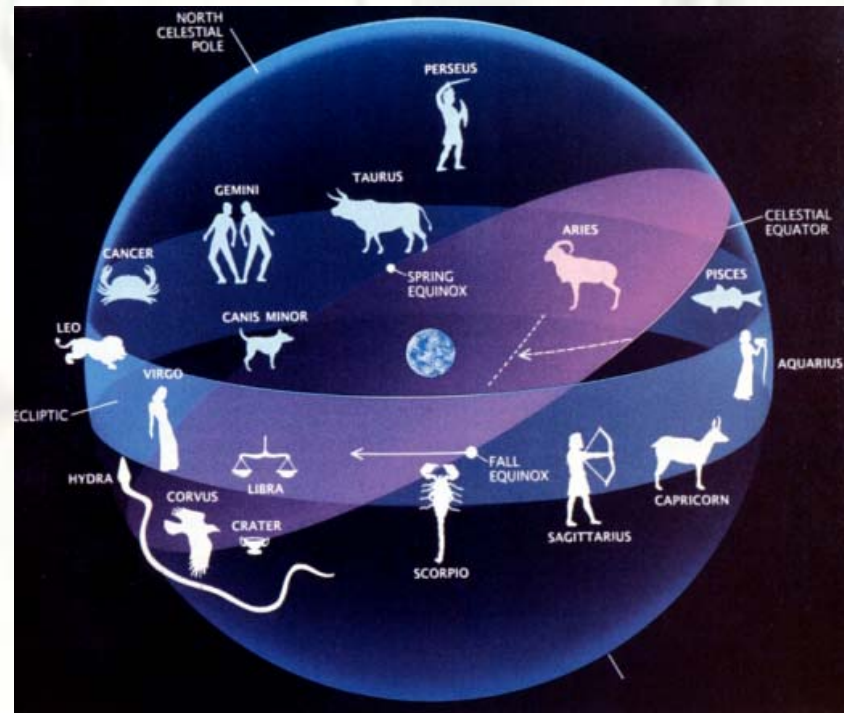
## Mithraism

- precession is not all that interesting to us: the Earth is wobbling like a top
  - but to geocentrists, the heavens seem to be lurching backwards
  - cf. Ulansey:  
“ . . . the stable sphere of the fixed stars was being unseated by some force apparently larger than the cosmos itself. Ancient intellectuals, accustomed as they were to seeing the work of the gods reflected in the works of nature, could easily have taken this great movement as evidence for the existence of a powerful, hitherto unsuspected deity.”

# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

- in first-century Rome, the sun was moving from the house of Aries to Pisces
  - it will soon move from Pisces to Aquarius
    - “the dawning of the Age of Aquarius”
  - earlier (ca. 2200 BCE) the sun moved from Taurus to Aries
    - Ulansey: Mithraism was tied to this astrophysical change

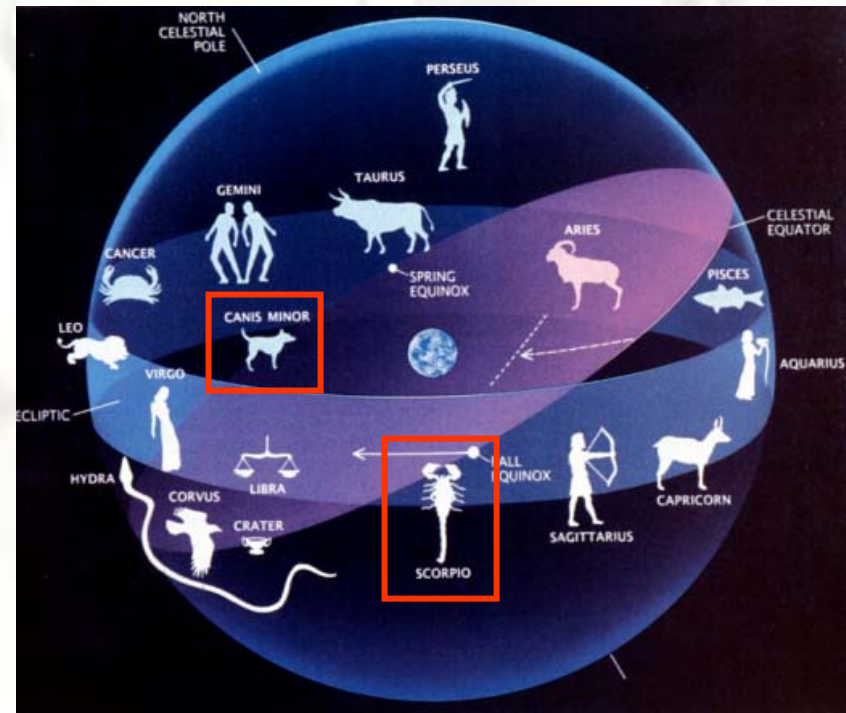




# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

- the tauroctony: the “killing” of the bull = the sun’s movement out of Taurus
  - n.b. the position of other constellations
    - Canis minor (below)
    - Scorpio (opposite)



