

**Frances HICKSON HAHN**

**Gratitude, Laud and Honor: religion and power in ancient Rome**

This paper will examine the role that rituals of thanksgiving played in Roman religion and society, especially in the construction of power. These rituals reflect a complex dynamic between praise and honor of the gods whose favor brought victory on the battlefield and of the commanders through whom divine power was mediated. Historians of Roman religion have generally neglected or dismissed the element of gratitude, perhaps because Latin literature has preserved so few examples of prayers of thanksgiving and because most of those examples appear in the comedies of Plautus and Terence. Yet a broad interpretation of gratitude as a phenomenon not simply of words, but of rituals as well, allows this study to illumine its significance in Roman culture.

The Romans expressed their gratitude to the gods primarily in the form of praise for specific divine benefits and not as a general glorification of divine power. Prayers associated with military victories, for example, were detailed descriptions of the ways in which divine assistance revealed itself: in the defeat of the enemy and its leader and in the safe return of Roman troops. The gods, however, were not the only recipients of honor on these occasions. The victory itself conferred special status on the victorious generals, who shared the stage with the gods in rituals of thanksgiving, such as supplications, as shown by numerous records of senatorial decrees in Livy that specify the name of the victorious commander. In fact, changes in the wording of these decrees and the increasing number of days of supplication in the last years of the republic both reflected the victorious generals political position and gave it greater prominence. The singular honor shown to the *triumphator* in the triumphal parade as he rode through the city adorned in the clothing and accessories of Jupiter or the king is well known. At the conclusion of that procession, it was also the generals privilege to place the laurel from his lictors *fasces* in the lap of Jupiters statue. In addition, the general spoke the prayer of thanksgiving praising Jupiter for his assistance. Finally, he presided over the sacrifice of bulls as a thank offering to the same god and personally performed the preliminary offerings.

Already in the Republican period, such markers of socio-political power were strictly controlled by the Senate, which debated and decreed all such forms of political recognition. During the middle and late Republic, there arose the notion that certain individuals, such as Scipio Africanus, Sulla and Pompey, were especially blessed by the gods with *felicitas*.. It was the power of this special position that led Augustus to restrict the opportunities for triumph to members of the imperial household. Moreover, although Augustus declined to celebrate additional triumphs after the spectacular celebration of 29, he did continue to observe those portions of the victory ritual that acknowledged the blessings of the gods, thus affirming his own status as a bearer of *felicitas*. In addition, it is likely that the fifty-five supplications in honor of victories won by himself or through his legates were all celebrated in Augustus name. This personal appropriation of supplications is certainly to be associated with the restriction of triumphs, but it also suggests an underlying issue of divine favor and the construction of power in Augustus rule.

In summary, this paper will argue that gratulatory prayers and rituals functioned to single out the privileged position of members of the nobility *vis y vis* the gods, and in highlighting these men's roles in the mediation of divine power, served to consolidate the existing power structure in the socio-political order.