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Divine Twins:
Remarks On the Conception and Birth of Romulus and Remus

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Abstract

There are many mythical variations surrounding the legend of Romulus, layered over time to create a rich and complex tradition about Rome's origins. This study examines different versions of the conception and birth of the twins, exploring the reasons behind these variations and, where possible, their chronology. Focus is also given to the question of primogeniture – whether Romulus or Remus was considered the elder – as well as to the identity and role of their parents, whose stories shift across ancient sources. These elements are crucial to understanding how Rome shaped its own foundation myths, adapting them to different historical and cultural contexts over time. By tracing these variations, we gain deeper insight into the evolving nature of Roman tradition and efforts to define its legendary past.

A God, a Vestal, Two Twins: Variants of the Myth

This study aims to concentrate on two particularly significant and often underestimated aspects of the myth concerning the birth of Romulus and Remus: the variant attributed to Promathion and the ongoing debate over the identity and role of the twins' parents. Rather than attempting an exhaustive survey of all known versions of the legend, this analysis is focused on these two thematic axes, as they provide crucial insight into the ideological and narrative mechanisms underpinning early Roman mythmaking. By examining these non-canonical elements, we gain a deeper understanding of how the foundational myth of Rome was repeatedly reinterpreted and reshaped to respond to evolving political, religious, and cultural imperatives.

The origins of the Romulus saga can be traced to the disputed succession to the throne of Alba Longa. According to Carandini, this episode likely served as the opening scene of *Alimonium Remi et Romuli*, the *praetexta* by Naevius which focused on the

early upbringing of Romulus and Remus.[1] A similar perspective is found in Zonara, who identifies the myth of Amulius and Numitor as the starting point of Roman history, emphasising their familial connection to the twins: Τὰ δὲ τῶν Ῥωμαίων ἀρχὴν ἐσχήκασι τὸν Νομίτορά τε καὶ τὸν Ἀμούλιον (*Zon.* 7.1). From this, the theme of twinship has generated numerous historiographical interpretations, all seeking to explain its significance through the lens of an underlying binary structure rooted in the cultural, political, and religious dynamics of the Roman world, traceable to its earliest origins.[2] Building on this common line, scholarly interpretations diverged on the dating of the phenomenon and the conceptual frameworks applied to analyse this binary structure. One of the earliest theories was proposed by Niebuhr, who dated the origins of the legend to the mid-Republican period. He viewed the motif of twin figures in Rome's foundation myth as an expression of the ethnic and political dualisms intrinsic in Republican Rome. These dualisms include the coexistence of Aborigines and Pelasgians on the site of the future city, the division between the Palatine and Quirinal communities, and the opposition between patrician and plebeian orders.[3] On this framework, Carcopino reinterpreted the twin motif in strictly ethnic terms, viewing the relationship between Romulus and Remus as an effort to reconcile Roman–Sabine tensions, which he dated to the 5th century BC. While Carcopino explicitly drew on Niebuhr's theories, Mommsen advanced a contrasting perspective, arguing that the legend of the twins was a later development. According to Mommsen, the original myth featured a single founder, with the second twin introduced in response to political transformations in the period between the expulsion of the Tarquins and the Samnite Wars.[4] This approach gained support: scholars such as De Sanctis and Pais endorsed Mommsen's thesis, proposing that the figure of Remus was integrated into the tradition

[1] This work is handed down by Donat. *Commentum in Terentii Adelphos* 4.1.121**.** Regarding the *praetexta* and the possible inclusion of episodes related to Alba, see the discussions in Carandini 2010: 247-248; Marmorale 1953: 152-161; Ogilvie 1965: 44-47; Cornell 1975: 15.
[2] As Carandini 2010: 284 notes, 'la nascita di gemelli ha sempre rappresentato un prodigio. Da ciò l'idea che fossero detentori di particolari poteri magici, a volte positivi (portatori di abbondanza), e altre volte negativi e pertanto da isolare.' The theme of twinship thus emerges as a recurrent motif within the narrative tradition, to the extent that it can be traced back to the original core of the myth, predating even the works of Fabius Pictor. On this topic, see Poucet 1976: 208; cf. 1985: 238-243; cf. 2000: 58-67; Fraschetti 2002: 6.
[3] On this matter, Niebuhr 1831: 205-216; cf. Wiseman 1995: 84-85; cf. Carandini 2010: 284.
[4] Mommsen 1881: 22-23; *contra*, Ver Eecke 2008: 193-194. This perspective is supported by the works of Briquel 1976: 73-97; Meurant 2000: 63-100; Delcourt 2005: 281-283. Additional discussion in Wiseman 1995: 86-87; cf. Fraschetti 2002: 7-9.

