

FOREWORD

Although Roman religious history has been an object of interest to European scholars since the Renaissance, the beginnings of today's academic research into the different religions and cults of the Roman Empire can be traced back to the 19th century. This was the age of Classicism, which sought its cultural role models in antiquity, and of Historicism, which had based the scholarly exploration of the past on the solid foundation of the critical research of sources and texts. Throughout history, however, the study of Roman religions and cults has undergone radical changes. These changes have been particularly extensive since the 1960s and 70s. The changes affect not only the details, but also the main questions: What did religion actually mean to the ancient Romans and what role did religion play in the social and private lives of Romans? What is the difference between our scientific concept / meta-term „religion“ and the Roman term „religio“, which, as we understand, has been known since Plautus, i.e. attested from the early second century BC? From what time can one talk about „religions“ in the plural within the Roman Empire and is such a concept justified at all? What has been the relationship between ethnic identity and religion among the Romans? Was there in the Roman Empire, before the triumph of Christianity at the end of the 4th century AD, a state religion? Is it possible to observe the so-called „Oriental cults“ of the Roman Empire as a unified group and distinguish them from other religions? How should one understand the relationship between early Christianity and other religions in the Roman Empire before the end of the 4th century? These and similar questions are at the heart of today's exploration of Roman religion(s).

This special issue of the „Usuteaduslik Ajakiri“, *„Religion‘ in the Imperial Roman Period – questions of status, fundamentals and revised perspectives,*“ aims both to illuminate diverse aspects of ‚religion‘ during the Roman imperial period and to provide an entrée into how current scholarly opinion of regards the multi-faceted religious and cultural strands within the Roman Empire. Moreover, we have made an effort to include both intra-disciplinary and cross-disciplinary papers. Our guiding principle has been an observation by Giulia Sfamemi Gasparro: „It is a matter of demanding new questions of the evidence; these can, on

occasion, shake the foundations of ancient theoretical edifices, but at the same time they allow us to progress towards a correct interpretation of the phenomena while respecting the historical data, rather than simply constructing new theories [...].“

The present special issue has been the product of collaboration between scholars from different countries (Germany, Russia, Spain, Estonia). It continues the theme of the previous special issue, „Vom Punjab über das Zweistromland und den Jordan bis an den Tiber – Zu ausgesuchten alterumswissenschaftlichen Fragestellungen“ (*Usuteaduslik Ajakiri 1/2018 (72)*), but focuses on religion(s) in the Roman Empire. The special issue is dedicated to the recently-deceased Estonian researcher of the religion of antiquity, Dr. Marju Lepajõe.

Editors