

More than Motions: Religion as affirmation of Roman Identity

According to the inscribed calendars, the Poplifugia (People's Flight) occurred on July 5th, making it the only Roman festival celebrated before the Nones of a month. Several of the ancient literary sources, however, report that the Romans celebrated the Poplifugia on the Nones itself (July 7th), which is often called the Capratine Nones (Plut. *Rom.* 27-29; *Cam.* 33; *Num.* 2; *Hist. Aug.* 7.2; Macrob. *Sat.* 1.36; *Sol.* 1.25). These sources also record two aetiological myths to explain the origins of the celebration: the disappearance of Romulus and the Roman victory over the people of Ficulea, Fidenae, and other neighboring towns devised by the maidservant Philotis. A close reading of Varro shows that the Poplifugia and the Capratine Nones were actually two different feasts, one on July 5th and one on July 7th (Varro, *Ling.* 6.18), that were conflated over time in the memory of the Roman people.

It is precisely the role of religious memory that this paper seeks to discuss. As Simon Price has argued, "All history is an act of remembrance" (Price 2002, 15). He suggests that many ancient societies engaged in a kind of memory network, through which they acquired self-knowledge by associating ideas (Price 2002, 17). Price indicates four main contexts by which these memory networks formed a culture's perception of themselves, "first, objects and representations; second, places; third, ritual behaviour (and associated myths); and fourth, textual narratives" (Price 2002, 17). The regular and zealous use of historical *exempla* (Roller 2018, 1) and appeals to the *mos maiorum* as a source of authority (Van der Blom 2010, 13) are familiar examples of the ways in which textual narratives about the past shaped Roman ideas about who they were in the present. This paper, however, is interested in Price's third context, namely ritual behavior and its associated myths, a topic that has received comparatively less attention.

Mary Beard expounded on the role of ritual and memory at the April festival of the Parilia in her 1987 article, “A Complex of Times: No More Sheep on Romulus’ Birthday.” Beard suggests that the Roman religious experience, made up of rituals and the narratives supporting those rituals, played a major role in defining Roman identity (Beard 1987, 3), and argues that as the Romans practiced their annual festival calendar, it developed and grew because the calendar followed no overarching story through the year like the Christian calendar (Beard 1987, 7). This flexibility allowed the Romans to incorporate any story from Roman myth and history to their calendar as they saw fit (Beard 1987, 10), forming in turn what she calls a “conceptual pageant of Rome and of what it was to be Roman” (Beard 1987, 7). Her arguments are similar to the memory network idea of Price. Aside from the Parilia, however, very few festivals have been subjected to this kind of analysis. Using the Poplifugia as an example, this paper will continue to show how the Roman religious calendar presented an avenue for Romans to engage with their past thereby affirming the participant’s identity as a Roman citizen.

Bibliography

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