Data in an empiricist episteme must be susceptible to sense perception. Where Roman religion is concerned, one or the other of two things must be true: either the actions of the gods in this world in their effects, or the gods themselves, must be material. Of course, the former in no way requires the latter. But much of Roman ritual, and many strands of Roman religious literature, do, in fact, situate the gods in this world, whether as recipients of cult or as inhabitants of particular spaces. What is more, many but by no means all of those actions and representations focalize such relations upon a particular visible manifestation of the divine, namely their cult objects. And yet, already in the ancient world, such patterns in religious behavior were construed by critics of contemporary religion as misconceived or even as fundamentally confused—as directing worship toward the representations themselves rather than toward the gods: hence idolatry, a contraction for "idol-olatry," from εἰδωλον + λατρεία, the worship of idols. The critique of idolatry has since had a long and distinguished history in the philosophical and religious literatures of Greece and Rome and, indeed, of Christian Europe,¹


and the sophistication of that tradition, and of its modern students, has in many ways overdetermined the study of idolatry itself, as though ancient philosophers or medieval or early modern Christians could be expected to describe accurately and faithfully the workings and presuppositions of Graeco–Roman religiosity.  

This chapter explores the problem of theorizing the materiality of the gods and their susceptibility to representation through consideration of two strands in ancient philosophy: first, that tenet of ancient theories of representation that required idols either to be or to represent the gods; and second, the problem of matter—which is to say, what sort of thing a material god might be. The latter is offered by way of suggestion only; for as a matter of method, it would be perverse to denounce the corrupting influence of ancient philosophy in its theories of representation while co-opting its understanding of matter. What that understanding offers, I suggest, is but one resource among many, for the imaginative work now required to understand and ultimately to describe gods who are and are not idols.

THE STONE THAT WAS THE GODDESS

Our ability to recognize the particularity of Roman religion and to comprehend its rituals depends in large measure on our understanding of its idols.  

Reconstruction of Greek and Roman rituals reveals that virtually all included the gods as participants. Indeed, the few rituals held without the gods inevitably observed their absence: the *sellisternium*, for example,

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2. Pietz 1985, 1987, and 1988 explore from this perspective the development of the modern anthropological category of the fetish. For other recent histories of religious historiography see Ando 2003b, 373–75; and below, chapter 5, pp. 000–000.

3. I would not follow Vernant 1985, 325–51, in arguing that the converse was true, that idols functioned as idols rather than objets d’art only insofar as they were used in rituals (see esp. 337 and 343–45). If that were true, one would expect many more cult statues to perform miracles, and one might expect famously beautiful statues by renowned artists to account for a disproportionate number of such miracles. But famous Greek sculptures were rarely more than sculptures. Roman anxieties about the efficacy of ritual in desacralizing objects also suggests that Vernant’s association of image and ritual needs modification.

consisted in part of a parade of empty chairs, in direct contrast to the *lectisternium*, a feast at which wicker representations of the heads of gods rested on couches and shared a meal. Richard Gordon called attention to this problem in a famous article on religious art in which he observed that Pausanias was as likely to refer to “Athena” as to “a statue of Athena” when he described any given temple. At one level, Gordon did no more than revisit a long-standing puzzle, namely the tendency of participants in Greek and Roman cult to confuse “image and prototype, represented and representation.” As Johannes Geßcken observed long ago, this charge had been the mainstay of rationalizing critics of idolatry throughout antiquity; Geßcken could do little more than document that fact, however, because he affirmed it. According to him, this confusion of categories was symptomatic of the “simplistic habits and superstitions des Völk.”

Few recent scholars have taken up the challenge presented by Gordon’s observation, namely that of explaining the seeming confusion of ontological categories implied by Pausanias’s diction, in large measure because they, like Geßcken, unwittingly subscribe to a theory of representation incompatible with pagan religiosity. For example, although several scholars have catalogued rituals in which idols were treated as gods and fed, washed, and clothed, none of them has sought to explain the philosophical or theological underpinnings of this behavior. Scholarship on ritualism and their critics...
als in which humans took the place of gods has with few exceptions been similarly abortive: extensive research has revealed that such rituals continued to be performed well into the Christian era, but they are labeled the relics of earlier religiosity and their survival evidence of institutional formalism.\textsuperscript{10} Jas Elsner’s discussion of “image as ritual,” in his essay arguing for a “religious way of viewing images,” and Greg Woolf’s kindred study of the Jupiter columns constitute two important exceptions to these generalizations, both explicitly indebted to Gordon’s work.\textsuperscript{11}

