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Romulus and Quirinus: An Etruscan Deity in Ancient Rome

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During the Augustan Age, Latin writers were eager to connect the glorious tales of Rome’s birth to her present supremacy and to show that her supposed divine origins had ensured her success. During this flourish of literature, a curious character emerges—Quirinus, whom most say is the deified Romulus. These writers would have us believe that Romulus’s apotheosis had been known since time immemorial, but evidence suggests otherwise. The tale was known at least as far back as Ennius but is of relatively late origin. Then, indeed, who is Quirinus, and why was his character so nicely molded to the heroic figure of Romulus? Moreover, why are there two tales of Romulus’s death? There are indications that Quirinus was an ancient grain god, one of Rome’s oldest deities. The legends of Romulus portray him as the war-loving founder of Rome. To connect the two, we must return to Rome’s earliest organizational system, the *curiae*, and thence to a brief discussion of Etruscan religion to see that Romulus’s death and apotheosis bear heavy Etruscan overtones. In all probability, Quirinus is simply one of the many faces of Mars, whose Etruscan origin, like Romulus’s, has been shaded with foreign influences and so altered that his original intents are almost imperceptible.

Livy writes of Romulus’s death and presents the two prevailing theories. In order to give a mythical overtone to the tale and because of *admiratio viri et pavor praesens*, he holds that Romulus was taken up in a sudden thunderstorm while mustering his troops in the Campus Martius. However, as he often does, Livy adds that the
senators tore Romulus to pieces. Plutarch embellishes his account of Romulus’s death with important details omitted by Livy, such as the fact that the king had summoned his troops for the dividing of the conquered lands and that his death occurred on the Nones of July (Quintilis). Plutarch also includes the two theories, but he gives the specifics of the senatorial assassination: “... the senators, convened in the temple of Vulcan, fell upon him and slew him, then cut his body into pieces, put each a portion into the folds of his robe, and so carried it away.” However, he also gives more credence to Romulus’s apotheosis.

Before beginning a lengthy discussion of the mythological and historical aspects of Romulus’s death, we must first consider some significant archaeological discoveries pertinent to our discussion. Excavations of the Roman Forum have yielded some interesting artifacts relevant to Romulus. Boni uncovered the legendary tombstone of Romulus in the Forum, accompanied by other objects dating as far back as the seventh or sixth century. The stone lions of Etruscan origin, which reportedly kept watch over the grave, have not yet been unearthed. Other forum excavations have yielded extensive cemeteries of cremated tribal peoples, and the altar of Vulcan, reportedly consecrated by Romulus himself. As Altheim notes, it is fitting that an altar to the god of fire stands in a cemetery of cremated remains. The relationship of these discoveries to the death of Romulus will be considered below.

The contradictions between the accounts of Romulus’s death have been the topic of heated debate since antiquity. Livy’s reticence belies incredulity at the story of his apotheosis, but he nonetheless transforms the mythical elements into what Ogilvie calls “a passage of moving speech.” Plutarch more enthusiastically relates both theories, leaving the final judgment to the reader. Both authors include the speech of Proculus Julius, who informed the Romans of Romulus’s ascent to heaven. Proculus is rumored to have been added to the story as late as the first century by the Julian gens (some say Caesar himself), who, in an effort to strengthen its
own nobility, named Proculus as a distinguished farmer from Alba Longa. The gens could not reasonably claim direct descent from the Alban kings at the time of the fabrication of the fable. However, in order to give some credence to their supposed role in the establishment of Rome, they conveniently created the mythological account of a Proculus who came from the same city as the Alban kings and prophesied of the greatness of Rome. The supposed role of the Julian gens in the founding of Rome and its eagerness for any close association with Quirinus is further supported by the erection of a statue of Caesar on the Quirinal Hill in 44 B.C. Cicero himself called into question the reality of Proculus and the role of the Julii in the fabrication of the story.

First, let us consider the account of Romulus’s dismemberment at the hands of the Senate, the theory that Livy considers to have spread quietly among writers. Livy says that Romulus summoned the army ad exercitum reversiones to the Capran marsh in the Campus Martius. Plutarch writes that he was distributing newly acquired lands to his men from the Sabines in the temple of Vulcan, known to be in the Forum. Plutarch’s version at first glance seems unlikely for the simple reason that the army could not be assembled within the pomerium. However, his association with the temple of Vulcan may derive from Romulus’s consecration of the same. Moreover, Plutarch may have confused the marshy Forum, which the Etruscan kings drained much later, with the marshes of the Campus Martius. Scullard points out, however, that temples to Vulcan had to be built outside the city. He then concludes that the temple must have been built before the Forum was annexed to Rome and belonged to an earlier village settlement, which is in accordance with the legend of its founding.

