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1. PROPOSAL DATA

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TITLE OF THE PROJECT (ACRONYM):
"Omnipotens. *Manufacturing and Empowering Gods in Greco-Roman Antiquity*" (OMEGA)

2. BACKGROUND, CURRENT STATUS AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE PROPOSAL

2.1. Background

The OMEGA project aims to effect a **paradigm shift in the understanding of the functioning and hierarchization of the Greco-Roman world by problematizing the meaning of "divine agency".** The name chosen for this project – **"OMEGA"** – is first and foremost an acronym for the broader title: "*OMNIPOTENS. MANUFACTURING AND EMPOWERING GODS IN GRECO-ROMAN ANTIQUITY*". However, it also hints at the status – ὁ Μέγας (*ho Mégas*, "the Great") – of the Greco-Roman divinities that are the focus of this study and nods towards the Christian *alpha-omega* symbol, which represents the omnipotence of god as the beginning and end of all things. In short, the OMEGA acronym evokes the subject of the proposed project, the **ancient construction of "super-gods"**, and sets it before us without prejudging similarities or differences between "monotheistic" or "polytheistic" religious systems.

Two preliminary clarifications are needed. First of all, while **religious praxis** can be, and often is, thought of as the expression of an institutionalized consensus shared by an established community (Scheid 2016), recent studies have significantly broadened the spectrum of ancient religion to also encompass **individual action and creativity** (Rüpke 2011; Albrecht *et al.* 2018; Gasparini *et al.* 2020). The combined use of these two different and complementary perspectives encourages us to describe religion – at least from the point of view of communication – as an efficient tool that enables actors to not only enlarge their social agentivity but also to obtain personal benefits from situations of crisis or risk. The development of strategies to make this communication more effective (e.g. through epiphanies) was a primary concern in Antiquity. In order to achieve this goal, cultic practices such as divination, magic, offerings, oracles, prayers, sacrifices, votives, vows, etc. could be activated, implemented, and even creatively modified through a process of **transcultural appropriation and bricolage** (on social agentivity, risk-management, and bricolagiste appropriation in the case of the Isiac cults in particular, see respectively Alvar Ezquerra 2018; Gasparini 2021; Gasparini & Gordon 2018).

Secondly, a number of interrelated developments served to broaden and deepen the religious offerings in the ancient Mediterranean. On the one hand, processes of **professionalization and intellectualization** of religion made cultic praxis and its communicative media progressively more sophisticated, while, on the other hand, **cohabitation** constantly enriched and diversified the range of options available. The Greco-Roman world was, in line with Thales' notorious aphorism, a "world full of gods" (cf. Hopkins 1999), the religious "marketplace" of which included an effectively limitless number of *puissances* to be worshipped and invoked, ranging across angels and demons, gods and demigods, genies, heroes, saints, and spirits. Of course, this divine plurality strongly encouraged **cultic competition**: the more powerful the *numen* one addressed, the better the chances of success for the contingent problem-solving strategy (on religious professionalization, cohabitation, and competition, see respectively Rüpke 1996; Lamine 2004; Engels & Van Nuffelen 2014). Over time, and regardless of the belonging of these options either to the crowd of Greco-Roman gods or to the plethora of Jewish or Christian religious referents (Yahweh, the Trinity, the angels, Mary and the other saints), competition tended to increase exponentially. In gambling terms, if I said that this god, for me, was *megas*, someone else could raise me one *megistos*; if I said that it was *altus*, one could raise me *hypsistos*; if I said that it was *potens*, someone might raise me *omnipotens* or *pantokratôr* (Belayche 2010; Chaniotis 2010).

The **overall goal** of the OMEGA project is to **challenge the traditional idea that Greco-Roman "pagan" religion, Judaism, and Christianity all developed in separate social realms**.

Against the still widespread tendency to historically conceptualize such religions in terms of parallel and alternative "cultural packages", I propose to approach this issue from a very different angle. I suggest that we should set aside the modern taxonomical dichotomy of "monotheism" vs. "polytheism" and focus instead on the shared Greco-Roman cultural **capability of manufacturing "bespoke" gods and empowering them up to the highest plausible level**. Or to put it another way, I seek to show how cultic actors – regardless of their religious affiliation – could eventually envisage and contemplate the possible selection or creation of **almighty gods**. **The specific objective of the OMEGA project is thus to analyse the strategies employed in these religious "high-stakes bets"** and, in particular, to examine a) the transfer to supernatural beings of onomastic and iconographic attributes originally pertaining to human political leaders; b) the symbolic exchange between weakness and power; c) the combination and grouping of deities; and d) the creation of an "ultra-divine" power.

2.2. Current Status

The topic of "**Big Gods**", to borrow Ara Norenzayan's term (Norenzayan 2013), has more than a century of important reflection behind it. From its very beginning, discussion in this area was grounded on a linear and teleological reconstruction of religious history that aimed to highlight the "transformation" of ancient paganism in the "revolution" of Christianity. Hermann Usener, Georg Wissowa, and Franz Cumont were among the earliest major proponents of this model (Usener 1896; Wissowa 1902; Cumont 1906), which in turn referred back to earlier views drawn from both German Hegelianism and French historiography (Renan 1882; Réville 1886). Such a model (the influence of which is evident in the subsequent *Annales* school of the late 1920s) intended to reconstruct an alleged internal evolution of **Greco-Roman polytheism** from religion to religiosity: the propagation of the so-called "Oriental religions" first, and then later of Neoplatonism, the mysteries, and other different forms of soteriology linked to the *post mortem* destiny of humankind, **would have "morally" paved the way for the triumph of Christianity** (cf. Molnár 2002; DuBois 2014; Gordon 2014). According to this perspective, religiosity would have soon passed from the old "all gods and goddesses" formula (necessary for pagan "superstition" to include all possible – known and unknown – divinities) to some new "minimalistic" divine abstractions, bringing together the powers and virtues of all gods into one single *Allgott*. This latter would have represented the peak of the aspirations of "paganism", a sort of "syncretism" at the highest level which would nevertheless have **"lacked the strength" to definitively transform itself into monotheism** (Höfer & Peter 1897-1902).

As early as 1913, while Bruno Müller was in Halle discussing his dissertation on *Megas Theos*, Otto Weinreich was publishing an article on the *Agnostos Theos* in the *Deutsche Literaturzeitung*. The works of these two scholars consolidated the *communis opinio* according to which the **Greco-Roman "pantheon" had to be considered as the "union of all the gods"** (Müller 1913; Weinreich 1913. Cf. Wallraff 2004). From the 1930s onwards, the opinion spread that while a linguistic case could be made for the development of a term for the divine totality, the sum of all the gods, into the name of a "total god" – attested in the Greek and Latin sources under the name of *Panthe(i)os* or *Pantheus* – it was not plausible to suppose that this name would have been "inflated", so to speak, to serve as a designation for many individual gods, as is well attested by both literary and epigraphic sources (Jacobi 1930; Pfister 1933). As a consequence, scholars again preferred to consider this specific deity as an expression of a pantheistic "syncretism": it was seen as typical of the Imperial era to ascribe the ability to embrace all of the gods to a sort of divine abstraction that incorporated the individual personalities of all deities – an **"all-embracing divinity"** (Ziegler 1949; Beaujeu 1955; Bayet 1971).

