

# Roma Mater Short Guide

## Roma Mater by Poul Anderson

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## Overview

The nine witch queens of Ys have cast spells to lure an able leader to their city—someone who will replace the hated Colconor as king of the city and who will make a good leader. The city has a dark custom, dating back ages to the founding of the Nine; the king must always be an outsider, and he must defend to the death in hand-to-hand combat his right to be king against any challenger. With their psychic powers, the Nine foresee the arrival of Gratillonus, weaken Colconor with a night of sexual revels, and then place Gratillonus in the unwanted position of having to fight Colconor. A trained soldier, Gratillonus slays the strong but untrained Colconor and finds himself not only the prefect of Rome but the King of Ys.

His first mission is to make Ys strong enough to hold Armorica securely for Rome while the civil war continues. To do this, he not only builds up the city's navy and defenses, but he works to make the city economically strong. He sees the life of Ys as a unified whole: The strong navy protects the city's shipping, making for secure trading with other cities; the trading makes the economy stronger, making the city better able to afford a strong military and making the citizenry prosperous; a prosperous citizenry means a happy citizenry, and good public morale means people willing to defend what is theirs against invaders and pirates, as well as people who are disinclined to rebel against Rome. These three aspects of society are often linked by historians and political scientists to the welfare of a nation, although they might differ over which of the three is the most important and how each—military, economy, public morale—is to be satisfied.

## About the Author

Poul Anderson was born in Bristol, Pennsylvania on November 25, 1926, to Anton and Astrid Anderson.

Karen Anderson was born in Erlanger, Kentucky on September 16, 1932, to Norman and Hallie Kruse. The Andersons were married on December 12, 1953.

In 1947, while still a college student, Poul Anderson had his first story published. When he graduated in 1948 with a bachelor's degree in physics from the University of Minnesota, he devoted himself to writing. By 1951, he was publishing several stories a year, and in 1952, his first book, *Vault of the Ages*, a novel for young people, appeared. Before the end of the 1950s, Anderson was a well-established author whose works included mysteries, historical novels, and nonfiction articles, as well as science fiction; he was well established as one of America's most popular science fiction authors, with a following comparable to those for Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, and A. E. Van Vogt. From the 1950s on, he has remained an industrious writer, publishing scores of articles, hundreds of stories, and scores of novels. In recent years, Poul Anderson's productivity has dropped, continuing a trend begun in the mid-1970s. This lower productivity may be partly explained by his writing the large and complex *The King of Ys* quartet. On the other hand, his writing shows greater maturity; his excellent command of language and style is matched by depth of characterization and themes.

Anderson is admired not only by a wide readership, but by his fellow authors, as well. The Science Fiction Writers of America have twice given him their Nebula award: once in 1971 for the best novelette, "The Queen of Air and Darkness", and once in 1972 for the best novelette, "Goat Song". In 1973, Anderson's short story "Call Me Joe" (1957) was included in *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame (Two A)* by the Science Fiction Writers of America. This publication is a gathering of what the members of the Science Fiction Writers of America believe to be the best science fiction short stories written before 1973. The World Science Fiction Convention Science Fiction Achievement Award, the "Hugo," which is primarily determined by science fiction fans, has been given to Anderson six times: once in 1972 for the best novella, "The Queen of Air and Darkness"; twice for the best novelette, once in 1969 for "The Sharing of Flesh" and once in 1973 for "Goat Song"; and three times for the best short story, once in 1961 for "The Longest Voyage", once in 1964 for "No Truce for Kings", and once in 1979 for "Hunter's Moon". In 1959, Poul Anderson was the guest of honor for that year's World Science Fiction Convention. In 1978, he received the World Science Fiction convention's Gandalf Award as a Grand Master of Fantasy. In 1972, the April issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* was devoted to Anderson and his work. In addition to his many awards for his science fiction, Anderson received the 1959 Macmillan Cock Robin Mystery Award for the best mystery novel and he received the 1974 August Derleth Award from the British Fantasy Society for *Hrolf Kraki's Saga*. From 1972 to 1973, he served as president of the Science Fiction Writers of America.



# Characters

Gratillonius, the main character, is a Roman soldier who has served on Hadrian's Wall in Britain. At the novel's opening, he has just helped to drive off a powerful army led by Niall. A native of Britain, he is aware of the importance of the Roman army to the peace and prosperity of the citizens of the Roman Empire. Without the army, Niall and others would ravage the Roman peoples, killing their men, raping their women, and stealing all that might be of value. Gratillonius is therefore proud of his work; it secures not only the Roman Empire but his own family from wanton destruction by cruel barbarians. He also believes that a soldier's simple honesty would well serve Rome as part of its leadership; he thus believes that his commander, Maximus, would make a good emperor. Part of his growth is his coming to understand that a soldier's simple honesty may be no more than a manifestation of simple ambition. Further, he learns to look beneath surfaces, to recognize the hypocrisy of Maximus and others who strive to rule rather than serve the Empire.

Gratillonius becomes a complex personality in Roma Mater. At first a somewhat dull underling who does as his superiors bid, he becomes a thinker, capable of taking significant action on his own initiative. Although he continues to see himself as no more than a soldier doing his duty, he actually becomes a capable politician, a good lover, and a compassionate leader. His growth binds the novel together. Each new test of his abilities brings forth new and abler responses; as the world around him changes, Gratillonius reflects that change.

His good heart becomes Ys' prosperity; his anguish is reflected in the terrors that beset his people.

An important part of Gratillonius's good heart is his sense of responsibility.

He sees himself as primarily a servant of Rome—its prefect in Ys—even though he is considered by Ysans to be their king. Yet, his true sense of responsibility shows itself early on, when he feels bound to tell Ysans that he must serve Rome's interests and that they should therefore be aware of what sort of king he would be—perhaps one that would not take Ys' well-being into consideration. Gratillonius is not given to self-awareness, but alert readers will see the irony in his insistence that he is primarily Rome's servant. He takes into consideration the feelings of Ysans; he works to make them prosperous; he even sets aside days for hearing the complaints of those of his subjects who believe themselves to have been wronged by the government, the law, or other Ysans. He even finds himself sometimes thinking in Ysan rather than Latin. Both he and Ysans continually view him as an outsider who temporarily rules the city, but he becomes intimately Ysan, and even though it is not recognized by Ysans, his fate becomes the city's fate. Should death take him, Ys may die, too.