Romulus’s violent death bears striking similarities to the assassination of Julius Caesar, as Ogilvie notes. The common version names the senators as the assassins, but others have named Romulus’s enemies or his new rabble of citizens. Some, in their etymological considerations of the Celeres, named Celer, the reputed
leader of the cavalry, as the murderer. Regardless of the identity of the assassin, whether a band of senators or a single perpetrator, the consensus seems to be that Romulus's tyranny, having surfaced especially after the death of Titus Tatius, was no longer tolerable and that his power needed to be checked.\textsuperscript{14} His opponents lodged similar complaints against Caesar, especially after the death of Pompey,\textsuperscript{15} and post-Caesarean writers undoubtedly capitalized on the likenesses to add color to their narratives.

The alternative to Romulus's violent death is far more pleasing and inspirational. Legend holds that Romulus ascended to heaven covered by a thunderstorm and assumed the name Quirinus. Although Livy does not specifically name Quirinus as Romulus's new identity, he refers to his deification in later passages. For example, Proculus simply calls him \textit{deum deo natus}\\textsuperscript{16} Also Tanaquil, to inspire ambition in her listless husband, reminds Tarquin of \textit{Romulus deo progenatus deus ipse}\\textsuperscript{17} For Romulus's first address as Quirinus, we turn to Plutarch's version of Proculus' speech. "It was the pleasure of the gods, O Proculus, from whom I came, that I should be with mankind only a short time." After including a prophecy of Rome's supremacy, the heavenly being continues. "I will be your propitious deity, Quirinus."\textsuperscript{18} However, Livy must have been aware of the legend since it dates to Ennius.\textsuperscript{19} Livy's religious skepticism is most likely accountable for this omission.\textsuperscript{20}

Dionysius of Halicarnassus writes one of the very few myths regarding Quirinus. During a festival of the Sabine god Quirinus, a girl of noble lineage danced in honor of the god. She was inspired by the god and went into a sanctuary whence she emerged, pregnant by him. She gave birth to a son, Modius Fabidius who when grown distinguished himself by exploits in war. He decided to found a city and gathered a band of companions. After journeying some distance, they came to rest, and at this spot he founded a city naming it Cures.\textsuperscript{21} To anyone even poorly versed in mythology, this story will undoubtedly sound familiar, for it is not unlike the myth surrounding the birth of Romulus and his twin Remus. The origin
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of the Modius Fabidius myth (Palmer cites Varro) is of negligible importance, but its similarities to the tale of Romulus are thought provoking. Most curious are the parallels between Quirinus and Mars. We read that Romulus assumed the name Quirinus upon his death, but the aforementioned myth implies Quirinus’s previous identity.

Romulus’s association with Quirinus raises several concerns regarding the origin of the myth, the appropriateness of Romulus’s association with Quirinus, and Quirinus’s pre-Romulean functions. In order to arrive at suitable conclusions, we must first turn to the pre-Romulean Quirinus, a member of the archaic triad which included Jupiter and Mars. He is certainly the god of the Quirites, but even the origin of Quirites is quite vague. Uncertainty of Quirinus’s primitive function prevailed even in antiquity as authors attempted to explain his origins through various etymological roots. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, borrowing from Varro, writes that the name of Quirinus derives from Cures, whose god he is claimed to be. He continued that Cures derives from the Sabine word for spear or lance, curis, thus implying an association with the Sabine god of war. Livy, Plutarch, and Ovid also include this etymological association with Cures.

