

Philosophy in Ancient Rome

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A Loss of Wings

By

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Translated by

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INTRODUCTION

ARCHAIC TOMBSTONE

In the secluded valley of thyme,
the domain of honey bees,
the deadstone, the stèle
‘Mètōn dedicates this tombstone
to his chosen Aktè,
the mother of his sons,
who died, twenty years old.
she baked the bread,
spun the wool,
managed the house.’
The wind is moving, the bees
zoom the silence more silent;
they work, they whisper:
‘Managed the house,
managed the house.’

The above poem is from the Dutch poet Ida Gerhardt. It was included in her collection *Het Sterreschip* of 1979. Two worlds, separated by a gulf of twenty-six centuries meet here in a few lines. Without having any intention of interpreting this poem, it may seem to us that the modern traveller will stop and muse about this collision of worlds. The girl Aktè has been dust for so long, just like her husband Mètōn, her sons, the bread she was baking, the wool she spun and the house she maintained. All of them disappeared forever centuries ago. Time with its indifferent omnipotence has wiped all away and it is as if they never existed. ‘It makes no difference’, says Marcus Aurelius, the imperial follower of the stoics. Our thinking seems to be overshadowed by the doom of temporality. Nothing will last forever, everything will perish and disappear. The archaic way of thinking of Mètōn and Aktè on the other hand seems to emphasize continuity: ‘managed the house’. Their confidence in continuity, endurance, regarding our idea of the power of time and finality, appears to us childish and naïve. In that hidden thyme-scented valley, with the wind moving and the bees droning in the silence, time seems to have come to a halt. Only by means of this poetic and idyllic

image of time having come to a standstill can the archaic world of lasting immutability and the modern world of restless temporality meet.

Mètōn and Aktè lived with a different sense of continuity than we do. Their sense of durability presupposed security, familiarity and meaningfulness, but also presupposed boredom, monotony, tradition and conservatism. This type of thinking is based on a natural and meaningful arrangement of life in general. Key words in this way of thinking are *phusis* and *kosmos*. Aristotle notes in his *Ethica Nicomachea* that there are no shoemakers producing shoes that fit nobody, which he follows with the rhetorical question: ‘Are we then to suppose that, while the carpenter and the shoemaker have definite functions or businesses that belong to them, man as such has none, and is not designed by nature to fulfil any function?’¹ ‘Of course not!’ is his answer. Even more than the carpenter and the shoemaker do human beings have to be present and busy in a meaningful manner. Man’s life here on earth makes sense and is effective. Everything makes sense. In *De caelo*, Aristotle says, ‘God and nature do not create anything in vain, - *ho de theos kai hē phusis ouden matèn poiouein*’².

This idea of meaningful security within a natural order is first broken by the Greek sophists. But, as much as it may have been torn apart and impaired, it remains present in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle and in that of the Stoics up to Marcus Aurelius. Not until Plotinus and Augustine of Hippo, in the third and fourth century AD, did this way of thinking completely break and disappear.

Aristotle expresses this security with the words *theos* and *phusis*. In Hebrew thought this same security usually originates from God and there is no role for nature. In Psalm 139, the security of man is impressively expressed:

‘O Lord, thou hast searched me and known me!

Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar of.’³ (KJV Psalm 139; 1- 2)

¹ Aristotle: *Ethica Nicomachea* 1097b 11. Translation H. Rackham, Delphi Classics, Hastings 2013.

² Aristotle: *De caelo* 271a 34-35.

³ Psalm 139; 1-2, King James Version (KJV).

The first six verses indicate that Yahweh knows man through and through. The next six verses ask the question ‘Whither shall I go from thy spirit?’ if I want to escape this hold on me by God?

‘If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.

If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;

Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.⁴

According to this representation, the preservation of man is attributed to being held by God. In the next six verses it is made clear with quite physical analogies how firm his hold is: ‘For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother’s womb. (13) ‘My substance were not hid from thee,’ and ‘Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being unperfect’. (15-16).

There is little doubt that about a thousand years later Aurelius Augustine in chapter six of book ten of his *Confessiones* had psalm 139 in mind when he began his soul-searching. Augustine obviously felt secure in the presence of God in a similar way. The first sentence reads: ‘My love of you, O Lord, is not some vague feeling: it is positive and certain Lord - *Non dubia, sed certa conscientia, domine, amo te*’.

Not only had the heart of Augustine been touched, ‘besides this, all about me, heaven and earth and all that they contain proclaim that I should love you.’ He continues with a clear paraphrasing of psalm 139, each time with a dismissive conclusion: ‘Not material beauty or beauty of a temporal order, not the brilliance of earthly light (...), not the sweet melodies of harmony and song; not the smell flowers, perfumes, and spices; not manna or honey; not limbs such as the body delights to embrace.’ None of this he loves as he loves God.

Then there is an enumeration of the phenomena which he implores to answer his question: ‘But what is my God I put my question to the earth. It answered, “I am not – *non sum*” – and all things on earth declared the same. I asked the sea and the chasms of the deep and the living things that creep in them, (...) I spoke to the winds that blow, and the whole air and all that lives in it (...). I asked the sky, the sun, the moon and the stars (...). I

⁴ Ibid 8-10.

asked the world for my God - *Interrogavi mundi molem de deo meo* - (...). Tell me something about my God and she replied, "I am not but He who made me" - *et respondit mihi "non ego sum, sed ipse me fecit"*.⁵

Just as in the psalm, Augustine starts off on a quest; he searches everywhere. But whereas the psalmist found his god everywhere and in everything, Augustine finds him nowhere. For Aurelius Augustine starts off with the assumption of the division, of the contrast between God and the world, creator and creation, a contraposition put forward by Paul in his letter to the Romans. The language of Saint Augustine is often fierce and his words are often passionate - 'I love you, O Lord!' But his conception of the world is quite a different world than the archaic world of the psalmist.