Meanwhile, Erik Peterson and Raffaele Pettazzoni were contributing to the revitalization of the debate around the concept of **"henotheism"**, a term introduced already in the 19th century by Friedrich W. Schelling and developed primarily by Friedrich Max Müller (Peterson 1926; Pettazzoni 1932. Cf. Sfameni Gasparro 2010). Of course, ancient people asked themselves whether a given god might be more powerful than another, going so far as to claim not only that a particular god was "the one" (*Te tibi / una quae / es omnia / dea Isis*: CIL X 3800. Cf. Gasparini 2011), but even declaring from a philosophical perspective (as Xenophanes did) the uniqueness of the divine principle driving the cosmos. This uniqueness represented, in Pettazzoni's words, the henotheistic "momentary fervor and religious exaltation" which could elevate one god above all the others. This god (*Pantheios* as well as Isis "*una et omnia*") would have represented the *emic* result of an "affective monotheism" which did not exclude the existence of the other divine beings (Bendlin 2000). Thanks to Henk S. Versnel, the debate on this subject has been revivified and substantially developed in more recent years (Versnel 1990; 2011; 2017).

Towards the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, many scholars reacted to this trend by developing positions that supported a degree of monotheistic exclusiveness in these acclamations, while proposing to mitigate it by designating it with expressions such as **"inclusive monotheism", "insular monotheism", "pagan monotheism", "pluriform monotheism", "quasi monotheism", or "soft monotheism"** (among others, see Athanassiadi & Frede 1999; Mitchell & Van Nuffelen 2010). Angelos Chaniotis has stressed that these attempts failed essentially because (contrary to the concept of "henotheism") they were built on an *etic* and misleading heuristic category which "reduces the quest for the divine in the Imperial period into a question of quantity, whereas the textual evidence for this period shows that we are primarily dealing with a question of quality" (Chaniotis 2010. Cf. also Frevel 2013).

Following in this direction, Ginevra Benedetti has now convincingly shown (Benedetti 2021a) that, on the one hand, the Greek and Latin epithets *Panthe(i)os, -a* and *Pantheus, -a* (attested between the 3rd cent. BCE and the 4th cent. CE) could be used to qualify several gods (Aphrodite/Venus, Artemis/Diana, Athena/Minerva, Caelestis, Concordia, Dionysos/Liber, Hermes/Mercury, Hestia, Isis, Priapus, Sarapis, Silvanus, Tutela, Tyche/Fortuna, Victoria, and Zeus/Jupiter) as "much more divine" than others. On the other hand, *Panthe(i)os / Pantheus* could also be invoked as an autonomous deity, honoured with further epithets such as *Augustus, Invictus, Magnus*, and with his own statues, altars, temples, and festivals. The Greek *pan-* prefix (as the Latin *omnis, -e*) would refer not to a quantitative "entire" (as expressed by the Greek *holos, -è, -on* or the Latin *totus, -a, -um*), but to a qualitative "whole" composed of multiple and different elements. Thus, *Pantheus* should not be conceptualized as a "total deity", that is, a divine abstraction that embraces all the gods, but rather as a "very, completely divine god", an "ultra-god", or, as I prefer, a "super-god".

Chaniotis has called this phenomenon **"megatheism"** and suggests that such a "designation of an expression of piety which was based on a personal experience of the presence of god, represented one particular god as somehow superior to others" (Chaniotis 2010). Robert Parker and Nicole Belayche have recently further investigated some of these expressions, namely exaltatory epithets and acclamatory formulas such as *Despotês, Hypsistos, Kyrios*, etc. (Belayche 2010; 2015; 2020; Parker 2017).

2.3. Justification of the Proposal

Unfortunately, this research has thus far been **limited to a few case studies, mostly taken from the Greek world and linked with** (in Parker's terms) **"the growth of praise epithets".** Chaniotis' inspiring reflections have also been confined to a single short article (dealing with just the Greek-speaking area of the Eastern Mediterranean) and are mainly grounded on arguments concerning cultic competition, without any further ambition to conceptualize the much wider spectrum of different strategies employed by the cultic actors "*ad maiorem deorum gloriam*". A comprehensive programme of research into and critical analysis of the strategies used in the construction of "super-gods" in the Ancient World still remains a desideratum, in particular with regard to the context of the Latin-speaking Western Mediterranean between the 2nd cent. BCE and the 3rd cent.CE.

The OMEGA project aims to fill this enduring gap. By drawing from the totality of the available Greek and Latin sources (provided by Archaeology, Epigraphy, Numismatics, Papyrology, Philology, etc.), and interpreting them in the light of an updated methodology based on current studies in Sociology and comparative History of Religion, OMEGA intends to investigate the **ancient capability for the manufacturing of "bespoke" gods and for empowering them to the greatest possible degree, regardless of the cultic actors' religious affiliation**. This thematically focused research will not only finally shed light on the dynamics of **religious cohabitation** in the area studied by the project (corresponding to the Roman territory at its widest geographic extent, and covering the **period between the 7th cent. BCE and the 7th cent. CE**), but will also explore in detail how divine pluralism engendered in the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean **processes of cultic competition and religious professionalization.**

Dealing with the dynamics involved in the manufacturing of "bespoke" gods, the OMEGA project begins from the assumption that ancient religious praxis can not only be described as a habitus dictated by an elite-driven civic religion that was shaped by the ideology of local oligarchic groups. As suggested by the influential Erfurt project on *Lived Ancient Religion* (Rüpke 2011; Albrecht *et al.* 2018; Gasparini *et al.* 2020), we should not underestimate the margins of flexibility which allowed individuals of all social strata to act as small-scale and self-styled religious providers, not only by appropriating earlier religious patterns and adapting them to their contingent needs, but also by innovating creatively in the development of new cultic media and new religious options. Michel de Certeau's **bricolage** and Pierre Bourdieu's **social distinction** are particularly relevant concepts in this regard.

3. *OBJECTIVES, METHODOLOGY AND WORK PLAN*

3.1. Objectives

The OMEGA project claims that the presence of several gaps in the knowledge and barriers to understanding still prevents a comprehensive grasp (in particular for the Latin West) of the **strategies and tools employed in Antiquity for not only the manufacture and empowering of gods but also the construction of what I call here "super-gods"**. The ambition of the OMEGA project is to finally fill these gaps and to achieve four key objectives. These goals can be summarized under the synthetic titles of "The Power of …": 1) Human Rulership; 2) Otherness; 3) Groupness; and 4) the One:

➢ **OBJECTIVE 1: The Power of Human Rulership**
   - **Knowledge Gap.**
     Given the present interest in the negotiation of power between the human and the divine, consideration of strategies for the creative transfer of both onomastic and iconographic features between gods and human political leaders will be Objective 1 of the OMEGA project. Within the Greco-Roman polytheistic system, the *puissance* of each god could be perceived and experienced through "signs" which revealed the divine presence (*signa*) and allowed the perceiver to identify the god's precise identity (*insignia*, *argumenta*) (Benedetti 2019). These iconographic attributes have traditionally been considered as visual materializations of the divine power that make their specific referents easily recognizable: the trident of Poseidon/Neptune, the lightning bolt of Zeus/Jupiter, the *caduceus* of Hermes/Mercury, etc. Similarly, specific onomastic attributes (epithets) have commonly been explained as responding to the need to inscribe the divine activity within a specific, personalized sphere of competences: Poseidon *Pelagios* ("Marine"), Jupiter *Tonans* ("Thundering"), Hermes *Psychopompos* ("Guide of Souls"), etc. Fueled by the positivist spirit of the 19th century, which was in turn galvanized by the Darwinian evolutionary theory, the historico-religious investigation quickly engaged in the attempt to **"prosopographically"** outline a sort of **gallery of ancient divine portraits**. The religious world began to be treated as if it were a biological field of study, putting the Greco-Roman gods under the microscope of scholars who concentrated on reconstructing (on the basis of the available literary and iconographic mythological sources) simplified genealogical trees for divine *personae*. One might expect that nowadays such an approach would be considered old-fashioned and would have been largely abandoned. That is not the case. In this regard, the most striking example is probably that related to the "Isiac cults", namely the cult of a dozen deities (including Isis, Serapis, Anubis, and Harpocrates) who participants conceived of as having originally been worshipped in Egypt and as belonging to the same mythical and liturgical circle. Over the last century, the creation of several *corpora* collecting together Isiac literary, epigraphic, numismatic, and archaeological sources (e.g. Hopfner 1922-1925; Vidman 1969; Bricault 2001; 2005, etc.) have greatly facilitated both synthetic and analytical research, but have also incidentally promoted the idea that these cults should (or, at least, could) be reified as a quasi-religion, that is, as a self-sufficient system of religious belief and practices like "Christianity". This approach continues to persist as an important, if not the predominant, strand in the History of Ancient Religion, preventing research from shifting from the *etic* perspective of the contemporary historians to the *emic* point of view of the ancient religious actors. Despite a variety of attempts to advance the debate, this phylogenetic perspective still hinders the possibility of considering the **ancient gods as being enriched and redesigned by individuals and communities** on an ongoing basis according to their situationally changing needs, hopes, and fears.
   - **Goal.**
     In contrast to the aforementioned "prosopographic" approach, which engenders an excessively fixed and compartmentalized image of ancient gods, the OMEGA project aims also to take in the gods' mutual relationships and the social and individual *emic* strategies of construction and representation of human/divine networks. When scholarship historically conceptualizes the mechanisms of negotiation between human and divine power, it tends to focus on the strategies used by humans (e.g. Hellenistic rulers or Roman Emperors) to increase their own worldly power, among which religion has always played a leading role (Caneva 2020). By way of example, we can think of the well-known marble portrait of the Emperor Commodus in the guise of Hercules, holding the lion's skin over his head and the club in this right hand, and thus

elevating himself by means of his association with the hero. The OMEGA project intends to radically overturn this perspective by **focusing instead on the strategies through which divine power was constructed by exploiting the onomastic and iconographic features of human political leaders, thus "cannibalizing" their symbolic capital.**

➢ **OBJECTIVE 2: The Power of Otherness**
- **Knowledge Gap.**
The strategies involved in the construction of the divine *puissance* have traditionally been conceptualized by selecting particularly powerful divine figures and then analyzing their features: Zeus/Jupiter, "King of the Gods" and chief character of Greco-Roman mythology, is a good example of where this approach might lay its focus. Yet, only very sporadically has sufficient attention been paid to the ability of weakness to be converted into a source of power. From a social perspective, we know that "groupness" is based on "the 'binds' of the local religious groups (that is the cultural '*map* of reference points – other groups, individuals, social categories – in relation to which the group draws its boundaries'), their 'bonds' (that is the 'set of assumptions about how the actors are obliged to each other in the setting') and their 'speech norms' (that is the set of 'assumptions about what kinds of communication are appropriate in the setting')" (Gasparini 2020a with reference to Lichtermann *et al.* 2017). In this respect, concepts of similarity and difference are crucial to the way in which social actors foster their own agency and build their identities. Lack and surplus create otherness, and otherness in turn creates social distinction. Can otherness and social distinction be applied to the topic of the construction of divine power?
- **Goal.**
As has been said, divine power has only very sporadically been analysed in terms of "excesses" and "flaws", or, in other words, of symbolic exchange between weakness and power (see Cusumano 2013 and Bonanno 2019 for the case-study of Horkos and other Greek gods). The objective of this research is to **explore in detail dynamics of activation of the divine power as a result of factors that habitually foment (in the human sphere) social marginality, such as anonymity, gender and transgenderism, physical deformity, wealth inequality, etc.**

➢ **OBJECTIVE 3: The Power of Groupness**
- **Knowledge Gap.**
If otherness is sometimes used as a means of empowerment, grouping can be even more effective. Scholarship has devoted much attention to the ancient construction of divine groups. In this regard, two particular processes of "groupness" have stood at the centre of the scientific debate. On the one hand, scholars have contented themselves with bringing religious practice back to the institutionalized activity of more or less extensive civic groups that would have selected a community – triads, enneads, *dodekathea* – of more representative divinities. It has been recognized that the Greco-Roman ***Dodekatheon*** (developed no later than around 600 BCE), as well as the Egyptian Ennead before it, represented an attempt to condense the unmanageable polytheistic plurality into a small number of especially powerful and representative gods. Nevertheless, this selection has for the most part been conceptualized as a shared pan-Hellenic or pan-Roman "divine institution" rather than the result of tailored selections based on the specific religious preferences of individual cities (cf. Dowden 2007; Rutherford 2010). On the other hand, scholars have traditionally labelled an almost endless variety of collective appellations for specific groups of deities as **"syncretic", "encompassing", or "globalizing" formulas** (Le Glay 1975; Cadotte 2002). These plural divine configurations could be circumscribed to a specific spatial (tangible and intangible) or ethnic context (*dii superi* / *dii inferi*, *dii caelestes*, *dii patri*, *dii Mauri*, *dii campestres*, etc.), or constructed on the basis of a certain specific quality shared by all the entities (*dii Augusti*, *dii magni*, *dii omnipotentes*, *dii conservatores*, *dii sanctissimi*, *dii iuvantes*, *dii boni* / θεοί ἀγαθοί, *dii consentes*, *dii salutares*, *dii permitentes*, etc.). Such divine "communities" have usually been considered to be the fruit of a "pantheistic syncretism" that aimed to build a "universal-god" (Benedetti, forthcoming b).
- **Goal.**
The OMEGA project claims that the names of the gods of the *Dodekathea* and other divine groups constantly changed from one context to another because they were the result of local and contingent decisions. The OMEGA project also claims that the indeterminacy of the "synthetic" formulas that referred to non-individualized pluralities of gods were the result of a

very individual and situational choice that mobilized "micro-*panthea*", composed by those specific deities, which really only made sense in relation to the contextual dedication of the individual religious agent. By investigating the situational factors behind the specific choice of specific deities gathered in specific groups, I intend to **explore the degree of contact/interference between institutions and individuals in negotiating the cohabitation of different gods in the same sanctuary or urban/rural context, in increasing (by means of conciseness or indefiniteness) the effectiveness of religious communication, and thus in bricolaging with bespoke and fluid combinations of divine entities perceived as particularly mighty.**

