

REVIEW

AUGUSTUS AND THE MYTH OF ROMULUS

Antonietta Castiello, *Augusto il fondatore: la rinascita di Roma e il mito romuleo*. Philippika 152. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2021. Pp. x + 195. Paperback, €49.00. ISBN 978-3-447-11651-0.

In her book, Castiello revisits a topic well known to Augustan scholars, but still capable of yielding new interpretations and insight into the first emperor's policies: Augustus' association with Romulus and the evolution of the Romulean legend in the Augustan age. Specifically, Castiello argues that Rome's foundation myth offered Augustus the baseline for his 're-foundation' of the city and his reshaping of Roman identity. Augustus' elaboration of the Romulean myth could have been a strategy to solve the 'identity crisis' experienced by contemporary Romans (ix). As explained in the book's preface, Castiello's work has been inspired by the studies of Robert Schilling, T. P. Wiseman, Augusto Frascetti, Gianluca De Sanctis, and Attilio Mastrocinque as well as Jan Assmann's memory studies and H.-J. Gehrke's notion of *intentionale Geschichte*. The approach thus taken is socio-anthropological, finding its most compelling application in Castiello's treatment of Roman territorial identity (Chapter 2, below).

Chapter 1 ('Augusto, Romolo e il *pomerium*: stato della ricerca') begins with a literature-review discussing seminal contributions to the study of the Augustan Principate, from Syme to Zanker to Werner Eck. Particular emphasis is given to the work of the German scholars Jochen Bleicken and Werner Dalheim, who have both focused on Augustus' radical change of image after Actium. The two scholars' main argument, which Castiello embraces, is that Augustus successfully became the sole ruler because he assumed the role of *liberator* and *reformer rei publicae*; in his quasi-chameleonic nature, Augustus is comparable to an actor who can read his audience and change the script based on the audience's expectations. One of the pressing issues of the new regime—and one of the central motifs of the book—was how Augustus could re-establish a sense of common identity after a century of civil conflicts and remind the Romans of their common past without falling into the same mistake of late republican politicians, who used episodes of Roman history for self-promotional interests, manipulating decontextualised *exempla* to support political agendas. Castiello's persuasive answer is that Augustus sought to reconstruct the Romans' collective memory by reviving Rome's foundation-

myth and creating a direct association between himself and the founder, Romulus. The main obstacle to this was the ambiguous portrait of Romulus as both Rome's founder and fratricide, but Augustus was able to overcome it, as post-Caesarian literary elaborations of the legend conveniently shifted the focus from Romulus' murderous act (and thus despotic behaviour) to Remus' sacrilegious trespassing of the *pomerium*.

Expanding on the methodological remarks made in the introduction, Castiello clarifies the soundness of her application of Assmann's studies about collective memory and Gehrke's notion of *Mythenrationalisierung* to the Romulean legend. The collective memory of a group is based on 'memoria comunicativa' (the oral transmission of myths within that specific community) and 'memoria culturale' (the modification of a myth through deliberate narrative changes over time and generations). *Mythenrationalisierung* is the process through which myth is not merely 'rationalised' but also made relevant to the present, becoming *intentionale Geschichte*. This manipulation of the past is typical of people in power (like Augustus) who use it to justify and maintain their position of authority. Employing these categories as a framework, it is possible to answer the fundamental question about the motives for the changes in the Romulean legend and Romulus' portrait during the Augustan age.

Chapter 2, 'L'identità territoriale e la figura del fondatore in antichità', opens with another methodological section discussing modern and ancient perspectives of identity. Castiello situates the early uses of the notion of *identitas* or *tautotēs* in presocratic philosophy and, subsequently, in Plato and Aristotle. Castiello quotes bits of the conversation between Theaetetus and Socrates in the *Theaetetus*, showing how the meaning of identity developed to signify 'being identical to self' and thus preserving one's substance over time. Aristotle later codified this concept in his *Metaphysics*, where he further defines identity in terms of 'not otherness'. Castiello maintains that this long excursus is necessary for approaching the study of Roman identity using not modern categories but rather the Aristotelian ones. While this is an important premise, I wonder whether the disquisition is in fact over-comprehensive. By the time the author returns to the theme of identity in Rome's foundation myth, one has almost forgotten what the book is about.