Stubborn and strong willed, he learns to compromise with those who disagree with him. Instead of using military force, he tries to use diplomacy; he avoids being oppressive and sometimes lets people have their way, even though they are wrong. On the other



hand, he does not become a saint. Regardless of the goodwilled advice of his wives and others, he sometimes insists on doing something simply because he feels Rome's or a friend's dignity requires it. For instance, he buries his second in command in a place forbidden to graves because he feels it would be just recognition of his friend's service to Rome and Ys. Such unnecessary waywardness can bring bad consequences; Dahilis' presence on the island on the night of her death is largely in response to the need to propitiate the gods who are offended by Gratillonius's many transgressions against them.

Dahilis is unusually complex for a female character that is supposed to be the ingenuelike lover of the main character. She needs to be complex in part because of her role as part of the Nine.

She is a queen who must be the lover of whoever may be king, meaning that she had to maintain her compassionate and forgiving nature against the brutal ravages of Colconor. She was able to do so because beneath her youthful, frail exterior is a strong personality. She urges Gratillonius to fulfill his sexual obligations with the other queens not because of the complaints of the other wives, but because of her caring about their needs and her love for Gratillonius. A weaker person might entirely reasonably want to keep her lover to herself—to joyfully share as much of his time as she could.

This is Gratillonius's view; lacking Dahilis' loving strength, he would spend all of his time with her. But concern for his well being makes Dahilis take him in hand; the resentment of the other wives would do him harm. Rather than joining with Gratillonius to make a romantic defiance of those who resented their love, she teaches Gratillonius something about how to compromise even on highly emotional issues and about how to take into consideration the feelings of others.

This lesson is an important part of Gratillonius's growth; he learns how to share love, and he learns the value of compromise well enough to seek further advice about how to practice it. Dahilis is almost universally loved in Ys. She is beautiful, she is graceful, and she is caring. Her death is therefore a blow that the whole city takes seriously, making it one with Gratillonius's grief, and thus emphasizing how he and the city have become as one.

Roma Mater has dozens of characters, most of whom appear only briefly. Of the Nine besides Dahilis, only three are shown as full personalities: Quinipilis, Bodilis, and Lanarvilis. Quinipilis is the oldest of the queens, sixty-five years old when Gratillonius becomes king. Her memories provide the background history for Ys, clarifying the law of succession for the kings and explaining how Ys has fared for more than a generation. Her experience has given her considerable political wisdom. Uninterested in having a sexual relationship, she nonetheless wins Gratillonius's trust. Her advice is valued not only by the king, but by her fellow queens. She is a tough woman who knows much about how to survive in a turbulent political environment. Bodilis is learned and thoughtful. She speaks Latin fluently and before his death enjoys the company of the city's only Christian cleric Eucherus, who in his turn admires her learning. Although she remains an adherent to the official religion of Ys, like most Ysans she is tolerant of other



faiths and is not put off by her friend's efforts to serve the local Christians. He eventually dies, and she turns to Gratillonus for companionship. Gratillonus, in turn, loses his beloved Dahilis, and Bodilis proves to be a sensitive lover who gratifies both his sexual and emotional needs.

Bodilis is quieter than Dahilis, but her keen mind and giving heart make her a suitably strong mate for Gratillonus.

Lanarvilis is trapped by her city's customs and religious faith. In love with Soren Cartagi, she was doomed to a frustrated love life when she was chosen to become one of the Nine, meaning that she could have no lover save whoever was king.

Soren Cartagi has become a powerful civic leader, both as the Speaker for Taranis and as the Timbermen delegate to the city's Council. They suffer quietly, thinking that they have kept their love secret, but as he learns to be sensitive to the feelings of others, Gratillonus sees how they care for each other. Because of his unhappiness over his love for Lanarvilis, Soren Cartagi almost unthinkingly opposes almost anything Gratillonus wants to do. Gratillonus works hard to win Soren Cartagi over, but their relationship is always strained. Lanarvilis, too, tends to oppose Gratillonus because of her unhappiness, although she willingly fulfills her sexual obligations to the king.

Her character is given complexity by her constant struggle to be fair to the king, to do what is right for Ys, and to maintain a carefully restricted relationship with the only man she has truly loved.

## Setting

The events in Roma Mater take place just before the beginning of the Dark Ages. The Western Roman Empire is in turmoil because of a civil war. Local economies are in general in a deep depression; government taxation has become ruinously oppressive; society itself is breaking down. The city-state of Ys has been in decline. Located on the west coast of Gaul, it has long been allied to the Roman Empire. Its people practice their own unique religion and have a society that has scarcely been Romanized. The Roman soldier Gratillonus is appointed the city's Roman prefect and finds himself caught in the many intrigues of Ysan government, as well as the schemes of Roman politicians and bureaucrats. He helps Ys achieve renewed prosperity. The Andersons have well researched the folklore and history that form the basis of their novel. The peoples, customs, and politics of the era are depicted vividly and with authority.





## Social Concerns

Underlying much of the whole King of Ys series is the subject of the public welfare. The novels discuss in detail the efforts of Gratillionius and others to make a better world for people to live in; much of the discussion focuses on the city of Ys and the effort of Gratillionius and the Nine to make it a prosperous and happy place. The Roman Empire is disintegrating, although no one at the time knows it.

The Scoti ravage Roman Britain, while Saxons and Jutes sail along the coast of Gaul, murdering and pillaging as they go.

The Franks have settled down in much of Gaul, and they continue their custom of brutal human sacrifices to their gods. The Empire endures one civil war after another and is consequently so weakened that it has to make concessions to the barbarians that raid across its borders.