➢ **OBJECTIVE 4: The Power of the One**
  - **Knowledge Gap.**
    Scholarship has often confused the concept of *Dodekatheon* with what is widely called "**pantheon**". Since Homer, the formula πάντες τε θεοὶ πᾶσαί τε θέαιναι – "all the gods, all the goddesses" (and similar variants) – and its later Latin version *dii deaeque omnes*, has been explained in terms of the goal of including (in particular in the context of consecrations, curses, oaths, and sacrifices) not only a plural divine collectivity, but the entirety of the divine interlocutors, trying not to neglect any of them and thus, again, making the religious communication more effective. These formulas became more and more standardized from the Hellenistic and, in particular, Imperial epochs, from which time it is not unusual to find dedications (e.g. to *Iuppiter Optimus Maximus*) followed by locutions like καὶ θεοί (πάντες) ἄλλοι, and *ceteri dii deaeque immortales*, "all the other immortal gods". The modern concept of "*pantheon*" that is commonly employed in the study of ancient civilizations suffers from the presumption that the polytheistic societies were able to identify, and therefore count, the entire number of *numina* they worshipped. This flawed assumption is based on the aforementioned modern "prosopographic" idea of ancient polytheism as a sort of chaotic Olympus inhabited by a crowd (very broad but still numerically limited: around 60 in a Greek *polis*, according to Mikalson 2010) of anthropomorphic gods gathered around the leading figure of Zeus/Jupiter. The OMEGA project intends to abandon this static and monolithic concept of *pantheon* in order to reconstruct instead the ancient elastic dynamics of shifts between plural and singular, between an all-embracing generic religious characterization and a specific, individual cultic designation like *Panthe(i)os/Pantheus* (Benedetti 2021a-b).
  - **Goal.**
    What happens if the mechanism of grouping of divine *puissances* does not gather a number of deities into a kind of divine "elite club" (*Dodekatheon*) or indeterminate plurality (*Pantheon*), but rather condenses their individual forces into a single ultra-power (*Pantheios/Pantheus*)? The OMEGA project intends to **investigate the strategies through which it was possible (in particular from the iconographic point of view) to empower specific gods as "much more divine" than others, that is, as "very, completely divine gods".**

3.2. Methodology

When individuals engage in religious matters, it is very common for them to follow the script of a group strategy and to be influenced by social pressure. In this respect, it is undeniable that habitus was decisive in Antiquity in the perpetuation of the class system and of its religious preferences. The model of the so-called **polis- or civitas-religion** has shown the enormous impact of an institutionalized civic religion based on a standardized performance of public, collective rites, and on elite-driven ideology (Scheid 2016).

Yet, this is only part of the story. The recent, pioneering ERC Advanced Grant research project *Lived Ancient Religion (LAR). Questioning 'Cults' and 'Polis-Religion'* (FP7/2013, n° 295555) (2012-2017), led by Jörg Rüpke at the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies of the University of Erfurt (FP7/2013, n° 295555), has proposed that we should shift our focus to the individual as an active (often unpredictable) actor, capable of situational and creative innovation. This line of research is interested in single cultic agents, not as "normalizing" actors (viz. representatives of institutional entities or local oligarchies), but as individuals who (independently of their social position) act as decision makers and conscious modifiers of established religious patterns (see e.g. Gasparini 2020b). In Margaret S. Archer's terms, this distinction can be roughly conceptualised as the difference between "downwards conflation" and "upwards conflation" (Archer 1988). While the first perspective considers the social structure as being dependent on the cultural system, the second treats the cultural

system as dependent on social creativity. Following the LAR theoretical framework, it is possible to augment the civic religion perspective (one need not replace it) with a set of religious practices including variety, creativity, religious multiplicity, fluidity and flexibility of identities, changes in forms of individuality, and spaces for individual distinction, that is, to examine religion as a practical resource available to emergent or self-styled religious providers, and to explore how this resource was selected and instrumentalized by other agents, whether individuals, families, cities, or other social groupings (see e.g. Gasparini & Gordon 2018).

Describing religion as a resource brings us to one of the topics that stands at the core of the OMEGA project, namely the ways in which religion is able to enlarge and strengthen interpersonal engagement and individual agency. I follow George H. Mead (Mead 1932) in supporting a concept of agency according to which human beings, embedded in multiple temporally evolving relational and situational contexts, build their perspectives through an intersubjective process of engagement with emergent events, which requires a continual negotiation between old and new, past and future. These agentic orientations can change when confronting a single emergent situation within the flow of time. They thus either reactivate past patterns incorporated in practical activity or they generate possible future trajectories of action, creatively reconfiguring the past patterns in relation to hopes, fears, and aspirations for the future. Of course, this strategic empowerment depends on the social and financial resources that can be mobilized and invested in religion. **Agency is historically variable** and, consequently, the reproductive and/or transformative dimensions of the agentic orientations of individuals can vary (increasing/decreasing) in accordance with a range of different factors, and in different times and places. Actors "continuously engage patterns and repertoires from the past, project hypothetical pathways forward in time, and adjust their actions to the exigencies of emerging situations" (Emirbayer & Mische 1998. Cf. Gasparini 2021). From the point of view of the interpretation of ancient religious phenomena, this approach has the welcome effect of reminding us that ancient literary, or even archaeological, evidence cannot be used as "sources" without paying proper attention to the origins of the initial information or to the interests being played out in the process of reception.

According to these methodological premises, the OMEGA project intends to show that the **process of manufacturing and empowering gods** should be understood not only as the consequence of an institutionalized process of decision-making. Rather, they are also **the result of situationally dependent innovations and adaptations by a number of local small-scale religious providers** freely using **religion as a resource to respond to emerging dilemmas**. In doing so, they act flexibly as conscious modifiers of established religious patterns or even invent new "traditions".

This is the theoretical framework of the OMEGA project. The concrete way in which I intend to achieve the project's goals is via a **multidisciplinary approach including a documentary basis that draws, at the same time, from archaeological, epigraphic, literary, numismatic, and papyrological sources.** In order to not only show the general feasibility of the project, but also to give some practical indications of the specific methodological direction that the research plan will take, I briefly describe here a number of case-studies related to the four main objectives of the project. Of course, this selection includes only a portion of the available material.

➢ **CASE-STUDY 1: Emperors, Kings, Queens, and Other Rulers**
As already anticipated when describing Objective 1, one of the least difficult (but, at the same time, highly understudied) strategies for increasing divine power was through the direct loan of elements that originally pertained to human political leaders. This is equally true for both onomastic and iconographic elements. On the one hand, **onomastic attributes** such as *Augustus/-a*, *Despotes/Despoina*, *Dominus/-a*, *Kurios/-a*, *Rex/Regina* could be used as effective tools for stressing divine, just as much as human, rulership. The use of the epithet *Augustus/-a* became, from the end of the 1st cent. CE, so widespread that, in some provinces, its "imperial coefficient" quickly inflated to the point of converting itself into a very common, honorific appellation, a sort of "Dear Mister God / Dear Miss or Mrs. Goddess". In his 2019 book, Villaret estimated that, in *Africa Proconsularis*, this rapid "augustalization" of the gods affected almost 80% of the religious dedications. This estimate has now been confirmed by a search of my recently completed epigraphic *SIRAR* database (see below), the potential of which has yet to be fully exploited. The OMEGA project intends to verify, for example, whether the gradual creation of more and more complex chains of attributes in the Imperial divine onomastics (sequences of epithets and multitheonyms) mirrors the parallel process of polyonymous "coagulation" (by the old senatorial aristocracy as well as by the 3rd-century new nobility) of *nomina*, *cognomina*, *agnomina*, and *signa*, which aimed at the celebration of an illustrious pedigree by commemorating multilateral ancestry (for a diachronic overview of Roman onomastics, see e.g. Salway 1994). On the other hand, this kind of loan of

