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ROMAN FESTIVALS IN PLUTARCH'S *LIFE OF ROMULUS*

In Plutarch's *Lives*, the mention of rituals, ceremonies, and the like does not always have a purely descriptive dimension, which can be evaluated both from the literary and the sociological point of view; in some cases, it may have a dominant, or at least relevant, meaning from a historiographical point of view as well. It is in this last perspective that I propose to analyze the *Life of Romulus*, which is one of the richest, together with its parallel *Theseus*, as far as this kind of material is concerned[1].

The pair *Theseus-Romulus* is interesting from many points of view, and first of all for its general introduction, which gives some important clues as to Plutarch's historiographical interests and tenets. As everybody knows, the *Life of Theseus* begins with what could be termed an apology on the part of Plutarch for trying to get so far back in time, with this pair, as to raise serious doubts whether his work, at that point, can legitimately continue to be called history or rather, more appropriately, a "land of poets and fabulists (ποιηταὶ καὶ μυθογράφοι)" (*Th*. 1.1). Plutarch goes on to explain why, in spite of such doubts, he has made up his mind, first to pass from Numa to Romulus, just because "my history has brought me close to his times"; and second, to place side by side Theseus, "the οἰκιστής of the lovely and famous Athens", to Romulus, "the father (πατήρ) of invincible and glorious Rome" (*Th*. 1.2)[2]. As for the last point, what should be noted is that Plutarch apparently realized just at this moment that one, and perhaps not the least important, aim of his parallelistic approach could be to place side by side the two main towns of the Greek and the Roman worlds. Rome and Athens appear now to Plutarch, through the persons of their founders (like Romulus), or at least reorganizers (like Theseus), as the emblems, respectively, of military power and glory, and of cultural and artistic talent: a juxtaposition which is much more substantial than the one which the previous pair, the legislators Lycurgus and Numa, could establish between Rome and Sparta[3]. But – and in this way we go back to the first point – conceiving and

A former version of this text was presented at the International Colloquium on *Ritual and Politics, Individual and Community in Plutarch's Works*, which was held at the University of Crete (Rethymnon), 27-30 April 2017.

[1] For a survey of the documentary elements in Plutarch's *Lives* see Desideri 2012 [1992a].

[2] Theseus, Plutarch says, was not the real founder of Athens, but the οἰκιστής, that is the man who συνῴκισε, *i.e*. joined in one city, the inhabitants of Attica (see *e.g*. Ampolo 1988, XVIII).

[3] On the differences between the juxtapositions of the two pairs, see more in Desideri, forthcoming; on the importance Plutarch assigns to Athens, as representative of the Greek

structuring a pair like that of Theseus and Romulus leads Plutarch to considerably enlarge the methodological criteria of his history-writing, and in more general terms his way of seeing historical knowledge itself. Plutarch says that his attempt was "to clean the mythical (τὸ μυθῶδες) through reason (λόγος), in order that it may take on the appearance of history"; but he is forced to recognize that "when it (*i.e.* the mythical) obstinately defies credibility (τὸ πιθανόν) and refuses to admit any commingling with plausibility, we shall ask our listeners to be indulgent and to accept ancient history (ἀρχαιολογίαν) in a gentle mood" (*Th.* 1.5, transl. Pelling[4]). Thus, Plutarch's listeners – or rather, Plutarch's readers – are invited to compare these two *Lives* in a way which is different from the usual one, because the texts which the author had to use as historical sources – texts of a multifarious, mostly poetical, in any case fabulous, nature – were not of the same type as those of the other *Lives* – which, as a rule, were basically more or less trustworthy historical reports, based on the texts of true and proper historians – and need a very special treatment in order to give us the information we are looking for.