Augustine lacks the safety within the natural order and because of the contraposition of the true Being - God - and the weak - the world of people - he is doomed to self-reflection and loneliness. After the separation between the world and the self, there is no salvation for the soul in the world: 'It does not direct itself to the outside world, but towards itself- *Hèxei ouk eis allo, all'eis heautèn,*' says Plotinus. 'For everything is after all within us - *panta eiso.*'⁶ In the same vein does Augustine repeatedly write: 'Do not seek out yourselves, turn into yourself, the truth resides in the inner of man - *Noli foras ire, in te redi, in interiore homine habitat veritas.*

Psalm 139, as paraphrased by Augustine, we also find, a thousand years later, almost literally in Goethe's poem, *Nähe des Geliebten* (Closeness of the beloved): 'I think of you, when for me the sun's reflection / shines from the sea.'⁷ Here too, the beloved is near and present in everything. In the dust along the road and in the wayfarer's shiver in the coolness of the night. The sound of the waves and the silence of the fields all invoke the proximity, the presence of the beloved. This time, however, it is not a god but a girl who is near. The '*Ich denke Dein*' is almost as programmatic as Descartes' *ego cogito*.

The psalmist felt himself secure in a very natural way in the presence of God. Augustine was aware that man as part of the creation is dependent on his creator, but they also oppose each other. Man is separated from the

⁵ Aurelius Augustine: *Confessiones* (translation: R.S. Pine-Coffin) London 1961 p. 211-212.

⁶ Plotinus: *Enneads* VI 9: 11, 38-39 and III: 8, 6, 40.

⁷ '*Ich denke dein, wenn mir der Sonne Schimmer / Vom Meere strahlt.*'

natural order and finds himself on his own, opposite his creator, God. For Goethe there is no god and love is directed towards the woman he loves. However, a natural certainty seems to be present: ‘The sun sets, soon the stars will light up for me. / O, were you here!’⁸

The psalmist, Aurelius Augustine and Goethe express themselves in almost the same words, but each time they were written in a totally different world and mean something different. So although the psalmist, Aurelius Augustine and Goethe used each other's words, the words themselves would be incomprehensible to the other users.

In the history of philosophy the idea prevails that ‘from the Greeks onwards’ the same words covered the same concepts ‘for millennia’. But words like ‘god’, ‘human’, ‘world’, ‘thing’, ‘time’, ‘eternity’ or ‘reality,’ whether expressed in Greek, Hebrew, Latin, German, or any other language, expire, fade and alter continually in meaning. *Psuchè* had a different meaning a hundred years before Plato than it did to Plato himself and again it had a different meaning to Plato’s pupils. Translated into Latin the meaning shifts once more and when words are incorporated into Christian thought the meaning is distorted even further.

Roman philosophy is often seen as a translation and continuation of Greek philosophy. Indeed, the Romans did adhere to Greek philosophy. But they often went further and usually had their own way of thinking. In the nineteenth century all attention was fully focused on Greek thought as the pinnacle of philosophy. A book like *De officiis* of Cicero was conceitedly considered to be a rewriting of Greek examples. Latin philosophers were denied any originality, and if it was admitted at all, it was often considered to be a pitiful counterfeit of the work of their Greek predecessors.

It is quite true that Roman philosophy is greatly indebted to the Greeks, but it is wrong to consider someone like Cicero merely as a follower or student of his superior Greek predecessors. Roman thought has its own history. It does not respond to the classic line of the thought of Plato and Aristotle, but to its coloured deformations which came to the fore in the Hellenistic era. And from the second century AD onwards, the rise of Christianity meant a new and powerful impetus for Latin philosophy.

⁸ ‘Die Sonne sinkt, bald leuchten mir die Sterne. / O wärst du da!’

Roman philosophy can be discussed in many ways. In this book I do not cover all its aspects. Although the chapters follow a chronological order, the emphasis is not directed towards the sequence of periods of thought but on the questions which were formulated – questions which we are still trying to answer. I have chosen a theme that serves as a guideline and gives unity to the book. In my study of Greek philosophy, *First Questions*, the question of what reality is, the nature of being - *ti to on*; – is the main theme. In this book the main theme is the rise of the concept ‘time’.

Within the preceding Greek philosophy, awareness of time or temporality (not to mention the awareness of the brevity of existence) was, for the Romans, not definitive for thinking and acting. In the Archaic Tombstone of Aktè the sense of continuity is the foundation of life. The idea of the richness of nature, of living, dying and the survival of all that grows, *phusis*, and the idea of the continuous ordering of everything, *kosmos*, in which is comprised existence and the existing ones, prevailed in Greek thought until well into the final era of the Stoics. What is quite moving in the notes of Marcus Aurelius is precisely the thought of the reliability of nature and *kosmos* on the one hand and ruthless destruction on the other. We have to abide by nature. Our lives and behaviour must be natural. When we die, we do not fall out of the great order of the *kosmos*. But in the work of Marcus Aurelius both foundations of Greek thinking are reduced to phrases, fragments of an earlier security of existence. The foundation of his thinking is a new certainty that nothing is certain, that everything disappears into the abyss of time. We have, as Seneca says, set our existence on a downhill course from the beginning and our temporal life will expire. We are doomed to disappear and go under without salvation and it will be as if we have never lived. It makes no difference anymore, says Marcus Aurelius.