symbols of human power to divinities included a plethora of **iconographic attributes**, which could easily be transferred from sovereigns to gods. Only a few of these have been analysed: the Ptolemaic *basileion* to Isis (Veymiers 2014) (Fig. 1), the royal tiara of Commagene to Attis (Alvar Ezquerra 2018-2019) (Fig. 2), the Roman imperial crown and *paludamentum* to Horus and other "gods in uniform" (Gasparini & Gordon 2018) (Fig. 3), the Emperor's gesture of public address (*adlocutio*) to Christian benediction, etc. Many other attributes are still waiting to be analysed in detail. One such example is Alexander the Great's elephant-scalp headdress, used initially to stress his military conquest of India as a new Dionysos (Fig. 4), then imitated by several Hellenistic rulers, and finally loaned to the divine personification of the Roman province of *Africa* (Fig. 5), as attested by a large number of appliques, frescos, gems, lamps, mosaics, numismatic emissions, statues, etc. (only partially collected in Salcedo 1996 and not sufficiently interpreted within a critical historico-religious framework).
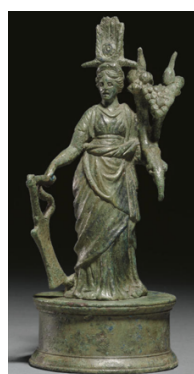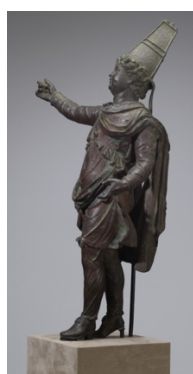

| Fig. 1 | Fig. 2 | Fig. 3 | Fig. 4 | Fig. 5 |

➢ **CASE-STUDY 2: "Excesses" and "Flaws"**

In accordance with Objective 2, the OMEGA project intends to investigate whether elements that are stigmatized in human society by their status of otherness and weakness might have represented rather a means of enhancement of power for a divine *puissance*. One example can be drawn again from onomastics. Some studies on **polyonymy** have shown that the many names of Apollo, Hades, or Isis *Myrionyma* (see the sources collected in Bricault 1996; Croy 2014) served to conflate the plurality of these divine entities and ascribe to them a surplus of power, stressing the multiplicity or extension of their skills, the diversity of their functions, the numerous places of worship where their presence was manifested, etc. Yet what about **anonymity**? The latter represented a condition of social marginality that was associated with oblivion in the human context, but within the divine sphere it could convert itself into an expression of implacable power (see Greek and Latin sources such as Lucan, Cassius Dio, Numenius, etc. Cf. Simon 1980). This was particularly the case when this characteristic was associated with gods related to the underworld, such as pre-Olympic deities like the Moirai, Sirens, and Erinyes. From a linguistic point of view (Bettini 2017), **grammatical irregularities** also represent a strategy of empowering. The name of the gods could go beyond the framework of **grammatical number** (being used in the singular as well as in the plural) or **gender** (since gods not only did not hesitate to take on characteristics that were both male and female – e.g. Vertumnus, Bandua, etc. – but even participated in both of the sexes, on which see Serv., *Ad Aen.* II 632). In both literary and epigraphic sources, the word θεός or *deus* could be employed indifferently to point to female or male deities, thus grammatically neutralising their gender distinction and appealing instead to their *numen* (using now a neutral, de-gendered term) and their extra-ordinary difference from humans. Androgyny and sexual ambiguity could also represent signs of power, as was the case with Hermaphroditus, Venus *Barbata*, the "vulva" of Attis (Alvar Ezquerra, López Gómez & Pañeda Murcia 2019), etc. On the other hand, lack or overabundance of attributes also contributed to the construction of such power. In particular, the kind of monstrosity produced by **physical deformity** (**incompleteness** as well as **surplus**: excess or absence of limbs, feet or hands, hair, etc.) could be perceived as a source of uncontrollable power: the Son of Oath has no hands or feet, while the Erinyes or Furies have many hands and many feet; Scylla has twelve feet; the *Graiai* (Gorgon's sisters) are single-toothed and one-eyed creatures; Polyphemus is a one-eyed giant; not to mention the monstrosity of other powerful supernatural creatures like Chimaira,

Echidna, Hydra, Kerberos, *Litai*, Orthos, Sphinx, Typhon, etc. The colour of clothing also marked divine power and made perceptible its scope and jurisdiction. Ancient societies often mobilized chromaticism in situations of communication with the divine. Gods were constructed through the use of the *poikilia* (**polychromy**: the description of Isis' mantle in Apul., *Met*. XI 4 is paradigmatic in this regard) or, conversely, colorlessness (or better **monochromy**: see again the white linen cloths of Isis' priests or the black rope of her *melanophoroi*), and, though specific colours marked the power of specific deities (like the golden Aphrodite), the chromatic contours of a single deity could be adapted in accordance with manifold cultic contexts and could vary over time.

➢ **CASE-STUDY 3: "Synthetic" Formulas, *Dii Certi et Selecti*, and the *Dodekatheon***
As Objective 3 aims to show, the degree of indeterminacy of **"synthetic" formulations** that are related to a non-individualized plurality or to the cumulation of different divine *puissances* into "syncretistic assemblies" or ***dodekathea*** was not intended to summarize or fuse its divine members into an "institutionalized" unity. Rather, they served to highlight their exceptional power in this or that local and situational circumstance. In this respect, a particularly interesting dossier is that composed of the North African epigraphic material and, specifically, the mention of the *dii fautores* ("the favorer, promoter gods") attested in *Numidia* at the *Statio Vazaivitana* (*CIL* VIII 17623-4) or in *Mauretania Caesariensis* at El Bayadh (AE 2014, 1590). I cannot conceive a better way of invoking and emphasizing the power of divine agency. Still other synthetic expressions could designate all the **gods co-venerated in a specific sanctuary** (θεοὶ σύνναοι, θεοὶ ἐντεμένιοι, συγκαθιδρυμένοι θεοί) or refer more generically to "all the (other) gods and goddesses" (οἱ ἄλλοι θεοὶ πάντες, *ceteri dii deaeque omnes*) (Pañeda Murcia 2021). In these cases, the OMEGA project intends to show that the decision to address the co-revered gods as a group could be determined by a practical need to call upon a divine multiplicity without naming each god individually, or by the ignorance of the identity of each and every god. Their appellation as *synnaoi* or *entemenioi* highlights the divine power and action in a specific cult place. The freedom with which the religious actors were ready to create personal "micro-*panthea*" obviously does not exclude the possibility that similar selections of smaller or larger divine groups could also be produced at a higher level, for example within the work of certain **intellectuals** (see Varro's *Dii certi*, *incerti*, *praecipui atque selecti*, but also the works of Cicero, Sallust, or even Julian).

➢ **CASE-STUDY 4: The *Signa Panthea***
Objective 4 of the OMEGA project claims that, when a particular intensification of the divine power was invoked, gathering together and accumulating a greater number of attributes (*insignia*) that belonged to different gods could represent a very effective tool. This is the case for a series of around 130 small objects (gems, oil lamps or *paterae*, and bronze, silver, or terracotta figurines) discovered in almost every corner of the Roman Empire and dated from the early Republican period through to the late Imperial epochs. These objects respond to at least three different strategies:
o A first strategy consisted in grouping together a certain number of **divine portraits (*signa*, mainly busts) and/or related attributes (*argumenta*) around or upon the anthropomorphic figure of a specific deity** (Fig. 6) **or ritual object** (Fig. 7). Sometimes, the "main" deity was easily recognisable thanks to certain of its features overwhelming the others (by size or privileged location). On other occasions, the different items were arranged without any attempt to construct a hierarchy.
o A second strategy consisted in the creation of the so-called **"Sabazius' hands"**, that is, bronze hands that are mostly (but not exclusively) connected to the cult of the god Sabazius (Berndt 2018). These are decorated with a profusion of divine attributes (*basileia*, *caducei*, clubs, cornucopias, helms, lyres, *paterae*, *peda*, *thyrsoi*, etc.) or animals (dolphins, serpents, turtles, etc.), thus empowering the god's *dynamis* that is symbolized by the hand (Fig. 8). Similar examples could still be found in the 5th to the 7th cent. CE, for example, in the Syro-Palestinian area, where a globe topped by a Christian cross decorated with the *alpha-omega* symbol marks the new religious appropriation of the symbology of the Sabazius' hand (Fig. 9).
o Finally, a third strategy consisted in a sort of **"superabundant" accumulation of divine attributes** (up to 25 elements belonging to as many different deities) around a sort of central trophy structure or pole, condensed and arranged in a more or less harmonious syntax (Fig. 10). Similar strategies of agglutination and fusion of different components in imaginative creations were not uncommon in ancient religion: see, for example, the Imperial and Late-Antique hybrid figures ("animal aggregates" or "tiermorphic *symplegmata*") commonly known as "***grylloi***", attested on gems as well as in wall-paintings. These composites were the result of the

