to a new understanding of her role as a Christian woman. In "The Arena," I consider the expectations and experience of the spectators and the martyrs as they gathered in the space of the final confrontation where Rome intended to exert its power over the Christian community.

Although the arena ended with Perpetua's death, the story of Perpetua's passion did not end there. Her diary was read annually on the day of her martyrdom, so her memory influenced many subsequent generations. But just as she transformed her memories as she adjusted to the new circumstances of Christian martyrdom, the memory of her passion was reinterpreted to suit a changed Christian world. The last chapter summarizes the fortunes of Rome, Carthage, and the Christian community after Perpetua's death, and looks at the use and reinterpretation of her text over time.

There are a number of good and accessible translations of the text of the "Passion of Perpetua and Felicity." I have chosen to cite the version that has the most accessible Latin edition of the text in conjunction with a translation. I have for the most part kept Musurillo's translation, changing only those parts that I believed could be made more accurate or understandable to modern readers.

Things are never simple when paradigms shift and ideologies conflict. Martyrdom represents perhaps the most vivid moment in such a clash of cultures. During the early centuries of Christianity, individuals were willing to die, and die horribly, to bear witness to a new idea that was displacing an old one. This book explores this conflict of ideas in the life of one individual. It further considers the power of the idea of this young woman whom we have remembered for so long.

one

Rome

Vibia Perpetua "came of a good family: she was well brought up and a respectably married woman." This is all that we are directly told about Perpetua's life before she came into conflict with the authorities of Rome. Figure 1.1 shows a statue of a young second-century Roman matron from Carthage. Perpetua would have looked very much like this modest young woman who was roughly her contemporary. Although the description of Perpetua's background is brief, it allows us to understand a great deal about her upbringing, and what ideas she absorbed in her youth. As a traditional Roman girl, she learned early that the center of her world was family, home, and the spirits who guarded them.

HOME AND HEARTH

Perpetua's family name, Vibius, suggests that the family had been Roman citizens for many generations. Her father was likely of some high rank in the municipal province, perhaps of the decurial class, although some speculate that he might have been as highly placed as senatorial rank.[1] In either case, the family must have been influential in the community, and must have benefited from its association with the power and history of Rome.

When Perpetua was born, she would have been placed at her father's feet. Her father picked her up, accepting her into the family over which he was the undisputed head.[2] In traditional Roman families, the power of the father *(patria potestas)* was complete and lasted as long as he lived, even after the child reached adulthood. Yet, the relationship that

Fig. 1.1 Roman matron. Bardo Museum, Tunis. Photograph by Bob Balsley.

developed between father and daughter was frequently close and sometimes affectionate. Among upper-class Romans, the father-daughter tie was important.[3] Obedient daughters forged political and social ties for the *pater familias*, and their obedience was often rewarded with paternal love. Some Roman texts describe the great affection that existed between fathers and daughters. In a famous example, Pliny the Younger described a father's grief over the death of his thirteen-year-old daughter: He recalled how the child would "cling to her father's neck," and at her death, the father "cast off all his other virtues and is wholly absorbed by his love for his child."[4] We cannot know whether Pliny's example was typical, but as we shall see in Perpetua's account of her father's reaction to her arrest, his deep grief revealed the close father-daughter bond that was possible in Roman families. The elder *pater familias* surely had looked forward to his daughter's comforting and gratifying him in his old age, an expectation that was to be scorned by Christian writers and Christian daughters.[5]

The authority of the father extended to all those within his household. Perpetua's immediate family included her mother and two living brothers (a third brother had died in childhood). The full household that came under the control of her father included slaves and freedpeople. In fact, the very term *"familia"* included these people not tied by blood but linked by law.[6] When Perpetua was arrested along with two of the household slaves, more than the favored daughter were flouting the authority of the beleaguered head of this house.

Under the absolute and affectionate guidance of her father, Perpetua received a good education. The use of language in Perpetua's diary reveals her to be well educated, and there is no reason to think she was an exception among Roman daughters. There is a great deal of evidence that Roman families valued education for their daughters. Fathers were probably more involved in the education of their daughters than that of their sons because sons were more likely to have tutors.[7] Romans believed educated women would be best able to pass on to their sons the values of Rome. For example, the first-century writer Quintilian wrote: "As for parents, I should like them to be as well educated as possible, and I am not speaking just of fathers." He continued to give credit to educated mothers, like Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi brothers, for their ability to instill eloquence into their sons.[8] Or, one can see the example of an epigram set up by a woman named Eurydice, who was an approximate contemporary of Perpetua. Her inscription read: "Eurydice of Hierapolis set up this tablet, when she had satisfied her desire to become learned; for she worked hard to learn letters, the repository of speech, because she was a mother of growing sons."[9]

As these examples show, even a favored daughter's education was designed to help her fulfill her role as a good mother. Marriages in the Roman tradition were arranged to provide suitable alliances between families. Among upper-class Romans, women married very young (by our standards), between the ages of eleven and sixteen or seventeen.[10] The laws of Caesar Augustus did not begin to penalize a young girl for nonmarriage until she was twenty,[11] so we may assume this to be the outer limit for a respectable girl to marry. Perpetua married in the upper limits of this age range: the account of her martyrdom says she was "newly married" and "about twenty-two years old"[12] (although this means she was twenty-one by our counting system). Perhaps her fond father was unwilling to arrange for her marriage, or there may have been other causes for the delay.

The issue of Perpetua's marriage raises one of the questions that has puzzled scholars of this text: Where was her husband during the proceedings? The account of the trial and the full diary make no mention of her husband, except to say she was a respectably married woman, thus implying the presence of a husband. However, the lack of the husband's appearance at the trial or even a mention of him in Perpetua's diary has raised much speculation. Several explanations have been offered for the husband's absence from the text. Perpetua herself may not have thought it significant to mention him. He may have been edited out of the text by subsequent redactors, perhaps to reduce the sexual implications of the presence of a husband.[13] Perhaps the husband had so disapproved of her conversion to Christianity that he renounced her and separated himself from the proceedings.[14] Maybe he was just out of town.[15]

At the very least, the omission of the husband likely signals the form of marriage contract that Perpetua had entered into. Under Roman law, women could enter into a *manus* marriage, in which case the woman moved from the control of her father to the control of her husband. However, that was not the only marriage possibility. By the late Republic (two centuries before Perpetua's marriage), most marriages were contracted so that married women remained in their father's power. It seems certain that this was the case with Perpetua's marriage, or her father would not have been the one to come to the trial and plead with his daughter.[16]

We will never be certain of the reasons for the omission of the husband, but his absence may at least serve to further demonstrate the importance of the father-daughter tie in Roman society. Perpetua may have seen her role as daughter as the most important bond to discuss and ultimately break, and the Roman audience in the third century would not have found the emphasis on her father inappropriate. Furthermore, the emphasis on her father rather than her husband shows the importance of a vertical continuity between generations—a continuity from her father to future generations. Perpetua was the dutiful daughter fulfilling the expectations of that role even though she was married.

Perpetua was to fulfill the family's expectation by bearing children to continue the family line. She discharged this duty; when she confronted the authority of Rome, she was nursing an infant son. As a Roman matron, she was raised to transmit the values of Rome to the next generation.[17] It was for this vital role as preserver and transmitter of Roman culture that Perpetua had been carefully educated and carefully guarded by her loving father.

This description of Perpetua's family life and situation satisfies our modern sociological curiosity, but it does not do justice to the Roman mind. Perpetua's position in the family and in the home was carefully ritualized by religious feelings and practices, most of which had been established with the founding of the city itself.

