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Reinventing tenacious anchors:

Romulus in the cultural memory of the early and late Roman Empire

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Related Projects: [Memoriae conditorum, conditores memoriae. Memory-making and the foundation of Rome in the Augustan age and Late Antiquity](#) & [Finding the present in the distant past. The cultural meaning of antiquarianism in Late Antiquity](#)

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We aim to show how the concept of cultural memory (central to several ongoing research projects within Dutch classical studies) can offer a valuable contribution to the method of anchoring innovation. In antiquity, cultural memory does not only serve as a passive recipient of past events: rather, it influences actions of individuals and groups in the present, by anchoring present and prospective events and transformations in a coherent whole of past and present. The 'soggy' and flexible nature of cultural memory, we argue, makes it particularly fertile ground for anchoring. Our hypothesis is that the tenacious aspect of Roman cultural memory can account for the longevity and success of an anchoring device, even if that device is applied to different ends or in conflicting contexts. The omnipresence of such tenacious anchors in Roman memory forces every potential heir to the Roman legacy to engage with them. Romulus is one of these tenacious anchors. His role in the foundation of Rome figures prominently in two crucial periods of transformation in Roman history. Drawing on theories of cultural memory, invented traditions, antiquarianism and intentional history, we hope to show briefly how Rome in

general, and recurses to her distant origins in particular, continued to function as important anchors for political innovations over the course of six centuries.

Reinventing the anchor: Romulus in Augustan and late antique Rome

The young heir and adoptive son of Caesar, who would take 'Augustus' as his cognomen in 27 BC, referred back to Romulus, the ancient founder of Rome, in order to seek legitimacy for his own innovative political position of Princeps. Famously, in the meeting of the Senate that bestowed an august honorary cognomen upon him, many were of the opinion that young Caesar should actually be named Romulus, *quasi et ipsum conditorem Urbis* ("as being, in a manner, a second founder of the city", Suet. *Aug.* 7.2).¹

It is perhaps less well known, and sharply at odds with the regular interpretation of the event, based on Cassius Dio (LIII.16.4-8), according to which Romulus was used to legitimize Augustus' new monarchic rule, that the comparison with Romulus referred back to no less a Republican hero than Cicero. In his third *Catilinarian*, delivered in the Romulean setting of the temple of Jupiter Stator, old Tully had likewise styled himself as a new Romulus,² surely not with the intention of seeking to overthrow the Republic and initiate a monarchy. What both Cicero and Augustus stressed by referring back to Romulus, was their role of saviours of Rome in a period of great peril and distress.

Augustus, however, went far beyond Cicero in doing so. Perhaps the most famous Augustan evocation of Romulus is the *casa Romuli* on the Palatine, next to the residence of the princeps.³ This pristine hut was seen and described by Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*Ant. Rom.* I.79.11-12), but although he was convinced of its antiquity, the Palatine hut must, for a variety of reasons it would take too long to elaborate on, either have been a pre-existing structure renamed after Romulus in the Augustan era, or a deliberate archaism constructed ex-novo on the Palatine, probably in 12 BC, when the cult of Vesta was also transferred to the hill.⁴ In providing a tangible monument that testified to Romulus' primordial presence on the very same hill where the princeps now resided (perhaps copied or transferred from the Capitoline hill, where a better attested hut was located), this Augustan invention of tradition provided the new founder of the city with a physical anchor that tied him to the original foundation. Since it fitted the purpose and the circumstances of the Augustan age so well, and was doubtlessly carried out with antiquarian precision, this reinvention of Romulus met with a great deal of success, convincing scholars up

¹ Translation by R. Graves (London 1957).

² Vasaly (1993: 49-59).

³ Among the vast literature on the subject, see e.g. Balland (1984), Edwards (1996: 35-43), Rea (2007: 21-43), Wiseman (2013: 251, 253-255, 263).

⁴ See Hunsucker (2013).

to the 21st century A.D. The innovation of the Augustan Principate was thus successfully anchored in Rome's primordial past by reinventing the honourable founder of the city.