Up to this point all that had to be said has already been said very well more than twenty years ago by Christopher Pelling, who underlined the quasi-fictional character of these *Lives* on the one hand, and their philosophical dimension on the other, underscoring Plutarch's more or less clear references to Thucydides, and Plato, respectively[5]. Plutarch does not explicitly mention, on the other hand, what is at first sight evident: that, when writing these *Lives* he was induced, or rather forced, to avail himself not only of literary (poetical and mythographical, or antiquarian) texts[6] – whose historical value was very dubious – but also of non-literary, sources: which, however, posed for him even greater technical and methodological problems than the others. Such is the case of the information that could be gathered from the relics, monuments, places, toponyms, words and sayings, religious traditions, popular customs, and – last but not least – public festivals still celebrated in Plutarch's own times, which in Athens (and in some other Greek city) or in Rome, were in some way connected with Theseus or Romulus, respectively, and their sagas[7]. Even though this kind of infor-

values, see Casanova (ed.) 2013.

[4] Pelling 2002 [1999], 172; all the other Plutarch translations in this text are by Perrin, in LCL.

[5] Pelling 2002 [1999], 178 ff.; and see also Ampolo 1988, with his theory of a "razionalismo attenuato" (XI ff.).

[6] This is particularly true for the *Theseus*: see Casanova 2013 and 2020.

[7] On this type of documents see Desideri 2012 [1992a], 274-278 (par. 5 *Il passato che vive nel presente*).

mation too had sometimes reached Plutarch through literary texts, in most cases it is reasonable to assume that it had been acquired from his direct experience as a visitor of the two towns (and of other Greek towns too), and as a curious investigator on the origins of cultural events, as well as on customs and linguistic phenomena, which apparently went back, in one way or another, to a more or less remote past[8]. This, of course, is not to say that he ignored the scholarly debate which had been taking place on such subjects in past times and was still taking place even in his own times. In any case, from the methodological point of view it is evident, as I said earlier, that these 'potential documents', regardless of the way they had been made available to the biographer, were even more difficult to manage than the literary ones; when dealing with them, the problem was not to try to give a rational aspect to a mythical tale, in order that it may "look like history", but to try to extract some historical information and knowledge from data which at first sight pertained solely to the present. They were, indeed, among the most genuine remains of the past, but how could they be read and interpreted adequately, from a historical point of view? Unfortunately, even though Plutarch makes extensive use of this kind of documents in both *Lives*, he does not say anything about the way they can be treated from a historiographical point of view either in the general methodological introduction we have seen at the beginning of *Theseus* – that is, at the beginning of the pair – or in any other place. So we are forced to make inferences from the way these documents are used in our two *Lives*. And as for the festivals, which are at the center of our interest now, let us begin by specifying that those we are concerned with are the ones which had, so to speak, a calendrical function: that is, those which were directed at commemorating, on a particular day, year after year, an event of particular importance for the history of the Greek or Roman communities, respectively, which had supposedly taken place on that very day in Theseus' or Romulus' times: in this sense, they continued to be a sort of testimony of that event even after a long period of time. This, at least, is what Plutarch regularly implies.

But there are relevant differences between the festivals presented in the two *Lives*: to begin with, it is easy to observe that, as Romulus never appears to have abandoned the area of Rome and its immediate surroundings in his saga, in the *Romulus* the events which are recalled through the festivals are much more directly connected with the history of the city than in the *Theseus*. In fact, as Theseus is actually a pan-Hellenic hero, Plutarch duly describes festivals in some way connected with him which are held in many

[8] On Plutarch's Roman 'autopsy' see Theander 1951, 2 ff., 12 ff., and now Desideri, forthcoming; on the Athenian 'autopsy', see Athanassiaki, forthcoming.