Early Romans attributed the greatness of Rome and the Roman character largely to their piety. Polybius, a perceptive Greek commentator, in about 150 B.C. said that the one thing that set Romans over Greeks was "the nature of their religious convictions."[18] A century later, Cicero articulated the same position more fully: "Moreover, if we care to compare our national characteristics with those of foreign peoples, we shall find that, while in all other respects we are only the equals or even the inferiors of others, yet in the sense of religion, that is, in reverence for the gods, we are far superior."[19] Such references could be multiplied, and they all give a clear sense that the Romans perceived their religious sensibilities to be very pious and different from other peoples'. The question for us is "different how?"

The first thing that strikes a student of Roman religion is the sheer number of deities. The fourth-century Christian bishop Augustine included in his massive work, *The City of God*, a disdainful discussion of the Roman gods, and this discussion by a man raised in the Roman religion gives an excellent idea of the ubiquitous presence of the divine that marked the serious, pious, traditional Romans. As a general summary, Augustine wrote, "The Romans assigned particular gods to particular spheres and to almost every single moment."[20] Although the bishop listed many of the deities, even he admitted he could not list all of them. As he said, "The Romans had difficulty in getting them into the massive volumes in which they assigned particular functions and special responsibilities to the various divine powers." For example, the goddess Rusina was in charge of the rural countryside, Collatina the hills, Vallonia the valleys. Augustine concluded that this proliferation of specialized deities indicated that the Romans worshipped inferior demons who did not have enough power to control anything beyond their tiny domains. They were "so clearly confined to their own particular departments that no general responsibility was entrusted to any one of them."[21]

When we remove Augustine's Christian bias, we get a picture of a people who saw divine power profoundly linked to the spaces they inhabited. Celsus, a second-century Roman (roughly contemporary with Perpetua) who was a pious pagan, expressed the important link between the gods and the spaces they inhabited more positively than did Augustine:

> [F]rom the beginning of the world, different parts of the earth were allotted to different guardians, and, its having been apportioned in this manner, things are done in such a way as pleases the guardians. For this reason, it is impious to abandon the customs which have existed in each locality from the beginning.[22]

Because Celsus had such an ingrained belief in the relationship between space and divine beings who inhabited it, he said Christians were at the very least ungrateful for living on the earth (the space of the pagan deities) and offering them no sacrifices. He equated it with using someone's apartment and paying no rent.[23]

A pious second-century Carthaginian noted almost in passing the Roman care for observing the sacred nature of some spaces: "It is the usual practice of wayfarers with a religious disposition, when they come upon a sacred grove or holy place by the roadside, to utter a prayer, to offer an apple, and pause for a moment from their journeying."[24]

Florence Dupont has given the best summary of the association of Roman religiosity with the spaces it inhabits: "The Romans thus spent their lives moving between one religious space and the next, switching god and appropriate behavior as they went. This was the form assumed by polytheism in Rome: a proliferation of religious spaces."[25] In modern Western traditions, we take for granted a transcendent God who can be addressed from wherever we are, and who we believe can keep track of falling sparrows everywhere. It is a little hard to imagine a situation in which each space was guarded and guided by a different deity, and that to be safe one needed to give the appropriate respect to the guardian of every particular space. When Cicero complimented the Romans on their extreme piety, he could well have been noting the vigilance (touched with fear) that marked their awareness of sacred spaces.

Of course the most important space of the Roman gods and goddesses was the eternal city of Rome itself. From the hills to the field of Mars, the many divinities watched over the spaces and were attuned to the public actions that took place there. The fourth-century pagan writer Symmachus pleaded for the maintenance of pagan temples in the face of Christian opposition. He recalled how the city itself was visibly sacred to anyone walking through it: "Through all the streets of the eternal city he followed the happy Senate and looked with blessed eyes upon the temples, read the names of the gods on the gables, described the foundations of the sanctuaries, marveled at the founders." He summarized his argument briefly: "[H]eavenly Providence has assigned the cities to various guardians."[26] Livy recorded a speech in which a Roman urged his compatriots not to move from Rome: "Your courage you can take with you and go elsewhere, but the fortune of this place [*fortuna loci*] surely cannot be transferred elsewhere."[27] This expresses strongly the Roman belief in the relationship between the gods and the public spaces they guarded.

But there were as many deities guarding the private space of the home. We have seen that the father was the center of the home, and this status was surrounded with religious ritual as well as legal authority. The father was charged with preserving the communal rituals that had served to preserve his family. He presided over the private rituals that emphasized family, home, responsibility, and duty—all the things that would ensure continuity of family and tradition. If the family continued under his stewardship, upon his death he would be venerated and used as a model for the behavior of subsequent family heads. There was no room in this system for individual longings. As Perpetua grew up in the home of a pious Roman family, she venerated the ancestors who were worshipped as having preserved her line. Her father could expect Perpetua's infant son to grow up and venerate him as he continued to preserve the heritage of the Vibii.

In addition to being guarded by the family ancestors, the home was in the care of many gods and goddesses, from Vesta of the hearth to many more too numerous to count. Augustine, again, might serve to give an example of the many household deities when he scornfully noted that the Romans needed three gods to guard the door: Forculus to guard the door; Cardea the hinges; Limentinus the threshold.[28] However, for a people so conscious of the importance of space, three gods at a door would not have been excessive.

When we recognize the importance the Romans placed on space and their need to identify the divine guardians of that space, we have only half the story of the traditional Roman religion. Knowing the right god or goddess is a beginning, but the Romans then believed one needed to recognize the divinity with appropriate ritual. Celsus said, "[W]e ought to give thanks to the gods who control earthly things, to render them the firstfruits and prayers, so that they will befriend us while we live."[29] Here we have the core of pagan religion: first one had to recognize the divinity linked to one space, then one had to offer the necessary cult ritual to that deity.

Rituals allow men and women both to appease the guardian of the space and to make the divine power of that space accessible for help. In Cicero's praise of Roman piety which I quoted above, the English translation says that Romans excelled in "reverence" for the gods.

However, the Latin word used was *"cultus,"* and this includes much more than the English word *reverence.* It also emphasizes right *action,* that is, the repeated performance of the right ritual acts. The respect for religious actions (that is, rituals) led to as much proliferation of ritual as there was of deities. Romans were so religiously conservative, or perhaps we should say careful, they were unwilling to abandon any religious rituals.[30]

Although many of the rituals were ancient and surrounded by extensive tradition, at heart Roman rituals that were practiced to appease the gods all shared a basic premise: the favor of the gods could perhaps be purchased by an offer of sacrifice. Depending on the circumstances, a sacrifice could be as simple as a few drops of wine offered on the family altar, or as grand as three hundred white oxen to be killed on the altar of Jupiter to keep Rome safe from the invasion of Hannibal in 217 B.C.[31] Whatever was sacrificed became the property of the gods, a gift from humans.

In human society, when one accepts a gift from someone, the donor and receiver are bound together in mutual obligation, and this principle was thought to apply to heavenly society as well. If the gods accepted the gift of sacrifice, people hoped they would respond favorably. And most Romans believed it worked. As late as the fourth century, on the eve of the victory of Christianity, Symmachus urged his compatriots not to abandon the old rituals that had kept Rome safe and prosperous: "[T]hese sacrifices drove away Hannibal from before my walls, and forced back the Gauls from the Capitol."[32]

The world of the ancient Romans was filled with religion. There were divinities too numerous to name, leaving hardly any space unsanctified. All demanded sacrifice to permit their spaces to be safe for humans, and Romans spent a great deal of time attempting to read omens and other signs to tell if their sacrifices had worked. Perpetua grew up in this crowded environment, and participated in the rituals that were the responsibility of the women of the family. Had Perpetua followed the traditional path of a highborn Roman woman, her life, like her mother's, would have been framed by a multiplicity of religious rituals.