Research in other areas of Greek and Roman religion has made significant advances in unpacking ancient descriptions of religious art. For example, Greek and Latin terminology for statuary always reflected the ontological status of the individual depicted and could record whether or not a given statue had been ritually consecrated.\textsuperscript{12} Similarly, Greeks brought to the appreciation of religious art a complex aesthetic that differentiated it from other forms of artistic production and assimilated it to a specifically literary theological discourse.\textsuperscript{13} For their part, the Romans positioned artwork in their temples in patterns that reflected ontological hierarchies, from god to human, whose appreciation might well aid modern investigations of Roman theological literature and imperial cult.\textsuperscript{14} But this ancient sophistication in

\begin{itemize}
  \item[10.] Back 1883 concludes a fascinating chapter with the judgment that “Hae actiones, quas proprie sacerdotes dixerim, non ab ipsius religionis initiis repetendae sunt, sed manifesto pertinent ad id tempus quo cultus deorum patriarchico illo statu relictus est et maximum partem in sacerdotum manus pervenerat. Attamen demonstrant, quantum antiquitus apud homines Graecos ipsa, ad quorum similitudinem illae celebrabantur, spectacula floruerint. Recte igitur Augustinus civ. 7.18: ex cuiusque dei ingenio moribus actibus ete sollemnia instituta sunt” (28–29). Kiechle 1970 ends a similar survey with the judgment that humans replacing gods in rituals was a feature of “der magischen Vorstellungswelt früher Religiosität.” Scheid 1986 constitutes a very important exception to the scholarship in this area, as in many ways does Link 1910, esp. 46–48 and 55–56.
  \item[12.] Schubart 1866, Estienne 1997.
  \item[13.] Madyda 1939, Gladigow 1990.
  \item[14.] Among earlier work I single out Link 1910. Link investigated the term \textit{santus} and had to confront its application to widely disparate things: gods, places, and people. His argument about the development of Roman belief does not persuade—his chronology is in any event indistinct—but his work is conspicuously free of the anachronisms that cloud much work
\end{itemize}
marking and observing metaphysical boundaries, through language, ritual, and law, has not elicited a correspondingly sophisticated and sympathetic explanation for the theology of idols and sacrality of material objects.¹⁵

Let me start with an episode from the history of Rome, whose narratives, ancient and modern, neatly illustrate the particular nature of my concerns. In the last years of the Hannibalic war, the Romans were told to bring Cybele, the mother of the gods, from Pessinus to Rome.¹⁶ Rejoicing in the many omens and prophecies that presaged its ultimate victory, the Senate gathered to deliberate *quaerit transportandae Romam deae esset*, “by what means the goddess should be transported to Rome.”¹⁷ It is not mere captiousness that leads me now to quote the Penguin translation of Aubrey de Sélincourt, who wrote for this clause, “the best means of transferring the image of the Goddess to Rome.”¹⁸ For the anxiety felt by the twentieth-century translator when confronted by a goddess who was a rock, which led him to replace the goddess with her image, was shared by Livy himself, and it is the history of that anxiety, as much as anything, that requires—indeed, demands—elucidation.

I say that Livy shared this anxiety because he vacillated in his estimation of the metaphysical or existential status of Cybele’s *baïtulos*. In Livy’s narrative, the Senate sent legates to Attalus of Pergamum and sought his aid in obtaining the goddess. I quote: “Attalus received the Romans amicably, led them to Pessinus in Phrygia, gave them the sacred stone that the natives said was the mother of the gods, and ordered them to take it to Rome.”¹⁹ The qualms reflected in the diction of that sentence had disappeared by the time the *lapis niger* arrived in Rome: there Publius Cornelius Scipio was ordered to meet the goddess at Ostia; there he received her from the ship; and in the temple of Victory on the Palatine he installed the goddess on the day before the Ides of April 204.²⁰

of that era, and his insistence that pagan gods dwelled in particular locations is welcome. See also Scheid 1996 and 1999b; Ando 2003b, 141–46 and 247–50.

¹⁵. On the sacrality of objects see Whitehouse 1996, esp. 13 and 19; and Glinister 2000.


¹⁷. Livy 29.10.8.

¹⁸. Sélincourt 1965, 579.

¹⁹. Livy 29.11.7.

Ovid’s narrative of Cybele’s arrival shares this feature with Livy’s history: he referred to the stone as the goddess at every opportunity but one, when he described Claudia Quinta fixing her gaze *in imagine divae*, “on the image of the goddess.” But not everyone felt this need to be distanced from those who identified idol and goddess. Writing four centuries later in defense of the altar and statue of Victory in the Senate house, Quintus Aurelius Symmachus asked the emperor, “Where shall we swear to obey your laws and decrees? By what scruple will the deceitful mind be terrified, lest it perjure itself under oath? To be sure, all things are full of god, nor is any place safe for perjurers. Nevertheless, the *praesentia numinis*, the presence of the goddess, is a powerful inducement to a fear of wrongdoing.” It is, I think, insufficient to say that Symmachus has done no more than elide a distinction between image and prototype, even in the service of a psychological or emotional understanding of religious art, for what was at stake for him in his quarrel with Ambrose of Milan was a great deal more than a philosophy of representation.

Let me provide two more examples, one historiographic, the other historical, the better to articulate my concerns by way of triangulation. In the first chapter of *Mimesis*, Erich Auerbach famously contrasts Homeric and biblical narrative in their strategies for “representing reality.” The episodes that he reads in that chapter are Eurycleia’s recognition of Odysseus’s scar and the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. Auerbach identifies the impulse of Homeric style as a desire “to represent phenomena in a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts, and completely fixed in their spatial and temporal relations.” Of course, the interaction between two metaphysically equivalent subjects lends itself to this reading; the question is why Auerbach contrasts the one encounter between two humans with another between God and a man. Although he alludes in a single line to the occasional arrival of Zeus or Poseidon from feasts of the Aethiopians, he refrains from suggesting that Homeric poetry and its representational impulses could have theological implications, as the representation of God in Genesis surely does; indeed, by refusing to select true comparanda, he denies the texts equiv-