combination of two or more (up to more than a dozen) elements, such as divine creatures (silens and satyrs), human faces or masks, animals (birds, boars, dogs, dolphins, elephants, goats, horses, lions, lizards, rams, rabbits, snakes, and unicorns), divine attributes (again *caducei*, clubs, cornucopias, *peda*, tridents, *thyrsoi*, etc.) and zodiacal or astrological signs. Actually, more is more in this case. These Arcimboldo-esque, surreal figures represented naïve *monstra*, whose lack of verisimilitude and immediate comprehensibility contributed to the construction of an otherwordly power (Lapatin 2011).
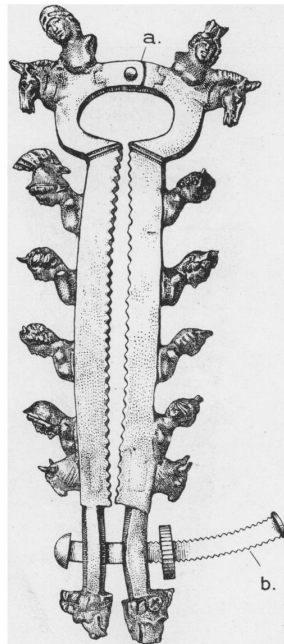

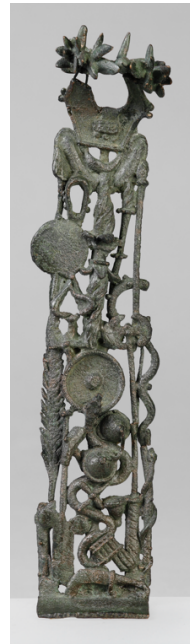| Fig. 6 | Fig. 7 | Fig. 8 | Fig. 9 | Fig. 10 |

This threefold series of "pantheistic" objects (extremely instructive as to the degree of creativity and bricolage of the actors involved) is usually identified with the **"*signa panthea*"** attested by Ausonius (*Epigrams* 32 and 33) and a number of inscriptions (*CIL* II 1473; VI 100; X 1557) (cf. Weisshäupl 1910; Wenz 1926; Eichler 1952; Stilp 2018; Benedetti forthcoming a). Ausonius called a marble *signum* of the Roman god Liber Pater by the name *Pantheus*, because it carried on it the *argumenta* of "all the gods" (*omnium deorum*). In order to stress the power of the god, the author firstly enumerated his multiple *interpretationes* by listing his different names in different places and cultures (Osiris in Egypt, Adonis in Arabia, Dionysos in India, etc.). Then, he visually constructed the *signum* as condensing the attributes of the "totality of the gods". Of course, this is something impossible and the expression has to be conceived rather as a "completely, totally" divine *signum*, that is, not an absolute divine totality but a relational totality of gods "particularly significant for the context and for the agents involved in the invocation" (Benedetti 2021a). The "superabundant" (but not infinite) coagulation of selected attributes combined together was the direct visual representation of this "complete ultra-power". The *signum pantheum* represented a "very divine sign" that expressed the greatest possible visualization of a "divine totality", constructed through a specific appropriation and combination of attributes that were particularly significant for the personal commissioner's religious constellation.

3.3. Work Plan

In order to reach the goals identified above and exemplified in the four case studies, it is clear that the OMEGA project requires a highly **multidisciplinary methodological approach**. Given the experience accumulated during the two medium/long-term positions I have held since completing my doctorate, I believe I have the skills needed to be an excellent PI for this project. Indeed, my combined expertise spans the fields of:

o **Archaeology**. I started my scientific career as an archaeologist and my personal style of research is still strongly influenced by a bottom-up approach, starting from the analysis of sector-by-sector

fundamentals and developing from these synthetic models of interpretations (see e.g. Gasparini 2016b).

- o **Epigraphy**. Greco-Roman and Semitic inscriptions are a particularly relevant category of material for this project, as they provide first-hand evidence of the extremely creative religious activity in the Ancient World. This has been shown clearly in the results of the recent ERC Project "*MAP. Mapping Ancient Polytheisms. Cult Epithets as an Interface between Religious Systems and Human Agency*", led by Corinne Bonnet at the Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès (2017-2022) (FP7/2016, n° 741182), with which I closely collaborated. For this reason, I have not only devoted several pubblications to this kind of material (e.g. Gasparini 2016c; 2020b), but I have also invested a good part of the human and financial energies of my current LARNA Project in the creation of an online database collecting together almost 6,000 Greek, Latin, and Neo-Punic inscriptions. When completed (at the beginning of 2022), my *Sylloge Inscriptionum Religionis Africae Romanae* (SIRAR) will represent a veritable mine of easily accessible information for all researchers studying ancient religion.

- o **Classics and Philology**. As emphasized above, ancient texts cannot be used as reliable sources without considering the agendas pursued by their authors. Despite this bias, indeed often precisely because of it, the literary sources must play a central role in any historical attempt to reconstruct ancient cultic praxis and I exploit them frequently in my scientific production (see e.g. Gasparini 2017).

- o **Comparative History of Religion**. A key turning point in my career took place during my first Post-Doc experience in Erfurt, where, thanks to the extremely stimulating atmosphere of the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies, I began to familiarize myself with the sociological tools that enabled me to access a higher degree of conceptual sophistication in the study of Graeco-Roman religion (see e.g. Albrecht *et al.* 2018; Gasparini 2021).

My publications and my track-record of early achievement demonstrate my consolidated **ability to work both independently and in a team**, including as a PI of LARNA and of the previous project *Introducing New, Re-Interpreting Old Gods. Religious Pluralism and Agency in Africa Proconsularis and Numidia* (2013-2017), funded by the German Science Foundation (DFG) (GA 1894/1-1). The collaborations that had their origins in the sparkling scientific life of Perugia, Erfurt, and Madrid, together with my extensive scholarly output, have created a context in which my research has been influential in many respects and has also enabled me to forge a very broad **international network of scientific collaboration and partnership**.

The **main challenge** I will face in leading the OMEGA project is to not only enlarge my research beyond the limits which have characterized my previous projects (both thematic, e.g. Isis studies, and geographical, e.g. Pompeii and Herculaneum, or North Africa), but above all to extend its chronological focus through to Late Antiquity. Consequently, my participation in this project will significantly extend my historico-religious skill base.

As for the **work of the core team** that I intend to assemble and supervise, it will be constantly monitored in order to avoid compartmentalization. This will take place through periodic meetings and seminars, including guest lectures at which invited visiting fellows will speak publicly in order to stimulate debate around the project's methodology and to broaden its empirical basis. Moreover, thanks to short-term research visits funded by the project, the OMEGA core team will be able to collaborate with a number of academic and scientific institutions (including the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt and the Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès), whose **partnership** will further enhance the methodological and empirical approach of the project.

