

The Temple of Venus Genetrix

Post by “Cassius” of August 29, 2023 at 7:26 AM

Here's the key point on syncretism:

This drift towards fatalistic beliefs was augmented by the growing practice of consulting astrologers, and received a smart fillip when Posidonius arrived to propose a syncretism of Stoic determinism and astral fatalism. The rivals of Epicureanism were swiftly combining to crush it. Its denial of the possibility of divination was being negated by a manifold practice yearly growing more universal. Its capacity for self-defense was simultaneously destroyed by the increase of gross hedonism under the same name. Between the Epicurean voluptuary and the Epicurean ascetic neither popular opinion nor serious legislation was likely to make a distinction. Julius Caesar enacted laws against both riotous living and new collegia.²⁵ It is likely that both of these resulted in the dispersal of the Epicureans. Vergil's teacher Siro certainly withdrew from the city, and his pupils probably followed him.²⁶

It was not the multiplication of its rivals, however, nor their combination, nor sumptuary laws, nor even the disorder of civil wars, that finally destroyed Roman Epicureanism as a distinctive movement. These were hostile influences, of course, but the real solvent was the irresistible Roman tendency to syncretism, which is much preferable to the term eclecticism. The latter distinctly implies the act of choosing, which is falsely assumed. For example, Posidonius did not choose out the Stoic belief in fate as an element of the Stoic creed which might be combined with astrology. The process was quite different. Practice preceded synthesis. The Stoic belief in fate had been held in certain Roman circles for a century. The practice of astrology grew up alongside of it. Syncretism took place in spite of the philosophers, and all they could do was to acknowledge it. Philosophy, like theology, often pretends to lead the procession, when in reality it follows it.

This process of syncretism, which in practice had been going on for a century, was abruptly and effectually, though somewhat prematurely perhaps, consummated by the philosophical writings of Cicero. The cessation of public life, which to him had been as bread and meat, threw him back upon the rich resources of his memory, and the death of Tullia spurred his mind and his pen alike to preternatural activity. In the two years and a half of life that remained he turned himself away from the immediate audience and synthesized the intellectual life of Rome for posterity. He hastened the syncretism that was all the while going on, and he absorbed the doctrines of all the schools into a composite fabric, not of true philosophy but of general culture.