Much of our present knowledge of Quirinus and his function in Roman religion is owed to Georges Dumézil. His assimilation of the corpus of then-known facts about Quirinus laid the foundation of later discussions. The improbability of the existence of the Sabine Cures had long been realized. The existence of Quirium is equally unlikely, but Dumézil undertook a trace of the etymological origins of the same. He expresses gratitude to Kretschmer for his recognition of the roots of *co-virio-, suggesting a collective body of viri. However, Dumézil also discredits this and emphasizes the more likely theory that Quirinus derives from *coviria-, in which curia finds its root. Hence, Quirinus is the god of the whole curiate organization, or the entire Roman population, not just of the individual curias.
Likewise, a similar etymological analysis of *Quirites* yields helpful insights regarding Quirinus's earliest functions. *Quirites* most likely derives from *co-viritēs*, which Dumézil translates as "the individualities" or simply, the "materials of the synthesis (co-virites) over which . . . Quirinus presides." Palmer expands this theory into a complex but viable etymology of Quirinus and *curias*. Since *Quirites* were the only collective title by which Roman citizens were called, it is likely that *Quirites* refers only to members of the curias, which were the building block of the civilian society. The curia has no familial or geographical origins; it is rather an assembly of citizens operating under mutual understanding of unity. In contrast with the *populus Romanus*, which is a collective body, the *Quirites* are individual.

The *flamen Quirinalis* presided over at least three major festivals, Consualia, Robigalia, and Larentalia, but surprisingly, he did not seem to have played a significant role in the festival of his namesake, Quirinalia. Quirinus's own *flamen* was third in rank, next to *flamen Dialis* and *flamen Martialis*, but Palmer still insists that the *flamen Quirinalis* "fulfilled a major religious function that could be properly described as the salvation of Rome." Several authors have shown that Consualia on 17 February coincides with *Feriae Stultorum* of Fornacalia during which feast the *cives Romani*, namely those not yet assigned to *curiae* assumed their curiate membership. Possibly, the connection between the *flamen Quirinus* and Consualia lies in Livy's account of the rape of the Sabine women at the festival Consualia, supposedly established by Romulus himself.

Though Quirinus was a distinct member of the archaic triad, his identification blurred as he began to be attached to other gods as an epithet, including Jupiter, Janus, and Mars. There are numerous assumptions about the relationship between Quirinus and his fellow deities, but I shall concentrate on one in particular, Mars. By the Augustan period, Quirinus had become firmly attached to his role as an epithet. Historians simply assumed that Quirinus was another title for Mars, a position that Palmer also holds. "When
Mars rages, he is called Gradivus, when he is tranquil he is called Quirinus."  

The work of Greek historians unfortunately cemented the character of Quirinus. The Greeks naturally assumed that Ares and Mars were equivalent deities. When trying to translate Quirinus into an appropriate Greek title, the writers sought a Greek god with a relationship to Ares similar to the relationship between Mars and Quirinus, hence, Enyalios, a lesser Greek war-god. 36 Sadly, however, Quirinus’s responsibilities are not purely war-related, nor are they clearly defined in any one canon. Thus, the Greek manipulation aggravated the corruption of Quirinus already incipient in his association with Mars. Furthermore, if Quirinus is little more than another epithet of Mars, as Palmer asserts, Quirinus’s equation with Enyalios is tragic, for Quirinus loses his own significance within his context of the many facets of Mars and is endowed with foreign characteristics leading to more disturbing and confused distortions. 37  

Dumézil holds that, in his sometimes tenuous ideas of functional mythology, Mars and Quirinus themselves are laden with symbolism. Mars represents the warrior class, Quirinus the farmers, tillers, and even fertility itself. At the same time, he is the god of the Quirites, whose members include both the milites and the populus. Dumézil resolves the conflict quite nicely by arguing that Quirinus is a guardian of peace always ready for war. 38 It has also been suggested that the festivals in which his flamen participates mark the beginning and the end of the warring season or the preparation for such by sowing grain in the spring and its harvest in autumn. 39 For instance, Consualia stems from condere and is related to the preservation and storage of grain. Fowler adds that the burial of grain took root from archaic sacrifices to chthonic deities, which would have considered harvested crops an acceptable form of wealth before the widespread use of precious metals. 40  

Let us now return to Romulus’s grave marker. For the sake of the argument, we will ignore the absurdity of a grave marker laid for a deified being. The burial patterns of the forum cemetery bear dis-
tinctly Etruscan characteristics. Two Etruscan-style lion sculptures guarded the gravestone commemorating Romulus. The altar to Vulcan is also telling of Etruscan influence, or possibly domination, for the god’s name seems of Etruscan origin. Since significant physical evidence surrounding Romulus’s death is Etruscan, the tale itself may have also been influenced. Even several varied versions link Romulus to Etruscan heritage. Coupled with the etymological evidence of the Etruscan origin of Romulus’s name, paternity, and his death gives strong support for the Etrurian source of the Romulus legend.