The research activities of the OMEGA project will be organized as follows:

- o Each member of the core team will assist the PI focusing on a specific **Work Package** dealing with the four main research Objectives of the OMEGA project: Stefano Caneva (WP #1), post-doctoral research Fellow at the University of Padova and editor, among many other publications, of *The Materiality of Hellenistic Ruler Cults* (Caneva 2020); Georgia Petridou (WP #2), Senior Lecturer in Ancient Greek History at the University of Liverpool and author, e.g., of *Divine Epiphany in Greek Literature and Culture* (2015); Beatriz Pañeda Murcia (WP #3), who has recently defended her PhD on "*Divine cohabitations in sanctuaries of the Graeco-Roman World*" (Pañeda Murcia 2021); and Ginevra Benedetti (WP #4), widely mentioned throughout the pages and who will defend her PhD at the beginning of 2022 on "*Il dio 'totale'. Πάνθειος / Pantheus alla luce delle interpretazioni linguistiche e iconografiche del politeismo antico*" (Benedetti 2021b). It is expected that the results of the individual research carried out by the PI and each of the core team's members will be published in **at least two monographs** (possibly shared by the PI and the other members of the core team: MS #10) **and *ca.* 20 articles** published

(individually or collectively) in international peer-reviewed journals, miscellanea, and proceedings of conferences. The **travel costs of the team** (research stays, meetings and congresses linked the project) will be covered with a total sum of €10,000.

- The four members of the core team will be directly involved by the PI in the organization of the two **international conferences** scheduled during the three-year project (MS #2 and 5) and in the **editing of the two related proceedings** (MS #7 and 9). The two conferences will deal respectively with WPs #1-2 and WP #3-4. The organization of these meetings (for a total of €20,000) will serve to strengthen the theoretical background of the project, widening the range of empirical evidence drawn upon and testing hypotheses regarding historical change. A further sum of €20,000 will be used for the **costs of publication**, including, in particular, linguistic editing and Open Access fees. These costs will cover not only the two volumes containing the proceedings of the conferences, but also the expected minimum of two monographs and *ca.* 20 articles containing the main results of the research of the core team's members.

o Every semester (with the exception of the first one), the OMEGA project will invite an internationally recognized scholar to **undertake a short-term (one week long) research stay in Madrid, attending the team's meetings and giving a final guest lecture** (MS #1, 3-4, 6 and 8). These stays by scholars who have substantially contributed to the methodological debate with their established historical research will further OMEGA's interpretive framework and broaden its empirical basis. A sum of *ca.* €5,000 will be used to fund these five visits.

o Further dissemination activities include sporadic participation in the **European Researchers' Nights** and similar events. The results of the meetings, and of all other planned research activities, will be collected regularly and made available on the OMEGA website, in addition to calls for papers, adverts, and quarterly newsletters. Social media outlets such as FaceBook, Instagram, and Youtube will be utilized to give further visibility to the research.

The result of these activities will be monitored against a sequence of 10 Milestones:

MS #	WP #	MILESTONES	TRIMESTER #
MS 1	WP 1	1st Research Stay and Guest Lecture	4°
MS 2	WP 3-4	1st Conference	5°
MS 3	WP 2	2nd Research Stay and Guest Lecture	6°
MS 4	WP 3	3rd Research Stay and Guest Lecture	8°
MS 5	WP 1-2	2nd Conference	9°
MS 6	WP 4	4th Research Stay and Guest Lecture	10°
MS 7	WP 3-4	Publication of the Proceedings of the 1st Conference	10°
MS 8	WP 1	5th Research Stay and Guest Lecture	11°
MS 9	WP 1-2	Publication of the Proceedings of the 2nd Conference	12°
MS 10	WP 1-4	Submission of Monographs	12°

The overall timeline of the OMEGA work plan (including the Work Packages and the related Milestones) can be summarized in a Gantt Chart as follows:

WORK PACKAGES		TRIMESTERS #											
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
WP 1 (PI + Stefano Caneva)	Research				1					5			10
	Dissemination											8	9
WP 2 (PI + Georgia Petridou)	Research						3			5			10
	Dissemination												9
WP 3 (PI + Beatriz Pañeda Murcia)	Research						2		4				10
	Dissemination											7	
WP 4 (PI + Ginevra Benedetti)	Research						2					6	10
	Dissemination											7	

4. *SCIENTIFIC-TECHNICAL IMPACT*

As with any ambitious, ground-breaking project expecting to achieve a series of high-gain and innovative results, there are certain potential risks which can be calculated and managed, but which cannot be ignored. Some of these **risks are of a methodological nature**:

- o An excessive conceptualization of ancient religious competition in overly economic "poker-like" terms (see above "high-stakes" and "raising" bets, etc.).
- o An indulgent modernization of ancient religion, projecting onto it a preeminent role for the individual which would merely represent a feature of the very individualistic contemporary world of the historian.
- o Collateral biases arising from the attempt to remove "polytheism" from a consolidated "monotheistic" teleological conception.

Through engagement with the ongoing debates on these issues spurred by the periodically invited visiting fellows and the organized conferences, I will be constantly monitoring the intrinsic risks of the general theoretical framework in order to anticipate their possible effects and to flexibly mitigate, if necessary, the methodological approach of the project. **Other risks are linked with the logistical aspects** of the research project, and, in particular, the possibility that some obstacles (to which the COVID-19 emergency has accustomed us) prevent access to the archaeological material preserved in museums for the purpose of their study and documentation.

The payoff for taking these risks is that **I expect high-gain rewards**. As anticipated in the introduction, the ground-breaking OMEGA project proposes a **paradigm shift in the understanding of the functioning and hierarchization of the Greco-Roman world by problematizing the meaning of "divine agency".** The *emic* analysis of situationally dependent and bricolagiste religious innovations aimed at invoking the intensification of the divine power of some "super-gods" and at creating tailored "affective monotheisms" as well as "micro-*panthea*" will show that **the construction of omnipotent gods (that is, of gods "more divine" than others) was also entirely possible within a "polytheistic" religious system,** and that the convergence of similar strategies in between "monotheisms" and "polytheisms" stemmed from the very same social realm, albeit one that was historically variable. The OMEGA project will further innovate by updating the research (in particular on **the Latin-speaking Mediterranean between the 2nd cent. BCE and the 3rd cent. CE)**, which, up to now, has in most cases limited itself (as shown by the State of the Art) to following in the footsteps of the scholarship working on the Greek-speaking area.

Accordingly, I provisionally foresee four main innovative results and related scientific impacts:

- ➢ **INNOVATIVE RESULT AND IMPACT 1**
  The OMEGA project will provide an **innovative, fresh, and comprehensive reconstruction of how easily and effectively onomastic and iconographic power-related attributes in the Greco-Roman world could be mutually loaned and transferred between human (namely political leaders) and divine actors**. The expected impact of this Objective is to encourage the

conceptualization of ancient gods as instances not only constantly enriched and individually redesigned and reconfigured, but also and above all emically perceived as shifting fluidly between an abstract *puissance* (*numen*) and a definite *persona* with its own birthday (*dies natalis*), "signs" (*insignia*), etc.