22. Symmachus *Rel.* 3.5.
alent sacrality. Classical literature is, on his reading, not religious literature at all.

Second, in a homily delivered late in the 390s, Augustine berated his audience for celebrating the birthday of Carthage in a public feast for the *genius* of the city. Had they not known that they were practicing idolatry? “It is no god,” someone says, “because it is the *genius* of Carthage.” As though, were it Mars or Mercury, it would be a god. But learn how it is regarded by them: not for what it is. For you and I know that it is a stone. . . . But they regard [the *genius*] as a *numen*, and they accept that statue in the place of the *numen*; the altar testifies to this. What is the altar doing there, if the *genius* is not regarded as a *numen*? Let no one tell me, ‘It is not a *numen*; it is not a god.’ I have already said, ‘Would that they knew this, as we all do.’ But that altar testifies to their belief concerning the *genius* and the statue and to their practice. It convicts the minds of those who worship it; let it not convict those who recline before it.”

To the evident concern of an Ovid or a Livy with the representational capacity of religious art, Augustine added an indictment against the materiality of the idols themselves—he and his fellow Christians knew that the statue was merely a stone—as well as a denial that pagan divinities had a metaphysical status equivalent to that of the true God.

These related concerns, the seemingly irreducible materiality of idols, on the one hand, and the seeming impossibility of representing anything invisible and incorporeal in or through matter, on the other, formed the basis of all critiques of idolatry in Graeco-Roman literature. I want now selectively to review that literature, in terms that draw out its origins within a specific philosophical tradition, in the hope that doings might clarify some difficulties in writing about religion in the ancient and modern worlds, and in reading what has been written.

IDOLS AS (MIS)REPRESENTATIONS: PLATO AND THE TRADITION OF CRITIQUE

Even the limited fragments that we now possess reveal Presocratic philosophers to have been absorbed with the issues that were to exercise August-

tine, albeit in different formulations and on the basis of different postulates and preoccupations. Xenophanes’ famous attack on anthropomorphism, for example, censured it as more than a strategy of representation. Of course, he argued, cattle that could draw would draw gods that looked like cattle, as humans drew gods with human forms; but anthropomorphism also concretized theological and metaphysical presuppositions of far greater moment, of which the joke about cattle and horses and lions was merely a reductio ad absurdum.  

And although Heraclitus attacked the forms of contemporary religious ritual with particular vehemence, like Xenophanes he did so because he believed that ritual expressed beliefs that he found insupportable. Insisting that idols as material objects had the same metaphysical status as other such objects—he likened praying to a statue to conversing with one’s house—he lamented that devotees of idols did not understand the true nature of the gods.

It was Plato, not surprisingly, who exercised the greatest influence on the critique of idolatry. He might have expected to do so through his attack on the immorality of traditional mythopoiesis, but those sections of the Republic were largely ignored until their arguments and their data were appropriated by Christian apologists of the second century and beyond. Rather, it was his complex subordination of representation and epistemology to metaphysics that sounded the death knell for sympathetic appreciations of idolatrous religiosity among later intellectuals, both pagan and Christian.

Of course, Plato had severe misgivings about the status of images of even material objects. Early in the Cratylus, for example, he drew an analogy between producing images of Cratylus and reproducing the number

26. Xenophanes fr. 166–69 KRS, esp. 167 (Clement Strom. 5.109.2): mortals think the gods are born and have clothes, voices, and bodies like their own.
27. Heraclitus fr. 241 KRS.
28. Weinstock 1926.
29. Vernant 1979, 105–37, provides an exceptionally useful overview of Plato’s theory of representation but does not consider its connection to materiality or its specific connection to religious art. Osborne 1987 offers a trenchant reading of Plato’s criticism of mimesis in Republic 10, but her discussion of its “repercussions” is deeply ahistorical, leaping from Plato to Byzantine iconoclasm, and she is in any event not concerned with cult practice. Her choice of “incarnation” as a term when discussing mimesis in religious art was unfortunate: it seems implicitly to justify (or it simply reflects) a decision not to come to grips with the materiality of gods and idols outside Christian thought.
10. Take anything away from 10 and it is no longer 10. So, a perfect image of Cratylus would be another Cratylus. What, then, is the principle of correctness with which we can judge images? Where representation as such was concerned, Plato answered this question most fully early in the *Sophist*. Writing there of the art of image making, which he called ἡ εἰδωλοποική ἢ εἰκαστική τέχνη, Plato argued that artists must necessarily leave behind the truth in order to give their creations not the actual proportions of their exemplars, but such proportions as seem to be beautiful. For this reason, plastic images, which are called “likenesses” because they are “like” their prototypes, do not even deserve that name, but should be called φαντάξματα, “appearances.”

In the *Cratylus*, the quest for a provisional principle of correctness by which to judge images soon yields to a very different question, one framed as a choice between starkly opposed alternatives. Is it better to learn about the truth of things from images of them, and from those images to conjecture about the accuracy of the image itself? Or is it better to learn the truth from the truth, and on that basis to judge its representations? By equating paradigm or prototype with truth, Plato transformed a problem of representation into one of epistemology. This argumentative sleight-of-hand has its analog in the *Sophist*, too. In that work, Theaetetus and the Stranger had reached a seeming paradox, that insofar as being belongs to what is true, and images are inherently false because inaccurate, neither images or idols nor appearances can exist at all, in any way, at any time. But they soon satisfied each other that both false speech and false opinion were possible, and this allowed them to concede a form of existence to imitations of things that really are.