Instead of the continuity – ‘Managed the house / managed the house’ – comes the short-lived fever of our frail and too temporary existence. Whereas temporality, time, for the Neoplatonic philosophers was still ‘reflection of lasting eternity’, in the course of centuries time and temporality became something independent and even contrary to eternity. For Augustine existence was broken from the start; it was shattered into fragments, dissolved in volatile, temporary activities: ‘But I am shredded in time, and its course is a mystery to me - *ego in tempora dissilui, quorum ordinem nescio*⁹’.

⁹ Aurelius Augustine: *Confessiones* XI 29, 39.

At the end of the period I am dealing with in this book, the time of Augustine, the silent security of Mètōn and Aktè was lost for ever. For Augustine, time itself is a *'distentio'*, an existence being torn apart, chased, plagued and restless, which in its precariousness ultimately finds only one resting point. 'The seventh day is a day without evening', he writes at the end of his *Confessiones*. Rest and light, continuity and an abode in eternity for Augustine can only be found with God, whereas our earthly days are lost in restless pursuit.

Perhaps for us the house of Mètōn and Aktè, or the abode in Augustine's eternity, may no longer exist. The natural foundation has disappeared; looking up to the stars no longer reveals the gods or God. We are more like the travellers in the story *The Steppe* of Anton Chekhov: 'When you gaze a long while fixedly at the deep sky, thoughts and feelings for some reason merge in a sense of loneliness. One begins to feel hopelessly solitary, and everything one used to look upon as near and akin becomes infinitely remote and valueless; the stars that have looked down from the sky thousands of years already, the mists and the incomprehensible sky itself, indifferent to the brief life of man, oppress the soul with their silence when one is left face to face with them and tries to grasp their significance. One is reminded of the solitude awaiting each one of us in the grave, and the reality of life seems awful, full of despair.'¹⁰

The wind is moving, the bees
 zoom the silence more silent;
 they work, they whisper:
 'Managed the house,
 managed the house.'

¹⁰ Anton Chekhov: *The collected short stories of Anton Chekhov*. Vol. I (Halcyon Classics).

I

THE AWAKENING OF THOUGHT

CHAPTER ONE

THE FLAMEN DIALIS

How philosophy came into Rome is unknown. There are some stories, but they contradict each other. The deeds and mindset of the oldest Romans are hidden in the dark in spite of the stories. The origin of Rome too remains vague. In fact, all we know are the stories. About Romulus and Remus, the shepherd's children and the wolf and about Aeneas who escaped with child and father from burning Troy. Both stories were written down by Livy; they were too good to be forgotten. But were the oldest Romans also aware that these stories were supposed to tell the origin of their city?

Over the last few decades the history of the first Romans has become even more exciting than it was in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries because of numerous archaeological discoveries and new theories. And the history of their thinking is also fascinating since we have got rid of all the nineteenth century prejudices surrounding it. In the schoolbooks of that century could be found the assertion that philosophy was Greek and that the epitome of ancient philosophy could be found in the Athens of Plato and Aristotle. All later philosophers were merely followers who could be classified as belonging to different schools of thought.

These schools increasingly got lost in all kinds of casuistry. The Romans were excellent soldiers, politicians and lawyers, but too down-to-earth to create a profound philosophy. Cicero and Seneca were the main Roman philosophers, but their importance was limited.

They were said to have translated and explained the original Greek ideas in treatises through rhetorical effects and imagery, thereby discrediting the original works. They were believed to be unimaginative and even modern translators in their introductions tend to apologize for the level of the works itself. The sparkling quest of the great Greek philosophers staled into Latin disciplinary teaching which further petrified into medieval scholastic philosophy. True philosophy, was the general idea, did not start again until the Renaissance. Prejudice was widespread and over the last

few decades have even cropped up in a number of scientific publications, which have swept these works aside as being of no importance.

Latin philosophy turns out to be quite refreshing for those who are willing to have a closer look. Philosophers such as Cicero, Seneca or the Emperor Marc Aurelius are only mediocre for those who are mediocre themselves. The influence of Latin philosophy is enormous and can hardly be overestimated. The way in which we read and understand the great Greek philosophers has to a large extent been influenced by the later Hellenistic interpretations. It is highly unlikely that we will ever retrieve the original meaning of some of the views of the Greek philosophers and whether we will in fact be forever restricted to a version compiled hundreds of years after the works were written. Roman thinking is by no means merely a blind adaptation of Greek philosophy. Very often we are dealing with wilful and at times profound transformation of the Greek texts. Moreover, the origin of Latin thinking lies not only in Greece, but also in the Tiber region. The thinking of the Romans has always had its own character and from its archaic origins this philosophy is essentially different from its supposedly Greek example.

The time that we took the colourful stories of Livy's first books about Rome's origins for granted lies behind us. For how did Livy acquire his material? He was not even a Roman and did not have access to the archives in which the minutes of the senate were kept. Yet his tales are fascinating and contain numerous details that seem to be first hand. Perhaps we are just attracted to the un-Roman nature of it. The Romans were interested in acquiring power and politics, Livy in character and morale. Because of this attention shifts from the renowned acts themselves to contemplation of these acts: towards thinking and philosophical opinions. Livy appears to start from a philosophical perspective that he also uses to reconstruct and evaluate the events. He shares the view that a person's character determinates his fate, as put into words by Heraclitus around 480 BC: *Ethos anthrōpōi daimōn*¹. For Livy this meant that if we knew something about someone's character, we were 'thus' able to derive his personal history.

¹ Heraclitus: fragment 22 B 119. H. Diels, W. Kranz *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Berlin 2008.