different Greek places. Accordingly, the mention of these festivals could be taken to confirm the reliability of the traditional tales of Theseus' eventful biography, even though Plutarch does not make any explicit declaration in this sense. On the other hand, as for Theseus' special role as king of Athens who had it restructured as the political center of Attica – which is the very reason, as we have seen, for making him the subject of a life which was to be the parallel of *Romulus* – what Plutarch mentions are just the series of festivals associated with Theseus' Cretan adventure, above all the *Oscophoria* (ch. 22), and those recording precisely the Attic *synoikismòs,* that is, the *Panathenaea* (ch. 24): both of which, according to Plutarch, established by Theseus himself. The *Oscophoria* are described at some length, but the spirit in which Plutarch approaches them could be termed purely antiquarian, no attempt being made to give a more general meaning to their complicated ritual; as for the *Panathenaea*, they are merely mentioned by Plutarch, together with the *Metoecia*, which – Plutarch limits himself to say – are still celebrated on the sixteenth day of the month of Ecatombaion. Conversely, in the *Life of Romulus*, where all the festivals have a civic dimension, only one of them is presented in purely antiquarian terms, the *Lupercalia*, which were celebrated in mid-February. Plutarch describes them at length, trying to explain the origins and meaning of their somewhat complicated ritual (ch. 21), but it is not easy to understand why he has paid special attention to this particular festival, which is introduced amidst a whole series of ancient Roman customs: even though one may suppose that Plutarch's aim was to underline its possible Arcadian, that is, Greek origin (ch. 21.4), in the same way as he reported that a Greek origin had been proposed for the *Carmentalia* as well (ch. 21.3) – a hypothesis which, in any case, he did not accept.

This purely antiquarian interest, anyway, might be considered unusual, as far as the festivals mentioned in the *Romulus* are concerned. In Plutarch's portrayal, Romulus totally devotes himself to his work as founder and organizer of the new town: as a consequence, the Roman festivals which tradition traces back to him are aimed at reliving the crucial events in the course of his undertaking, the founding of Rome; an event which, moreover, is considered of extraordinary historical and ideological relevance[9]. Particularly important, from this point of view, is the long, very well-known, passage (ch. 12) in which Plutarch establishes a connection – as if bound by a secret and intimate relationship – between the day of the founding of Rome, duly recorded in a special festival, and that of the birth of Romulus himself.

[9] On the ideological aspects of the *Romulus* see Jones 1971, 88-94 (but he only takes into account the way in which Plutarch manages the literary tradition), and Giua 2005.

Let us examine the entire sequence of that passage step by step[10]. Plutarch begins by saying that "it is agreed that the city was founded on the eleventh day before the calends of May [that is the twenty-first of April]", and immediately adds that "this day the Romans celebrate with a festival, calling it the birthday of their country (γενέθλιον τῆς πατρίδος)". As far as this festival is concerned, the author specifies that on this occasion there was no blood sacrifice and that it truly was a pastoral festival, called *Parilia*, which the shepherds used to celebrate even before Rome's birth: in saying that, Plutarch possibly aims to underline that Romulus, choosing this very day to found Rome, intended to establish the new city in a friendly and spring-like context[11]. At this point Plutarch gives the further indication that on that very day – which was the thirtieth of the month, according to the Greek lunar calendar – "there had been a conjunction of the sun and moon, with an eclipse, which apparently was the one seen by Antimachus, the epic poet of Teos, in the third year of the sixth Olympiad". These last indications suggest that Plutarch wanted to give the foundation of Rome, both as a fact in itself and as an event in Romulus' life, an astronomical background, which was the premise for an astrological one. In fact, Plutarch goes on to tell the story of the philosopher, mathematician, and aspiring astrologist – so to speak – Tarutius, who at his friend Varro's request managed to retrieve "the day and hour of the birth of Romulus, making his deductions from the so called astral influences on the man's life, just as the solutions of geometrical problems are derived. For the same science (θεωρία), Varro said, must be capable not only of foretelling a man's life when the time of his birth is known, but also, from the given facts of his life, of hunting out the time of his birth"[12]. Needless to say, Tarutius had been able, "very courageously and bravely", to fix in terms of the Egyptian calendar the hour and date not only of Romulus' birth, but of his mother's impregnation too; and to retrieve, in the same terms, the hour and date of the foundation of Rome as well[13]: "as it is

[10] For an exhaustive commentary on the whole passage see Ampolo 1988, 300-304; for an interpretation of the astronomical dates Vila Echagüe.