Plato has shifted ground once again. For what are these things that really are? Not Cratylus, of course, nor any corporeal object: for all such things are subject to generation and corruption, and insofar as they always in flux, no knowledge of them is possible. What had seemed an argument

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30. *Cratylus* 432b–d.
32. *Cratylus* 439a–b.
34. *Sophist* 264d: ἐγχωρεῖ δὴ μηθάματα τῶν ἀντων ἐνια.
about epistemology has its foundation in a simple—indeed, simplistic—ontology. It informed much of Plato’s work, including analogies he drew with image making. So, for example, he likened the particular examples used by geometricians to so many images in water, εἰκόνες εἰν υδάσαι, used for seeking realities that are visible only through intellection.35

These varied strands of argument find their nexus in the Timaeus. Early in that work, Plato distinguished between two kinds of things: those that are and have no origin, and those that are always in a process of becoming but never are. The former are apprehended by intelligence along with reason; the latter by opinion with the aid of sense perception.36 Understood in these terms, Plato observed, the world itself is an object of sense perception and must have been created through participation in some object of intellection: the world, in other words, is a copy of something.37 But applying words like “image” and “paradigm” to cosmogonic processes made Plato uneasy. He had earlier deliberated whether to designate the universe by οὐρανός or κόσμος or some other name, and lamented that it would be impossible to speak even the little that one might know of the father and maker of the world.38 He no longer hesitated. In speaking in this way, he continued, we must assume that words are akin to what they describe: when they relate to the lasting and permanent and intelligible, they ought to be irrefutable and unalterable, but when they express only likeness, words need be only similar or analogous to what they describe. The problem of representation was thus resolved by the paradoxical assertion that the words of discursive language can represent the truly existent more accurately than objects of metaphysical status like unto themselves, namely those subject to generation and decay. “As being is to becoming,” Plato could then conclude, “so truth is to belief.”39

Plato had begun by positing a direct connection between a particular ontology and a set of epistemological distinctions, and only a few pages later used the same two assertions, before either had been proved, to complete a syllogism about representation. Later in the Timaeus he returned

35. Republic 510d–e.
37. Timaeus 29a.
38. Timaeus 28b–c.
to problems of representation, asking whether one can designate corporeal objects using ταὐτόν, “the selfsame thing,” “the very one,” since doing so would make a complex assertion about the identity and ontological integrity of the object in question. Plato concluded that only what receives all bodies and all forms can be so designated, because it never departs from its own nature and never participates in any way in any form. It is the mother and receptacle of all created and visible and sensible things, and yet it cannot be called “earth” or “air” or “fire” or “water,” but is an invisible and shapeless form; all-receiving, it participates in some way in the intelligible and is itself utterly incomprehensible.\(^{40}\)

So far, so good. But Plato closed this section by turning once again to epistemology. “There: I have put forth my argument. If mind and correct opinion are two different categories, then there must be self-existent ideas, which are not susceptible to sense perception but are apprehended only by the mind.”\(^{41}\) The formulation of the final argument as a conditional is a typical Platonic sleight-of-hand. For its articulation invites one unreflectively to assent to precisely what had been and largely remained at issue, namely that the distinction between knowledge and belief corresponds with or, rather, rests upon a metaphysics conceived in ontological terms.

ART AS REPRESENTATION

What has all this to do with idols? A great deal. In what follows, I shall follow modern trends in the study of ancient philosophy and treat the twin foundations of idolatry critique separately, concentrating first on representation and only later on materiality.\(^{42}\) But these problems cannot be entirely divorced. On the contrary, I shall argue in closing that it is presuppositions about materiality and metaphysics that lead us, as they led Augustine, to insist that idols must be—indeed, can only be—idols of something. Pagan understandings of the representational capacity of idols

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\(^{40}\) Timaeus 50b–51a.

\(^{41}\) Timaeus 51d.

\(^{42}\) Cf. chapter 7 below, which attempts to break down the distinctions drawn by modern scholars between Christian and pagan theories of the sacralization of space. Pagan rituals of sacralization, and Christian reliance on sacred narratives and the contingent location of holy relics, presuppose very similar theories of divine immanence.
and the ontological premises of pagan ritual turn out to be far more fluid, complex, and potentially conflicting than any interpretation consistent with a Platonic metaphysics would allow.

Philosophizing defenses of idolatry existed in a variety of forms, but they all accepted the premise that the function of idols was to represent, and not in any way to be, the god. I label these texts “philosophizing” in part because their authors are demonstrably familiar with Plato, but especially because defending idolatry by recourse to theories of representation itself takes place only within a particular intellectual and discursive tradition.

