

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

ROMAN MYTHOLOGY

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Overview The Romans inherited a great deal from the Greeks--in political concept, artistic styles, language itself--for Latin is a derivative of Greek-- and in mythology--that is, tales of the gods. By the later stages of the Roman Empire the Greek 'system' of the Olympians had merged into the Roman pantheon, to form that body of 'Greco-Roman' mythology we read of in school, but during the Roman Republic and in practice well into the Empire, the Romans remained close to many of their own indigenous and popular rites. The agricultural origins of Roman culture long defined Roman myth and worship, as did their hospitality to the immigrant belief systems of the states and communities they occupied in the course of their voracious political expansion.

Monarchy and Republic The Romans believed in the historical actuality of the narratives they generated, about the early period of their development. We have seminal accounts which the Romans gave themselves, of their formative period, through the beginning of the Empire (27 B.C.E. Those would be the accounts Virgil gives in the *Aeneid*, about his epic hero, the founding of the Latin State in Italy, and his historically fruitful marriage to Lavinia, the queen of the indigenous of the Latin peninsula. Eager to please his patron, the Emperor Augustus, Virgil concocts a brilliant literary genealogy for the new ruler-- and creates a compelling myth. The Roman historian Livy (59 B.C.E.-17 A.D.) gives us our most ambitious account of the early centuries of Rome, starting with the putative founding of the city by Romulus and Remus--and in the telling weaves as much myth-history into his presentation as had Virgil, in hexameters. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (60-7 B.C.E.), in his *Roman Antiquities*, supplements the extensive myth history scheme of Livy, blending narrative tale with mythical account of the first six or seven centuries of the Roman experience. Ovid, in his *Fasti* (8 C.E.), preserves for us a compendium of pre-Empire narrative myths.

The moral tenor of the early mythological history The tales these historians, and Virgil, recount, are strongly slanted toward the picture of a god fearing, moral, even noble early phase of Latin culture. The myths we read concern such exemplary issues as The Rape of the Sabine Women, a much repeated cautionary tale about protecting your precious cultural resources, the achievements of the second King of Rome, Numa Pompilius, noted for having established many of the hallowed social-political institutions of the city, or Horatius at the Bridge, more or less credulously believed to have single-handedly held off the forces of Lars Porsena, in a battle formative for the survival of sixth century B.C.E. Rome. The narratives, of our Roman historians looking back on this period, interweave luminous tales of oracles--like the Cumaean Sybil, from whom the last Roman King, Tarquin, purchased oracular texts, which the Romans would consult at times of need and crisis throughout their history. Early Roman, its early monarchy then republic, became treasure troves of narrative tale and myth, on which later Romans depended for example and inspiration, as Americans today like to turn to the tales of their First President and their Founding Fathers.

The protective tenor of the early mythological history Ritual, and agriculturally based, the myths of the early monarchy and republic, in Rome, often concerned the celebration of gods who oversee the land and its growing processes. Many of the familiar Roman myth-figures are generated from this agricultural setting and its cares: Janus, the guardian of entrances and doors; Lares, resident deities of the household hearth; Ceres and Pomona, rural gods of grain and fruit; Consus and Ops, deities of the harvest. With each of these figures myth tales are associated, delight and belief in which were a strong component in the precautionary mythology of the early Romans.

The construction of Greco-Roman mythology In broad terms, the creation of a Roman Empire, which was in theory anyway with us until 1453 C.E., was a marker for a new kind of global Rome, in which the creative impact of Greek culture was to be felt in literature and arts, and in the mythology where the Romans invested their narratives of cosmology, the rituals that support the state and government, and the decorative story tales--the 'myths of the Greeks and Romans'--which in the course of Empire intermeshed with the state religion of Rome. Ovid's *Fasti*, mentioned above, were a treasure of lore

concerning the earliest myths and rituals of the Roman monarchy and republic, while the same Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (8 C.E.) cast a similarly wide net over the Greco Roman mythological corpus. From the beginning of the world to the inception of the Roman Empire Ovid writes and rewrites 250 myth stories, a fusion of the classical myths of Greece--the Olympian Gods, their escapades, rivalries, power-struggles, and above all love and the metamorphoses it entails--with the glowing new history of the Roman Empire. This unique epic of cosmology, myth, and current events is the lab experiment part excellence in laying out the narrative parameters of Roman myth. The same gods and goddesses, who cavort and instruct across the pages of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, display themselves in art, painting, and architecture throughout the Roman Empire, and in fact throughout the world, where Roman motifs have carried them to our day.

Reading

North, John, *Roman Religion*, Cambridge, 2000.

Wiseman, T.P., *Remus, a Roman Myth*, Cambridge, 1995.

Discussion questions

How did the Romans learn about the mythological stories of the Greeks? Did they worship the Greek gods?

What role did the neighboring Etruscans play, in the shaping of Roman mythology and religion?

How did the early Christians, as they organized their theology after the 3rd century C.E., react to Roman mythology?