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Representation of the divine: modes and strategies in Roman religion

In using statues and temples, ancient religions had a powerful instrument to construct – or, from a different perspective, represent – the divine in a differentiated, polytheistic form. It enabled ritual access, stimulated reflexion, inspired imagination in day or night dreams and visions, it even informed critical philosophical thinking. Inquiring about the will of the gods in the many forms of divination draw on this system of representation, too. The gods could be met and addressed in their temple, sacrifices enabled via extispicy to put questions and receive immediate answer. This introduced an element of risk into the communication, but subjected the gods to human rules of communication. But how to represent the incontrollability, the otherness of the gods? At Rome, prodigies were the media for incalculable utterances of the divine. The paper will sketch this differentiated system and inquire about how these different strategies relate to each other and address the problem of their clashing: What about having the gods destroy their own representations by lightnings melting bronze statues or destroying temples?

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