When the Duke (a term that means a Roman military governor) Maximus decides to make himself Emperor, he needs to pacify the peoples that would be at his rear as he fights towards Rome. To this end, he appoints Gratillionius Roman prefect of Rome's ally, the city state of Ys, located in Armorica, a region of northwestern Gaul, just south across the waters from Britain. Gratillionius is to keep Armorica secure from barbarian invasions and to keep it safely in Maximus' camp.

Unknown to Maximus and Gratillionius, the nine witch queens of Ys have cast spells to lure an able leader to their city—someone who will replace the hated Colconor as king of the city and who will make a good leader. The city has a dark custom, dating back ages to the founding of the Nine; the king must always be an outsider, and he must defend to the death in hand-to-hand combat his right to be king against any challenger. With their psychic powers, the Nine foresee the arrival of Gratillionius, then weaken Colconor with a night of sexual revels, and then place Gratillionius in the unwanted position of having to fight Colconor. A trained soldier, Gratillionius slays the strong but untrained Colconor and finds himself not only the prefect of Rome but the King of Ys.

His first mission is to make Ys strong enough to hold Armorica securely for Rome while the civil war continues. To do this, he not only builds up the city's navy and defenses, but he works to make the city economically strong. He sees the life of Ys as a unified whole: The strong navy protects the city's shipping, making for secure trading with other cities; the trading makes the economy stronger, making the city better able to afford a strong military and making the citizenry prosperous; a prosperous citizenry means a happy citizenry, and good public morale means people willing to defend what is theirs against invaders and pirates, as well as people who are disinclined to rebel against Rome. These three aspects of society are often linked by historians and political scientists to the welfare of a nation, although they might differ over which of the three is the most important and how each—military, economy, public morale—is to be satisfied.



Religion also receives extensive coverage in *Roma Mater*. At the time the novel's events take place, the Roman emperor has declared all religions save Christianity illegal. Even so, Gratillionius worships Mithras, a god that particularly appeals to Roman soldiers. Gratillionius is saddened by his faith's declining number of worshippers, but he remains a steadfast adherent to Mithras even though he could be executed for disobeying the law. He seeks to attract new members to his faith, yet he recognizes that eventually the worship of Mithras will disappear because of Christianity's appeal to women.

Women are excluded from the high rites of Mithraism, whereas Christianity encourages their participation in the faith; this attracts women to the Christian faith.

The women usually bring up their children as Christians, costing Mithraism many of their sons as well as all of their daughters.

Some readers may find the handling of Christianity in *Roma Mater* to be disturbing. Although it is treated as the dominant faith in the Roman Empire, it is shown to be a minor faith in *Ys*. Gratillionius treats Christians well and even imports a Christian pastor when the old representative of the official church dies.

However, Gratillionius regards Christianity as an unmanly faith. Further complicating the religious life of *Ys* are the city's native faith and other imported faiths in *Ys* and among its Armorican neighbors, such as the Frankish worship of violent gods that demand human sacrifices. The native religion of *Ys* focuses on three gods: Lir, lord of the sea; Belisama (also called Isis and Ishtar), the patron goddess of *Ys*; and Taranis, the warlike god who is incarnated in each new king of *Ys*. The entire *King of Ys* series treats the worship of these gods matter-of-factly, as everyday parts of the lives of their worshippers and of the fortunes of their city. In addition, the magic the Nine work through their gods is treated as real: An appeal to Lir calls up a storm that crushes a marauding fleet of Scoti; Belisama can help heal the sick; and Taranis can manifest himself in battle. The gods of other faiths are also treated as real. The Scoti are a vile and violent bunch who worship bloody, vengeful gods. When they are forced into a desperate battle, a horrifying dark figure with a scythe cuts through the *Ysan* and Roman soldiers. When Niall, a powerful Scoti warlord curses the ruler of *Ys*, Dahilis, the wife most beloved by Gratillionius, dies a terrible death. Most of those who worship other gods resent Christianity. Although Mithraists make claims of exclusivity for their gods, denying the existence of all others, somewhat like the Christians do, most other faiths accept the existence of other gods. For instance, the worshippers of the Three (Lir, Belisama, and Taranis), regard their gods as having a special interest in *Ys*, but they do not see their gods as being universal for all people; some people have other gods that are valid for them; still others may worship gods so similar to Lir, Belisama, or Taranis that the worshippers of the Three regard those gods as the same as their own, only that they are worshipped with different names. On the other hand, Christians claim that their faith is the only true one—that all others worship false gods or even Satanic spirits.

As the official religion of the Roman Empire, Christianity persecutes nonbelievers; its intolerance of other faiths is seen as evil by some members of those faiths. Furthermore, Christians are shown to be a mixed lot: Some are deeply religious and



even work miracles (treated as completely real miracles); others are vile hypocrites, using even torture to enforce their beliefs. Most are ordinary people, with no more certainty about their fates after death than most ordinary members of other faiths.

A minor social theme, but an interesting one, is that of sexual politics. The point is made several times that the women of Ys are unlike those found in Roman society. When the novel brings this point up, it speaks not of the ancient world but rather of the modern one, addressing itself more to twentieth-century readers than to the realities of the ancient Roman past. The Ysan queens in particular are portrayed as liberated women with modern ideas about the role of women in society. Gratillionius has trouble adjusting to women who speak their minds, who are leaders in civic affairs, and who unself-consciously engage in activities Gratillionius is used to thinking of as exclusively man's work. A significant part of his growth as a character is his learning to accept women as equals. However, when Roma Mater suggests that Gratillionius is used to Roman women who are submissive to men, it may be doing a disservice to the customs of ancient Rome. Roman women were among the most liberated of the ancient world. Men were expected to serve many years in the military; while they did this, their wives and mothers ran the family businesses and farms. The Roman woman was generally respected for her command of the law and of business practices, as well as for her ability to hold a family together under often trying circumstances. At the time the events of Roma Mater takes place, women of the elite classes had lost many of their old virtues, but the vast majority of Roman women were as tough-minded as their men—maybe more so. In the Eastern Roman Empire, the status of women had taken on some forms that today would seem degrading or bizarre, but this was not true to the same degree in the Western Roman Empire. The theme of sexual politics is therefore not one that tells much about the ancient past; it instead emphasizes the very important role the women of Ys play in the affairs of their state, and it clarifies for readers the relationship Gratillionius has with his wives— their argumentativeness and even defiance of Gratillionius comes naturally to them. It reflects their everyday way of life.



