

Religion: public display & private worship

do ut des

Roman religion was very practical and contractual. The phrase 'do ut des' - *I give so that you might give* sums up the Romans' relationship with the gods. Religious law centred on the ritualised system of prayer and sacrifice that in turn brought blessings from the gods. Proper accordance to these rites and rituals brought harmony and prosperity while neglect or omission brought divine anger and harm to the State. It was a simple equation.

In this passage from Virgil's *Aeneid* Cloanthus makes a conditional vow, 'If I win I will sacrifice a bull and pour out a libation'. His promise is dependent on the god fulfilling his side of the bargain too and helping Cloanthus win.

Virgil *Aeneid* 5.232-243 (translation A.S. Kline)

et fors aequatis cepissent praemia rostris,
ni palmas ponto tendens utrasque Cloanthus
fudissetque preces, divosque in vota vocasset:
'di, quibus imperium est pelagi, quorum aequora curro,
vobis laetus ego hoc candentem in litore taurum
constituam ante aras, voti reus, extaque salsos
porriciam in fluctus et vina liquentia fundam.'
dixit, eumque imis sub fluctibus audiit omnis
Nereidum Phorcique chorus Panopeaque virgo,
et pater ipse manu magna Portunus euntem
impulit; illa Noto citius volucrique sagitta
ad terram fugit, et portu se condidit alto.

And with their prow alongside they might have snatched the prize, if Cloanthus had not stretched out his hands over the sea and poured out his prayers, and called to the gods in longing. "Gods, whose empire is the ocean, whose waters I course, on shore, I will gladly set a snow-white bull before your altars, in payment of my vows, throw the entrails into the salt water, and pour out pure wine." He spoke, and all the Nereids, Phorcus's choir, and virgin Panopea, heard him in the wave's depths, and father Portunus drove him on his track, with his great hand: the ship ran to shore, swifter than south wind or flying arrow, and plunged into the deep harbour.

Do you think Cloanthus would have won the race if he had not made his prayer?
Why do you think Portunus decided to aid Cloanthus rather than his opponent?

The Punic Wars: During the Second Punic War with Hannibal, the Romans promised Jupiter Capitolinus (protector of the city of Rome) the sacrifice of every single animal born in the spring of that year, on the condition that Jupiter would protect the Romans from the Carthaginians for five years. A detailed contract was drawn up, promising that all animals would be diligently cared for, and even go so far as to stipulate what would happen should they happen to die before the sacrifice (they would still count as sacrificed animals, as they had already been consecrated. a bargain, the promised offerings could be withheld.

The death of Trajan: If gods did not uphold their end of a bargain, the promised offerings could be withheld. The story goes that when the emperor Trajan died sacrifices to the gods were withheld on the grounds that the gods had not kept their emperor alive for the agreed upon time.

What is the relationship between mortals and humans in these stories?

How is this relationship with the gods different to many modern religions?