A Goddess for Runaway Slaves? Feronia and Her Worshippers

Not much is known about the goddess Feronia, apart from her Sabine origin. Her cult is attested from the regal period to the end of the first century BC through literary, epigraphic and numismatic evidence. Her name is associated with *ferus* and her sanctuaries are found in groves. Nevertheless, she is not only a protectress of vegetation, but also of freedmen and runaway slaves. This paper investigates how a Sabine goddess connected with groves became the champion deity of slaves seeking freedom.

Both Greek and Latin authors attest Feronia's connection to springs and groves (Livy 1.30, Dion. Hal. 3.32.1, Strabo 5.2.9) and Servius credits her with the miraculous and immediate re-birth of her grove in Terracina after it had been burnt down (*Ad Aen.* 8.564). Servius also reports that at the same cult site there was a marble seat bearing the inscription *bene meriti servi sedeant, surgant liberi*, which could grant freedom on behalf of the goddess. Votive inscription to Feronia found in Trebula Metuesca, Rome and Nepi and dedicated by freedmen and slaves also support the identification of the goddess as a protectress of slaves seeking emancipation. In a coin minted in 18 BC (*RIC* I 281), Feronia is even represented with the same attributes as Libertas, and it is identified as the Sabine goddess only through the legend on the coin.

Having thus established that Feronia was indeed a champion of slaves seeking freedom, I also suggest that the long-standing tradition of groves as safe havens for runaway slaves – which, as Livy reports (1.8), was first established by Romulus – is the reason why Feronia became associated with slaves in addition to vegetation. Indeed, according to legend, Romulus had created a safe place in a grove near Rome for runaway slaves who wanted to gain freedom and begin a new life in his new settlement. Therefore, I argue that Feronia became a deity comparable to Libertas through her strategic location in groves, following a tradition dating back to the beginning of Rome itself.