# Social Sensitivity

Roma Mater falls into a literary subgenre some critics call adult fantasy. The term adult fantasy probably came into being because many, probably most, readers tend to think of fantasy as a kind of children's literature; the word adult serves to distinguish books like Roma Mater from what such readers expect fantasy to be. Works such as J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) and Richard Adams's *Watership Down* (1972) are examples of adult fantasy. They have themes commonly associated with adult literature: complex sexual relationships, the challenges of raising families, the difficult choices between survival and sacrificing oneself for others, and similar issues associated with the problems of adulthood.

It is possible for young readers to miss the complexities of such novels—even to be confused by the violence, sex, and truths that seem to be elusive and obscure. Even so, the *Lord of the Rings* and *Watership Down* are often placed in the young adult sections of libraries and bookstores. So it often is with the King of Ys books. These books are subtle, detailed explorations of human relationships. The sexual themes in particular are much more raw and plain than one might normally expect in books aimed at young adults. Even though young adult readers are in general already well acquainted with sexual themes in literature, the sex lives depicted in Roma Mater and its sequels may be disturbing to them. Prostitution, homosexuality, animalistic passion, as well as loving, joyful sex, are all depicted starkly. On the other hand, the sexual relationships are essential to the development of both characters and plot, and they are artfully presented.

The magic, adventure, and wonderfully detailed world of the King of Ys books make them very attractive to young adult readers, and many young adults will certainly read them. Those in early adolescence may find the characters' relationships too bewildering to follow, making the books best suited to young adults in their late teens, as well as to grownups.

The violence in Roma Mater is explicit. Gratillonius is an experienced soldier who must fight and kill challengers in order to remain the King of Ys. He does not glory in fighting; as a professional soldier he regrets having to fight, having learned from hard experience what misery killing brings.

Some of the violence is frightful; the supernatural themes in the novel give the violence a nightmare quality that is notably artful, but decidedly unpleasant.

Religion also receives extensive coverage in Roma Mater. At the time the novel's events take place, the Roman emperor has declared all religions save Christianity illegal. Even so, Gratillonius worships Mithras, a god who particularly appeals to Roman soldiers. Gratillonius is saddened by his faith's declining number of worshippers, but he remains a steadfast adherent to Mithras even though he could be executed for disobeying the law. He seeks to attract new members to his faith, yet he recognizes that eventually the worship of Mithras will disappear because of Christianity's appeal to women. Women



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## Techniques

For much of Poul Anderson's career, some critics have lamented the author has not created novels worthy of his prose style. When one examines *The Game of Empire* (1985; see separate entry), written about the same time as *Roma Mater*, one can see how completely in command of his writing style Anderson truly is, but some critics might complain that the story itself is shallow. However, *The Game of Empire* was plainly intended to be an entertainment, not a deep investigation of the meaning of life, and to entertain is actually a very good reason to write a book. On the other hand, *Roma Mater* is a deeper book; it discusses in detail significant aspects of the human experience.

Furthermore, like *The Avatar* (1978; see separate entry) before it, *Roma Mater* fulfills the high expectations some critics have had for Anderson's work. The style is complex and demanding. Anderson uses the skills acquired from a lifetime of creating believable science fiction worlds to flesh out the alien world of the last years of the Western Roman Empire. As a consequence, the novel contains many detailed descriptive passages; the Andersons have both carefully researched and fully thought out their presentation of cultures very different from that of modern America. A sign of their success in their effort is how ordinary the extraordinary aspects of the Ysan world seem.

Gratillonius comes off as a hard-bitten soldier who is an ordinary man placed in extraordinary circumstances. He is not a superhero. This enhances the universality of his experiences; his successes, joys, failures, and griefs are part of the universal human experience, helping to make his story one of broad commentary on human affairs.

The heavily descriptive approach taken by the Andersons makes the narrative move slowly. Many a great writer has needed a receptive audience to encourage his work, and in this the Andersons are helped. Many dedicated readers of fantasy and science fiction particularly enjoy wellcreated imaginary worlds. Although their world is based on history, the Andersons have fleshed it out and in so doing have created a remarkable portrait of the Ysan times that becomes ever more fascinating as the narrative continues. There is already an audience—one that has read books such as J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955; see separate entry) and Isaac Asimov's *Foundation and Empire* (1952)— that is prepared to read a slower than average narrative in exchange for a rich portrait of another world. Furthermore, the Andersons show a mastery of suspense: Once they have their story in motion, the suspense increases. As the Ysan world is developed, more and more threats to the main characters may be seen. With a narrative that begins quietly and not with a bang, *Roma Mater* nonetheless offers much to capture the imaginations of readers.

## Literary Qualities

Roma Mater is a deep book; it discusses in detail significant aspects of the human experience. Furthermore, like *The Avatar* (1978) before it, *Roma Mater* fulfills the high expectations some critics have had for Anderson's work. The style is complex and demanding. Anderson uses the skills acquired from a lifetime of creating believable science fiction worlds to flesh out the alien world of the last years of the Western Roman Empire. As a consequence, the novel contains many detailed descriptive passages; the Andersons have both carefully researched and fully thought out their presentation of cultures very different from that of modern America. A sign of their success in their effort is how ordinary the extraordinary aspects of the Ysan world seem. Gratillonius comes off as a hard-bitten soldier who is an ordinary man placed in extraordinary circumstances. He is not a super-hero.

This enhances the universality of his experiences; his successes, joys, failures, and griefs are part of the human experience, helping to make his story one of broad commentary on human affairs.