Livy knew hardly anything about the decemvir Appius Claudius, but he knew his tendencies, *ingenium*², which he assumed were the determining factors for his deeds. Livy therefore considered himself to be able to describe the life of Appius Claudius despite the lack of facts.

Those who are familiar with this philosophical attitude of Livy will notice that his characters have recognizable contours. Time and again he determines whether someone is pious, gentle, courageous, reckless or whatever, after which the contours are coloured in. This means, for example, that in concluding that Servius Tullius was a pious king, Livy assumed that he ‘therefore’ built temples. We now know that temples attributed to him for this reason were actually built by his predecessors and successors. Also, Livy established that Camillus was pious and Coriolanus was reckless and subsequently these properties come to the fore from the deeds attributed to them.

The conclusion is that Livy described Rome’s political history from a moral point of view. In his preface he emphasizes that history shows that the moral standards of mankind are in decline. Livy writes in his *Praefatio* that he wants to study ‘the kind of lives our ancestors lived (...) I would then trace the process of our moral decline, to watch first, the sinking of the foundations of morality as the old teaching was allowed to lapse, then the rapidly increasing disintegration, then the final collapse of the whole edifice, and the dark dawning of our modern day when we can neither endure our vices nor face the remedies to cure them.’³

Here too, Livy shows himself to be indebted to a philosophical thought. It is the idea that after pure and noble beginnings, mankind, after having been driven out of paradise, irrevocably declines from bad to worse. This idea was widespread in ancient times and it is possible to find this idea both in the Greek historian Herodotus as well as in the Bible book of Daniel. That such a directive becomes the guideline for the description of the history of Rome is remarkable. Livy follows this directive for his history right from the time that the first king, Romulus, the murderer of his brother, made Rome a refuge for fugitive criminals, right up to the time that under Augustus the ‘*Pax Romana*’ was established over an immense empire.

² Livy: *Ab urbe condita* III, 36, 1. Translation: A. de Sélincourt. Penguin Classics p. 34, Harmondsworth UK 1984 .

³ Livy: *Ab urbe condita* I 1, 4.

When we read Livy's history with attention we will soon detect prominent similarities to Greek history. In 510 BC., after a love affair, the last tyrant of Athens is expelled by two men. In 510 BC, the last tyrant king of Rome, Tarquinius Superbus, is also driven out after a love affair and succeeded by two consuls. In 480 BC three hundred Spartans under the leadership of Leonidas fight against the superior numbers of the Persians in the pass of Thermopylae. In 477 BC, three hundred members of the '*gens Fabia*' find their death against the superior enemy at the battle of the Cremera. Brutus, the man who drives the last Etruscan king out of Rome presents remarkable character traits in common with his namesake who killed Julius Caesar in 44 BC. While reading the familiar story about Coriolanus, a reader who has read Herodotus may sometimes think, 'didn't I read this somewhere before?' Indeed, the words of the mother of Coriolanus before the gates of Rome were inspired by the words of the Greek Iocaste.

The number of examples of parallels can be increased effortlessly and the conclusion is inescapable: the time of the end of the kingship in Rome is unknown, the story about the rape and suicide of Lucretia is mere fiction, the role of Brutus is unclear and the appearance of the two consuls is way too early.

Like most historians in antiquity Livy is not primarily focused on establishing historical facts. His books have remained so exciting because he uses the facts to his liking in order to invoke a grandiose tableau of steadfast character on the one hand versus moral decay on the other. Sometimes he changes the facts simply for reasons of writing a good story. The well-known story of Hannibal's crossing of the snowy Alps with army and elephants would not be that exciting if it were told in two instalments. However, the crossing was in all probability successful because Hannibal split his army into two parts, each taking a different route.

When we come to the story of Coriolanus, it is even more complicated. The crux of the story lies in the arrival of Coriolanus before the gates of Rome, where he, after having dismissed two high delegations of senators and priests, listens to and complies with the entreaties of the third delegation; the women of Rome under the leadership of his mother. That climax would be lost when Livy had described what had actually happened, namely, that Coriolanus did not march to Rome with his army once but twice. Livy opts for the moral power of the story, combining both expeditions and has Coriolanus' army performing a geographically impossible tour de force. Livy wants to show examples of determined

characters and a Coriolanus who returns two or three years later does not fit into his story.

I pointed out that Livy's philosophical and moral beliefs directed his writings. Still, there are other factors involved. For instance the story is more important than the facts. Livy creates a theme in his tales through which will be heard by his educated audience the resonance of other, Greek stories. Every well-educated Roman would have recognized many of the stories and would have been able to place the examples echoed by Livy.

When Livy has the battle of the Romans for Veii last for ten years and has it finally settled by means of a ruse, many a Roman will have remembered the ten-year struggle of the Greeks at Troy and the taking of the city by the ruse of the horse. The siege of Veii however, lasted about six years and the story of the stratagem by which it was taken is as unreliable as it is beautiful.

In the same vein the first readers of the gospel realized that the story of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth in Bethlehem was not based on a historical fact, but that it was a reference to the Old Testament. After all, Bethlehem was the city of King David! 'The city of David' in the time of the Roman occupation must have had the same evocative meaning as the V-for-Victory-sign during World War II when heard through the opening motif of Beethoven's Fifth symphony.

In addition to the mythical references, the exemplary type-casting was important in the narrative. Camillus is pious and Coriolanus reckless. These renowned traits of the main actors of the story give the narrative sharp contours and creates unity.