The problem for idolatry’s champions was twofold: first to defend the use of images and only secondarily to defend anthropomorphism. As so often, we know the most influential defense of images in the Western tradition only from its opponents. For it was the first-century Roman polymath Varro who introduced the Latin-speaking world to the allegorical interpretation of religious statuary, and we know his works on religion almost exclusively through the extracts of them quoted by Augustine. We are, therefore, in no position to say whether Varro developed this theory of religious art himself, on analogy with Stoic allegorizing interpretations of Hesiod, although it seems clear that both he and Cicero knew Zeno’s reading of Hesiod’s *Theogony*. In any event, according to Augustine, Varro argued that the material objects used in religious rituals served to draw the eyes’ attention to them in order to direct the sight of the mind to invisible things.  

Augustine placed a terse formulation of Varro’s argument in the mouth of a fictive pagan in a sermon delivered during the closing years of the fourth century: “Suppose some debater stands forth, one who seems learned, and says: ‘I do not worship the stone. I merely venerate what I see, but I worship him whom I do not see.’ Who is this? ‘An invisible numen,’ he says, ‘that presides over that idol.’ People who defend the use of images in this way seem learned only to themselves: they may not worship idols, but they still worship demons.”

Other advocates for idolatry similarly accepted the premise that idols had to be defended as representing something. Although both Dio Chrysostom and Porphyry ultimately defended anthropomorphism, each began

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his defense of religious art by reflecting on its function and power. Dio admitted that it was difficult for humans to gain access to and secure knowledge about the divine. He identified four sources of accurate information: poets, lawgivers, artists, and philosophers. Although he knew the story that Pheidias had been inspired by Homer, he also insisted that artists could become the rivals and peers of the poets, as “through their eyes they interpreted the divine for their numerous and less experienced spectators.”

By allowing that artists ἐξηγούμενοι τὰ θεία, “interpret the divine,” Dio implicitly elevated them to rivalry with the philosophers, as he had explicitly compared them with the poets, for it is the philosopher, according to Dio, “who interprets the divine in speech and most truthfully and perfectly proclaims its immortal nature.”

In On Images, Porphyry followed Varro and Dio in construing the interpretation of statues as material objects on analogy with the reading of words as material signs. In the preface to that work Porphyry promised “to those who have learned to read from statues as from books what is written about the gods” that he would reveal “the thoughts of wise theology, in which men have revealed God and God’s powers through images susceptible to sense perception, by rendering the invisible in visible forms.”

All these authors shared with Plato the basic metaphysical assumption that incorporeal deities and, indeed, incorporeal ideas exist not simply on a different but on a higher plane than embodied humans; it was this assumption that triggered the need for the divine to be interpreted rather than merely depicted and that required artists to render the divine not from a corporeal model but from some outstanding form of the beautiful that existed in their minds. The philosophical basis of these debates is nowhere more apparent than in Origen’s refutation of Celsus or the first book of John of Damascus’s On Images.

45. Dio Or. 12.46.
46. Dio Or. 12.47; Madyda 1939, 9 and 38–39.
47. Porphyry Περὶ ἁγιλαμάτων fr. 351 Smith (fr. 1 Bidez). See also fr. 353: “[Ἀλλ’ ἐπεὶ πάντα τῶν περὶ τούτων ἀπάρχον δή καὶ μοστηλαμένοι λόγοι εἰς ἀσωμάτως δυνάμεις μεταφορικός ἀνήγγειλεν, ἀπὸ τοῦ διαφέρον μέρη τῶν κόσμων τῆς θεσπισμῶν αὐτῶν συνεκαίνει, ἀλλ’ ἐπὶ τῶν ἀμφοτέρως καὶ ἀσωμάτως δυνάμεις, σκεφαλάμβανε ἐὰν μή καὶ οὕτως μᾶν χρή τὴν θείαν ἀνόμιαν ἀποδεικνύσθην, ἀλλ’ ἀεὶ πολλάς ἡγεῖται.”
48. Cicero Orator 2.8–9; Madyda 1939, 16 and 27–29.
49. See esp. John 1.7.
Christians were both idolaters and poor metaphysicians because they believed humans had been created in every way similar to God. Did they not depict God saying, “Let us create man in our image and resemblance \[\text{κατ’ εἰκόνα καὶ ὑμοίωσιν ἡμετέρας}\]?” This was impossible, Celsus continued, because God did not make humans in his image, nor does God resemble any other visible being. Origen defended Christians first with a specious semantic argument, insisting that God made man only in his image but not in his resemblance, a claim for which he offers no proof but a formulation that achieved lasting influence. Origen also undertook a more rigorous defense of Christian metaphysics. Celsus has clearly misrepresented the Christians, Origen wrote, when he suggests that we think what is made “after the image of God” is the body, whereas the soul, which is better, is deprived of what is “after his image.” For none of us, Origen asserted, thinks that your idols are actually images of gods, as you do, as though such things could depict the shape of an invisible and incorporeal deity; still less do we imagine that anything created after God’s image could be \[\text{ἐν τῷ φθαρτῷ σώματι}\], “in a corruptible body.”

THE MATTER AND MATERIALITY OF RELIGIOUS ART

What is a corruptible body? Are there incorruptible bodies? These questions return us to theories of matter and to the reception of Plato’s \textit{Timaeus}. For among ancient readers, that text remained to the end of antiquity a touchstone in debates about creation and hence about matter. Not surprisingly, the features that make it most characteristically Platonic—its peculiar and misleading claim to debate first principles, and its use of myth to describe things it elsewhere labels unrepresentable in discursive language—serve as lightning rods in subsequent debate. In reviewing that literature, I turn first to Aristotle, Plato’s most influential reader and most powerful critic.