*Roma Mater* and its sequels offer an unusual use of history for the foundation of their stories. In a typical fictionalization of history such as *I, Claudius* (1934) by Robert Graves, the author fills in historical gaps with learned conjecture, but he remains steadfastly realistic in his accounts. The Andersons freely use magic and miracles in their accounts. An interesting effect of this is surprising—by taking the supernatural as literally the way the ancient peoples believed it to be, the Andersons show respect for them. Their world view is not trivialized, it is instead shown to be rich, making ancient life more fulfilling for people than it might otherwise have been. The fantasy of *Roma Mater* is an effort to show the ancient people's own beliefs at work. The result is an at once enjoyable and thought-provoking exploration of several interesting ways of viewing human experience. In part, it is this presentation of divergent world views in active participation in the affairs of humanity that makes *Roma Mater* a fine work of literature.

The heavily descriptive approach taken by the Andersons makes the narrative move slowly. Many a great writer has needed a receptive audience to encourage his work, and in this the Andersons are helped. Many dedicated readers of fantasy and science fiction particularly enjoy well-created imaginary worlds. Although their world is based on history, the Andersons have fleshed it out and in so doing have created a remarkable portrait of the Ysan times that becomes ever more fascinating as the narrative continues.

There is already an audience—one that has read books such as J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954-1955) and Isaac Asimov's *Foundation and Empire* series (first three volumes 1951-1953)—that is prepared to read a slower-than-average narrative in exchange for a rich portrait of another world. Furthermore, the Andersons show a mastery of suspense: Once they have their story in motion, the suspense increases. As the Ysan world is developed, more and more threats to the main characters may be seen. With a narrative that begins quietly and not with a bang, *Roma*

Mater nonetheless offers much to capture the imaginations of readers who give it a chance.



# Themes

Roma Mater is one of the most thematically complex of Poul Anderson's novels.

Thorough in its details and careful in their presentation, the novel attempts to portray an enure society in transition from a backwater people into a major military and economic power. Furthermore, the characterizations tend to be deep, with many subtleties and nuances fleshing out the characters so that they seem to be full human beings. The characters and the society are deftly interwoven into the novel's themes so that each theme is seen from more than one view and each action is shown to have many effects.

Magic is one important theme in the novel, and it is handled in an unusual way.

It is presented as something that is an ordinary part of human affairs, not as something wondrous. The matter-of-fact handling of magic emphasizes its relation to its human practitioners, allowing the novel to focus on them without the distraction of their having to be superhuman and therefore beyond human understanding. Magical powers tend to be burdensome in the novel. The nine queens of Ys are chosen by the mysterious appearance of a crescent on their bodies when a reigning queen dies. Any hopes of marrying a lover are ended; one queen, Lanarvilis, must endure a lifetime of physical separation from the man she loves and must see frequently in her job.

Another queen, Forsquilus, has the power to let her spirit sail out of her body and journey in the form of an owl. The experience is not only wondrous; it is exhausting and unpleasant. She takes no pleasure in having a psychic power denied to others. Furthermore, all of the Nine have civic duties to perform. One of them must always be on a sacred island, in communion with the god of the sea.

They share this lonely chore by alternating it among themselves, with one replacing another every day. The one queen who has healing powers is often using it to aid her subjects. Others perform public rituals, provide advice on a wide range of personal matters, and try to improve the lot of Ysans through charity. These are not superbeings; they are instead women yoked to their jobs and duties, and like other people they tire, get cross, feel unhappiness, and endure other problems of living.

The intimate weaving of magic into people's lives helps to give Roma Mater its special tone and point of view. The magic allows Gratillonius and the Nine to see events that are far away and to prepare to deal with the consequences of those events. It also allows the book's audience to see how Ys is fitting into the larger world events without ever having to move the focus from the main characters.

World events are not separate from the characters, to be discussed abstractly in passages separate from the story's central action. Instead, they are part of the characters' intimate lives, always affecting them.

Another important theme of Roma Mater is that of making history.



Throughout the King of Ys series there is the consciousness of making history.

Early on, the novel points out that most of the people of the Western Roman Empire had no idea that their civilization was in a soon-to-be-fatal decline; that is, they were unaware that history was being made. In the case of Gratillonius, there is the belief that the decline is a temporary thing that can be reversed by good leadership. He operates throughout Roma Mater on the assumption that the Roman Empire has a long future ahead of it; his work in Armorica is to him but a shoring up of the defenses and economic wellbeing of a small part of the empire. On the other hand, Maximus has an inflated view of his own role in history; he seems to fail to recognize that high ambition and great charisma must be tempered by a realistic vision of what can be done and by an understanding of the real needs of people. He is too mean spirited and self-absorbed to fill the role of savior of the Roman Empire. This is the way much of history is shown in Roma Mater, the personalities and abilities of individual people shape what happens. Maximus' cruelty and duplicity doom him and his effort to become supreme ruler of the Empire.

Gratillonius's simple honesty and good heart temper his soldier's training, making him a good ruler of Ys. Like Maximus, he does not understand his real role in history; instead of saving Ys for the Roman Empire, he is actually creating a self-sufficient, prosperous people, who in turn create a culture in which civilization may be maintained even while the rest of the Roman world falls into ruin. The theme of the making of history is therefore treated in two significant ways: 1) that people seldom realize that history is being made around them and 2) that history is shaped by the strengths and weaknesses of individual people.

Love is a theme that is treated in a thoroughly adult fashion in Roma Mater.

Some readers will place the novel in the literary subgenre of heroic fantasy and will therefore expect to see love and sex treated in an adolescent fashion, mistakenly assuming that as heroic fantasy the novel is probably intended for teen-agers, only. In fact, the novel is more properly an epic than a heroic fantasy; its poetic language, in-depth characterizations, and its effort to interpret history make it more akin to the epic of Achilles than the tales of Conan the Barbarian. Typical of the care in which the entire King of Ys series is written, the love theme is looked at from several angles and is treated fully.

