



***OBSOLESCENT.
MANAGING DIVINE INEFFICIENCY,
COPING WITH RITUAL OBLIVION AND NEGLIGENCE***

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES
Universidad Carlos III de Madrid
Madrid, UC3M Campus Puerta de Toledo
4-6 November 2026 / 12-14 May 2027

Call for Papers

Religions of the ancient Mediterranean were built around power, efficacy, and expectation. Gods were invoked as healers, protectors, judges, and guarantors of cosmic order. Rituals promised stability; oracles offered guidance; prayers sought relief; and vows created bonds between mortals and the divine. Yet, ancient religious life was also saturated with disappointment, ambiguity, and breakdown. Gods remained silent; oracles misled; rituals went wrong; vows were left unfulfilled; believers doubted, converted, or accused the gods of injustice, indifference, or impotence. These moments of failure were not marginal anomalies. They were constitutive of how ancient religions functioned. And yet, for a long time, scholarship has preferred to look elsewhere: to divine omnipotence rather than divine inefficiency, to ritual success rather than ritual breakdown, to belief rather than doubt.

The **OMICRON** project – *Obsolescent. Managing Divine Inefficiency, Coping with Ritual Oblivion and Negligence* – invites us to reverse this gaze. Instead of asking how ancient gods were made powerful, it asks what happened when they did not work. Across the Greco-Roman world, people lived in a religious universe full of high expectations and equally high risks. Yet, religious systems did not collapse under these pressures. On the contrary, they developed subtle and powerful mechanisms of reinterpretation, negotiation, blame, repair, and adaptation. **OMICRON** is devoted to understanding these mechanisms, not as secondary reactions, but as central engines of religious change.

To explore this terrain, **OMICRON** will host two international conferences in **Madrid**. The first (**OMICRON 1**), held from **4 to 6 November 2026**, is open to a public Call for Papers and will bring together scholars working on concrete cases of religious “failure” across the ancient Mediterranean. The second (**OMICRON 2**), held from **12 to 14 May 2027**, will build

upon the first and move toward theoretical and comparative synthesis; it will involve invited speakers only. Together, the two conferences will gather **around 50-55 participants**.

We invite contributions that examine moments when the religious system – whether embodied in a god, a ritual, a sanctuary, or a narrative – did not perform as expected. This may mean gods who did not know, could not see, or could not act; rituals that miscarried or were invalidated; or humans who failed to believe, to obey, or to communicate with the divine. Some failures emerged from the gods themselves, whose omniscience and omnipotence were often challenged by myth, narrative, and lived experience. Gods could be deceived, outwitted, or emotionally overwhelmed. They could misunderstand what was happening, or choose not to intervene when mortals most desperately needed them. In other cases, failure arose in communication, when oracles spoke in riddles, signs were ambiguous, or divine messages were fatally misinterpreted, producing catastrophe rather than guidance.

Yet, failure was just as often human. People doubted the gods, denied their existence, or redefined them as merely deified mortals. Others converted to new religious systems when the old ones no longer made sense. Even those who remained faithful frequently found themselves trapped in religious obligations they no longer experienced as meaningful. Rituals were performed out of fear, coercion, or habit rather than conviction. Gods could compel obedience, punish hesitation, and force humans into acts that violated their own moral or emotional dispositions. And when prayers and vows failed – when suffering continued despite sacrifice – devotees had to find ways to live with divine silence.

OMICRON is interested not only in these failures themselves, but in what people did with them. How were disappointments explained? How were divine reputations saved? How were rituals repaired, reinterpreted, or replaced? How did doubt, anger, guilt, and despair shape religious practice? And how did these moments of crisis generate new cults, new narratives, new norms, and new forms of belonging? We welcome papers engaging with these questions from any disciplinary perspective, including ancient history, classics, religious studies, archaeology, epigraphy, papyrology, biblical studies, late antique studies, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, and cognitive approaches to religion. Particular welcome is extended to contributions that work comparatively across different kinds of sources, especially papers that bring into dialogue texts belonging to different literary genres and authored by different voices, in order to explore how religious failure was conceptualized, narrated, and managed in diverse discursive contexts. We are especially interested in work that crosses the conventional boundaries between polytheism and monotheism, between literature and lived practice, between belief and ritual, and between success and breakdown. By bringing together scholars working on different traditions, regions, and bodies of evidence, OMICRON seeks to show that religious failure was not a weakness of ancient religion, but one of its most creative forces. It was through moments of silence, misfire, and disappointment that gods were reimaged, rituals renegotiated, and communities reshaped.

Contributions are expected to engage with one or more of the following six thematic axes:

- 1) divine ignorance, deception, emotional instability, and the limits of omniscience, omnipotence, and moral authority;
- 2) divine absence, silence, delay, ineffective or harmful interventions, and the unintended consequences of divine action;
- 3) misleading oracles, ambiguous signs, failed epiphanies, misinterpreted dreams and prophecies, and the breakdown of divine messaging;

- 4) religious doubt, skepticism, euhemerism, unbelief, conversion, and the fragility of human religious commitment;
- 5) coerced human obedience, loss of religious motivation, excess of religious concern, ritual performed without conviction, moral conflict;
- 6) unanswered prayers and requests for healing, ineffective vows, ritual (e.g., sacrificial) error and impurity, neglected cults, and institutional responses to breakdown (priests, sanctuaries, law, theology), as well as strategies of repair and reinterpretation.

Submission and Practical Information

Proposals including a title and an **abstract of ca. 500 words** should be sent to Valentino Gasparini at vgaspari@hum.uc3m.es by **1 March 2026**. Papers may be submitted in **English or French**. **Contributors are kindly asked to indicate the thematic axis (or axes) to which their proposal primarily relates.**

All travel costs (up to 250 euros), as well as food and accommodation, will be covered by the organization. Participants will be hosted for two nights at the Hotel Puerta de Toledo at Madrid, located directly in front of the UC3M campus where the conference will take place. Nevertheless, participants are encouraged to draw on their own funding resources if these are available.

The submission of a proposal implies not only the presentation of an **original paper**, but also a **firm commitment to submit the corresponding written contribution** for inclusion in the collective volume gathering the proceedings of both conferences, provisionally planned for the RGRW (*Religions in the Graeco-Roman World*) series at Brill. While final acceptance depends on both the editors' and the publisher's evaluation, **authors are expected to engage with the full publication process.**

Project and Institutional Framework

The OMICRON conferences are part of the research project “*Obsolescent. Managing Divine Inefficiency, Coping with Ritual Oblivion and Negligence* (OMICRON)”, running from 1 September 2025 to 31 August 2028 at Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Instituto de Historiografía Julio Caro Baroja. The project is directed by Valentino Gasparini and funded by the National Plan for Scientific, Technical and Innovation Research (PEICTI) 2024–2027, Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities, Spain (PID2024-161385NB-I00).

The first conference is organized by Jaime Alvar Ezquerra (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid), Ginevra Benedetti (Università degli Studi di Siena), Valentino Gasparini (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid), Beatriz Pañeda Murcia (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia, Madrid), and Ramón Soneira Martínez (Austrian Archaeological Institute).

The second conference is organized by Stefano Caneva (Università degli Studi di Padova), Valentino Gasparini (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid), Georgia Petridou (University of Liverpool), Fabio Porzia (Consiglio Nazionale della Ricerca, Rome), and Emiliano R. Urciuoli (Università degli Studi di Bologna).