50. Origen \textit{Cels.} 4.30, and cf. 7.62.
52. Origen \textit{Cels.} 6.63 and 7.66.
53. Two recent overviews of the Platonist tradition obliquely relevant to this chapter are Gerson 2005 and Karamanolis 2006. They have quite distinct perspectives, though each is concerned to explicate Aristotle’s place in that tradition. Neither is invested in the questions foregrounded here.
In his engagement with Plato’s physics, Aristotle reacted above all to two related problems, the first having to do with theory, and the second with the particular articulations by which theory was elaborated. So, according to Aristotle, Plato offered no theory of matter or, rather, none that satisfied Aristotle’s demand for logical coherence. The theory of Forms, for example, demanded the existence of unformed matter, whether of chronological or merely logical priority. This demand Plato signally failed to meet. Hence Aristotle asked whether Plato’s universal receptacle or his so-called “space” might be interpreted as prime matter but declared the text insufficiently precise to allow any certainty. It was not that Plato failed to appreciate the existence of this problem, as Aristotle pointedly observes. For his part, Plato wants the Forms to preexist, to be prior to corporeal matter. But as Aristotle notes, Plato’s own illustration of formation—that of a goldsmith imposing a design on previously unformed gold—did not require that the design exist before the gold, nor, in fact, could it explain the existence of the gold at all.

I do not want to belabor the details of Aristotle’s reading of Plato. It is, however, crucial to understand two things, both connected to the paradoxical reception of Aristotle’s critique among later Platonists. The first has to do with the elaborate connection Aristotle drew between forms and particulars, on the one hand, and the ontological status of the different kinds of matter from which each is made, on the other; the second principally with the tools for discussing materiality that Aristotle bequeathed to Graeco–Roman posterity.

As regards the first legacy of Aristotle’s critique of Plato, although Aristotle insisted that prime matter existed prior to its formation only in potentiality and not in actuality—only, that is, logically and not temporally—he did concede to Plato that the metaphor of the goldsmith may have been useful as a narrative representation of processes that were themselves atemporal. Writing in the *Metaphysics* of the making of a bronze sphere...
from unformed bronze, he observed that we call the particular and the form by the same name, and yet what we call the form cannot have any existence—is not, in his terms, a self-subsistent substance—merely because we have a name for it.57

If Aristotle resembles Plato in having connected problems of epistemology, representation, and metaphysics, he did so in radically different ways. So, for example, Aristotle conceded that most people defined processes of generation and corruption, γένεσις καὶ φθορά, by drawing an incorrect ontological distinction between perceptible and imperceptible matter.58 On the other hand he insisted, first, that some matter was potentially susceptible not to sense perception, but only to intellection; and second, that both kinds of matter were properly speaking unknowable prior to their formation. That is why we assign the same name to both forms and particulars.59

The second crucial legacy of Aristotle’s critique of Plato is more subtle. It consists of the conceptual and terminological apparatus that Aristotle developed to correct Plato, which was appropriated by later Platonists merely to supplement him. Of particular importance were the assimilation of Aristotle’s logically and potentially extant matter, what he calls the πρῶτη ὑλή, to Plato’s universal receptacle, on the one hand, and the complex belief that “intelligible” particulars had some form of imperceptible matter, different in kind from ὑλή γεννητή καὶ φθορητή, sense-perceptible matter subject to generation and corruption, increase and change. This endowed Plato’s ontological framework with a form of underlying and unchanging ὑλή νοητή, intelligible matter, that could be the object of reason and νοσθήσει, to correspond to the corruptible matter that was the object of opinion and sense perception.60

The complex afterlife of these debates within middle Platonic physics lies to one side of my project, concerned as it is with pagan and Christian theorizing about idolatry. I therefore concentrate here on two prob-

58. Aristotle De generatione et corruptione 318b18–27; cf. Metaphysics 1036b32–1037a5
60. As both Joachim 1922, xxxiv and 143–44, and Bostock 1994, 156–57 and 165–66, make clear, Aristotle regarded intellectual matter as nothing more than an imaginary logical postulate, useful for discussing the application of concepts like “place” and “touch” to τὰ γεωμετρικά.
lems: first, the gradual evolution of a specifically Latin vocabulary for matters of materiality prior to Augustine (and so prior to his historically decisive articulation of a Latin idolatry critique), and, second, the recursive application of an Aristotelian vocabulary to problems of theology raised (or discovered by later readers) in the Timaeus. The testimony of Cicero’s Posterior Academics is crucial to both problems, both for its account of the eclecticism of Antiochus of Ascalon and for its explicit discussion of problems of translation. These issues became intertwined when Cicero turned to ὑλή, “matter,” because in brief compass he equated Aristotelian prime matter with Platonic space, called them both materia, and identified corpus, or body, as the product of this matter and Stoic ποιῶτης, which he rendered with qualitas. Cicero implicitly acknowledged the eclecticism of this brief essay on initia, “first principles,” when he assigned authority for its various components to Antiochus, Aristotle, or the Stoics, but he often labeled the whole as the thought of the Greeks.