around the 4th century BC to legitimise the dual structure of the consulship.[5] In this view, Romulus was the original founder, while Remus was a later addition, reflecting the Republican political order. In contrast, Schulze and Kretschmer presented a radically different hypothesis, arguing that Remus, not Romulus, was the original eponymous hero, with Romulus's name derived from his brother's. More recently, Wiseman has challenged the notion that Remus was a secondary figure added to the myth of Romulus. He argued that portraying Remus as an afterthought is inconsistent with the central theme of fratricide, which presupposes the narrative coexistence of both twins from the outset.[6] Wiseman proposed that Romulus and Remus were conceived simultaneously, between the mid-4th and mid-3rd centuries BC, as symbolic representations of the dual nature of Roman society, embodying the tensions and balance between its social and political structures.

Departing from these conventional historiographical interpretations, in our opinion, the first critical element to consider is the conception of Romulus and Remus. Ancient sources preserve three principal versions of the twins' conception, each offering distinct insights into the myth's ideological and narrative construction. The earliest and most extensively attested version, preserved in the account of Fabius Pictor, appears to have constituted the dominant tradition, as indicated by the breadth of subsequent references across multiple sources. In this variant, the narrative opens with Rea Silvia engaging in a ritual act, collecting lustral water either from a spring or river, as noted by Statius (*Silvae* 1.2.243), or, more commonly, from a sacred grove consecrated to Mars, as reported by a broader array of ancient authors.[7] Despite their divergences, all extant versions exhibit a consistent structural feature: the presence of a supernatural intervention or prodigious omen that serves as the narrative catalyst. According to Servius (*ad Aen.* 1.273), Rea Silvia is startled by the sudden apparition of a wolf, leading her to take refuge in a cave where she encounters Mars. By contrast, Fabius Pictor and Vennonius (*Orig.* 20.1) identify a violent and unexpected storm as the divine sign inaugurating the subsequent chain of events. A third variant, preserved in Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1.77.1) and Plutarch (*Mor.* 320a-b), introduces the

[5] On this topic, see De Sanctis 1907: 207-210; cf. Pais 1926: 313-320.
[6] Wiseman 1995: 84-96; 113-120; *contra*, Schulze 1933 and Kretschmer 1909: 288-303.
[7] Dion. Hal. 1.77.1 is the only source to provide a chronological reference; additional references include Fabius Pictor in *Orig.* 20.1-3; App. *BCiv.* 1.6; Serv. *Ad Aen.* 1.273.

occurrence of a total solar eclipse, a detail plausibly introduced in the late Republican period to intensify the myth's dramatic tension.[8] Although these accounts diverge in detail, they converge on fundamental elements: Rea Silvia was visited by Mars in the form of a spectral figure, who later revealed his divine identity and foretelling the future greatness of Rome through their progeny. Across the various narrative strands, a recurrent and distinctive motif of this variant emerges with clarity: the conception of Romulus and Remus is invariably initiated by a sudden and unpredictable supernatural occurrence, emphasising the primacy of divine agency in the myth. In this regard, the event is depicted as being entirely beyond human influence, orchestrated by the gods as an omen of Rome's imperial destiny. The connection to the divine is further emphasised through symbolic elements associated with Mars, such as the wolf and the storm, further anchoring the myth within the religious and cultural framework of early Roman culture, framing Romulus's birth as a divinely sanctioned act foundational to the city's identity.[9]