That was to prove itself a valuable recipe for success. More than three centuries later, a Gallic orator hailed Constantine as a new Romulus, again miraculously helped by the sacred Tiber, this time not washing ashore a basket with a pair of providential babies, but drowning Constantine's doomed opponent, Maxentius, at the Milvian bridge (*Pan. Lat.* XII (9) 18.1-2). A poignant reinvention of Romulus, indeed, since it was Maxentius who had linked himself to Romulus most conspicuously, in honour of which he is deemed *falsus Romulus* by the Constantinian panegyrist.

But the device wasn't successful for emperors alone, anchoring their rule of Rome. The Christian poet Prudentius, around the year 400, evokes Romulus in one of his lyric treatments of the conversion of Rome to Christianity. While Christ becomes the new founder of the city, Romulus now becomes a faithful Christian (*Prud. Perist.* II. 409-420, 441-444):

"These words spoken in jest, he [St. Lawrence] then looks up to heaven, and sighing deeply prays in pity for the Romulean city: "O Christ, the one name, the glory and strength of the Father, creator of earth and sky and founder of this city, who hast set the sceptre of the world on Rome's high citadel, ordaining that the world obey the toga of Quirinus and yield to his arms, (...) May she [Rome] see that countries far apart are uniting in one state of grace, and may Romulus become one of the faithful, and Numa himself be now a believer."⁵

The ultimate expression of Rome's Christianisation, not to speak of Peter and Paul replacing Romulus and Remus as twin founders of the city by the year 450 (see pope Leo the Great's 82nd Sermon). Similarly, Augustine presents the asylum established by Romulus and Remus as a prefiguration of Christ, sheltering refugees during the sack of Rome in A.D. 410 (*De civitate Dei*, I.34, V.17). Both of them thus anchor the major innovation of the new religion that took over Rome in the unlikely, but evidently authoritative figure of Rome's founder. Or, of course: founders, in the plural. Where's Remus in all this?

Young Horace had famously found an anchor for the civil wars of his day in Romulus' fratricide (*Epode* 7).⁶ Although Augustine treats the matter with a remarkable mildness and scholarly integrity (see *De civitate dei* III.6), there was certainly no lack of Christian authors polemically exploiting Rome's primordial sin

⁵ Translation (slightly adapted) by H.J. Thomson (Cambridge, MA 1953); see further Mastrangelo (2008: 76).

⁶ See further Wiseman (1995).

of fratricide in Late Antiquity. Jerome scandalises Rome's founder, setting him and his hut (there we have it again) against Christ and Maria, creating an opposition between Rome and Jerusalem at the same time (Hier., *Praef. ad Dydim. Spir.* = PL XXIII, 107). The combination of commenting on Romulus' fratricide and a shift in the balance of prominence from West to East would prove productive for centuries to come.

A negative anchoring: Romulus in 6th century Constantinople

In Constantinople, the new Rome at the Bosphorus, different authors debated the moral legitimacy of the old capital of the empire through a close scrutiny of the questionable character of Romulus, who had founded Rome on the blood of his brother Remus.

The moral anchoring of Rome in comparison with Constantinople is conspicuous in the chronicle of John Malalas (c. 490 – c. 570 AD), up to the point of providing a structure to the chronicle as a whole. The chronicle, which recounts the salvation history of Christianity, is in fact a circle composition. Its centre is book X which recounts the life of Christ. The seventh book with the history of the foundation of Rome and book XIII with the foundation of Constantinople, are both two books removed from the central book X, and are six books removed from the beginning and the end of the *Chronicle*. The pivotal position of book X with the coming of Christ also entails a moral shift; book VII anchors the city of Rome and its founders negatively as opposed to the city of Constantinople, the morally superior counterpart of the old Rome.