Gratillonius alone has nine wives, the nine witch queens of Ys, allowing for nine different sorts of love relationships.

With Dahilis, he has a full-blown, romantically passionate love. They cannot get enough of each other, and when they are together the outside world seems trivial to them. Having eight other wives complicates the relationship. A selfless lover, Dahilis speaks up for her fellow queens, asserting that they deserve Gratillonius's attentions. A caring lover, she points out to Gratillonius that for his own welfare he should spend time with each queen.



Brought up with typically Roman notions about monogamy in marriage, Gratillionius is never fully comfortable with having more than one wife, but he has good sense and tries to do as Dahilis suggests.

Their relationship is the stuff of epics; Dahilis' death shakes the world and leaves behind the seeds of the future of Ys.

Sex is treated as an essential part of romantic love relationships. However, other kinds of love are also explored. The love of followers for their leader is a powerful motivator in Roma Mater. The Roman soldiers follow Gratillionius into battle and other tasks out of love born of admiration and respect, both of which are earned by Gratillionius's fair discipline and care for the well being of his men.

The people of Ys are more fickle in their love for their king because their laws call for kings to fight to the death all challengers, thus replacing both good and bad kings fairly often. They grow to love Gratillionius in part because he brings on a period of prosperity and because he wants all his subjects to be treated fairly under the law. In Roma Mater, the love of leaders is transitory, depending on whether the leader turns out to merit or not to merit the love and on how well the followers believe their own, often petty, desires are met. Gratillionius loves Maximus because the general seems like a strong leader with unswerving integrity.

He eventually learns that love based on appearances is foolish; Maximus turns out to be sanctimonious, cruel, and a betrayer of his own promises. On the other hand, Gratillionius is acutely aware that the love of followers must be constantly earned; it is not like the passion between man and wife, which can grow continually out of simply being together; it requires constant effort to renew. He must always take care that his followers appreciate his work for them, or they may turn on him.

The love of friendship is largely subsumed in Gratillionius's relationship with his wives. His position as both Roman prefect and King of Ys separates him from most ordinary relationships. On the other hand, he shows a robust love of living. Where others may bemoan their unhappy lots in life, he continually strives to make his life work out the way he wants it to. He knows great grief and disappointment, yet strives against even the worst fates. This element helps to make him like an Ancient Greek epic hero: He defies fate, always seeking to alter it, even when the great movement of world events sweeps over him and his hopes. This robust love of life is tied to Gratillionius's belief that life can be made better; those who are weary of their lives do not share his faith in the ability of one person to make life worth living.

Faith is also tied in with the love for supernatural deities. Gratillionius has a genuine love for Mithras—a god that is very real to him. Everywhere, he sees Mithras at work. Mithras is the great commander, and his followers are part of a great army dedicated to doing good.

Life for Mithraists is a constant battle between good and evil, with each person being a soldier in the battle. Many Roman soldiers worship Mithras because he resembles the



ideal military commander, always taking care of their needs and providing wise guidance. Gratillionius's love for Mithras is treated sensitively, without condescension. From Gratillionius's point of view, Christianity is an intolerant threat to his ability to worship freely. In much of the Western Roman Empire, Mithraists must hide out from Christian persecutors. Even so, the love for Christ is also presented as an honest and normal part of human life. Many people are devoted followers of Christ, and they exemplify Christian virtues. Realistically presented, these Christians have their dark moments, but their passion for God shows why Christianity appealed to millions of people in the waning days of the Roman Empire. Christ drew love because he offered love in return; He also made his individual followers feel important.

The love for other gods is somewhat more complicated in Roma Mater. For instance, the gods of Ys are as much feared as loved. Although Belisama is a motherly figure credited with keeping Ys safe from her enemies, Lir is seen as a violent, vengeful god who demands devotion rather than love, and Taranis is a warrior who demands obedience and discipline. When Ysans commune with their gods, it is without the wholehearted love shown by Mithraists and Christians.

The love the gods have for the city of Ys is conditional; the proper ceremonies and paying of respect must be made or their love could become anger. Thus the worshippers of the Ysan gods show anxiety in their attitudes toward their gods. Their love is mixed with fear.

Another theme that is important is that of death, although it is not handled with the same depth as love. From the very beginning of Roma Mater, it is clear that the Roman Empire is dying. The characters of the novel may not know that it is dying, but readers cannot help but see the historical signs. Rome is turning inward on itself, more concerned with civil wars and political infighting than with safeguarding its borders and caring for its people. Slowly but surely, the Roman border guards are being withdrawn from Roman Britain, leaving its completely Romanized people at the mercy of greedy predators like Niall. People are losing faith in their government. Their allegiances are changing to powers likelier to protect them. This is one reason why foolish Roman officials fear the strong Ys that Gratillionius builds to help protect the Roman frontier. They see people giving their allegiance to the city state rather than Rome. Dominated by thoughts of political infighting, these officials will eventually try to kill Gratillionius (in Dahut), instead of taking the rational approach of alleviating the miseries that drive citizens to small, justly ruled regions such as Ys. Furthermore, the Empire is killing itself with excessively high taxes, which are mercilessly collected—to the point of taking children to be sold as slaves when their parents cannot pay their taxes in full. Early in Roma Mater, Gratillionius sees how his father's lands have suffered because of unjust laws and government officials willing to be bribed by the rich. He does not fully comprehend what his father's plight means for the empire as a whole, but it portends the death of the Roman way of life.

For Ysans, death is more than an event in which the spirit is separated from the body. The spirits are real things, moving among the people and traveling in a spirit-world as real as that of mortal life.



They even have a caste of boatmen who must ferry the spirits to the island where they can leave for the afterlife. This is serious business; when the boatmen take on their cargo of spirits, their boats actually sink down under the weight. Bits of conversation can be heard from the spirits, with a voice or brief glimpse of a figure suggesting who a spirit was in life.

For Ysans, spirits are every bit as real as mortal bodies, although the spirits are mysterious and frightful.