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

- **Mithras: a powerful god capable of moving the heavens**
  - but who was this god really?
  - no constellation named “Mithras”
  - but Perseus is above Taurus
    - Greek hero but a god in Asia Minor
    - tied to Mithradates



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

- lesson of the Mithras cult: “Be different but not too different!”
  - link the old and the new
    - e.g. old “Mithras” and familiar Perseus
      - plus astrology
  - make your cult novel and familiar, both revolutionary and comfortable



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Mithraism

- little wonder, then, the Mithras cult became very popular very fast
  - but like Akhetaten, what goes up fast is likely to come down fast
  - a cult that plays to the moment this well is bound not to age well



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Dionysus and Christ

- but none of these deities look much like Christ, except in a few superficial details
- cf. **Dionysus**
  - much better parallel to Christ
  - Greek god but originally from Asia Minor, ca. 1200 BCE



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Dionysus and Christ

- **Dionysus' myth (i.e. "invented history")**
  - son of Zeus and long-suffering human mother
    - his mother Semele was very important in Dionysus worship
  - seen as a bearded youth
    - asexual himself, though inspiring love in others
  - highly emotional worship
  - detractors scorn/kill him
    - but reborn in triumph and avenged after death



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Dionysus and Christ

- now imagine Dionysus in a Jewish context in the first century CE
  - formula for a **messiah** (“anointed one”)
    - in Greek *christos*
    - cf. Joan of Arc: the need of the downtrodden for the myth of a savior-to-come

# Roman Cults and Worship

## Dionysus and Christ

- then throw in some buzz-words from Greek philosophy like *logos* (“word”)
  - remember that the New Testament was published in Greek in order to reach a wider audience



CHRIST IN MAJESTY, WITH ALPHA AND OMEGA, the first and the last—signifying that in the end we fall into the hands of our maker. This wall-painting in the fourth-century catacomb of Commodilla, to the south of Rome, may be as old as the catacomb itself.



# Roman Cults and Worship

## Dionysus and Christ

- this way, Christ makes “historical” sense
  - Christianity appealed to the Roman public
  - i.e. its founders knew what they were doing



early Roman  
relief of  
Jesus dressed  
as an  
aristocrat

# **Roman Cults and Worship**

Conclusion: The "Cult" of Christianity

- **in other words, Christianity played well to the general interests of those ancient Romans who were searching for meaning in their lives**
  - in particular, it avoided pitfalls which held back and undermined other cults
  - let's review those in detail

# **Roman Cults and Worship**

## Conclusion: The "Cult" of Christianity

- **vs. Greek philosophy:**
  - Christianity appealed primarily to the heart, not the head
  - this saved it from having to be “logical”
- **vs. Mithras and other mysteries:**
  - Christianity allowed a wide-open path for spreading the gospel
  - while it lost some initial impetus, it was a better plan in the long run

# **Roman Cults and Worship**

## Conclusion: The “Cult” of Christianity

- **vs. emperor worship:**
  - Christianity based itself on “weakness”
    - “The meek shall inherit the earth”
  - vs. the very real and tangible but transitory power of rulers
- **vs. Isis:**
  - Christian leaders worked hard to enforce uniformity of worship across the empire
  - this helped to keep down forces promoting diversity and schism

# Roman Cults and Worship

Conclusion: The “Cult” of Christianity

- and along with all these wise decisions, early Christian leaders also brought something new to the altar: **exclusivity**
  - an idea central to Judaism but very different from the polytheistic traditions dominating most ancient civilizations
  - but also a savvy choice because it gave people trapped in the “machinery” of imperial rule a sense that they could do something to make themselves different

# **Roman Cults and Worship**

## Conclusion: The "Cult" of Christianity

- **this free choice, real or not, was in and of itself very enticing and made people feel important as individuals**
  - especially to the lower classes, it offered a vindication of one's personhood
  - thus, the first converts were women and slaves, for the most part
  - it took a long time and some modification of Christian theology to reel in Roman men
- **and that's the next chapter of the story!**