Likewise, the very accounts of Romulus’s death have distinctive Etruscan religious overtones. For those who subscribe to Romulus’s ascension to heaven in a sudden thunderstorm, there is fascination with lightning and its portentous meanings. Furthermore, Proculus’ listeners immediately accept his tale unconditionally, no doubt because of the miraculous events which they have just witnessed. “In all Etruscan ritual manifestations, one receives an impression of surrender, almost abdication, of all human spiritual activity before the divine will, shown by the two-fold obsession: how to know the will of the gods and how to put it into practice.” Indeed, the citizens are given the will of the gods, namely that Rome become caput orbis terrarum, and they learn how they may put the will of the gods into practice. Proinde rem militarem colant sciantque et ita posteris tradant nullas opes humanas armis Romanis resistere posse. Hellenistic influence on Etruscan religion is also evident in the deification of the semi-mortal Romulus, for primitive followers did not believe in the afterlife. However, after communication with Greek religions, Etruria became aware of the possibility of post-mortal existence or even of apotheosis, but only by means of certain rigidly prescribed rituals.

Plutarch records that Romulus was in the temple of Vulcan, but he does not say what Romulus was doing there. Incidentally, the dating of the Nonae Caprotinae as Romulus’s demise is by no means verifiable. As mentioned earlier, Romulus could have mustered his troops near the temple of Vulcan, but it is equally likely that he was
performing some religious function, similar to that performed at Volcanalia. The rites of Volcanalia are vague, but the underlying principle seems related to worshipping a chthonic deity, the fire-god Vulcan, and seeking his protection of grain. If Vulcan is the god of consuming fire, then Romulus's offerings to him almost seem a preparatory rite for his death. At the same time, Romulus's translation into a god with agricultural responsibilities could be an answer to the Romans' request for abundance with the Quirinus's protection of the grain supply, as suggested by his *flamen*’s role in the agricultural festivals.

Romulus's association with Quirinus is hardly surprising in consideration of the primitive origins of the myth of Romulus. Romulus, the son of an Etruscan agricultural deity, later given to concerns of war, becomes Quirinus, an agricultural deity of Indo-European origin later associated with war-time preparations. The parallels are worth considering, but Quirinus is the only weak link in the chain. However, the assimilation of Quirinus and Romulus is relatively late and Palmer includes an excellent discussion of the legend's transmission.

In 388 B.C. the first temple of Mars was built by the Romans but outside the *pomerium*. Not quite a hundred years later, politically ambitious plebeians converted to their advantage the remnants of the Mars Quirinus cult which had languished with the ascendancy of Jupiter Feretrius. These statesmen fashioned a mythology of ancestry in which Romulus, the eponymous founder of Rome, bears the cult name Quirinus betokening the union and accord between the Romans and the Sabines. Severed from its deity, the word Quirinus became a deity in its own right. No longer was he Mars but Romulus, deified son of Mars. No doubt, the Romans were stimulated to these mythopoeic confections by the Greeks whose ancestry was traced back to Dorus, Ion, Achaeus, Aeolus, and Hellen. Hazy glimpses into their past induced the Romans to evolve a story of gods and men of the two towns of Rome and Cures. At the end of the Republic when Roman insight into the past
had grown even dimmer, and the political mythology of the third century had acquired the lustre of antiquity, the ingenious Sabine Terentius Varro breathed new life into the Sabine origins of the Tities, Quirites, and Quirinus and further injected the Sabine lance (curis) into the discussion, for his working hypothesis was ‘Scratch a Roman, find a Sabine.’

Quirinus is most likely one of the many faces of Mars, as Palmer argues, a claim supported by Pallotino’s brief assessment of Tuscan religion. On the Etruscan concept of the divine, he writes, “This vagueness [towards number, attributes, sex, and appearance of the gods] seems to point towards an original belief in some divine entity dominating the world through a number of varied, occasional manifestations which later became personified into gods, or groups of gods and spirits.” Evidently, Quirinus encompasses Mars’ agrarian responsibilities and has some connections with military functions, while at the same time there appears a veneer of association with the underworld, both of which give Quirinus a distinctly chthonic flavor. His character has been so muddled by foreign religious accretions that it is necessary to examine the origins of his myth rather than of his cult. And indeed, it seems that the Romans, anxious to sanctify their beginnings, would have liked to assume that Romulus returned to heaven as Mars. However, since the stories surrounding Romulus’s birth were of later origin, writers could not make the substitution without causing numerous problems for an already complex story. Instead, under Etruscan influence, the writers separated Mars from Quirinus and gave the god’s alter ego to their own conditor Romulus. Thus these writers created a new identity for Quirinus.