Most of the many cults the Romans developed for women were designed to uphold ideals of female conduct.[33] In addition to behavior, cults preserved the carefully ordered Roman hierarchy. There were cults for respectable women and noble women, and others for lower-class women and slaves. There were cults for virgins, wives, women who had been married only once *(univira),* and widows. Perpetua's life as a Roman woman was structured and defined by the cults that had been developed to preserve the social order.

When Perpetua was a girl, she probably observed her mother participating in the cults that dignified the role of Roman matrons. If her mother had been married only once, she could participate in the worship at temples reserved for *univirae.* She could touch a veiled statue in the temple of the cult of Patrician Chastity or participate in the worship of Womanly Fortune (Fortuna Mulieribris).[34] By reserving the most prestigious cults for women who had carnally known only one man, Roman families were advocating and attempting to preserve the strong family ties that seemed to have generated Rome's greatness.

In addition, Perpetua's mother would have participated in the cult of the Good Mother (Mater Matuta). This cult expressed a class exclusivity by permitting access only to Roman matrons, and having a ritual in which they physically abused and evicted a slave woman.[35] Tertullian, a contemporary of Perpetua's, claimed that this rite was also limited to *univirae,*[36] so we can probably conclude that this was likely the case at least in Carthage during Perpetua's life. The Roman religion (and the society that it mirrored) was not one of equality. When Perpetua and her slave Felicity were equal in martyrdom, they made a dramatic statement that Christianity transcended social structure instead of preserving it.

The Good Mother cult not only defined and reinforced group solidarity by excluding slaves but forged family bonds beyond those of the direct nuclear family. The rites of the Good Mother included particular rituals in which women prayed for the children of their siblings (or only their sisters—the sources are unclear).[37] Perpetua may have joined her mother at these rituals and forged close ritual ties with her mother's sister. At her trial, when Perpetua's father urged her to think of her aunt and not continue her headstrong path to martyrdom, he might have been calling on ties that had been ritually made at the rites of the Good Mother.

When Perpetua reached puberty (at about fourteen years old),[38] she would have come under the protection of Fortuna Virginalis, or Virgo, the goddess in the form of patroness of young girls. Perpetua would have dedicated her girlhood toga to the goddess, and after this dedication, she would have put on the *stola,* the dress of the respectable matron[39] (see Figure 1.1).

When Perpetua married, she then moved her devotions from Virgo to Fortuna Primigenia of Praeneste. In this form, the goddess was the patroness of mothers and childbirth. Perpetua's family no doubt saw in Perpetua's bearing of a healthy son the blessings of this goddess.

This general account of the rituals linked to a woman's life leaves out an important dimension of the religious experience of Roman women,

the spiritual or emotional element. If the cults only reinforced social status, they would not have been satisfying or as popular as they were. In their rituals, Romans felt themselves in touch with the divine, connected in a mystic way. There had to be some religious coin of the realm that demonstrated that the gods and goddesses were indeed listening. The Romans saw this proof in the many dreams and omens which they spent a great deal of time interpreting. The women's cults particularly (especially that of the Good Mother) were associated with prophecy and ecstatic experiences.[40] A ritual in which someone felt herself ecstatically inhabited by the goddesses was a successful one indeed.

Of course, Perpetua did not emulate her mother and follow the stages of a woman's life through the worship at the altars of the goddess in her various incarnations. At some point she learned of Christianity and took a different path, but we'll follow this direction in a subsequent chapter. However, when people adhere to a new idea (a religion or philosophy), they do not start with a blank slate. They bring some of the old ideas that have become so much a part of their being that they do not even know they are there. This is what happened with Perpetua. She was a young Roman matron, connected to her family, bound by ritual understandings of the world that made the space she inhabited sacred to divine beings. Further, she expected these divine beings to be sometimes accessible to humans. They sent dreams, omens, and prophetic wisdom to those specially chosen to bridge the gap between the human and the divine. She kept these underlying assumptions of traditional Roman life as she worked to create a new understanding that would allow her to walk bravely into the arena.

As with all traditional Roman families, the core of the beliefs of the Vibii rested with home, hearth, and family. These ideas had been formed in the early settlement times of the Republic and had been preserved by the carefully conservative Romans. However, for two centuries before Perpetua's birth, these ideas were no longer sufficient to explain the Roman situation. Rome, so carefully linked to space, no longer simply occupied the space of the seven hills of the city. Rome had conquered other lands, lands guarded by other gods and goddesses. Their understanding of the sacred had to include much larger spaces, and this larger space was presided over by the godlike figure of the emperor.

EMPIRE AND EMPEROR

By the second century, when people said "Rome," more often than not they meant not only the city but the empire that covered much more territory. By then Rome encompassed the whole of the Mediterranean

world, and the rituals developed by the traditional society to propitiate the gods and goddesses of the space around the city somehow no longer were adequate. For example, in 202 B.C., during the Punic Wars, an oracle had promised that the Great Mother, Cybele, would bring victory to the Romans. It was not sufficient to pray to Cybele for victory; the goddess (in the form of a large black meteorite) had to be brought to Rome and installed in the city.[41] Once placed there, she could guard that space and join the many deities who watched out for imperial Rome. In the same year, Scipio defeated Hannibal, so the oracle was right. As effective as this remedy seemed to be, it was impractical to think that Rome could move all the deities that guarded all the territory to the city itself.

The empire needed a god (or gods) who could transcend the individual spaces of the many cities that were guarded by their own divinities. From the time of Caesar Augustus, that god was the emperor. A decree issued circa 9 B.C. by a league of Greek cities in Asia expresses the veneration accorded Augustus and many of the subsequent emperors: "Whereas the providence which divinely ordered our lives created . . . the most perfect good for our lives by producing Augustus and filling him with virtue for the benefaction of mankind, blessing us and those after us with a savior who put an end to war and established peace."[42] The most famous praise of Augustus as savior appeared in Virgil's *Aeneid*, when Aeneas is told of the glory that was to be Rome: "Here is Caesar and all the line of Iülus that will come beneath the mighty curve of heaven. This, this is the man you heard so often promised—Augustus Caesar, son of a god, who will renew a golden age in Latium."[43]

One might dismiss Virgil's poetry as politically inspired hyperbole, but there is some evidence that people *did* see the emperor as a form of divinity who could bestow blessings directly on them. We have many surviving petitions in which people appealed directly to emperors for favors. In these petitions, people addressed themselves to "your divinity" or "you, greatest and most divine of Emperors."[44] Inscriptions and literature show the degree to which people generally believed they depended upon the emperor to bring safety and prosperity to society.

Public welfare depended upon the well-being of the emperor, so it was appropriate that public religion focused on prayers for him.[45] This attitude was not so far removed from that of the reliance on the *pater familias* to preserve the family and keep it safe. The emperor became the father of the extended family of the empire. The family worship of Augustus became a public cult,[46] and ancestor worship became adapted to the new circumstances of empire.

Augustus accepted the responsibility of presiding over the cultic life of the empire by assuming the position of *pontifex maximus*, the chief priest of the empire. This effectively linked religious with political power in a way that had not existed in Rome under the Republic.[47] This link established the logic for subsequent deification of the emperors, first the dead then the living.

One of the religious sensibilities that most profoundly separates us from the ancients is the notion of "worshipping as a god" a living man. Paul Veyne makes this ancient feeling accessible to us as he explains that the ancients knew the emperor was not a god. (You don't declare a person a god if he actually is one.) However, the deification of the emperor was a decision to "award him 'honours equal to those of the gods' . . . , meaning sacrifices and altars, the external signs of the respect due to the gods." When cities deified a living emperor, they "recognized that he had a divine nature, as the sacramental formula put it."[48] So people venerated emperors because, by virtue of their office, they were perceived to have (or perhaps hoped to have) the kind of "genius" that could keep the state safe in the same way that an ancestor's genius kept a family intact.