[11] On the religious meaning of *Parilia* see Sabbatucci 1988, 128 ff.

[12] Pérez Jiménez 1992, 272, rightly underlines that here Plutarch appears prepared to recognize, unlike in other cases, the possible scientific value of astrology, somehow establishing a connection with the initial debate on the possibility of recognizing a certain historical value to mythical tales (but in the final comment, 12.6, Plutarch blurs, in a way, his own optimistic view).

[13] Which was "on the ninth day of the month Pharmuthi, between the second and the third hour". Plutarch ignored, apparently, or did not care, that this date – which coincides with our October 4 – is not the same as that of the *Parilia* indicated previously (April 21); however, for a possible explanation of Plutarch's (seeming?) inconsistency see Vila Echagüe, 7: "The calendar Romans used in those days [*i.e.* before Julius Caesar's calendrical reform] was high-

thought, Plutarch says, "that a city's fortune, as well as that of a man, has a decisive time, which may be known by the position of the stars at its very origin". In this way, the historical, "documentary" value of the foundation festival was soundly confirmed by the political and military accomplishments over the centuries of the city of Rome, whose providential destiny could be reflected, even *a posteriori*, in particularly favorable astrological conditions at its birth[14]. And, at the same time, as I have said before, the close connection between Romulus and his marvelous creation, destined for so great a future, was scientifically, as it were, confirmed.

The ideological aspect is no less relevant – beyond the obvious differences between the two episodes – in what Plutarch has to say about the Roman festival, the *Consualia*, which was traditionally connected with the second most important event of the Romulean history of the town, the famous "rape of the Sabine women" (ch. 14-15): in fact, this festival was celebrated on the very day in which supposedly the rape had been committed, that is "the eighteenth day of the month of August, once called *Sextilis*" (ch. 15.5). In raping the women of the Sabines (as well as of some other neighboring peoples), the founder aimed – according to Plutarch – to ensure the demographic future of a town which, as it was full of males thanks to the famous asylum, likewise had at its beginnings a very small number of female inhabitants. But Romulus' purpose was at the same time "to make the outrage an occasion for some sort of blending and fellowship with the Sabines after their women had been kindly entreated" (*i.e.* honorably married by the Romans after the rape). What Plutarch aims to stress here is that Romulus instituted a peculiar feature of Roman society, that is, its being open to welcoming alien peoples, to the point of inserting them into its own community, and placing them at the same political and social level as the Romans themselves; "this, more than anything else – Plutarch says shortly after – was what gave increase to Rome: she always united and incorporated with herself those whom she had conquered" (ch. 16.5)[15]. This feature is

ly irregular, and it is quite possible that when Tarutius composed Rome's horoscope, the ninth day of the month Pharmouthi coincided with the eleventh day before the calends of May".

[14] Plutarch was evidently convinced (see also Proculus' tale of Romulus' prophecy in 28.2, quoted *infra*, p. 210) of the providential character of Rome's empire (see, among many others, Forni 1989, 13-20; Desideri 2012 [2005], 141; Stadter 2015 [2005], 93).

[15] This, of course, is a frequently observed feature of Roman politics, usually connected with Romulus' management of the Sabines affaire (see *e.g.* Cic., *Balb.* 31 *princeps ille creator huius urbis, Romulus, foedere Sabino docuit etiam hostibus recipiendis augeri hanc civitatem oportere*; D.H., *A.R.* 2.16). As for the function, in this context, of marriage, see Tsouvala 2014, 204 ("marriage is thus perceived as a political institution that can unite not only separate bodies and individuals, but also families and even enemies in a mutually beneficial relationship").