➤ **INNOVATIVE RESULT AND IMPACT 2**

The OMEGA project will also innovate by not limiting its scope to the analysis of certain strategies of religious rhetoric, but enlarging it to encompass such features as the grammatical irregularities which stress divine ambiguity (in gender and number) as a source of empowerment, as well as other features drawn from dynamics of social distinction and marginality. This should **stimulate and fuel the scientific debate on the relationship, on the one hand, between social "otherness" and dynamics of "groupness" (rather than religious identity), and, on the other, between alterity and power.**

➤ **INNOVATIVE RESULT AND IMPACT 3**

The OMEGA project will **generate new knowledge on the complex interface between institutions and individuals, habitus and innovation, civic and lived religion**. The analysis of the construction of divine power as a means of enlarging social agency, as well as a strategy of risk-management, will strongly enhance investigations into religious pluralism and cohabitation within the same cultural Greco-Roman realm. The results of this research will not only challenge "pan-Hellenic" or "pan-Roman" traditional approaches, but will also **feed further reflection on the degree of exclusiveness of the concept of "*sacrum*"** within shared sacred spaces (sanctuaries), domestic *vs.* civic contexts, and urban *vs.* rural settlements.

➤ **INNOVATIVE RESULT AND IMPACT 4**

Of course, the OMEGA project will not content itself with further questioning categories like "syncretism" or enriching the conceptual charge of other concepts such as "henotheism". OMEGA actually intends to reconceptualize ancient cultic practices (divination, magic, offerings, oracles, prayers, sacrifices, votives, vows, etc.) in the light of religious competition in empowering gods and elevating their almighty virtues. A particularly innovative field of study will consist in the analysis of how the assembly of disparate elements relating to divine attributes, while apparently lacking any comprehensible scheme, may still, or even especially, increase their symbolic capital. The expected impact of this Objective is a **shaking up of the debate on the unresolved tension between divine plurality and singularity, on the dangers of universalistic explanations based on a quantitative rather than qualitative interpretation of the ancient experience of the divine, and on the processes of sophistication (read professionalization and intellectualization) of religious communication in the *longue durée*.**

5. *SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT*

As for the expected final output of the OMEGA project, around **2 monographs, 2 edited volumes, and *ca.* 20 papers in the form of articles in international peer-reviewed journals or chapters in books** (mostly written in **English** in order to reach the largest possible number of readers) are expected to be published during and immediately after the three-year project. Most of the publications will be **open access**. I advocate the idea of collecting these volumes within a **bespoke editorial micro-series** (published by a prestigious publishing house like Routledge, De Gruyter, or Brill). This series could act as a pole of attraction for the subsequent publication of further volumes by authors outside the core team, centred on themes directly compatible with the OMEGA project, thus extending the output of the OMEGA project over time beyond its three-year duration.

By overcoming longstanding issues and conflicting views in the field of History of Ancient Religion, the OMEGA project will open up **new lines of research** which I hope to develop in a future long-term project together with colleagues who I will, in the meantime, involve in my international scientific network. This project may eventually deal with some of the consequences that the results of the OMEGA project are likely to generate, for example, in the comparative study of similar dynamics within different cultural contexts, such as **early Islam or ancient Japan**.

However, my **main future goal** will be the **drafting of a new history of ancient religion tracing a narrative that will move definitively beyond the cultural bipolarity between "monotheism" and "polytheism"**, and beyond the specifically Greco-Roman strategies for constructing "super-gods" that will be analysed within the OMEGA project.

6. *TRAINING CAPACITY*

a) Training program

The OMEGA project would greatly benefit from the presence of an FPI contract. The PI commits to give the call as much visibility as possible (via the traditional public channels as well as personal emails directed to the colleagues which make part of the PI's international network) in order to be able to reach and select the **candidate with the greatest skills**. Depending on the peculiar interests and abilities of such candidate, the **thesis project would be linked to specific aspects of the WP #2** ("The Power of Otherness"), to be individuated and extrapolated in collaboration with PI. The advantage of this work package is the breadth of the epigraphic, literary and archaeological records this objective deals with. On the one hand, this would step the path for a holistic training of the person who may cover this position and, at the same time, would limit the risks of conceptual distortions thanks to a focus on a well-defined subject.

The candidate would follow the **Doctorate Program in Humanities at the UC3M**. Our university has a specific training program for the doctorate, which consists of:

1) **Mandatory thematic seminars up to a total of 30 hours throughout the entire doctoral period.** These seminars are given by professors who regularly collaborate with the program as well as by prestigious international researchers. Its schedule is published every academic year.
2) **Mandatory doctoral thesis seminars up to a total of 5 hours throughout the entire doctoral period.** These semiannual seminars bring together doctoral students and coordinators of the seminar in order to discuss and evaluate together the progress of the doctoral students. The students must attend an edition of these seminars by presenting their own research.
3) **Mobility actions up to a total of 300 hours throughout the entire doctoral period.** Students will be able to spend at least 3 months in research centers with the approval of the Academic Committee of the program. After the stay, a report must be submitted to approval.

During the three-year doctoral period, at least **three different research stays of three months** would be scheduled at the Max Weber Center for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt (Germany), the Université Toulouse – Jean Jaurès (France) and the Escuela Española de Historia y Arqueología en Roma (Italia). The presence in these institutes of international researchers (like Jörg Rüpke and Corinne Bonnet) who have substantially contributed to the methodological debate on the topics of interest for the OMEGA project would represent a crucial asset for the scientific development of the doctoral student, let apart the huge amount of libraries, museums and archaeological remains of Rome. These stay proposals do not close the possibility to other destinations that the circumstances advise more appropriate.

b) Training experience

The PI has not only led BA and MA theses, but is currently **supervising a doctoral thesis**, within the context of his project *Lived Ancient Religion in North Africa*, titled "*Transformaciones religiosas en el Norte de África durante la Antigüedad Tardía (ss. V-VII): conversión, evolución, adaptación*". The expended date of submission of the thesis by María Fernández Portaencasa is end of 2022.

c) Scientific-technical and training context of the team and the institution

As for the resources on which the OMEGA project can rely, the Universidad Carlos III de Madrid **(UC3M) is one of the top 10 universities in Spain** and is ready to provide the core team with an equipped workplace and all the necessary related facilities. The UC3M has an important **Library of Humanities, Communication and Documentation**, with a large collection of books related to ancient religions, mostly provided by the PI's current LARNA project and by the Research Group *Historiography and History of Religions* of the **Institute of Historiography Julio Caro Baroja**. The IHJCB, of which I am a member, has played host to the LARNA project between 2018-2022 and is ready to go on offering its valuable support. Under the supervision of Jaime Alvar Ezquerra (its Director from the foundation of the Institute in 2002 up to 2020, and still PI of the Research Group *Historiografía e Historia de las Religiones*), the IHJCB has established itself as the **most highly rated institute of the entire UC3M**. The IHJCB not only leads an **inter-university Masters course in *Science of Religions: History and Society***, but also publishes **two different journals on these topics** (*Revista de Historiografía* and *ARYS. Antigüedad: Religiones y Sociedades*), both of which are very well regarded in international rankings and are included in the most prestigious citation indexes. In Madrid, the OMEGA project can also rely on the **cooperation of international research centres specialized in the study of the Greco-Roman world**, such as the *Centro CIL II* (Universidad de Alcalá), the *Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Madrid*, and the *Casa de Velázquez*.

Of course, as far as possible, the doctoral student will be involved in the **teaching tasks** that are allowed, to start his/her teaching training. To date, all predoctoral recruits have enjoyed the opportunity to become involved in teaching the degree in Humanities and in the transversal courses in Humanities. More over the candidate could be involved also in the **editorial board of *ARYS***, of which the PI is general secretary, in order to increase her/his editorial skills.

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