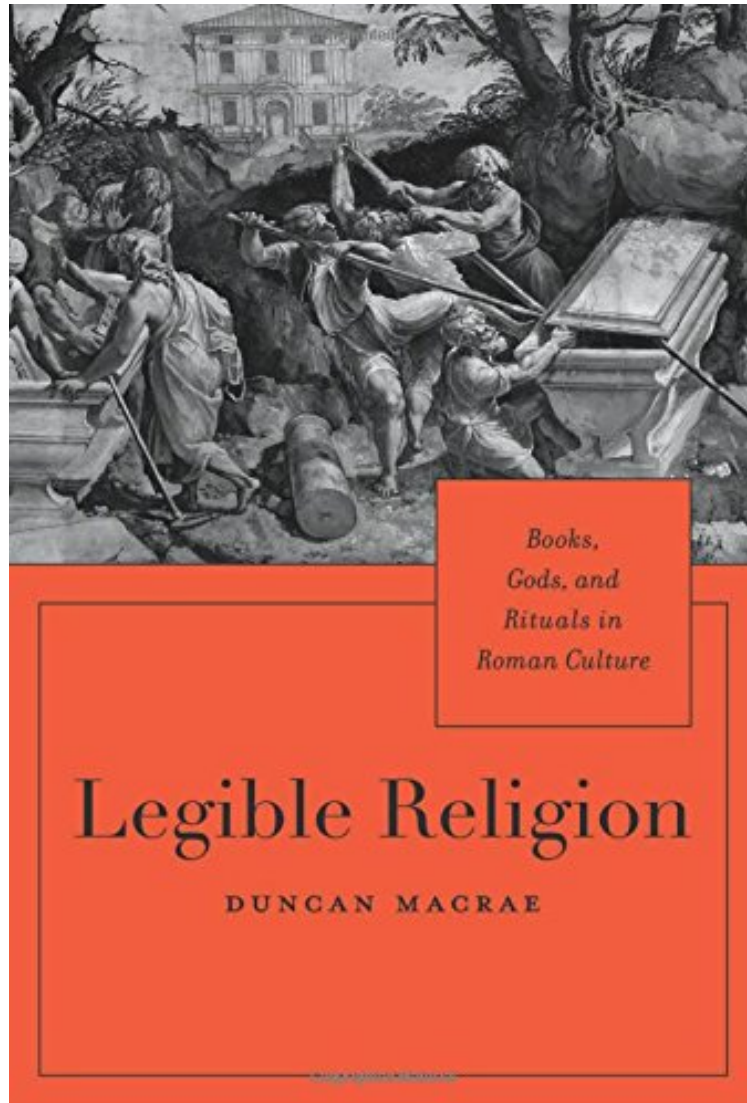


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## Legible Religion: Books, Gods, and Rituals in Roman Culture

*Duncan MacRae*

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**Duncan MacRae : Legible Religion: Books, Gods, and Rituals in Roman Culture** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Legible Religion: Books, Gods, and Rituals in Roman Culture:

Scholars have long emphasized the importance of scripture in studying religion, tacitly separating a few privileged religions of the Book from faiths lacking sacred texts, including ancient Roman religion. Looking beyond this

distinction, Duncan MacRae delves into Roman religious culture to grapple with a central question: what was the significance of books in a religion without scripture? In the last two centuries BCE, Varro and other learned Roman authors wrote treatises on the nature of the Roman gods and the rituals devoted to them. Although these books were not sacred texts, they made Roman religion legible in ways analogous to scripture-based faiths such as Judaism and Christianity. Rather than reflect the astonishingly varied polytheistic practices of the regions under Roman sway, the contents of the books comprise Rome's civil theology—not a description of an official state religion but one limited to the civic role of religion in Roman life. An extended comparison between Roman books and the Mishnah, an early Rabbinic compilation of Jewish practice and law, highlights the important role of nonscriptural texts in the demarcation of religious systems. Tracing the subsequent influence of Roman religious texts from the late first century BCE to early fifth century CE, *Legible Religion* shows how two major developments—the establishment of the Roman imperial monarchy and the rise of the Christian Church—shaped the reception and interpretation of Roman civil theology.

With this book on the role of writing in Roman religion, MacRae offers a reasoned and persuasive corrective to current scholarship. While scholars center all too often on the importance of ritual action and religious practice, *Legible Religion* provides a timely and important reminder that writing, reading, and thinking about religion were just as essential to people's religious identities in the Roman world as were their sacrifices and vows. (Andreas Bendlin, University of Toronto) In this important new book, Duncan MacRae reevaluates the relationship between Roman religion and the works of ancient Roman antiquarians. He cogently argues that the latter are not mere sources of data about Roman religion, but themselves played an active and crucial role in defining that religion. This book will be of interest to anyone concerned with the relationship between religion and text. (James B. Rives, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill) About the Author Duncan MacRae is Assistant Professor of Classics at the University of Cincinnati.