Peace and prosperity of the empire was something that people all over the region could pray for. Offering sacrifices for the safety of the emperor could draw people together in a common hope.[49] This was a hope that transcended the many spaces that were guarded by the many separate territorial gods and goddesses who protected their favored cities and regions. In the second century, the North African proconsul who sentenced some early Christians to death (before Perpetua's trial) said: "We too are a religious people, and our religion is a simple one: we swear by the genius of our lord the emperor and we offer prayers for his health—as you also ought to do."[50] There could not be a more concise explanation of the cult of emperor. Pared down to its essence, it consisted of people praying and offering sacrifices for his well-being in order to receive well-being in return. In this way, Romans could continue many of their traditional attachments while accommodating the new, changed circumstance of an empire.

The importance of the imperial cult as a unifying principle was perhaps most visible in the provinces, which tended to suffer from the centripetal forces of local deities guarding local spaces. In North Africa, for example, there were many dedications made to many local deities "on behalf of the emperor's health."[51] In addition to such private prayers, Carthage had official priests who presided over the imperial cult, and priests of individual deified emperors, such as Augustus, Vespasian, Titus, Nerva Antoninus Pious, and later, Septimius Severus.

Furthermore, these priests were charged with presiding over a good number of ritual occasions throughout the year. The birthdays of deified emperors remained in the calendar indefinitely, and celebrations of other kinds took place during the life of an emperor. These rituals included blood sacrifices and lesser sacrifices of wine and incense along with presentations of games. By the middle of the third century, there were about twenty sacrifices a year in honor of deceased emperors and other imperial figures.[52] This scale of celebrations made the imperial cult highly visible in the Roman world, and for Romans used to cultic activities bringing prosperity, these sacrifices were an important part of the ritual year. The significance of these rituals perhaps will help us understand the great offense the Christians gave when they refused to participate.

In A.D. 146, about thirty-five years before Perpetua was born, the man who would become the first African emperor, Lucius Septimius Severus,[53] was born in Leptis Magna, a city in the North African province of Tripolitania on the shore south and east of Carthage. Like many privileged Romans living in the provinces (indeed like the Vibii), he received a good education, although it never quite erased his provincial background. For example, in spite of his Latin studies, he never lost his North African accent. After he was emperor, he was embarrassed when his sister visited Rome from Leptis, for she could hardly speak Latin at all.[54] It may be that his provincial roots led him to marry women from the provinces rather than from Rome itself.

Like many provincial young men, in 164 Septimius went to Rome to continue his studies and to begin the course of public life that was expected of an aristocratic Roman youth. The course of his career was certainly helped by a wealthy uncle, who lived in Rome and who could give him the necessary introductions. Under Marcus Aurelius, he served in Italy, Spain, Gaul, and Syria, rising consistently through the ranks. Septimius's chance to reach for the imperial purple came with imperial instability following the death of Marcus Aurelius. Marcus's son, Commodus, was unlike his Stoic father and was murdered in 192. The next emperor, Pertinax, was killed the following year. Septimius had himself declared emperor by his troops and marched to Rome to depose Emperor Julianus, whom Septimius declared to be a usurper. In the unstable times after the murder of Pertinax, the praetorian guard had offered the purple to the highest bidder, so Septimius had an opportunity to undo what had appeared to have been done so casually. By 197, Septimius had defeated his rivals and entered Rome in triumph to take over the rule that would last until his death in 211.

As emperor, Septimius never forgot that his rise to power was due to

the affection of his troops. He was to the last a military emperor, always more comfortable in the field surrounded by his troops than in Rome surrounded by courtiers. The description given by one of his biographers reveals his Spartan nature:

> His clothing was of the plainest; indeed, even his tunic had scarcely any purple on it, while he covered his shoulders with a shaggy cloak. He was very sparing in his diet, was fond of his native beans, liked wine at times, and often went without meat. In person he was large and handsome. His beard was long; his hair was gray and curly, his face was such as to inspire respect.[55]

Septimius spent much of his reign fighting wars in the East and finally in Britain. Yet, even a military emperor like Septimius could not ignore a domestic side. As a Roman, he showed as much concern for his family as Perpetua's father did. Septimius was not only an emperor, he was *pater familias* of his household, and that proved to be as difficult a job as running an empire.

When Septimius was about twenty-five years old, his father died. He had to return to Africa at that time to set his affairs in order and take his place as the new *pater familias*. Three years later, he married a North African woman, Marcia, about whom little is known. They had two daughters, but Marcia died about ten years later. Septimius was not to remain a widower, and he seems already to have had imperial aspirations. He wanted a second wife suitable to the purple. He found her not in his provincial home of North Africa nor in the city of Rome. Instead, he turned to the East for his next bride.[56]

In about A.D. 180, Septimius led the legions in Syria. While there, he visited the temple of Baal (a god also venerated in North Africa). He came to know the priest, Julius Bassianus, who was well connected as a Roman and must have seemed well connected spiritually to the superstitious African.[57] The younger daughter of Julius, Julia Domna, was unmarried, and she had an auspicious horoscope: it showed that she should be the wife of a king.[58] In 187, when the widower sought a new wife, he turned to the beautiful Syrian woman. Julia Domna and Septimius were married probably in summer of 187. Septimius's attitude toward her horoscope was typically Roman: with an omen, the cause and effect could be reversed. The horoscope did not necessarily predict his rise to the imperial throne; it could just as easily cause his rise. Septimius was clearly playing the omens as best he could.

Julia bore him a son the following year.[59] He was named first Bassianus, then Antoninus, but history remembers him as Caracalla, the nickname that derived from the kind of hooded cloak he favored.[60]

The following year, a second son was born, Geta. This completed the imperial family. Consistent with his role as *pater familias*, Septimius had to provide for his progeny. He arranged good marriages for his two daughters by his first wife; they were married in Rome to men who would help their father consolidate his position as emperor. He tried to prepare his sons to take his place. He had Caracalla named Caesar as early as 197, when he first took the title of emperor, and he consistently tried to prepare both his sons to rule. However, as we shall see in the last chapter, the hatred the two boys had for each other overcame any hopes the father may have had for them.

Because he was emperor as well as *pater familias*, Septimius had many more ritual obligations than did other fathers. In addition to domestic rituals, Septimius was charged with care of the public good. He was both the focus of the imperial cult that served to join the empire together and, as a divine being, he was to bring the blessings of the gods to the empire and its people. He was in the peculiar position of being object of worship and responsible for worship. We can follow his efforts in both these related activities.

Septimius's first responsibility was to bring divine blessings to the empire. By the second century, one of the principal ritual acts of the emperors was to sponsor games in the arenas of Rome and the provinces. Septimius fulfilled this obligation in lavish ways. The ancient historian Herodian described the impressive sacrificial games that the emperor offered to the Roman people. He said Septimius put on "continuous shows of all kinds and slaughtered hundreds of wild animals from all over the world. . . . He also gave victory games, to which he summoned from every quarter performers of musical acts and mock battles." Herodian goes on to describe the many lavish simultaneous theater performances the emperor arranged. For the grand games of 202, heralds called people from all over to come to games "the likes of which they had never seen before and would not see again."[61]

The account of the family's involvement in the games of 202 shows the intimate relationship between the imperial family, sacrifices, and the prosperity of the empire. Septimius himself sacrificed nine cakes and other sacrificial foods with the formula "[B]y virtue of this may every good fortune come to the Roman people." The sacrifice made by his son, Geta, was even more impressive. He sacrificed a pregnant sow as a whole burnt offering with the same prayer offered by his father. Both concluded their prayers with the request that the "Latins [may] be ever obedient."[62] The sacrifices performed the traditional function of Roman religion: offer the gods something in hopes of a direct return in prosperity and peace (identified as obedience among the Latins).