The second version of the myth, first attested during the later annalistic period, marks a significant departure from the earlier canonical narrative. In this variant, Rea Silvia is not impregnated by Mars, but by a mortal man. The identity of this figure varies across sources: some refer to him as an anonymous commoner, while others explicitly identify him as Amulius (*Orig.* 19.5; Dion. Hal. 1.77.1), whom Dionysius of Halicarnassus describes as fully armed, a detail that likely reflects a rationalising intent. In fact, Dionysius would have had no reason to depict the figure as armed unless he was attempting to humanise Mars, by transforming his divine essence into a more tangible representation. This interpretive strategy finds a parallel in the Byzantine chronicle of John Malalas (*CSHB* 178), who attributes the act of violence to a soldier. An isolated tradition, preserved by Pseudo-Isidorus (*Hist.* 3), claims that the assailant was Rea Silvia's husband. However, this latter account stands in tension with one of the most structurally significant features of the myth: Rea Silvia's identity

[8] Celestial phenomena were commonly associated with exceptional events in Roman myths, such as the divine conception of Romulus or his subsequent apotheosis. Besides, Plut. *Rom.* 12.5 records that the astronomer Tarutius, using retrospective astrological calculations, dated Romulus's conception to 24 June 772 BC, the summer solstice, during an eclipse. This kind of elaboration may reflect the late Republican intellectual currents, profoundly influenced by Hellenistic astronomical thought, which sought to confer legitimacy upon Rome's origins.
[9] Relevant references of the destiny of Rome in *Orig.* 20.1; Cic. *Rep.* 2.4; Dion. Hal. 1.77.1. In this regard, Cappelli 2000: 163; cf. Caradini 2010: 168 on the Bolsena mirror.

as a Vestal virgin, a narrative element typically regarded as belonging to the earliest stratum of the tradition and essential to the myth's framework.[10]

A lesser-known variant of the myth, representing an alternative tradition to the canonical version and attributed to the historian Promathion,[11] is preserved by Plutarch (*Rom.* 2.4-6). In this account, Rea Silvia is not presented as the daughter of Numitor, but as a slave belonging to the daughter of Tarchetius, the tyrant of Alba. According to this version, she conceives the twins under extraordinary circumstances after encountering a flaming phallus that emerges from the hearth of the *regia*. Plutarch explicitly characterises the story as entirely mythical: *οἱ δὲ μυθώδη παντάπασι περὶ τῆς γενέσεος διεξίασι* (*Rom.* 2.4), emphasising its divergence from the more historically anchored versions of the legend. The narrative revolves around a prophetic oracle delivered by Thetis, foretelling that the woman who unites with the hearth-born phallus will bear a child destined for greatness. To control the prophecy's outcome, Tarchetius commands his daughter to fulfill it, but she defies her father's order and sends her slave in her place. Upon uncovering the deception, Tarchetius condemns both women to death but is ultimately swayed by a vision of the goddess Vesta, who intervenes in a dream to spare their lives. Instead, he imposes a sentence of perpetual virginity upon them, confining them with the stipulation that they may only be released upon the completion of a weaving task. Each night, Tarchetius secretly unravels their progress, thereby preventing them from finishing the task. This narrative motif bears a striking resemblance to the episode of Penelope's loom in Homer's *Odyssey*, suggesting its later addition.[12] Given the thematic association between weaving and marriage prospects in both Promathion's account and the *Odyssey*, scholars have interpreted this episode as a symbolic rite of passage or initiation for young women. Within this interpretive framework, the act of completing the weaving task represents

[10] Although the identity of who committed the rape is not defined, Dion. Hal. 1.77.1 describes the assailant as a suitor in love with Rea Silvia; Ps.-Ger. *Chron.* 146 attributes the act of violence to a group, referring to her as *constuprata a consodalibus*.

[11] Promathion remains an obscure figure: scholars have proposed two principal identifications. The first associates him with Promathidas of Heraclea Pontica, a writer active in the early 3rd century, discussed by Desideri 1967: 366-416. The second hypothesis links him to Promathos of Samos, a figure operating between the late 6th and early 5th century, already mentioned in Arist. fr. 248 Rose; D'Anna 1975: 211; Wiseman 1995: 58. An alternative proposal, advanced by Gabba 1967: 147-149, suggests that Promathion may have been an otherwise unidentified author active in the 1st century BC. More detailed discussion in Ampolo 1988: 272-276; Carandini 2010: 266; cf. Martínez-Pinna 2011b: 110.