But the full extent of Aristotle’s influence on Platonic physics emerges with particular clarity in the philosophical handbooks of Alcinous and Apuleius. Alcinous took from Plato his correlations between knowledge and intellection, on the one hand, and sense perception and opinion, on the other. Indeed, like Plato, Alcinous accepted this distinction as axiomatic: it is because intellection and opinion are categorically different that their objects possess differential ontological status; there must be primary objects of intellection, πρῶτα νοητά, as there are primary objects of sense perception, πρῶτα ἀισθητά.

Post-Aristotelian metaphysicians, lacking the courage of Aristotle’s rigorous empiricism, and adhering to a Platonizing physics that would have dismayed Plato and Aristotle alike, concluded quite naturally that objects

62. I set aside here consideration of philosophy at Rome between Cicero and the late first century C.E. There is, however, much of interest in this material. Seneca’s extended meditation on first principles, for example, would repay careful study, both for its Platonic smith who imposes form on Aristotelian bronze, and for its vocabulary, which is largely independent of Cicero (see, e.g., Ep. 58.16–31; cf. Ep. 65.8–9 and 90.28–29). Indeed, Seneca’s language reveals just how fluid the Latin philosophical tradition remained in the middle of the first century.
64. Alcinous 9.4; cf. Timaeus 51d–52a.
of intellection and sense perception each require their own kind of matter. What Alcinous provided, therefore, is a thoroughly Aristotelianized account of the *Timaeus*. Not only did he accept without hesitation that the universal receptacle, the mother and nurse of all things, and space are one and the same, but he equated them with an Aristotelian substratum inaccessible to sense perception and consisting of matter. This substratum is neither corporeal nor incorporeal, but is body in potentiality. That there was neither a continuity in language nor in any meaningful sense a continuity of meaning in the concepts of “substratum,” “matter,” and “potentiality” between Plato’s time and his own would not have concerned Alcinous; the doxographic tradition, as we would term it, was not concerned with history in that sense. So it was that Alcinous could conjoin those equations by adapting an argument from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and so identify matter as a first principle, from which the world was created, and then ask by whom and with reference to what it was fashioned. The answers to those questions were, of course, God and the Forms, the former imposing the latter on a chaotic, imperceptible preexistent substratum of matter. If on the one hand we have here traveled far from the *Timaeus*, we are far from the *Cratylus*, too, and reside now among gods with a far more complex, if somewhat nebulous, relationship to matter.

Apuleius provides our best glimpse into the Latin reception of Plato between Cicero and Lactantius. In book 1 of *On Plato* he described Plato’s first principles: God, matter, and the Forms. According to Apuleius, prime matter is *improcreabilem incorruptamque*, by which he meant it is not subject to *gevnesiκαι φθορά*, generation and corruption. This matter is potentially recipient of form and is the substratum of creation. It is, finally, indeterminate and imperceptible: it is infinite insofar as its magnitude is indeterminate; it is neither corporeal or incorporeal. It cannot be body, since it lacks form; but without body it cannot be said to exist.

65. Alcinous 8.2: Καὶ πρῶτον γε περὶ ἄλλης λέγομαι. Ταίτηρ τὸ νῦν ἐκμαγείδω τε καὶ παν- δικῆς καὶ τιθήνην καὶ μητέρα καὶ χώραν ὄνομαξε· καὶ ὀποιείμενων ἀρτῶν τε μετὰ ἀνασθή- σας καὶ νόθω λεγομοι λητῶν.
66. Alcinous 8.3.
68. Alcinous 12.2.
69. Apuleius *De Plat.* 1.5.
70. Apuleius *De Plat.* 1.5.
Alcinous drew his correspondences between epistemology and metaphysics in a section of his handbook separate from that on first principles. Apuleius for his part understood that knowledge of first principles was inseparable from our capacity to articulate or represent it. So, for example, he tentatively concluded that prime matter was unsusceptible to sense perception but accessible to intellection. He grew more certain when he turned to the distinction between objects of intellection and their essence, and objects of sense perception and their essence. The former are visible to the eyes of the mind and exist always in the same way, equal to themselves; the latter must be judged by opinion, whether rational or irrational, because they are created and pass away. What is more, the essence of objects of intellection, insofar as it is the subject of discourse, offers grounds for rational and abiding true statements; the essence of objects of sense perception, which are like the shadows and images of true things, offers ground for disputation and words that are inherently inconstant.

It would be interesting to trace the development of this conceptual framework in greater detail, for its influence on theology and the exegesis of creation narratives from the Jewish diaspora to late antiquity, from Philo to Hermogenes and Tertullian, to Calcidius, Proclus, and John Philoponus. In this area as in so many others, Plotinus broke with his predecessors: his model of divine immanence, that of a mirror reflecting images, created conceptual space for growth in new directions. Julian the Apostate’s writings on embodiment similarly allowed for new understandings of ritual practice, which have been largely ignored by those convinced that paganism was on the wane by the mid-fourth century. At present, however, I want only to return to the problem of gods and idols, and I do so by way of Augustine.