A present-day reader of *The life of Saint Benedict*, by Pope Gregory the Great, written about AD 600, may be amazed at the very first sentence. Benedict is described as 'being very mature since his birth'. According to us not a very sympathetic trait. But Pope Gregory probably did not know anything about the child Benedict, nor did he have any interest in that child. However, right from the beginning the main theme had to be clear and that is the immediate result of the signal: *senex puer*. The readers of these words in this *Life of Benedict* may well have thought about Tobias or of the twelve-year-old Jesus in the temple.

The type-casting of people and putting down a straightforward personality right at the beginning of the story, indicates another element of Livy's storytelling technique: rhetoric. Speaking in public and convincing others

was very important in antiquity. The foundation of every career and also, therefore, the main component of school education was rhetoric. In the text of Livy, as in many writers of antiquity, this rhetorical trait is easy to recognize.

In his *De oratore* Cicero teaches us - and he provides convincing examples - how a story, a *narratio* has to be told: it must be concise (*breviter*), clear (*aperte*) and convincing or probable (*probabiliter*). A story is concise when diversions are avoided, clear when the personalities are type-cast right at the beginning and convincing when the narrated facts are consistent with the characters of the actors -*ad naturam eorum qui agent accommodabitur*⁴. Livy brings this about quite skilfully and this brings us back to the beginning: his philosophical conviction was that someone's character determines his acts and the course of his life and destiny.

When Livy, who wrote at the time of Augustus just before and after the beginning of our era, thinks and writes so differently from what present day readers might expect of an historian, how remote and odd would have been the mindset of the Romans in the early centuries after the founding of the city? We know practically nothing of this earliest way of thinking. The largest part of those ideas we would now call 'religious' ideas. However, the problem is that it is extremely difficult to fathom Roman *religio*, which originally had no images of the gods. It seems they might have attempted to explain natural phenomena through *religio*.

The Romans considered themselves to be the most religious of all peoples - *religiosissimi omnium gentium*. With the rise of Christianity no attention was given to the Romans and their 'pagan' beliefs. Gods who apparently stood for all sorts of natural functions, such as *Sterculus*, 'the Shitter', and *Sordidus*, 'the Farter', only invited ridicule from the church fathers. The perception that *religio* is religion and therefore a god or gods are central to that concept forms a barrier for the correct understanding of Roman religious thought and even more of their rituals.

The pontifex Cotta says in the discourse as written by Cicero that the Roman religion can be divided into three parts - *omni populi Romani religio in sacra et in auspicia divisa sit*, 'in sacrifices and divination by birds', and the third aspect 'predictions, if the interpreters of the Sibylline

⁴ Cicero: *De oratore* II 326-329.

oracle or the haruspices have foretold any event from portents and prodigies'⁵.

In Roman literature, when sacrifices, divination of birds, secret books and haruspices of the liver are mentioned, we do not give those things much attention and our knowledge of these things is therefore quite limited. Our ideas about Roman religion come from the statues of the gods which we see in museums. But even then, it seems that in a museum of Roman antiquities we only encounter Greek gods whereas the real Roman gods are mainly to be found in the Etruscan museum.

In the Forum Romanum can be seen the scant remains of the *regia*, the building in which the *rex sacrorum*, the king of the sacrifices, performed his rites. In this building the oldest gods of Rome, Mars and Ops were also honoured. Mars was the father of Romulus and Remus and the Roman New Year began on the first day of the month named after him: March. The spears of Mars were kept in the *regia* and at each declaration of war a priest had to call to them: 'Awake god of war! - *Mars vigila.*' Mars, Jupiter and (Janus) Quirinus formed the triade that was honoured during the first centuries of Rome's existence. Not until much later did the Capitoline triad, Jupiter, Juno and Minerva come to the fore. The ease with which these three deities are compared to the Greek triad of Zeus, Hera and Athena is actually incomprehensible. The links between the Capitoline deities and the Etruscan deities Tinia, Uni and Menrva were much closer.

In outdated books Roman religion is often describes as being syncretic, a hodgepodge of gods brought to Rome from vanquished countries and Rome itself was supposed to have hardly any original gods. However, the opposite is true. The 'import' of gods from outside was not easy in Rome, and the senate vigorously tried to stop it. When the Egyptian gods and goddesses were finally admitted, after many bans and expulsions, this was only allowed on the field of Mars, outside the city. It also took centuries for Christian church buildings to reach the centre of the city. In the beginning they were all situated outside the city walls. Only when a city was sacked and completely razed to the ground after being conquered, which was the case with Veii and Carthage, were the deities taken to Rome. During the wreckage of Carthage in 146 BC, according to Macrobius, Scipio is supposed to have solemnly said:

⁵ Cicero: *De natura deorum* III 2, 5. Translation: C.D. Yonge. Delphi Classics, Hastings 2014.

‘Whoever you are, god or goddess, who used to protect the people of Carthage, I pray and beg you now and ask forgiveness. Now leave the space and temples of Carthage, and abandon that city and its people, let revenge, fear and forgetfulness come over them and go with us, my soldiers and my people to the holy places of Rome and bless the prosperity of our weapons.’⁶

We seldom catch a glimpse of the oldest gods of Rome and even then we have to look closely. For instance Livy (I, 55) writes that when King Tarquinius wanted to build the great temple to Jupiter on the Capitol in order to do so he had to de-sanctify and secularize some sacred places. The gods were quite willing to leave; only Terminus and Iuventus refused to go. Apparently both of them had established ancient rights of old to stay in that place.