Ritual acts were only half the story for religious Romans. The other half was proof of the efficacy of the sacrifices. In part, proof was the preservation of the emperor and empire (no mean feat with the Roman history of political assassination and civil war). A second part of the proof of divine involvement was the presence of omens and dreams. Dio Cassius gives a fine (if gruesome) example of the relationship between sacrifice and omens. He described how Septimius's predecessor, Julianus had "killed many boys as a magic rite, believing that he could avert some future misfortunes if he learned of them beforehand."[63] Julianus attempted by means of a sacrifice to call forth an omen that would give him foreknowledge.

The historians of Septimius's reign included frequent descriptions of dreams and omens as implicit proof that Septimius was connected to divinity. Not surprisingly, the greatest number of the omens pointed to Septimius's qualifications to be emperor. The implied message in the Julianus anecdote was that his sacrifice was not effective because the gods had not meant him to rule; he was a usurper. In Septimius's case, the omens pointed to his fitness to rule. For example, as a young man Septimius arrived at an imperial banquet inappropriately dressed. He was then lent a toga that belonged to the reigning emperor. He saw this as an omen predicting his rise to the throne.[64] It is not surprising that most of the omens were of this sort, because Septimius's divinity was based on his holding the imperial office; therefore, demonstrations of divine approval of that fact were essential in supporting the imperial cult.

In addition to performing rituals for the good of the state, Septimius was also a guardian of the imperial cult itself. One of his first acts as emperor was to create a public ceremony to deify the murdered emperor Pertinax, whom he claimed to be vindicating. He had a wax figure of the dead emperor made and arranged for it to lie in state in the Roman Forum. With much ceremony the figure was praised and mourned. Then, the wax effigy was burned, and at the same moment an eagle was released. The eagle's flight was to mark the deification, or apotheosis, of Pertinax.[65] By visibly emphasizing the deification of Pertinax, Septimius surrounded himself, as Pertinax's successor, with an aura of divinity.

Septimius further enhanced his imperial cult by associating himself with the Egyptian god Serapis. It was not unusual for emperors to claim a special relationship with one of the gods, indeed to imply that they were an incarnate god. The sources all indicate that when Septimius traveled to Egypt in 201 he was much influenced by the worship of Serapis.[66] From this time onward, Septimius was portrayed wearing his hair and beard in the style of Serapis (Figure 1.2 shows a bust of

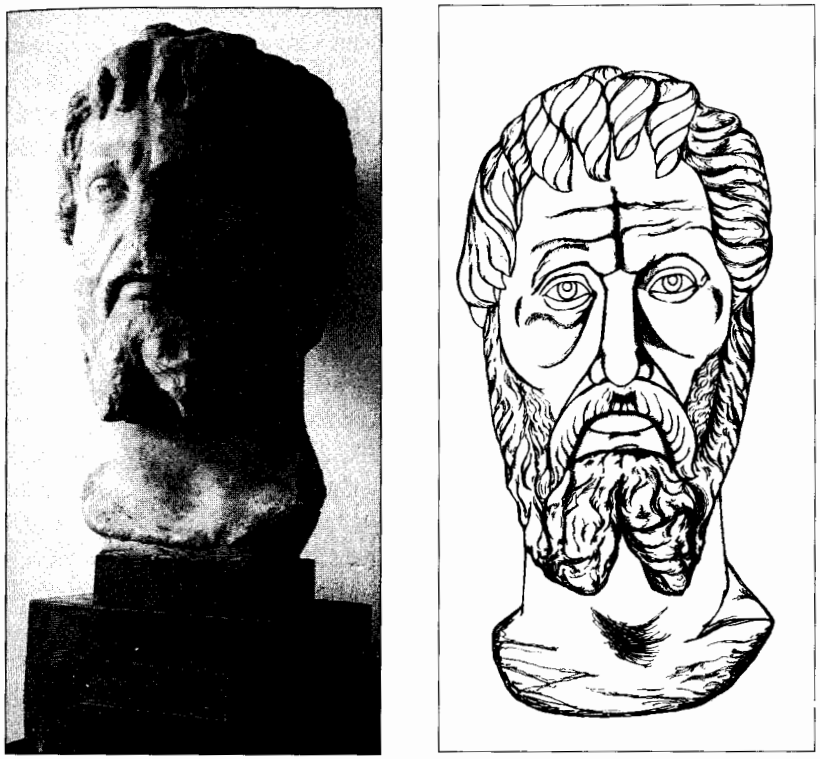

Fig. 1.2. Septimius Severus. Bardo Museum, Tunis. Photograph by Lynn Santure. Drawing by Alicia Nowicki.

Septimius with the forked beard and forehead curls that linked him with Serapis).[67] When Septimius built the great arch in his own honor in his hometown, Leptis, he was portrayed as Serapis, and his wife, Julia Domna, was depicted as Isis, the Egyptian goddess.[68]

Septimius's choice of Serapis as his associated divinity made a good deal of sense, and illustrates again the profound link in the Roman mind between divinity and space. In the first place, although Septimius was a Roman emperor, he associated with a deity from his native Africa. Yet, because the imperial cult was to transcend limited space, Septimius's choice of Serapis was also suitable.

The traditional Egyptian gods did not include the god Serapis; instead, the important pair was Isis and her brother/husband Osiris. Although the cult of Isis spread throughout the Mediterranean world, Osiris was a god particularly associated with the Nile.[69] In the Hellenistic period, as many of the Egyptian deities were assimilated into the Greek pantheon, Osiris was changed into Serapis. As Plutarch ex-

plained in the early second century, "It is better to identify . . . Serapis with Osiris, who received this appellation at the time when he changed his nature. For this reason Serapis is a god of all peoples in common."[70] In his new form as Serapis, the old god Osiris left his traditional space of the Nile and brought healing, salvation, and protection to wide areas of the empire. Thus, Serapis was an appropriate incarnation for a North African emperor whose imperial cult was to tie the empire together.

There was one more way Septimius seems to have tried to strengthen the imperial cult, and this act would have the greatest impact on the fortunes of Perpetua and her family. In 202, he issued an edict that forbade conversion to either Judaism or Christianity.[71] We have no way to be certain what made him decide to issue the edict. Perhaps it was his desire to encourage the cult of Serapis/Septimius that made him try to discourage competing conversions.[72] Perhaps the reason was political: Jews and Christians were becoming influential in the East, and Septimius, who had just returned from there, may have been trying to reduce their power.[73] Whatever the precise motivation for the edict, it had some results. The imperial cult might have been strengthened a bit in some localities by the reduction of competition, and Christians died for their beliefs. Eusebius, the great fourth-century chronicler of church history, said that the Severan persecution fell hardest in Alexandria, where many Christians died (including the father of the famous church father Origen).[74] The strength of the persecution in Alexandria makes sense because Septimius had just been to Egypt, and his association with the Egyptian god Serapis gave him a good deal of support among Alexandrian pagans. The persecution was not limited to Egypt but spread westward in North Africa. A small group of Romans in Carthage who were studying to convert to Christianity came into direct conflict with the emperor's edict. Perpetua and her companions would violate the edict and be offered as sacrifices for the well-being of the emperor's son Geta.