[12] In this regard, see the references in Hom. *Od*. 2.93-110.

not merely the attainment of domestic skills, but also the readiness to assume the societal responsibilities associated with marriage.[13] According to Promathion, the union between the slave woman and the phallic apparition from the hearth results in the birth of twin sons. Tarchetius orders his servant, Teratius, to kill the infants, but instead of carrying out the execution, Teratius abandons them along the banks of the Tiber. There, they are first encountered by a she-wolf, who nurses them, and subsequently discovered and raised by a local shepherd.

Considerations on the Promathion Variant

The Promathion variant presents several interpretative challenges, the most critical of which concerns its chronological framework.[14] In attempting to establish a plausible date for the account, a lot of features of Etruscan provenance emerge as potentially significant. Although the setting is nominally Alban, the king Tarchetius bears a distinctly Etruscan name whose origin seems to be linked to, or perhaps derived from, that of the Roman Tarquins. A similar observation can be made regarding the character of Teratius, whose name likewise appears to reflect Etruscan onomastic patterns. Equally notable are the structural affinities between this version and the tradition concerning the conception of Servius Tullius. In both narratives, the birth of a future ruler is attributed to the miraculous union of a slave woman – Ocresia, in the case of Servius, a war captive and servant in the household of Tarquinius Priscus – with a phallic apparition emerging from the flames of the *regia*.[15] This resemblance extends beyond narrative motifs to thematic elements, including the presence of an Etruscan oracle within the saga. The oracle's prophecy, which attributes a favourable destiny to the child born from the union of the phallus and the servant, recalls traditional associations with the rise of Servius Tullius. On this point, Mazzarino argues

[13] For the symbolic interpretation of the weaving episode, see Cairo 2016: 21. Nevertheless, from the mid-8 century BC, both the Etruscans and the Romans had established sustained contact with Greeks. These interactions imply a degree of exposure to the myth of Odysseus and its narrative motifs. Malkin 2004: 189-195 offered an analysis of the mechanisms of oral cultural transmission from Greek epic into the Roman tradition on the origins of the city.
[14] Historiographical debate in Gabba 1967: 147-149, Cornell 1975: 26, Bremmer 1987: 50; *contra* Accame 1959: 155, Mazzarino 1966: 93-94, Alföldi 1965: 327-288; Strasburger 1968: 15-16. Wiseman highlights the debate on whether the account represents a later compilation. Further details on this interpretation can be found in Wiseman 1995: 57-59.
[15] On this matter, see Ampolo 1988: 273; Coarelli 1997: 140-141; Wiseman 1995: 57.

that the political function of this variant strengthens its association with the period of Servius Tullius.[16] Nevertheless, this connection does not necessarily indicate that the saga originated during that time. Rather, the narrative seems to be composed of several layers, often showing internal inconsistencies that suggest a process of gradual accumulation and revision over time. Such complexity highlights the inherently fluid nature of mythological traditions, which are shaped in response to changing historical, cultural, and political contexts. While determining a definitive chronological placement remains challenging, the presence of Etruscan elements suggests that the transmitted version of the saga may encode the socio-political dynamics of the final phase of the regal period, and that its elaboration can plausibly be situated within this specific historical context.

Although narratively irreconcilable with the other two accounts, the Promathion version preserves essential elements that ensure coherence with the mythological logic of the story. Despite divergences in plot and sequence, significant analogies nonetheless emerge within the structure, particularly evident in certain key moments of the narrative. Among these are the figure of the malevolent king, the presence of miraculous events, and the theme of hierogamy, recurring motifs that probably suggest the existence of a shared symbolic or narrative core. Furthermore, this version includes prodigious signs that prefigure both the miraculous nature of the conception and the exceptional destiny of the offspring.[17] As in the canonical account, for instance, a range of extraordinary phenomena precedes the epiphany of Mars, reinforcing the divine orchestration of the events to follow. Similarly, in the version under consideration, we find both the oracular prophecy of Thetis and the prodigy of the phallus. The pronounced parallels between Promathion's version of Romulus and the birth narrative of Servius Tullius suggest a deliberate recontextualization of the former within the broader framework of Rome's foundation myth. If so, the analogies between Promathion's account and the legend of Servius Tullius could also support a

[16] In this regard, Mazzarino 1960: 93-94; Cairo 2016: 21. Furthermore, Carandini 2010: 275 argues, *contra* Ampolo 1988: 274-275, who suggested the presence of an ancient Etruscan core, that the first part of the text attributed to Promathion is more influenced by the cultural climate that emerged in Rome at the end of the 6th century. About the connection between the conceptions of Romulus and Servius Tullius, see Martínez-Pinna 2011b: 111-112.