In his moral comparison between Rome and Constantinople, John Malalas portrays Rome as the evil counterpart of Constantinople. The main target of his anti-history is Romulus and the origin of Rome. The whole of the seventh book is littered with negative remarks on the founder of Rome. The fratricide of Romulus (*Chron.* VII.1) is the cause of natural disasters and civil unrest (*Chron.* VII.2-5). In response to these calamities Romulus devised several ways to deal with his unruly subjects. For instance, the hippodrome at Rome turns out to be a Machiavellian devise, designed by Romulus only to divide his populace into factions and to divert them from plotting against their tyrant (*Chron.* VII. 4-5):

“He started work again immediately and built the hippodrome in Rome, wishing to divert the mass of the people of Rome because they were rioting and attacking him because of his brother (...) When Romus saw members of any of the factions supporting the populace or senators who were disaffected and opposed him because of the death of his brother, or for any other reason

whatsoever, he would decide to support the other faction, and so he secured their favour and their opposition to the aim of his enemies.”⁷

The atmosphere of illegitimacy surrounding the foundation of Rome is coupled to a notion of continuous civil strife. The original murder of Remus by Romulus sets in motion a continuing succession of civil unrest and factionalism during the reign of Romulus (*Chron.* VII.1-7), which will endure throughout the account of Rome’s early history –and, indeed, throughout the rest of the chronicle.

As analysed by my estimable colleague Raphael Hunsucker, the Roman anchoring practices associate Augustus and the Principate positively with Romulus. Yet in the context of the negative anchoring by John Malalas, the associations between Romulus and Augustus provide suitable ground for criticisms of Augustus and the late antique mode of emperorship he represents. Malalas stresses the continuity between the illegitimate rule of Romulus and the Roman kings on the one hand and the emperors on the other hand. The reign of Caesar neatly parallels the rule of Romulus in its illegitimacy. The same anti-imperial views underlie the negative description on the accession to power of Augustus (for example, *Chron.* IX.19). Romulus, the Roman kings and Roman emperors are different aspects of the same illegitimate rule.

Malalas’ negative treatment of Romulus has its parallels in the antiquarian treatises of John of Lydia (c. 490 – c. 565 AD). John of Lydia gives the fratricide of Remus by Romulus a prominent place in his theoretical reflections on the Roman political system at the beginning of his *De Magistratibus*. John of Lydia characterises the rule of Romulus as *regium* or tyranny. He continues with a theoretical reflection on the distinction between just, constitutional kingship and mere tyranny. John of Lydia also specifies how the rule of Romulus qualified for the second variant (*Magistr.* I.5):

“Consequently, Romulus was a tyrant; first of all because he had killed his brother, though older, and because he used to do rashly whatever occurred to him. For this reason he was called also Quirinus, that is to say, *kyrios* (...)”⁸

John of Lydia also associates Romulus the tyrant with Augustus, albeit implicitly. For instance, in *Mens.* IV.111 (Bandy IV.101), John of Lydia points out that Augustus received many nicknames, ‘for some called him *Quirinus*, as if to say, *Romulus*, but others *Caesar*.’ In the light of the analysis in *Magistr.* I.5 of the name Quirinus, denoting Romulus’ tyranny, Augustus’ new title acquires an edgy association, to say the least. Also in *Magistr.* II.3, we hear how Augustus used the same insignia as Romulus and his father Julius Caesar. The otherwise glorious association between

⁷ Jeffrey et al. (1986: 92-94).

⁸ Bandy (1983: 15).

Romulus, Caesar and Augustus is shaded by the echoes of tyranny, civil strife and fraternal hate.

Conclusion

As we tried to show, the tenacity of Romulus as an anchor is not impeded by the fundamental ambiguity inherent in his character. On the contrary, the multi-layeredness of Romulus proved highly potential for the anchoring of Roman identity throughout the vicissitudes of Roman history. The persistence of such a tenacious anchor calls for innovation in the use of the anchor itself. The flexible nature of cultural memory allowed for a continuous re-anchoring of Romulus as an anchoring device –whether in order to positively anchor new forms of leadership in the Augustan age or, negatively, in order to criticise the same forms of power in late antiquity.

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