LONGING FOR THE DIVINE

The system of Roman religion which I have outlined should have taken care of people's spiritual needs. The spaces of the home and city were guarded and the guardians ritually appeased. The political entity of the empire was cared for in the name of the imperial cult. The only problem with the system was that it did not work. In texts of the period, along with the careful descriptions of rituals and deities, there appears a growing sense of uncertainty. The uncertainty seems to have

begun with the expansion of the empire at the end of the first century B.C.,[75] when Rome moved beyond the spaces carefully circumscribed by their traditional rituals. Historians who have written about the subsequent centuries note this spiritual longing in different ways. For example, in a classic work, E. R. Dodds writes of the second and third centuries as an "age of anxiety."[76] A modern biographer of the emperor Septimius Severus saw his reign as the "beginning of a period of considerable moral, intellectual, and spiritual ferment."[77] The spiritual ferment is evident in the number of inscriptions dedicated to various gods of the empire. During the reign of Septimius there are dramatically more inscriptions surviving than from any other period of the empire.[78] Frequency of inscriptions can testify as easily to prosperity as to spiritual longing, but nevertheless it does show that people were trying to communicate with their deities. These examples can be multiplied but should be enough to suggest that something was going on in the spiritual life of the empire.

The problem that seems to have been experienced by many in the Roman Empire was a spatial one: the divine world appeared to have moved further away from the human one. Dodds recognized that the texts showed an increased emphasis on the "antithesis between the celestial world and the territorial one."[79] This distance caused some to question the efficacy of traditional rituals, like the sacrifices offered to the deities. Lucian of Samasota in the second century wrote a scathing satire of sacrifices, imagining gods opening their mouths to eat the smoke and drink the blood spilled on the altars.[80] He concludes with dismissal of the sacred rituals that were at the heart of the Roman religion: "In view of what the dolts do at their sacrifices and their feasts and processions in honour of the gods, what they pray for and vow, and what opinions they hold about the gods, I doubt if anyone is so gloomy and woe-begone that he will not laugh to see the idiocy of their actions."[81]

It was the rare Roman who achieved the level of cynicism expressed by Lucian. Most tried to solve the problem by bringing divinity and humanity more closely together. Plutarch, who wrote in the early second century, expressed this struggle succinctly: "The effort to arrive at the Truth, and especially the truth about the gods, is a longing for the divine."[82] This longing for the divine formed as much a part of Perpetua's (and Septimius's) mental universe as the rituals and beliefs that were so carefully preserved as part of the traditional Roman religion. Perpetua ultimately joined the divine and the human in Christian martyrdom in the arena, but that was not the only possibility for a second-century searcher.

One way to bring heaven a little closer to earth was through astrology and magic.[83] These are related in that they attempt to understand the secrets of the universe through reading the heavens. This understanding was supposed to allow one to manipulate the future through this foreknowledge. Magic was an attempt to use celestial power to manipulate events on earth. Both express a longing for humans to have more access to divinity. There was little provision for (or practice of) magic and astrology in traditional Roman religion developed in the close-knit spaces of the early Republic. By the first and second centuries A.D., however, the practice of both was growing exponentially.[84]

We have seen the degree to which Septimius himself depended upon the practice of astrology. He selected his second wife by this means to try to manipulate the future, and this was not an isolated instance. His biographer wrote that the emperor consulted horoscopes frequently, for this was "a study in which like most Africans he was very proficient."[85] This phrase not only shows the emperor's affinity for the art but suggests how extensively it was practiced in North Africa, where Perpetua and her comrades were exposed to it.

Magic, too, was widely practiced. We can read many of the magical spells that everyday people wrote down and buried in an attempt to use the supernatural to control the mundane. One example of a magical attempt to influence events may be seen in an inscription in Rome that tried to conjure up demons to ensure that a charioteer would lose:

> May he not leave the barriers well; may he not be quick in the contest; may he not outstrip anyone; may he not make the turns well; may he not win any prizes . . . ; may he meet with an accident; may he be bound; may he be broken; may he be dragged along by your power, in the morning and afternoon races.[86]

Magic was also used by those who were highly educated and cultured. A famous North African from the second century, Apuleius, is a perfect example of a man who was driven by a longing for the divine, and who pursued his quest through many paths, including the study of magic.[87] He was a well-known citizen in Carthage; he had even been accorded the honor of being appointed as the chief priest of that city.[88] He wrote prolifically, and Perpetua, a generation later, would have known about this famous man, for his statue had been erected in Carthage. This was a high honor for which Apuleius had thanked his fellow citizens.[89] Apuleius was honored as a scholar, philosopher, and man wise in the ways of divinity. Two centuries later, the great North African Augustine further honored Apuleius by quoting him extensively and discussing his philosophy in *The City of God*.[90] Apuleius

makes a wonderful case study of a second-century Roman who tried to access divinity by many different paths, and I shall follow his spiritual quest as I look at the various outlets for Romans' spiritual longings.

Apuleius was certainly interested in magic. His work, *Metamorphosis, or The Golden Ass* was based on the premise of a widespread curiosity about magic. He had firsthand knowledge of the subject and problems related to it because he was put on trial for practicing magic. In his "Apology," we have his defense, and this educated, articulate tract gives us a fine lens through which to see ancient understandings of magic beyond the spells that survive in inscriptions and texts.

Although Apuleius denied that he was guilty of the charges brought against him, he did not deny the existence or efficacy of magic, nor did he hide his knowledge of it. The charges brought against Apuleius were several: (1) He purchased a fish for magical purposes; (2) he used a mirror; (3) he kept "secret things" wrapped in linen on his household altar; (4) he burnt birds for magical purposes; (5) he had a statue made of rare wood, and (6) he used a love charm to win his wealthy wife. Many of these charges show the fine line between accepted traditional religion and forbidden magic. After all, Roman religion allowed reverence for statues of gods, and indeed Apuleius produced the statue of "rare wood" and showed it to be a statue of Mercury, and thus a legitimate cult object.[91] Further, burning animals on altars as sacrifice was central to traditional Roman religion. The charges show more about people's insecurities concerning the supernatural (and about Apuleius's enemies) than they do about any new rituals.

In denying these charges, Apuleius did reveal a great deal of knowledge about magic. For example, when he dismissed the fish charge, he said that things other than fish are sought by sorcerers: soft garlands, rich herbs, "male incense," "brittle laurel," "clay to be hardened," "wax to be melted in the fire."[92]

What he revealed as the essence of his "apology" was that he had studied a great deal of esoteric knowledge in his search for the divine, but that it was a legitimate quest. He quoted philosophers and physicians in his defense,[93] showing what a fine line there was between magic and the pursuit of knowledge. He called philosophers the "high priests of every god,"[94] and he surely numbered himself among them.

As Apuleius rightly noted, the pursuit of philosophy for the ancients was another way of trying to have access to the divine. Dio Cassius tells us that Septimius's wife, Julia Domna, studied philosophy and surrounded herself with sophists. Dio surmised that she did this because she was excluded from political involvement by one of Septimius's advisers.[95] However, the history of Septimius and his wife reveals a

consistent pattern of searching for divine truth by all means possible, and Julia Domna's exploration of philosophy was perfectly consistent with this search.

