

The Transformative Powers of Religion in the Late Antique Landscape of Ostia

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In 359 CE, hoping to calm the sea and a city riot over famine, the urban prefect of Rome went to Ostia's Temple of Castor and Pollux to make a sacrifice (Amm. Marc. 19.10.4). It is not the only testimony to the lasting presence of the traditional cults at Rome's old harbor. In March an annual festival of Isis inaugurated the reopening of shipping routes for spring; and every year on 23 August, the town honored Vulcan, Ostia's preeminent deity, with games and celebrations.

Late Antique scholarship, however, has often focused on identifying the town's Christian buildings and overlooked the urban dynamic in which these new monuments were situated. Using a wider lens to explore the archaeological record of the fourth and fifth centuries, I foreground the city's traditional religions as a way to gain a more nuanced picture of Christianization. Here, I reveal a dynamic religious environment in which traditional cults and Christian monuments developed distinct centers of religious power throughout town.

We do not know precisely when traditional cults came to an end at Ostia; a portion of Rome's population celebrated the Vulcanalia into the sixth century. Yet Roman religion remained intricately intertwined with concepts of Roman time; and a fifth-century consular diptych from Ostia provides a physical reminder that the Roman year, named for its consuls, continued to hold a central place in the late antique town.

Against this backdrop, I examine how Ostia's martyrs and their eponymous churches emerged as powerful counterweights to the lure of traditional urban sanctuaries. The martyrdom of a bishop, his presbyter and deacon, is recorded on 23 August; SS. Aurea and Ercolano were martyred on the next day (AASS IV, p. 757-761). The only saints' days known at Ostia, all fall during the festival of Vulcan. A topographical comparison of sanctuaries and saints' churches reveals a shift in ritual activity from the urban center towards the periphery and these new extra-mural buildings.

A fifth-century graffito from the center of town provides evidence of this competitive urban environment. A column near the *macellum* records the miracle of a mute beginning to speak; the text uses a Christian formula (*lege et intellege*). At the time of its discovery, it was re-used along the road towards the Temple of Castor and Pollux. Placed along a well-worn route to a traditional shrine, with parts of the urban fabric beginning to crumble, it was a subtle sign of Christianity's pervasive power.

By the sixth and seventh centuries, a specifically Christian topography had developed outside the walls of the ancient city, focused, in part, on a reverence for holy men and women; but one that had also effectively replaced the traditional religious sites within, casting the entire town as a powerful "absent presence" of traditional cults (Annabel Wharton).