More relevant is the second part of Chapter 2, in which Castiello discusses Klaus Müller's theory of *topogenesis* and the role of the territory in the creation of a group's collective identity. The process of *topogenesis* involves a fated leader and a group of people seeking new land, which is eventually allotted to them by divine will and where the group is conducted by the fated leader. Castiello emphasises the relevance, here as well as in the Romulean foundation myth, of the divine element: since the territory is chosen by the gods, the leader will mark out the future city's borders and centre through a religious ritual. In turn, as an individual chosen by the gods to fulfil the foundation's rituals, the leader

possesses *charisma*—in Max Weber’s definition, ‘a divine gift of authority that allows him to be acknowledged in his leading role by the other members of a community’. The territory within the ritually traced borders is perceived as pure, and any trespassing is thus a religious transgression. Castiello compares this model to J. M. Lotman’s concept of semiotic borders, which have the function of translating the signs that, through them, pass into the semiosphere into words intelligible for the semiosphere’s inhabitants. The act of marking out the city’s borders and purified space within might also recall the Aristotelian idea of catharsis, as the elimination of the ‘other’ is an integral part of the construction of a system or society. Hence, the ‘catarsi territoriale’ (44) is the first step in the creation of group identity.

In Chapter 3, ‘I figli della lupa e la fondazione di Roma’, Castiello contextualises the story of Romulus’ founding of Rome within the broader category of legendary journeys and foundations of cities by heroes, such as the survivors of the Trojan War. The general pattern—which consists of the hero’s exile or escape from the motherland, his search for new land, his violent acquisition of it, and the final land’s consecration—is illustrated through the story of Antenor, the mythical founder of Padua. It is not entirely clear why Castiello did not choose a better-known story for this purpose, such as that of Aeneas, which is moreover linked directly with Rome’s foundation. Castiello also appears to overlook the fact that, in the ancient sources, Romulus is never portrayed as an exile or a fugitive; rather, he deliberately leaves Alba Longa to build his own city. Castiello then revisits the main events of Romulus’ early life from his miraculous birth from Rhea Silvia and Mars to his adoption by Faustulus together with Remus, his turbulent youth, and the clash with Numitor’s shepherds. The latter provides the aetiological background for the establishment of the Lupercalia and the definition of Remus as a ‘wolf-like’ character, the natural antagonist of Romulus and the civilised world he will demarcate by tracing the *pomerium*. The episode of Remus’ abduction further deepens the gap between the two brothers by opposing the rustic lifestyle of Remus to Romulus’ pious pursuits. It is here that Castiello convincingly connects Romulus’ character to Weber’s idea of *charisma*: Romulus possesses the qualities of a good leader by choosing to perform sacrifices to the gods on behalf of the community instead of wasting his time strolling in the countryside.

Castiello further explores the differences in the characterisation of Romulus and Remus in the episode of the revelation of their divine birth, observing that earlier authors (i.e., Valerius Antias, Livy, and Dionysius) at this point turn Remus into a secondary character, whereas later ones (Conon, Ovid, and Plutarch) give equal prominence to both brothers. Castiello’s analysis focuses on the sources that the respective authors had access to, but seems to ignore their individual agendas. The emphasis on Romulus’ deeds in Dionysius and Livy cannot be merely attributed to Fabius Pictor but should

consider the two authors' backgrounds and especially their Augustan setting.¹ Castiello's investigation of the episodes of Remus' rescue and the restitution of Alba Longa's throne to Numitor similarly centres on the layers of the tradition and the antiquity of the surviving versions, arguing that the oldest version has Romulus as the protagonist, whereas the most recent layers allow for the collaboration of the twins in solving the crisis—possibly as a consequence of a post-civil-war climate and the related abhorrence of despotic personalities. The argument is convincing but, again, Castiello appears to favour a *Quellenforschung* approach that obscures the authors' individual narrative choices. This might detract from her main proposition, which is precisely to investigate changes in the Romulean legend at the time (and even at the hands) of Augustus.

The last portion of the chapter deals with the events immediately preceding Rome's foundation and, specifically, Remus' murder. The section is valuable in its thorough deployment and classification of the numerous sources covering the episode, including later sources such as John Malalas, the *Chronicon Paschale*, and John of Nikiu, which are often disregarded in favour of classical authors. Castiello convincingly shows how the story changed in the late first century BCE. Diodorus, Dionysius, and Ovid frame Remus' crossing of the *pomerium* as a hostile act and thus implicitly identify him as a *polemos* or *hostis* whose killing is wholly justified. The conclusion contains important observations about the role of Romulus as a symbol of Roman identity: his importance was such that his legend kept being modified to satisfy the contingent expectations of a changing society. The legend had Romulus as the only founder in the early stages; then, during the civil wars, his despotic traits and the animosity with his brother were heightened; at the dawn of the Augustan monarchy, Romulus became the model ruler.