The most popular Hellenistic philosophies, Epicureanism, Stoicism, and Platonism, all in some form or another attempted through reason and rationalism to bring humans a bit closer to the divine. Epicureans urged people to live lives of "calm beatitude" like that of the gods.[96] In emulation, heaven and earth were joined. Philosophers did not simply offer wisdom in large matters, such as how one is to live one's life; they also offered reflection about smaller matters, frequently of interest to those attracted to magic. For example, Apuleius quoted from Epicurus in his consideration of the use of mirrors for magical purposes, wondering if indeed "images proceed forth from us, as it were a kind of slough that continually streams from our bodies?"[97] By offering explanations of the natural world, philosophy shed light on the supernatural. However, philosophy as an enterprise generally scorned magic as unworthy of the rational thought that was leading up to knowledge of God. The second-century pagan philosopher Celsus, for example, dismissed the magic/miracles that drew Christians: "[T]hose who have had anything to do with philosophy . . . are above such trickery."[98]

Stoicism offered a clear ethical system that emphasized personal dignity in a world controlled by fate.[99] But it also offered a way of bringing the supernatural world in touch with the human one, for by focusing on personal behavior, it located God within. The great stoic Seneca wrote: "God is near you, he is with you, he is within you. . . . [A] holy spirit indwells within us, one who marks our good and bad deeds, and is our guardian."[100]

The most important philosophic movement that established a system of bringing heaven and earth together was Platonism. Apuleius proudly quoted Plato and the philosopher's "glorious work, the *Timaeus*" and showed how Plato explained the "constitution of the whole universe."[101] Apuleius's work was so imbued with Platonism that Augustine identified Apuleius as a Platonist.[102] Celsus is another fine example of the pagan pursuit of philosophy as a spiritual choice in competition with Christianity. In *On the True Doctrine*, he ridiculed Christianity and advocated following traditional Roman ritual enhanced with Platonic understanding. He contrasted the teachings of Plato with those of Christ and found the latter wanting.[103] He urged all spiritual seekers to "follow reason as a guide."[104]

These (and other, similar) second-century Platonists set the stage for the great Neoplatonic synthesis of the third century. Then, philosophers like Plotinus and his student Porphyry created a complex system that offered an explanation for how the divine and the human were linked together, both in life and after it. Plotinus argued that the existence of the soul in humans marked the presence of the divine, and this presence closed the gap between humans and the deity: "The Soul once seen to be thus precious, thus divine, you may hold the faith that by its possession you are already nearing God: in the strength of this power make upwards towards Him: at no great distance you must attain: there is not much between."[105] At his death, Plotinus is reputed to have expressed his deeply held belief in the possibility of reunion of the soul with its creator by saying he could now try "to make that which is divine in me rise up to that which is divine in the universe."[106] The space that separated humans from God became insignificant in the Neoplatonic system.

Plotinus and his followers in the third century shaped Platonism into a form that was readily absorbed by Christian thinkers. By the fourth century, Christians like Augustine saw no incompatibility between Neoplatonism and Christian wisdom. In the second century, however, that was not yet so. In the writings of Celsus and others, Platonism was one of the many options selected by people longing for the divine. Christianity was another.

Philosophy had a somewhat limited appeal. Its practitioners needed leisure and education, and the income that both of those require. More people tried to satisfy their spiritual desires through one or more of the mystery cults that were extremely popular in the second century. Apuleius, in his eclectic search, was also an initiate of mystery religions. During his trial for magic, he acknowledged that he kept "secret" items wrapped in linen, but he again argued these were legitimate religious items. He claimed to have been initiated into a number of mystery religions: "I, . . . moved by my religious fervor and my desire to know the truth, have learned mysteries of many a kind, rites in great number, and diverse ceremonies." And he kept at home "certain talismans associated with these ceremonies."[107] Apuleius was one of many who looked to the mystery religions for the special knowledge of divinity, and these cults formed a major element in shaping the thought of the second century.

Septimius Severus shared an interest in sacred mysteries with his subjects. When he traveled into Egypt, his biographer wrote, "He inquired into everything including things that were carefully hidden; for he was the kind of person to leave nothing, either human or divine uninvestigated."[108] Septimius's identification with Serapis was a way of

joining himself with the deity in a sacred, mystical mystery. Furthermore, Herodian described Septimius's continued interest in the mysteries, and his desire to incorporate the mystery cults into the public imperial cult. Septimius frequently arranged "all-night religious ceremonies in imitation of the mysteries."[109] These efforts to encompass individual longing for the divine into the imperial cult did not work. There was a profound opposition between the individualism implicit in the mystery religions and the public cult of the emperor that would not be resolved until more than a century later, when the emperors converted to Christianity. During the second century, people were drawn directly to various mystery cults to satisfy their religious longings; they did not want to go through the emperor.

There were many mystery religions in the second century: Eleusinian rites, cults of Dionysius, Mithras, Isis, and others. All shared some general characteristics that gave them a great deal of appeal for people searching for Plutarch's divine truth. Unlike the public cults that were fully open to everyone, mystery religions had secrets available only to the specially chosen, and the final initiation served to link the believer with the deity.[110] This mystic union eliminated the space between the natural and supernatural that represented the heart of the second-century religious dilemma. Furthermore, mystic union generally offered the initiate a hope for life after death. Apuleius recorded that Isis spoke to him, saying, "[I]t is within my power to prolong your life beyond the limits set to it by Fate."[111] This salvation was offered to any who would receive the secret initiation. Through such initiations, common people might hope to share the divinity, the apotheosis, experienced by emperors.

These general elements that the mystery religions shared formed a religious experience that shaped people's consciousness of the holy. This was even more so because only the final initiation was secret. Other elements of the cult worship were public and highly visible, offering tantalizing proof to observers that some special people had been able to bridge the gap between heaven and earth. It is worth looking in some detail at these elements of worship because they influenced, indeed defined, Perpetua's understanding of the sequence of progress to the holy. As we shall see, her martyrdom had many elements of an initiation into a sacred mystery.

People desiring initiation began with a ritual purification, which could take various forms, and which made the initiate worthy of entering the next stage, or the procession. The procession was a public phase of the mysteries, in which people moved from the profane to the sacred. The procession moved with music and dance from the public

arena to the sacred precincts of the cult deity. Dancing, and music in general, offered a way to seek and celebrate individual ecstatic experiences, one characteristic of mystery religions. Finally, those who had been selected for initiation moved to the most sacred space where they could encounter the manifest deity during initiation.[112]

In the second century, one of the most popular of the mystery cults was the cult of Isis. This was the cult that drew Emperor Septimius and his wife, Julia Domna. Further, it was a visible cult in North Africa and one that appealed strongly to women. It would have been one possible outlet for Perpetua's spiritual longings had she not turned to Christianity. Perpetua's countryman Apuleius, whose spiritual quest we have been following, was an initiate and priest of Isis. The spiritual environment that shaped the martyr and the emperor was strongly influenced by the cult of the North African deity.

Isis had been a goddess of ancient Egypt for more than two millennia before her worship spread to the rest of the Hellenistic world. In the mythology of the goddess, Isis was said to have lived through the experiences that confronted many ordinary women during their lives. Isis loved her brother/husband Osiris (later transformed into the more universal Serapis). Osiris was killed by his jealous brother Set, so Isis suffered the deep loss of her beloved. She searched for him, and spent some time as a prostitute during this period of trial. Finally, she collected his dismembered body, and bore a child by him before he was brought back to life. She was often portrayed as a good mother nursing the infant Horus. As this brief summary may show, Isis offered compassionate understanding to women, mothers, sons, lovers, and those driven by adversity to lives that traditional Roman religion scorned. Isis was no *univira* who carefully tended conservative and tranquil homes.[113]

For all Isis's association with women's experience, her powers were not limited to women's spheres. She was the creator goddess: she divided heaven from earth, she assigned languages to nations and invented alphabets and astronomy. She controlled lightning, thunder, and winds.[114] She was both omnipotent and loving, and she claimed a universality that contrasted with the local deities. The goddess expressed her omnipresence to Apuleius, saying: "I, whose single godhead is venerated all over the earth under manifold forms . . ."[115] Her appeal was wide and included both men and women in her priesthood and her followers.