The treaties of the Roman state were not concluded in the temple of the Supreme God on the Capitol, but in an old annexe dedicated to *Iuppiter Feretrius*. He was also honoured in the shape of a piece of flint: *Iuppiter Lapis*. This god of thunder had apparently older rights for this kind of ceremony than the later supreme god. For example, the oath pronounced on this occasion by the *Fetialis* was directed to this god of thunder: ‘May the violators of this treaty be struck like swine by the flashing bolt of lightning.’ Also, the very first *triumphus* did not lead to the temple of the supreme god but to that obscure annex of ‘the Striker’, ‘the Smiter’.

The temple of Saturn inaugurated in 497 BC too, had older predecessors. Saturn is often compared to his Greek look-alike Kronos. However, he has nothing to do with him. The name is Etruscan and the festivals, the *Lua Saturni*, Saturnalia, were purification ceremonies, *lustrationes*. Saturn was a god of the seeds and the celebrations in his honour were held on December 17, at the end of the sowing time. The seed disappears in the fields and germinates unseen in the dark of winter in the darkness of apparent death, only to revive in Spring and Summer. The richness of the fertile earth was the domain of Saturn and it was not for practical reasons but out of religious significance that in the temple of Saturn, the *aerarium*, the treasury of the state, was kept. The god of the fertile earth who covers over the seed so that it may re-emerge was also the only god in Rome to whom sacrifices were offered with uncovered head while his statue remained covered.

⁶ Macrobius: *Saturnalia* III 9, 7-8. Translation by the author.

The end of Saturnalia was in what is now Christmas night. Macrobius writes that at that time the world turned topsy-turvy and everything was permissible for children and slaves - *Saturnalibus tota servis licentia permittitur*⁷. The child was seen as the representation of the resurgence of new life, the rebirth of the plant as the fruit of sowing. With this reversal the circle was closed and the new year could begin. *Lustrare* is *circuire*, Servius writes in his comment on Virgil: 'Cleaning is to close the circle'⁸. *Lua Saturni* is related to *lustrare*, 'to purify', 'to clean', and with *lustrum*, purification or expiatory sacrifice. The first *lustrum*, the conclusion of a five-year period, instigated by the first Roman King Servius Tullius, is said to have taken place after the oldest census.

The ritual with which the Romans closed the year is quite remarkable. In the wall of the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, the annual nail, *clavus annalis*, was fixed. Livy writes that 'an ancient law, recorded in archaic words and letters'⁹ stipulated that this should only be done by the supreme magistrate, the *praetor maximus*. In later years this task was transferred to a *dictator clavifigendi causa*, a dictator in the cause of hitting the nail.

This example indicates that a simple thing like fixing a nail was of great importance. It offers us a glimpse into ancient Roman thinking. In the first place, the fixing of a nail was obviously a way of keeping track of the number of years. In addition, it was also the end of a period and a cleansing. Not only was a nail fixed every year but this was also done on special occasions, after contagious diseases or hideous crimes. So it also had the meaning of 'closing' 'concluding' something in order to start again with a clean slate. *Clavus*, nail, is derived from the verb *claudere*, 'to close'. The nail is a 'closer': a period had been closed, the evil was over, life could go on again.

This second meaning brings us to the third and most important meaning, which is also the reason why the nail had to be fixed by the *praetor maximus*. The fixed nail is the symbol for irreversible fixation, an indication of fate, *fatum*. The nail represents both the end of the past period and the beginning of a new one. The fixation underwrites the course of events. The nail has to do with fate and the course of life and can therefore only be fixed by the highest authority.

⁷ Macrobius: *Saturnalia* 1 7, 26.

⁸ Servius: *Ad Verg. Buc.* 5, 75.

⁹ Livy: *Ab urbe condita* VII 3, 5.

The determination and fixation of the course of events by religious acts, rituals, leads us to a typical Roman way of thinking and acting: dealing with time by means of the calendar.

The Greeks had a reliable way of registering the passage of years with the aid of the Olympia games, but for all other purposes the calendars were hopelessly different in each city and region. The Romans used a lunar calendar in the first seven centuries of Rome's existence, in which the years alternately had 355 and 377 or 378 days. Julius Caesar introduced the (Egyptian) solar calendar, which had 365 days each year. Not until the sixteenth century, in 1582, was this Julian calendar improved by Pope Gregory XIII and the current system introduced.

The calendar was absolutely secret, just like the laws, the regulations, the rules of divination by birds and the more decisive actions in the course of life. Priests and *patres* knew its mysteries but, the public remained ignorant. The publication of the laws did not come about before the appointment of the ten men – *decemvir* in 451 BC. The decemvirate decided that also the calendar should be made public, but it was not until 304 BC that Gnaeus Flavius was instructed to implement this. Thanks to Livy we are aware of the numerous instances in which the Senate stopped the demands of the population by appealing to all sorts of obscure laws and practices which were unknown to the population and only accessible to priests and the fathers. Up until the end of the republic it was possible to obstruct for days on end elections, public assemblies and orders to the military commanders because a college of priests believed that the omens were unfavourable.

Owing to the discovery of an inscription we have the archaic Roman calendar, the *Fasti Antiatres Maiores*. That calendar does not show the days of the week but is divided in the first, *Kalendae*, fifth or seventh, *Nonae*, and thirteenth or fifteenth day, *Ides*. On those days are two separate annotations. The days have letters: a C, *Comitalis*, for the days when the 'comitia', the public assembly was allowed to be held; an F, *Fastus*, for the days on which all legal acts, such as trade, were allowed but on which the public assembly could not be convened; an N, *Nefastus*, for the days on which neither trade, nor jurisprudence, nor a public assembly could take place. Apart from these three there are some other letters which are an indication of how old this calendar is, such as QRCF, *Quando Rex Comitavit Fas*, which meant Fastus-day: the day on which the king's court met. There are also indications of the festivities celebrated on various days. However, these indications are real enigmas. For example, what was

the meaning of a festival such as ‘*arbor intrat* – the entry of the tree’? Or what was the precise meaning of ‘going under the sister-yoke’? We may never know.