AUGUSTINE, IDOLS, AND THE AFFECTIONS OF THE MISERABLE
In his great commentary on Genesis, written early in the fifth century, Augustine was concerned to reconcile his own form of a Christian Pla-

71. Apuleius De Plat. 1.5.
72. Apuleius De Plat. 1.6.
73. Plotinus 4.3.
74. See, e.g., Julian Ep. 89.293a–d, together with R. Smith 1995.
tonizing metaphysics with a narrative of creation that rather unfortunately concretized very different theological presuppositions. Yet analysis of and writing about such issues raised irresolvable problems of representation, ones that Augustine sought to explain by appeal to the very metaphysical postulates that had motivated his project in the first place.

When, therefore, Augustine asked how it was that God had said, “Let there be light,” he wavered between two possibilities: God had spoken either in time or in the eternity of his Word. The first option he dismissed: si temporaliter, utique mutabiliter, if God had spoken in time, then his words would have been subject to change, for material words inevitably sound and pass away; their matter is subject to generation and corruption. “But this is an absurd and fleshly way of thinking and speculating.” Augustine’s diction, carnalis, “fleshly,” invoked two closely related problems. Being embodied souls, not only did humans interact with the world through sense perception, but their language and their physics had developed to explain the physical and not the intelligible world. Genesis had, therefore, to accommodate its narrative to the limitations of discursive speech and the patterns and habits of thought that human speech could articulate. Genesis 1.2, for example, represented the “waters” as preexistent not because matter participated in God’s eternity in any way, but because God had to be said to be stirring above something: in actuality, Augustine insisted, the verse referred not to spatial relations, but to God’s powers, which were transcendent over all things.

As this example indicates, Augustine took pains throughout the commentary to be as precise as possible in matters of priority, both logical and temporal, and never more so than in matters of matter. Unformed matter, he insisted, was created at the same time as the things made from it: just as a speaker does not utter sound and then fashion words from it, so God did not first make unformed matter and then impose form upon it. Unformed matter is thus prior not in time, but in origin; and Scripture has, in narrating with the material words of discursive language, sep-

75. The following paragraphs treat material studied in depth in Ando 2001.
77. Augustine Gen. litt. 1.2.4.
78. Augustine Gen. litt. 1.2.5.
arated into a temporal sequence actions that God did not separate in time
in the act of creation. Augustine extended his concern for precision
about materiality to the theology of demons and angels: demons may be
animals, but they are ethereal ones. Their ethereal bodies remain ever
strong and do not suffer corruption in death. Formed not from corporeal
matter but from what Augustine called spiritual substance or what
Apuleius might have called intelligible matter, the bodies of demons were
not susceptible to sense perception. The anthropomorphism of their idols
was thus doubly corrupting: the familiarity of their appearance was as re-
assuring as it was deceptive, and it granted to them such power as they
had over the affections of the miserable.

The particular metaphysics and theory of matter that underpinned Au-
gustine’s understanding of Genesis and the bodies of demons also framed
his view of idolatry. In a sermon delivered in Carthage in 404, he once
again posited a fictive interlocutor as a learned defender of pagan prac-
tice. “When I worship Mercury,” he says, ‘I worship talent. Talent can-
not be seen; it is something invisible.’ We readily concede that talent is
something invisible [aliquid inuisibile], and insofar as it is invisible, it is bet-
ter than sky, or earth, or sea, or anything visible. Indeed, invisible sub-
stances [substantia inuisibilis], such as life, are better than every visible sub-
stance, since everything visible is a physical thing [quia omne uisibile corpus
est], and talent is indeed a great thing. Nevertheless, if you were to con-
sider the talent that they say they worship, what does it do? For do not
many with great talent err? Perhaps they err greatly who think that tal-
et is to be worshipped using an image of Mercury.”

What, then, of Cybele? Was the black stone really the goddess? Did the
Romans get the one and only black stone that may have been the god-
dess? Might they, in fact, have received a duplicate of the stone housed

80. Augustine Gen. litt. 1.15.29.
82. Augustine En. Ps. 113.2.6. Augustine regarded Plato’s inability to conceive of “spiritual
substance” as the principal failing of Platonic theology; on this problem see Ando 2001,
38–43.
at Pessinus, or even one copy among many? Let me suggest one way to answer these questions without looking at the history of Pessinus.

Plato’s metaphysics of representation has influenced the reading of this episode and others like it in two ways. On the one hand, because we assume that copies are not only different from but inferior to their exemplars, we insist that religious artifacts cannot be duplicated. Hence the Romans must have received the one and only black stone. Paradoxically, because we assume that the divine exists on a higher plane than the corporeal, we also believe that the black rock must have represented, rather than been, the goddess. But surely a sign or a symbol or an image can be reproduced?

I suggest that ancient understandings of materiality, and the philosophy of representation underlying religious ritual, provide a means to obviate this most Platonic of false binarisms. Recognizing further hypostases beyond or between the divine and the corporeal, people in the ancient world might well have understood that Cybele somehow was, and yet was not coextensive with, their black stone; and in that way, she might also have been, but not been identical with, other black stones.

I do not know what the Romans brought from Pessinus to the Palatine in 204 B.C.E. But I suspect that the metaphysical and epistemological doctrines bequeathed to us from Plato are not going to help us to find an answer. What I do know is that Cybele’s shrine in Pessinus remained an active site of cult and focus for pilgrimage for at least 560 years after her batullos went to Rome. For that reason alone, I suspect that Lucius Cornelius Scipio received both more and less than the black rock that was the goddess in the port of Ostia twenty-two hundred years ago.