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Notes

1. E.g. Liv. 1.16.6; Plut. Rom. 27.6.
2. Liv. 1.16.6.
8. Liv. 1.16.7: caput orbis terrarum.
11. Liv. 1.42.
13. Romulus’s death also is quite similar to the mythological death of Dionysus. Little is known about the specific nature of the Dionysiac initiation rites, but they usually involved the mangling and devouring of wild animals at the hands of the participants. Dodd writes that behind this rite lay the belief that consuming the fresh blood of the victim added “its vital powers” to those of the participants and that “the victim was felt to embody the vital powers of the god himself, which by the act . . . were transferred to the worshippers” (Introduction, Eur. Bacchae, xvii). In the Romulean context, since Romulus was known to have been born from a god and to have possessed certain divine attributes, those who participated in his death were symbolically taking upon themselves some of his divinity, especially his ruling right, which incidentally returned to the Senate during the interrex following his death. Dionysiac worshipers also believed that such rituals prepared them for the afterlife. In the light of Michael York’s hypothesis that Romulus as Quirinus was a type of underworld god, Dionysiac parallels emerge (York, “Romulus and Remus, Mars and Quirinus” Journal of Indo-European Studies, vol. 16, 1988, 165). In sup-
port of this hypothesis comes Altheim's discussion of funeral processions, which passed through the forum over the grave of Romulus as an essential component of the burial rituals (Altheim 95). Although the parallels between Dionysus and Romulus-Quirinus are interesting, they are by no means conclusive or helpful to clarifying the greater mysteries surrounding the identity of Quirinus, and a good deal of further research is needed for discussion of this question.

14. Dion. Hal. 2.22.
16. Liv. 1.1.16.
17. Liv. 1.40.3.
22. Liv. 1.13.5.
26. Palmer points out the absurdity of a state with a racially diverse population assuming the name of a minority. Archaic Community of the Romans 157. Dumézil 160n.: "The etymology based on a Sabine curis, quiris "spear" is rather unlikely: (1) Sabine qu causes difficulty; (2) the spear belongs to Mars rather than Quirinus; (3) the Quirites, as opposed to the milites, can hardly have been defined by the spear or by any other weapon; (4) on the basis of the 'spear,' how are we to explain curia?"
27. Quirium could not have taken its name from the Quirinal Hill; the Quirinal was actually first called the Agonus, not at all connected to the supposed root. See Palmer 157, 160, and 176.
28. Dumézil called the curia the smallest division of each of the primitive tribes. See Palmer, Archaic Community of the Romans, for a complete and conclusive discussion of the origin of the curiae.
31. Suet. Caes. 70.
33. Palmer, 164. Much of the flamen’s responsibility centered on warding off pestilence and ensuring the prosperity of crops through symbolic rituals.
34. Palmer, 171 argues that three flamines do not a triad make.
36. Dion. Hal. 2.48, 9.60; see also Polybius 3.25.6.
37. Dumézil, 264.
38. Dumézil, 262.
39. Consualia was celebrated on 21 August and either 12 or 15 December and Robigalia on 25 April. See Michael York, The Roman Festival Calendar of Numa Pompilius (New York, 1986).
40. W.W. Fowler, The Roman Festivals of the Period of the Republic (Dallas: Kennikat, 1969), 207. Larentalia and Robigalia also have agricultural and fertility undertones.
41. Altheim, Weltberrschaft und Krise (GG 172ff.)
42. e.g. Macr. Sat. 1.10.16. Also, Mars is believed to be an Etruscan agricultural deity.
43. W. Schulze, Zur Geschichte Lateinischer Eigennamen, (Berlin 1904), 368.
45. Liv. 1.16.7.
46. Pallotino, 149.
47. Fowler writes that a renowned cult of Vulcan flourished at Ostia. In August, grain from trade partners arrived in their storehouses, and its citizens sacrificed to Vulcan to ward off the threat of burned grain supply. See Roman Festivals, 210.
49. Pallotino, 140.