It is well known that Augustus and a good number of emperors rebuilt sanctuaries of non-Roman deities and encouraged the revival or reorganization of a number of cults in Greece, Egypt, North Africa and elsewhere. Outside officially-sponsored cult, visual and discursive representations also show the persistence, integration, deliberate reinvention, and manipulation of “local” (pre-Roman) religious ideas.

The usual assumption is that these Roman period buildings and texts show continuity along the same religious traditions. For instance, in the realm of cult, it is often assumed that the same activities continued in Roman times in the same sanctuaries on the traditional festival days. Assuming this scholars use epigraphical data from the imperial period to reconstruct worship or religious ideas in pre-Roman times. There are signs, however, that other kinds of changes were taking place and perhaps even a growing conformity among similar cults. At Thebes, for example, the Kabeirion, the site for a long-standing mystery cult, was radically reoriented and given a large theatrical complex in the center that it never had before. Did this massive building project simply give permanent monumental form to a cult that remained unchanged, or did it reimagine the mysteries and their celebration along the lines of other more famous celebrations? And long inscription promulgating rules for the mysteries at Andania seems to take a small, formerly family business, as it were, and expand the role of the state in controlling both the cult celebrations (e.g. strict sumptuary rules) and a nearby market. Is this simply a formal recognition and documentation of how the cult was always run? Or does it represent a radical reinvention? And if there really are signs of important changes, can we talk about the Romanization of native cults? Such changes suggest that we should be careful when we use Roman-period evidence to reconstruct archaic and classical rituals.

Similar issues are at play in religious ideas and literary re-workings of "local" myth and theology within Roman literary circles. For instance, when writers of the Roman east draw on local antiquarian traditions (e.g., Philon of Byblos and Lucian of Samosata for Phoenicia and Syria, respectively), can we use them as a source for local cult and mythology? And what is their intention when re-casting these traditions in the in Greek language for a Roman-period audience? How are the religious landscapes of their “ancestors” transformed in their new representations? Other types of objects or iconography (e.g., mosaics, coins, etc.) raise the same questions.