placed on a symbolic level, so to speak, thanks to the episode of the Sabine women, each of whom was even entreated by her kidnapper to build a family unit with him, through a regular marriage. That is why Plutarch goes on to mention two further aspects of the Roman wedding rituals: first we have the long discussion on the meaning of the traditional cheer "talasius!", which was launched during the wedding ceremonies (ch. 15.1-4)[16]; and secondly, the reference to the custom of parting the bride's hair with the head of a spear: which passed for "a reminder that the first marriage was attended with war and fighting" (ch. 15.7). Two aspects that, not by chance, are dealt with in the *Quaestiones Romanae* too[17], as Plutarch himself duly recalls. Moreover, another important Roman festival – not a calendrical one, indeed – was in some way connected, according to Plutarch, with the famous rape: the triumph, which for the first time had been held by Romulus himself after his victory over the *Caeninenses* – one of the peoples whose virgins had been raped – and the killing of their king Acro (ch. 16). And at the end of the story we find the famous episode of the raped Sabine women who intervene, along with their newborn children, in the midst of the battle between their fathers and husbands, entreating both of them to stop the fratricidal struggle and to reach a common political agreement (ch. 19). In Plutarch's tale, their long and moving speech uses much more refined arguments than the speeches previously attributed to them by Livy or Dionysius. It can be said, in conclusion, that the *Consualia*, the festival in which the whole story was commemorated year after year, in so far as Plutarch considers it a summary of many essential elements of Roman society, in a sense represented for him a document which was fundamental to the city's history.

The last Roman festivals mentioned in the *Life* which we must consider are the ones connected with Romulus' death, or disappearance, on the seventh of July (ch. 27.4). Plutarch says that "the day on which he vanished (μετάλλαξεν) is called People's Flight (*Poplifugia*) and Capratine Nones (*Nonae Capratinae*), because they go out of the city and sacrifice at the Goat's Marsh; and 'capra' is their word for she-goat". Plutarch proceeds to specify that "as they go forth to the sacrifice, they shout out many local names, like Marcus, Lucius, and Gaius, in imitation of the way in which, on the day when Romulus disappeared, they called upon one another in fear and confusion" (ch. 29.2). As is well-known, according to the Roman tradition Romulus did not really die – in fact it was said that his corpse had never been found – and a lot of conjectures were made about that final disappear-

[16] Vd. Theander 1951, 13.

[17] See respectively *QR* 31 (271f-272a) and 87 (285b-c), with Boulogne 2002, *ad ll.*; on the ideological (as well as topographical) value of *QR* see Scheid 2012.

ance; Plutarch himself devotes two entire chapters of this *Life* to speculating on that problem, and his considerations are very interesting from our point of view. He follows the version according to which Romulus was holding an assembly of the people in an open space – precisely in the above mentioned Goat's Marsh, which is located in the Campus Martius – "when suddenly strange and unaccountable disorders with incredible changes filled the air": in a nutshell, as it were, an incredible storm came on, the multitude dispersed and fled, and at the end, when they gathered together again in the same place as before, the king was no longer there. At this point the leaders "exhorted them all to honor and revere Romulus, since – they said – he had been caught up into heaven, and was to be a benevolent god for them instead of a good king" (ch. 27.7); and some days later, Romulus himself, appearing to the patrician Julius Proculus, was said to have told Proculus that, being a god since the beginning, he had been sent among the humans just for the purpose of founding Rome – that is, the "city destined to be the greatest on earth for empire and glory" – following which returning to heaven, which was his natural seat (αὖθις οἰκεῖν οὐρανόν, ἐκεῖθεν ὄντας: ch. 28.2). He was also said to have advised Proculus "to tell the Romans that if they practise self-restraint, and add to it valour, they will reach the utmost heights of human power". This idea, that Romulus had become (again?) a god, assuming the name of Quirinus, is basically shared by Plutarch (ch. 28.3; 29.1), though with some corrections. In his opinion, "we must not violate nature by sending the bodies of good men with their souls to heaven, but implicitly believe that their virtues and their souls, in accordance with nature and divine justice, ascend from men to heroes, from heroes to demi-gods, and from demi-gods, after they have… freed themselves from mortality and sense, to gods, not by civic law, but in very truth and according to right reason, thus achieving the fairest and most blessed consummation" (ch. 28.8)[18]. This, therefore, according to Plutarch, is what effectively happened to Romulus; and there is no need to underline that when accepting the idea that Rome had been founded by a man to whose soul, thanks to his outstanding virtues, had been granted the privilege of ascending (again?) from the status of man to that of god, Plutarch gave at the same time a sort of final confirmation of the initial proposition regarding the providential nature of Rome's birth.