[17] According to Martínez-Pinna 2011b: 111-113, the element of fire in the hero's birth represents a motif rooted in Latin mythology. Supporting this thesis is the legend of Caeculus, founder of *Praeneste*, which similarly features the symbolic role of fire; cf. Serv. *Ad Aen.* 7.687.

later dating for the author than those traditionally proposed by scholars: indeed, it is reasonable to suggest that the historian, already familiar with the “Fabian” saga of Romulus, should be placed in a chronological context no earlier than the 3rd century BC.[18] The second part of the narrative, concerning the exposure, closely mirrors the traditional *vulgata*, particularly aligning with the account of Pictor. Consequently, the myth can be analysed as comprising two distinct narrative sections: the first, influenced by the Etruscan stories of Servius and Tarquinius, and the second, which aligns with the canonical version.

However, within Promathion’s narrative, a significant inconsistency emerges that sets it apart from the first variant discussed. Unlike the *vulgata*, in which the tyrant Amulius seeks to prevent the continuation of Numitor’s legitimate lineage, this version lacks any such dynastic conflict. The absence of this element logically should preclude the necessity of the exposure motif. Nevertheless, it paradoxically remains embedded within the narrative structure. To address this inconsistency, the introduction of a servant who replaces the predestined royal daughter during the sexual union with the phallus appears to function as a narrative device. This substitution provokes the wrath of King Tarchetius, thereby providing an alternative rationale to sustain the exposure motif, compensating for the absence of a dynastic threat. This narrative inconsistency may be addressed by positing a syncretic process, wherein two originally independent traditions – the hearth motif and the canonical account – were amalgamated within the same mythological variant preserved by Promathion.

A further mythological inconsistency arises from the oracle delivered by Thetis. The prophecy, which predicted the birth and future greatness of a single child born from the symbolic union of the hearth's phallus and a slave woman, appears inconsistent with the birth of twins. Martínez-Pinna maintains that the prophetic destiny announced by the oracle is intended solely for Romulus, with Remus' function concluding at the city's foundation. As such, the version of the myth transmitted by Promathion may already encode a latent reference to Remus’ death, prefiguring his narrative subordination and foreshadowing the singular prominence of Romulus as the divinely

[18] In this regard, Carandini 2010: 275. On the relationship between the legend of Servius, the Tarquins, and the account provided by Promathion, Briquel 1981: 14-20; Fraschetti 2002: 4; Ampolo 1988: 274-275; Wiseman 1995: 57; Strasburger 1968: 15.

sanctioned founder.[19] In our opinion, this apparent contradiction could be reconciled by assuming that the prophecy referred generically to a son, without specifying the quantity of offspring. Alternatively, it may again reflect the same mythological variant preserved by Promathion, with the plausible fusion of two distinct narrative traditions: the hearth legend and the canonical version.

The birth order: the primogeniture of Remus

The issue of primogeniture between Romulus and Remus represents a detail of considerable significance, particularly in relation to the theme of twinship. Although this motif is firmly established in the literary tradition, dating back at least to Fabius Pictor, the precise order of their birth remains uncertain. Owing to Romulus's dominant role in the myth, there is an almost implicit assumption that he was the firstborn, although this is not explicitly confirmed by the sources. There are several indications that suggest the existence of a variant in which primogeniture is ascribed to Remus. The most explicit reference is found in Lydus's *De Magistratibus* (1.5): Ὥστε τύραννος ἦν ὁ Ῥωμύλος, πρῶτον μὲν τὸν ἀδελφὸν ἀνελὼν καὶ τὸν μείζονα, καὶ πράττων ἀλόγως τὰ προσπίπτοντα. This passage unequivocally designates Remus as *meízōn*, a term interpretable as "elder" chronologically or as "greater" hierarchically. It also introduces a narrative in which Romulus's fratricide acquires a more dramatic connotation, positioning the act not merely as a personal conflict but as a subversion of natural and familial order. The inclusion of this detail serves to reframe Romulus's fratricide, imbuing it with a more dramatic and morally charged dimension, positioning the act not merely as a personal conflict but as a subversion of natural and familial order Although scholars usually dismissed this passage as a later fabrication, primarily due to the late date of Lydus's work, it is reasonable, following Russo's interpretation, to believe that Lydus preserves a trace of an earlier tradition in which Remus is the more prominent brother because his firstborn status. Several sources support this position. Notably, there are instances where the founder of Rome is mentioned second, following his brother. Examples include Naevius' work *Alimonium Remi et Romuli*, a passage from *De Legibus* which reads *quae ab isto malo praedicari quam, ut aiunt,*

