

Blood on the Altar and Bodies in the Air: Religion in Roman Executions

The concept of religious execution is as old as civilization. The fear of offending or potentially offending the gods could bring a death sentence that was steeped in ritual and appeasement. Every early culture had their own forms of religious execution, but it was something that the Romans excelled in. Romans had many different methods of religious execution: everything from live burial to beheading. The forms were many and varied and each was for a different aspect of religious offense. Vestal Virgins would be buried alive. Parricides would be sewn into an oiled sack and thrown from the Tarpeian Rock. Those who damaged crops or moved border stones would be hung up and their throats slit in a field. Slaves, foreigners, and bandits would be crucified and left to rot after death. Every form of execution that the Romans performed had a religious element to it that sought to win the favor of or appease the anger of the gods. Every religious execution was intended to maintain the *Pax Deorum*, the Peace of the Gods, which was the contract that the Romans understood that they lived under with their deities. Therefore, maintaining this contract was of utmost importance, otherwise the gods would remove their favor from the Roman people and they would have more hardship than normal, such as famine, plague, and great military defeat such as the defeat at Cannae. The Roman idea of *Do Ut Des*, I give that you may give, is an important factor in religious executions. Therefore, this paper will explore several methods of Roman religious execution and the reasons behind them.