Death is also a mechanism of the state: Rome may execute transgressors, and Gratillonius and other non-Christians live with the threat of death because they disobey Rome's edict that everyone must worship Christ. In Ys, death is an intimate part of how their state is run. Their kings are all outsiders because Ysans wish to avoid internal rivalries and bloodshed over struggles for supreme power. Instead of choosing their own ruler, they let Taranis decide. He supposedly chooses a victor during hand-to-hand combat between the ruling king and a challenger.

The winner rules Ys. The reigning king must wait during every full moon in a small encampment outside the city; if a challenger comes, he must fight him.

During the rest of the month, the king may live in the city, but he must come to the encampment any time someone comes there and challenges him. The system is supposed to secure young, strong leaders for Ys, but as in the case of Colconor, it can result in mean-spirited brutes running the government. Gratillonius has supposedly been chosen by the gods in response to the Nine's request for a good leader. He is a veteran of combat, and he has distinguished himself as a fighter. His workmanlike approach to hand-to-hand fighting makes him superior to even stronger, quicker, and younger men. This should allow him to rule a long time and to bring stability to the city's government. He does not like having to kill challengers; at first it even sickens him. Eventually he spares one challenger, angering Ysans, but earning the young man's love and devotion.

Ysans fear that by not giving Taranis the life of the challenger Gratillonius may bring supernatural punishment to the city. Gratillonius points out that as king he is supposed to be the incarnation of Taranis and that the sparing of Rufinus may have been the god's will. Even so, the custom of using death to choose kings makes it part of Ysan civic life, so that the threat of death is part of the government, as well as part of the religious and everyday life of the people of the city.

Warfare also brings death to the novel.

Gratillonius is an experienced field commander who knows how to organize troops, train them, and use them in combat. As a military leader, he has a somewhat detached view of death in combat.

When he uses the magic of the Nine to cast Niall's marauding fleet on the shores of Ys, he commits his legionaries and Ysan marines to a desperate fight in which many die. After the battle, he adds up his losses and considers them a small price to pay for



saving the frontiers of the Roman Empire from the ravages of Niall's ruthlessly cruel followers. In this, Gratillionius has something in common with Maximus, for Maximus uses men's lives in his own schemes. A significant difference between the two men is that Maximus will sacrifice the lives of his troops to fulfill his own ambitions, as well as in the service of Rome, but Gratillionius is always selflessly looking to serve the common good. To Niall, Gratillionius's victory is a personal tragedy; his son dies in the fighting, and he curses Gratillionius and Ys. A death in combat may have deeply personal implications, even though it is only one among many.

Furthermore, the loss of Gratillionius's trusted second in command Eppillus brings home the highly personal nature of each individual death. With this death, Gratillionius once again risks angering the Three of Ys; he has his officer buried in a forbidden area, where over time water may seep through the grave and leak into the sea. This is considered to be a great transgression against Lir, but it is yet another way that Gratillionius begins to change how death is treated in Ys.

Death becomes an intimate part of the life of Gratillionius, even beyond the many deaths he has seen as a soldier. It even seems ready to sweep away his love of life because it takes from him the one truly passionate relationship in his life.

Dahilis, beautiful, selfless, and compassionate, is carrying Gratillionius's child when she dies while trying to properly consecrate the sacred island just outside of Ys. Gratillionius transgresses again against the Three by entering forbidden areas on the island while searching for Dahilis; when he finds her he is too late to save her. He delivers their child by Caesarean section, which leaves him a badly shaken man. The death of Dahilis punctuates the climax of *Roma Mater*, it is an awful, cosmic moment, as the very forces of nature seem in conflict. It is an emphatic reminder that the world around Ys is dying, and that try as he might, Gratillionius may be unable to prevent death from overwhelming all that he loves and all that he builds. Later, this emphasis on the death of love is repeated at the end of *Gallicenae*. The spirit of Dahilis has returned in the form of seal, a common occurrence for the spirits of the Nine. In this form she befriends, comforts—even sings to—her daughter Dahut. Then Dahut, daughter of Gratillionius, suffers the terrible loss her father suffered, except she knows what will happen beforehand and is helpless to prevent it. A killer whale kills the seal. For a second time, the dying of Dahilis points out that Ys is like an island of life in a sea of death.



## Key Questions

Roma Mater is rich in historical and cultural details, as well as characterization and themes. If a group wished to spend some time studying the region and era featured in the novel, good discussions could focus on how the Andersons handle their subject matter: Are they accurate? What details did they fill in from their imaginations? Are they true to the spirit of the beliefs of the ancient peoples they mention? Another good approach to discussing the novel would be a traditional one: Focus on characterization and themes. Are the characters well rounded?

How are they individualized? Do they carry symbolic burdens? Do their portraits offer insights into the human condition? Do they harmonize with the themes? How deep are the themes? Are they fully explored or shallow? Some of the answers might note that each queen fits into a pattern that encompasses them all, with each serving as a foil for Gratillionius, as well as serving to advance the novel's themes. The themes themselves seem to fall into groups. There are the twentieth-century themes; these are themes that would have meaning for the modern reader but probably not for the people of ancient Armorica and would include the feminist ideas and socioeconomic criticism of the novel. Others would focus on the universal human condition and would include ideas about how religious beliefs (or the lack of them) shape how people behave and the lives they lead. Roma Mater is rich in themes, and a group could spend fruitful hours organizing them and debating their merits.

1. At the back of the book is a section titled "Gallicenae" that provides terms and historical details chapter by chapter. Does this section enhance your appreciation of the novel?
2. Why is Gratillionius faithful to Rome?
3. What are the individual personalities of the Nine? How are their personalities revealed? How do their personalities affect their work? How do their personalities affect Gratillionius's work?
4. How well are magic and the supernatural treated in Roma Mater? Does the treatment enhance your enjoyment of the book?
5. How well do you follow the religious politics of Roma Mater? How do they complicate Gratillionius's efforts?
6. How effective are Gratillionius's policies for making Ys prosperous? Which policies work best? What do the Andersons seem to be saying about government and its relationship to the economic well being of a nation?
7. Roma Mater is heavily descriptive. Is this good or bad? How does it affect the story?