One of the best descriptions of the cult of Isis was written by Apuleius, whom we have seen as an omnivorous seeker of spiritual truth and an initiate into her mysteries. In his witty book *The Golden Ass*, Apuleius writes of an inquisitive young man, Lucius, who dabbles in

magic and accidentally is turned into a donkey. The novel is about his adventures as he searches for a way to resume his human form. At the end, Lucius sees Isis appearing to him in a vision; he is called to conversion and resumes his human form. The new Lucius, however, is different from the old. He is no longer drawn to magic as a way of understanding and controlling the world. Instead, he becomes a priest of all-knowing Isis, and receives true knowledge, that of mystic spirituality. In this amusing yet poignant tale, we can see the longing of individuals in the second-century empire for personal meaning, for visions, and for individual salvation. The many followers of Isis were less articulate than Apuleius but bear silent testimony to the inadequacy of traditional Roman religious expressions to satisfy their spiritual longings.

Perpetua would have been frequently exposed to the cult of Isis through public observances visible to everyone. Worship of Isis included a number of public festivals. Daily rituals to the goddess included prayers at the beginning of the day and in the afternoon at her numerous shrines. During midday, the shrines were open for individual private prayer and meditation.[116]

In addition to these daily celebrations, there were two major annual celebrations of her cult. One was the Festival of Search and Discovery that took place in the fall and recalled the search of Isis for her husband.[117] The second celebration took place in the spring and revealed and celebrated the goddess's ties to the sea. This celebration recalled Isis's searching the waters of the Nile for Osiris's dismembered body and noted the spring's calming of the rough waters.[118] Because of this link to the sea, it is not surprising that Isis was a patroness of navigation and commerce. Therefore, port cities were particularly receptive to her worship. On March 5 of every year, magnificent processions proceeded to the sea to inaugurate the shipping season.[119] Apuleius described one such procession that included musicians, priests, priestesses, and worshipers marching joyously to the sea to greet the goddess.[120]

Perpetua must have grown up witnessing the public worship of the goddess and watching the annual processions that helped mark the seasonal cycles. The presence of the Isis cult in Carthage is perhaps strangely relevant to the young matron's imminent martyrdom. Rodney Stark, in an excellent analysis of the growth of Christianity, shows that there is a highly significant correlation "between the expansion of Isis and the expansion of Christianity. Where Isis went, Christianity followed."[121] The longing for the divine that drew some followers to the Egyptian goddess drew others to Christ. And Perpetua's memory of the sacred processions seems to have shaped her descriptions of her progress to martyrdom.

All these various quests for spiritual connection with the divine, from magic through philosophy through mystery religions, shared one major characteristic with the traditional Roman religions that they were supplementing. People trying these paths wanted to know they worked. In traditional Roman cults, people wanted to know their sacrifices had been accepted by some response from the deity. This response could take the form of an omen or a dream. Practitioners of these other forms of religion were at least as strong in their desire to see the proof of the efficacy of their rituals. The proof that the divinity was imminent involved visible signs of that imminence.

The best sign of divine presence was thought to be prophecy, through which one could know the future. Apuleius said that the "prize of magical incantations" was "divination and prophecy,"[122] and by this he meant that the goal of magic was prophetic utterance. Prophetic sayings usually accompanied an ecstatic condition. Apuleius, revealing his Platonism, explained that human souls could be lulled into a kind of trance so that consciousness of the body would fade, leaving the soul to recall its divine origins. In this condition, the soul could predict the future.[123] Plotinus was said to have achieved divine union in an ecstatic trance several times during his life,[124] so even pure philosophy sometimes demonstrated its validity in the Roman spiritual coin of prophecy.

Ecstasy and prophecy were at the heart of the mystery religions as well. Livy described the bacchanalian rituals: "Men, as if insane, with fanatical tossings of their bodies, would utter prophecies."[125] Seneca described with horror the frenzy in the worship of Cybele, when men in an ecstatic passion castrated themselves.[126] The priests of Isis were supposed to be particularly adept at prophecy,[127] and dream instruction assumed a central place in the cult of Serapis.[128] In describing his own initiation in the cult of Isis, Apuleius remembered how he was called to the cult through a dream.[129]

Dreams were not separate from prophecies uttered in ecstasy because they, too, could be prophetic. Just as in ecstasy, when the soul was believed to be communing with the divine, in dreams the soul was free to probe divinity. So, dream messages were looked on as part of the proof of divine intervention. As an incarnation of Serapis, Septimius Severus gave a great deal of credence to dreams, as did his wife, who the chronicler said was "skilled in dreams."[130]

In a world longing to experience the divine, prophetic utterances of all kinds were given a great deal of weight. Of course, the search for prophets led to misunderstandings and bred outright charlatans. In Apuleius's trial, he explained that a boy in his company was not in an

ecstatic trance; he was experiencing an epileptic seizure. It was a medical problem, not a religious expression.[131] The second-century religious skeptic Lucius offered a detailed and delightful description of a false prophet who capitalized impressively on people's desire to be in the presence of the divine.

Lucian wrote how a particularly fine-looking young man decided to take advantage of people's desire for prophecies. This young man, Alexander, would found a prophetic shrine so he would become rich. He succeeded beyond his expectations, and Lucian carefully exposed how Alexander wrapped a large serpent around himself and held a fake serpent's head in his hand. The head of the serpent seemed to speak, uttering prophecies.[132] The cult was structured as a mystery religion with all the appropriate ceremony, and it was also self-consciously established as an alternative to competing spiritual movements. Lucian wrote how Alexander led the crowds in shouting, "Out with the Christians!" and "Out with the Epicureans."[133] The cult was extraordinarily popular because it appealed to the religious hopes that were so pervasive in the second century.

As a daughter of Rome growing up in the late second century, Perpetua would have been exposed to all the ideas I have outlined here. She was raised in the closely guarded spaces of the family and the home, where sacrifices were offered to household deities, and where her father carefully guarded the destiny of his family. Further, Perpetua grew up knowing that the welfare of Rome was secured through the prosperity of the emperor and *his* family. In traditional fashion, Perpetua had watched and participated in sacrifices at the altars for the well-being of the imperial family. Finally, Perpetua could not help but see the spiritual longing that dominated the age. Magicians and astrologers were everywhere; processions for mystery religions were dramatically visible; and philosophers like Apuleius spoke in the forum and won great renown for their intellectual searches.

Perpetua shared this spiritual longing or she would not have been drawn away from the more traditional Roman path that her father had expected her to take. We know she sought after the prophetic dreams and visions that marked divine presence or she would not have recorded her own dreams so carefully. Other young daughters of Rome with such spiritual longings followed the cult of Isis. Perpetua sought out the mysteries of the risen Jesus.

two

Carthage

Perpetua was not purely a daughter of Rome. Her experiences and her interpretations of those experiences were shaped by her life in Carthage, the provincial capital of North Africa (see figure 2.1). Carthage was the wealthiest and most cosmopolitan city of the empire after Rome itself. Here one could see people and goods from all over the empire. Merchants (much as today) sold their wares in crowded stalls in the forum. The city hummed with the sounds of many languages. Perpetua, like Emperor Septimius Severus, could speak Punic, a Semitic language that had been brought to North Africa by the first founders of the city. Her preservation of the old language is one suggestion that we must look to her Carthaginian heritage as well as to her Roman one to understand her martyrdom.

THE CITY

According to legend (which we have no particular reason to disbelieve) Carthage was founded in about 800 B.C. by a Phoenician princess, Elissa, known more popularly as Queen Dido. Dido left Tyre in a dispute with her brother and sailed westward through the Mediterranean seeking a new region for settlement. Dido and her crew were not charting unknown waters; for centuries Phoenician vessels had sailed the western Mediterranean as far as Spain looking for raw materials (especially metals) for trade. As with all ships in antiquity, Phoenician vessels hugged the shore as they traveled during the day, and anchored every night. By the time Dido sailed, there were probably anchorages and

Perpetua's Passion

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