And when the meaning (or a part of it) of some festivals is discovered, the religious sentiments evoked by them remain within the four walls of a scholar’s study. We know that the Roman calendar knew days on which ‘death opened up - *mundus patet*’. But who of us is able to imagine the terror and the awe which seized the Romans on those days? These were days belonging to the dead who wandered freely among the living. A gust of wind, a bit of a draught and one became frightened. Was it caused by the souls of recently deceased relatives? All daily activities came to a standstill, the shops were closed and the temples of the gods were barred. Of course, one had to protect oneself, so that early in the morning people were chewing on *spina alba*, the white thorn, sometimes taken from the torch used at the marriage ceremony. The chewing was done *purgationis causa*, in order to be pure. As a defense against the threatening dead it was advised to smear the door posts with pitch. On the days when the dead wandered, the relief was great when finally the hunt of the dead began and the *Manes exite paterni!* resounded. The dead would then return to their graves.

Until recently the religious thinking and acting of the Romans were considered to be simple. Frans Cumont, an expert in Oriental religions, is surprised that ‘such a highly civilized people had such a childish religion’. Martin P. Nilsson, who in mid-twentieth century was considered the expert on the Greek religion, stated that the greatest victory ever achieved by the Greeks was the victory of their gods and philosophers on those of the Romans.

The foundation of these views can be found in classical schooling and literature departments. Religion was known and understood as far as it appeared in literature. The gods were the gods in Homer’s story. But until well into late antiquity more than 95% of both the Greeks and the inhabitants of Italy were shepherds or farmers and their faith had nothing to do with that of Homer, Plato or Cicero. The customs of German farmers as described by the Grimm brothers in the nineteenth century provide in all likelihood more information about ancient faith a few kilometres outside the gates of Athens or Rome than the writings of Ovid or Varro.

What contributed to even further misunderstandings was the portrayal of the Homeric world of gods: beautiful sculptures by great artists,

complemented by an extremely fascinating theogony and mythology. The oldest faith in Rome, however, knew no images; it knew only vague and obscure gods and nothing was told about their descent or deeds. Gods in Rome were not personalities such as those in Greece, but *numina*, names that covered natural activities.

Mars is not a war god like Ares. About him no stories were told such as the adultery with a goddess, after which the loving couple are caught under a net and the gods who hurried to the scene howled with laughter. No, 'Mars' was essentially the name for the conquering power that can be seen everywhere new life comes out. Mars shows itself in spring, in March, when the growing plants appear once more out of the still dead and bare earth.

Mars, *Dis Pater*, the rich father, Saturn, possibly derived from *satur*, amply saturated, and Vesta are *numina* who deal with the abundance and fertility of the earth. *Vesta Terra est* the Romans knew and the Vestal fire was extinguished every year on the first day of the month of March, cleaned and re-ignited. A terrifying event with fatal consequences in case something went wrong.

According to the tradition the cult of the Vestal virgins was instigated by the second king of Rome, the Sabine king priest Numa Pompilius. The awe and respect for the six young women, who were in office from their tenth to their fortieth year, was unimaginably great. The Vestal Virgins were 'earthmothers'; they were honoured as *Terra Mater* and virgin mother. The life of the earth and of the population was bound to the holiest place of Rome. That was not the fire of Vesta, but the *penus Vestae*, the storage cellar where the *mola salsa*, the sacrificial meal and the other sacred objects, the *sacra quaedam* or *sacra fatalia* were stored: the *penetralia* on which depended the existence of the Roman state. The storage cellar was sealed off with a cloth and divided into two as it contained both life and death. Here, the 'security', 'forfeit' of the unending life of the Roman population was kept. The chamber was surrounded with such mysteriousness that no communication about the inside or the rites which were performed there has come to us. Plutarch, in his life of Camillus, recoils from giving a description; awe restrained him¹⁰. What could be seen was indescribable for two reasons. In our eyes there were only a few oddities: some flour, some penis like sticks, a wooden statuette of the *Deus Fascinus* and some other very ancient old and untidy trivial

¹⁰ Plutarch: *Camillus* XX 5.

items, objects as small and negligible as a grain of seed lost somewhere in a furrow. And yet, from that minute and negligible beginning something wonderful and indescribable would come forth, new and rejuvenated life.

Concerning the hearth, the focal point of Roman society, I would like to give two more observations, a modern and an ancient one. Modern is the understanding that behind or below the surface of Rome's military and political, strongly patriarchal history, there lies a world that is feminine and has to do with the enigmatic fertility of the earth, with the belly of nature and the birth of all life. Later, towards the end of the period of the kings, the temple of the male Jupiter Optimus Maximus arose high on the Capitoline hill. But at Rome's oldest locations, the Forum Romanum and the Forum Holitorium, we find the cult of the Vestal Virgins, the temple of the morning mother, the *Mater Matuta*, the ancient temples of Juno and mysterious places, such as the source of the nymph *Iugurtha*.

Sometimes it is as if by means of archaeological excavations we can find not only older layers of Roman consciousness, but that we can also strip from Livy's narrative the layers with which he covered up the stories he found unpleasant. When the last King, Tarquinius Superbus, is expelled by the act of a woman, Lucretia, the Etruscan ruler Porsenna wants to enslave Rome. Because of later casual remarks we can conclude that he succeeded, but Livy treats us to world-famous stories concerning the failure of Porsenna's siege of Rome. Is it possible that Livy not only obscures the failure of the Roman army, but by means of heroic accounts of brave fighters also covers up a layer of matriarchy? First of all it is Horatius Cocles, 'the One Eye', who defends the pile bridge on his own. Further on this is done by Mucius Scaevola, 'the One Arm', who puts his hand in fire for the sake of Rome.