8. A little library research could enhance a discussion of Roma Mater. It is based on folklore from western France. What are the original stories? How are they reflected in Roma Mater?
9. What is Gratillonus's rank? What were the duties of a Roman officer of his rank in his day?
10. What is the real history of the region around Ys? Are there many verifiable details from Gratillonus's time?
11. What were the various religions practiced in Gaul in the last years of the Western Roman Empire? Do the Andersons accurately depict them?
12. What are the facts of Maximus' rebellion? Do you think Maximus was a good man or a bad one?
13. Trace the development of Gratillonus's characterization through all of the King of Ys novels. Is the characterization consistent? Does Gratillonus change believably? Is he a better or worse man at the end than he was at the beginning?
14. What was the status of women in Roman Gaul? What were their rights? What were their duties?
15. Some critics regard Poul Anderson's Tau Zero (1970) to be a classic example of "hard" science fiction. That is, the novel is as strictly scientifically accurate as possible while telling its fantastic tale. On the other hand, Roma Mater is heroic fantasy set in an historically accurate world. Compare the novels. What elements does Tau Zero have that Roma Mater does not and vice versa? What makes Tau Zero science fiction, distinct from Roma Mater? What makes Roma Mater epic fantasy, distinct from Tau Zero?





## Topics for Discussion

1. At the back of the book is a section titled "Gallicenae" that provides terms and historical details chapter by chapter. Does this section enhance your appreciation of the novel?
2. Why is Gratillionius faithful to Rome?
3. What are the individual personalities of the Nine? How are their personalities revealed? How do their personalities affect their work? How do their personalities affect Gratillionius's work?
4. How well are magic and the supernatural treated in Roma Mater? Does the treatment enhance your enjoyment of the book?
5. Why is Dahilis special to Gratillionius?
6. How well do you follow the religious politics of Roma Mater? How do they complicate Gratillionius's efforts?
7. How effective are Gratillionius's policies for making Ys prosperous? Which policies work best? What do the 3914 Roma Mater Andersons seem to be saying about government and its relationship to the economic well being of a nation?
8. Is Christianity treated fairly in Roma Mater?
9. What would make Roma Mater adult fantasy rather than children's fantasy?
10. Roma Mater is heavily descriptive.  
Is this good or bad? How does it affect the story?



## Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Roma Mater is based on folklore from western France. What are the original stories? How are they reflected in Roma Mater?
2. What is Gratillonus's rank? What were the duties of a Roman officer of his rank in his day?
3. Describe the armor and weapons of Roman soldiers in the era the events in Roma Mater take place.
4. What is the real history of the region around Ys? Are there many verifiable details from Gratillonus's time?
5. What were the various religions practiced in Gaul in the last years of the Western Roman Empire? Do the Andersons accurately depict them?
6. What are the facts of Maximus's rebellion? Do you think Maximus was a good man or a bad one?
7. How did Christianity become the official religion of Rome?
8. Trace the development of Gratillonus's characterization through all of the King of Ys novels. Is the characterization consistent? Does Gratillonus change believably? Is he a better or worse man at the end than he was at the beginning?
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10. Some critics regard Poul Anderson's Tau Zero to be a classic example of "hard" science fiction. That is, the novel is as strictly scientifically accurate as possible while telling its fantastic tale. On the other hand, Roma Mater is heroic fantasy set in an historically accurate world. Compare the novels. What elements does Tau Zero have that Roma Mater does not and vice versa? What makes Tau Zero science fiction, distinct from Roma Mater? What makes Roma Mater heroic fantasy, distinct from Tau Zero?



## Literary Precedents

Roma Mater and its sequels offer an unusual use of history for the foundation of their stories. In a typical fictionalization of history such as *I, Claudius* (1934) by Robert Graves, the author fills in historical gaps with learned conjecture, but he remains steadfastly realistic in his accounts. The Andersons freely use magic and miracles in their accounts. An interesting effect of this is unexpected— by taking the supernatural as literally the way the ancient peoples believed it to be, the Andersons show respect for them.

Their world view is not trivialized, it is instead shown to be rich, making ancient life more fulfilling for people than it might otherwise have been. Other uses of fantasy in ancient settings are typified by Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) and L. Sprague de Camp's *Lest Darkness Fall* (1941; see separate entry). In each case the novel's main character is mysteriously transported back to the Dark Ages, and in each the fantasy derives out of the modern inventions the main characters introduce to the peoples of antiquity. In Twain's case, the novel trivializes the ancient peoples, showing them as crude and foolish barbarians. The fantasy of *Roma Mater* is of a different sort; it is an effort to show the ancient people's own beliefs at work. The result is an at once enjoyable and thought-provoking exploration of several interesting ways of viewing human experience. In part, it is this presentation of divergent world views in active participation in the affairs of humanity that makes *Roma Mater* a fine work of literature.



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He also mentions that he and his wife "have a fairly ambitious collaborative piece of fantasy novel in mind."



## Related Titles

The sequels to *Roma Mater* are, in order, *Gallicenae*, *Dahut*, and *The Dog and the Wolf*. So captivating is the first book that many readers will feel compelled to read the others. Like *Roma Mater*, *Gallicenae* is a lyrical book, with finely descriptive prose and fully developed characters. It shows Gratillonius finally maturing into full command of his skills, and he learns to distinguish between what is truly good for Rome and what is good only for its leaders. *Dahut* is the most suspenseful of the books.

Readers of the previous books will be well aware of the powers of the main characters, save for *Dahut* herself, who has a mysterious potential to change the world. Even at her birth, some of the Nine saw her as the end of the old world and the beginning of a new one.

In this novel, Gratillonius is threatened by conniving Roman officials and embittered Ysan ones; the whole of Ys is threatened by the powerful and mercilessly vengeful Niall. *The Dog and the Wolf* brings forth final confrontations between good and evil, yet its tone is suggestive of events that will not end without the end of human experience itself.



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