Coming back to the festivals which Plutarch connected with Romulus' disappearance, from our point of view it is not important to comment that the *Poplifugia* and the *Nonae Capratinae* in all probability had nothing to do

[18] On the religious value of this famous passage see Brenk 2017 [1987], 122-124; Graf 1996, 275; Santaniello 1996, 364f.; Sirinelli 2000, 440.

with each other, being after all celebrated on two different days, the fifth and the seventh of July, respectively[19]. The important thing for us is that Plutarch associated them in such a way as to be able to find in those festivals proof confirming the reliability of one of the versions of Romulus' death, according to which the founder and first king of Rome had actually been transformed into a god – or rather, following Julius Proculus' revelation, had regained his divine nature after performing the providential mission for which he had been sent to earth. With this interpretation of the two festivals, Plutarch applied the finishing touch to his portrait of the personality of a great man, Romulus, whose features, due to the poor reliability of the literary documentation regarding him, could not otherwise be adequately retraced. The main festivals of Rome still testified to the outstanding qualities of a hero who had not only founded a city which would have such a splendid future, but at the same time had provided Rome with the principles to follow in order to obtain and preserve success, and at the end was justly rewarded for his great accomplishments[20]. In conclusion, from the historiographical point of view, Plutarch's *Romulus* reveals its author's skill in finding the documents he needed in order to give his hero the 'historical' dimension he was looking for. It is easy, of course, to raise doubts as to the validity of these documents, and the way they are interpreted by Plutarch – the same kind of doubts we have when reading, for instance, in his *Solon*, that the chronological difficulties of the meeting between Croesus and Solon cannot induce one to reject "a story (which) is so famous and so well-attested and, what is more, when it comports so well with the character of Solon, and is so worthy of his magnanimity and wisdom"[21]. In both cases, actually, Plutarch seems to believe that ideology is more important than truth, or, more precisely, that the ideological value of an event is in a way independent from the possibility of proving beyond doubt its historical truth. I would not say, in any case, that such an attitude must be considered a consequence of Plutarch's choice of a biographical, rather than a properly historical, approach; what I believe, on the contrary, is that Plutarch is perhaps to be considered more sincere a historian than the proper historians.

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[19] See Ampolo 1988, 340; on the nature of the two festivals see Sabbatucci 1988, 228 ff.

[20] I believe it is correct to say that Plutarch appears to consider specifically appropriate to the great politicians an idea that, in its original Platonic (or better Pythagorean) version, generally concerned all the just men; but one ought to add that this same special connection could already be found in Cicero's sixth book of *De republica*, at least (6.13 *omnibus, qui patriam conservaverint, adiuverint, auxerint, certum esse in caelo definitum locum, ubi beati aevo sempiterno fruantur*): for some clarifications on this point see Stok 1993, 29 and 73.

[21] *Sol*. 27.1 (on this passage see Desideri 2012 [1992b], 243 f.).

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ABSTRACT:
Roman calendrical festivals are one of the most important 'documents' in Plutarch's attempt at reconstructing Romulus' life and glorious deeds, which constitute the foundation of the Roman Empire. In this essay I aim to explain what historical meaning Plutarch attributes to such festivals as the *Parilia*, the *Consualia*, the *Poplifugia* and the *Nonae Capratinae*, which the Roman tradition closely linked with Romulus.
KEYWORDS:
Plutarch, *Life of Romulus*, Plutarch's documents, Roman calendrical festivals, Roman Empire.