

# Religion in the Roman Empire

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## 'The Book of Fate'

### A Distinctive Representation of *Matronae/Parcae* and the Spread of Literacy in the Northern Provinces of the Roman Empire

#### Abstract

There are ca. one thousand inscriptions and a few dozen reliefs dedicated to or representing the goddess-triad called *Matres/Matronae*. A distinctive kind of representation shows the deities not with the usual fruit basket in their laps, but with an infant wrapped in strips of cloth, a scale, and an open book-scroll. To understand the potential meanings of this representation, we need to consider two things. One is the fusion of the *Matres/Matronae* and the *Moirai/Parcae*, who were – in classical Greco-Roman mythology – responsible for the fate of the child to be born. The other is that both in Greek and Roman cultural areas, the *Moirae/Parcae* were related to writing, so depictions of them often also contained book-scrolls. Moreover, the *Parcae* were also known by the Romans as *Carmenta*, who sang charms (*carmina*) at birth, which have also been recorded on writing tablets or book-scrolls. The spread of the cult and representations of these goddesses would not have been conceivable, of course, without widespread literacy and classical education in the first and second centuries in the Germanic and Gallic provinces of the Roman empire.

**Keywords:** *Matres, Fatae, Moirai, Carmenta*, iconography, syncretism, book-scrolls

#### 1 The cult of the *Matres/Nutrices* in the West

More than one thousand inscriptions and altars from the imperial age bear witness to how widespread the cult of the *Matres* and *Matronae* was, in both Celtic (from Cisalpine Gaul to Britain, and also probably in Spain) and Germanic (the Rhine valley) areas.<sup>1</sup> They are usually depicted in groups of three, with attributes such as babies, napkins, bread, spindles, and distaffs, as well as rich vegetal and animal symbolism. Baskets or platters of fruit often rest on their laps. The image is often mounted in a niche (an *aedicula*) in the front face of a votive altar. In Germany, the iconography tends to

1 Barnard 1985; Spickermann 1994; Garman 2008; Woolf 2004.

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## Editors

Jan **Dochhorn** (Durham), Maren **Niehoff** (Jerusalem), Rubina **Raja** (Aarhus), Christoph **Riedweg** (Zürich), Jörg **Rüpke** (Erfurt), Christopher **Smith** (St Andrews), Moulie **Vidas** (Princeton), Markus **Vinzent** (London) and Annette **Weissenrieder** (Halle)

*Religion in the Roman Empire (RRE)* is bold in the sense that it intends to further and document new and integrative perspectives on religion in the Ancient World combining multidisciplinary methodologies. Starting from the notion of 'lived religion' it will offer a space to take up recent, but still incipient research to modify and cross the disciplinary boundaries of 'History of Religion', 'Anthropology', 'Classics', 'Ancient History', 'Ancient Judaism', 'Early Christianity', 'New Testament', 'Patristic Studies', 'Coptic Studies', 'Gnostic and Manichaean Studies', 'Archaeology' and 'Oriental Languages'. It is the purpose of the journal to stimulate the development of an approach which can comprise the local and global trajectories of the multi-dimensional pluralistic religions of antiquity.

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