However, neither of these men achieves his goal. Only at the third attempt, that of the girl Cloelia, does Porsenna decide to give up the siege.

A similar pattern can be found in the story about Coriolanus, in which the fate of Rome once again is at stake. Twice the delegations of high-ranking men meet with a refusal, and only when the mothers of Rome send a third delegation, including Coriolanus' own mother, Veturia, who refuses to embrace him and says that she regrets giving birth to him, does Coriolanus turn around and leave. 'There was no envy of the fame the women had earned, on the part of the men of Rome (...) and to preserve its memory

the temple of *Fortuna Muliebris* was built and dedicated,' writes Livy¹¹. It has to be feared however, that Livy's story is just one big, and largely successful, attempt to erase the traces of the archaic matriarchate.

The ancient testimony of the reverence that was given to the virgin mothers and guardians of Rome is more shocking. Those who stood watch over all that lived also had a close connection with death. Servius notes in his comment on Virgil, that *sacer* means 'holy' as well as 'cursed'¹². All that is sacred is taboo. In the bible book II Samuel 6, 6-9 we find the scene in which a man touches the Ark to prevent it from falling over and has to die because he touched what was holy and untouchable. This goes against our sense of justice, but it originates from a very fundamental and authentic sense of sacredness. That was also realized by the Romans. Anyone who passes under the chair bearing a Vestal priestess must die. But the criminal sentenced to death meeting a Vestal priestess is pardoned.

In his *Life of King Numa*, Plutarch relates about the punishment that was given to the virgin convicted of immoral behaviour. Unchastity of a Vestal was considered to be incestuous. Those who protected life should not be killed but had to be given back to the mother of all, the earth. At the city gate near the field of the first Roman king, Servius Tullius, below the present Via Goito near the Ministero del Tesoro e del Bilancio:

'... a small chamber is constructed, with steps leading down from above. In this there is a couch with its coverings, a lighted lamp, and very small portions of the necessaries of life, such as bread, a bowl of water, milk and oil, as though they would thereby absolve themselves from the charge of destroying by hunger a life which had been consecrated to the highest service of religion. Then the culprit herself is placed on a litter, over which coverings are thrown and fastened down with cords so that not even a cry can be heard from within, and carried through the forum. All the people there silently make way for the litter, and follow it without uttering a sound, in a terrible depression of soul. No other spectacle is more appalling, nor does any other day bring more gloom to the city than this. When the litter reaches its destination, the attendants unfasten the cords of the coverings. Then the high-priest, after stretching his hands toward heaven and uttering certain mysterious prayers before the fatal act, brings forth the culprit, who is closely veiled, and places her on the steps leading down into the chamber. After this he turns away his face, as do the rest of the priests, and when she has gone down, the steps are taken up, and great

¹¹ Livy: *Ab urbe condita* II 40, 11-12.

¹² Servius: *Ad Verg. Aen.* 3, 75.

loads of earth are thrown into the entrance to the chamber, hiding it away, and make the place level with the rest of the mound.¹³

Archaic thinking and acting, the life of the earliest Roman is saturated with ‘religion’. However, we do not understand Roman reality if we satisfy ourselves with the formal, almost juridical definition of *religio* and *pietas* given by Cicero: ‘do the right thing for the gods – *iustitia adversum deos*’¹⁴. Cicero also knew that *religio* is the attachment, the commitment, the link and chain between people and gods, heaven and earth. The Greek word for this would be *harmonia*. In his *De fato* Cicero writes that ‘to neglect’, ‘to disregard’ – *negligere* is the opposite of *religere*, ‘to be involved’ which is the essence of *religio*.

This involvement can be illustrated by a scene from the life of the *flamen Dialis*. In addition to the priests, pontifices and members of consecrated colleges such as the *Salii*, there were priests of certain gods in Rome, the *flamines*. The three most important were the priest of Jupiter, the priest of Mars and the priest of Quirines. The priest of Jupiter was not called the *flamen Iovialis*, like the *flamen Martialis* and *Quirinalis*, but *Dialis*, the priest of the bright day.

He had to radiate light and brightness during his life. Death was not allowed to touch him, and he was not allowed to come near a grave or enter a house in which there was a corpse. He was not allowed to ride a horse or to see an army going to war. The personality of the *flamen Dialis* is completely overtaken by his function, he is life itself. It is remarkable that, unlike the *Martialis* and the *Quirinalis*, he holds his position with his wife, *flaminica*, and children, *camilli et camillae*.

The importance of this goes way beyond the indication of his ‘jovial’, exuberant life style. The Romans had six ways of entering into a marriage. The marriage of the *flamen* and the *flaminica* was the *confarreatio*, the holiest commitment. As priest of Jupiter, the protector of marriage, the *flamen Dialis* himself, together with the pontifex maximus, conducted his marriage ceremony. His wife was then *sacerdos Iovis* and the holy bride of the priest of day, *coniunx sancta Dialis*. In fact, she was not the priest’s bride, but he was the husband of the priestess. In case of divorce or at the death of his wife, the *flamen Dialis* lost his dignity. The actual bearer of

¹³ Plutarch: *Numa* X 3-7. Translation B. Perrin, Delphi Classics, Hastings 2013.

¹⁴ Cicero: *De Natura deorum* I 41, 116.