[19] On the interpretation of this mythological inconsistency, see Martínez-Pinna 2011b: 113.

de Remo et Romulo, a fragment from Tacitus' *Annales* that states *quae octingentos et triginta ante annos Remi Romulique infantiam texerat* (13.58), and a passage from Hemina: *pastorum uulgus sine contentione consentiendo praefecerunt aequaliter imperio Remum et Romulum*.[20] Another notable reference occurs when Romulus is called *Altellus* (Fest. 6-7 Lindsay), a term that can be translated as "the smaller other," suggesting that he was the younger. [21] In this context, it is plausible that Romulus's name originated as a diminutive form of *Rhomo*, the name attributed to Remus in various sources, particularly Greek.[22] It is noteworthy that both authors list Remus before Romulus and provide evidence for the use of the names *Romo* and *Romulus*, further supporting the hypothesis of a diminutive origin.[23] So, considering these testimonies, it is also likely that Lydus was drawing on a well-established tradition, incorporating it into his narrative.[24]

This relationship between the twins carries significant implications. As Carandini observes, in many cultural traditions, the firstborn twin is often seen as having been born prematurely, particularly when their birth was forced or expedited.[25] Consequently, the firstborn may be construed as incomplete or deficient relative to the sibling born at the "proper" or divinely ordained moment. The idea of Remus' premature birth, coupled with his inability to evolve beyond his original state, functions as a symbolic anticipation of his early death. On this point, Carandini suggests that Remus forced his mother to give birth before the natural term, aligning him with disorder and chaos, qualities opposed to the civic order embodied by Romulus. Within this framework, Remus, as the firstborn, is portrayed as incomplete or flawed: he crosses the sacred pomerium, consumes *exta*, and is ultimately killed for his transgressions. The presence of twins and the fatal rivalry between them serve a clear narrative purpose. Romulus, as the founder, represents the new urban order, while Remus stands for the older, untamed world. His death, occurring in some versions

[20] Hem. fr. 14 (Cornell); Diod. Sic. 8.3.5; Serv. *Ad Aen.* 1.273. Regarding this, see Carandini 2010: 475; Wiseman 1995: 203. Additionally, Russo 2015: 290-291 suggests that the inversion of names is not indicative of Remus' primogeniture, as seen in the case of Naevius, who, while placing Remus before Romulus in the title, names his tragedy *Romulus*.
[21] On this point, see Fraschetti 2002: 28; Russo 2015: 290; Carandini 2010: 475.
[22] Relevant in this regard are the accounts of App. *BCiv.* 1.6; Plut. *Mor.* 36; 315a, both of which cite Aristides Milesius concerning the birth of Romulus and Remus.
[23] Another mention comes from Fest. 6-8 (Lindsay); cf. Varro, *Ling*. 9,50.
[24] For further details, see the considerations in Russo 2015: 290.
[25] On this matter, see Carandini 2006: 379-380; cf. Cairo 2010: 50-51.

immediately after the city's boundary is marked, symbolises the exclusion of chaos from the newly founded civic space.[26] The act of fratricide thus legitimises the emergence of a single political authority and reflects a broader cultural need to anchor Rome's origins in a myth of order, unity, and rightful rule. In this sense, the elimination of Remus is a ritualised expulsion of the archaic and the undifferentiated; an act that marks the transition from a liminal, ambiguous state to a structured civic identity.