Chapter 4, 'Il *pomerium* tra mito e storia', considers why the Augustan sources did not eliminate the conflict between the two brothers altogether from their retelling of the legend. The answer, Castiello argues, lies in the significance of the *pomerium* for the Romans as a sacred space (*locus*); by jumping over or through it, Remus became a *homo sacer* and was thus punishable by death. In the first section of the chapter, Castiello discusses the ancient sources for the foundation ritual as well as the etymology and nature of *pomerium*. The section is rich in interesting details, although one might wonder whether such wealth and the extensive philological analysis are absolutely necessary to support the idea that the *pomerium* was a dynamic entity and that—to reconnect with the previous chapter—Remus committed a sacrilege when he trespassed it.

¹ Matthew Fox has analysed precisely this episode of Dionysius' *Roman Antiquities* (1.76ff.), providing insight into Dionysius' use of Fabius Pictor: M. Fox, 'The Prehistory of the Roman *polis* in Dionysius', in R. Hunter and C. C. de Jonge, edd., *Dionysius of Halicarnassus and Augustan Rome: Rhetoric, Criticism and Historiography* (Cambridge, 2019) 180–200.

Chapter 5, ‘Augusto e il mito di fondazione,’ returns to the book’s main theme, namely, Augustus’ association with Romulus. Castiello describes the war between Octavian and Antony—the last of the civil wars—as a fratricide, since the two men were both heirs to Caesar (even if Antony was not officially so). A latter-day Remus, Antony had come to embody the ‘other’ and was in fact framed by Octavian and his allies as an enemy of the Roman state. His role as a *lupercus* and his preposterous gesture of offering Caesar the crown during the Lupercalia race supplies a compelling association with the *lupercus* Remus and his transgression at the first Lupercalia when he stole the *exta* for the sacrifice. Castiello carefully retraces Augustus’ career, from his family background and adoption to the days of the triumvirate, the wars against Brutus and Cassius, Lucius Antonius, Sextus Pompeius, and finally Antony. In my understanding, this section’s purpose is to explain Octavian’s increasing influence and military success and the reasons for the widening gap between himself and Antony. While eventually it achieves this purpose, there are too many unrelated facts reported, which almost turn the section into a history textbook chapter.²

In Chapter 6, ‘Il *pomerium* come strumento partecipativo postumo’, Castiello provides an in-depth analysis of the strategies by which Octavian rebranded his image after Actium. The association with Romulus as the founder of a new era was certainly powerful, but Romulus’ figure also bore negative connotations as a legacy of the late republican struggles with his despotic portrait. The Augustan sources were responsible for purging Romulus from the sin of fratricide without changing his role in the foundation of Rome and the establishment of the *pomerium*—the two acts that gave the Romans their identity as a united people. Thus modified, the legend could offer a comparison with the events surrounding the last civil war and Octavian’s role as a champion of *romanitas*. Romulus symbolised the new beginnings of Roman society and the idealised re-foundation of the state conducted by Augustus: as part of Roman collective memory, Romulus became, through Augustus, part of the new world order. In this context, the *pomerium* acted like a *mnēmotopos*, a place that has become part of a community’s collective memory (151). Romulus’ *pomerium* was a badge of inclusion, separating the city’s endosphere from the exosphere where Rome’s enemies resided. By defeating Antony and, subsequently, pardoning Antony’s supporters, Augustus cast himself as a new Romulus, who punished the enemy and included former ‘traitors’ in the endosphere, in the re-founded Roman community.

² I agree with Laura Fontana in her review (*BMCR* 2022.11.14) that the section could indeed have been more in line with the book’s main topic and focused on the Romulean associations of Augustus.

Overall, the book takes an original, interdisciplinary approach to its subject matter, showing how even widely studied topics like Rome's foundation legend and Augustus' rise to power still offer opportunities for debate and new interpretations. The weakest feature of the book is its obvious nature as a Ph.D. dissertation, which is never completely disguised. There are numerous, lengthy literature-reviews of several topics that do not really add much to the book's arguments and could have been more fittingly summarised in a few footnotes (e.g., the controversial etymology of *pomerium* and the diatribe between 'fideisti' and 'scettici', both in Chapter 1). Discussions of methodological issues appear in almost every chapter and, notwithstanding their usefulness in appreciating the author's approach, they are generally too long and too comprehensive, even distracting, to belong in a monograph. In Chapters 2, 3, and 4, the deployment of all the sources known to Castiello on the topics in question with full texts, while demonstrating her exhaustive knowledge of the literary tradition, hinders the linear progression of her reasoning and might diminish the reader's attention. The bibliography appears thorough and up-to-date, although it lacks interpretative sources and commentaries on most of the ancient authors cited in the text. The book will nevertheless be useful to Augustan scholars as well as scholars interested in Romulus and Rome's foundation legend for the novelty of its method and interpretation and the abundance of ancient sources provided.

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