The father and mother of the twins

The events surrounding the conception and birth of the twins cannot be fully understood without considering the circumstances concerning their parents. The relevance of the daughter seems confined to her role as the mother of the twins, serving as an instrument of the destiny of Rome.[27] This interpretation is supported by various inconsistencies within the development of the legend. Firstly, there is the issue of her name. Frequently referred to as either Rea Silvia or Ilia, both names of Greek origin, the sources do not agree on this aspect, perhaps reflecting the character's marginality. For the first of these names, the association of "Silvia" with "Rea" should be considered not as an original component of the legend, but as a later addition from a layer of tradition that is not easily identifiable.[28] It was likely incorporated to affirm the girl's connection to the Albanian dynasty, serving a sort of gentilicial function. This has led Schwegler to suggest that in the earliest version of the tradition the mother of the twins did not have a proper name.[29] This is a radical conclusion; however, lacks direct confirmation in the literary sources. A more nuanced interpretation is proposed by Martínez-Pinna, who argues that in the most common version of the legend the characters in question would have likely borne a different name, now lost, which was

[26] For further details, refer to Carandini 2010: 475.
[27] For previous studies on the character, see López Fonseca 1991: 43-54.
[28] The name of Rea Silvia is attested in Dion. Hal. 1.76.3; Liv. 1.3.11; Strabo 5.3.2; App. *BCiv*. 1.5; Ovid. *Fast*. 3.11. For Ilia, see Ovid. *Fast*. 4.55; Serv. *Ad Aen*. 1.273.
[29] For further details on this interpretation, see Schwegler 1853: 429. The designation *Ilia* is unanimous until the time of Caesar, when the designation *Rea* appears as a substitution or alternative to *Ilia*. The attribution of the Alban royal title *Siluia* to *Ilia* appears for the first time in Aristides of Miletus (*Ps. Plut., Mor.* 19), and among the writers of the Augustan era, only Ovid uses it in *Fasti* 2.383 and 3.11, but clarifying her identity with *Ilia*. In this same author, the matronymic for Romulus and Remus is *Iliades*: *Met.* 14.781; 824; *Fast.* 3.62. Consideration on Rea Silvia or Ilia, López Fonseca 1991: 43-44.

later replaced by Ilia and then Rea Silvia. This change would have resulted from the integration of the indigenous component of the myth with the Trojan element. In this perspective, Rea Silvia can be seen as a guarantor of this hybrid connection.[30] The loss of the original name and its subsequent replacement could therefore be viewed as an indication of the marginality of Numitor's daughter in the tale, reducing her to the purely functional role of mother to the twins. From this viewpoint, the figure of the mother of the founder was progressively reconfigured to strengthen the mythical link between Rome and Troy, fulfilling a role that had not originally been assigned to her. As for the chronology of the name, it seems that Ilia, in the earlier versions, could be understood as a clear reference to her Trojan origins, so much so that, according to authors like Naevius or Ennius, she would have been the daughter of Aeneas. The name Rea, a later addition, could be dated to the 2nd century BC, once the Albanian dynasty had been established to bridge the chronological gap between Aeneas and Romulus, as suggested by some modern scholars.[31] An additional inconsistency within the narrative regarding the mother of Romulus and Remus concerns the fate assigned to her in different versions of the myth. Once again, this underscores the secondary role of the character. According to the account, Rea Silvia was already a Vestal virgin at the time of the assault, attributed either to Mars or, in one version, to a mortal man, thereby violating one of the most sacred vows of the Vestals. It is well known that the punishment for a Vestal found guilty of impurity was live burial, a form of sacrificial punishment justified by the sacred nature of their role.[32] However, in Rea Silvia's case, the myth either remains silent or presents varying versions of her fate,

[30] It is important to recall some considerations put forward by Martínez-Pinna 2011b: 105; cf. 2011b: 120-121. The Trojan references concerning Ilia, such as those found in Virg. *Aen*. 6.778 and Ovid. *Am.* 3.6.54, suggest that the name could signify "the Trojan woman". Further etymological interpretations are discussed in Grandazzi 2008: 783; Bandiera 1985: 905.

[31] The kinship between Aeneas and Romulus is already attested in Ennius and Naevius, according to Serv. *Ad Aen*. 1.273. On this matter, Ogilvie 1965: 32 provides valuable insights. Moreover, within the works of these poets, there is a discernible short chronological distance between Aeneas and the twins, reflecting a genealogical configuration that seems to originate from a Greek tradition, evident in Eratosth. *FGrHist* 241 F45 and Lyc. *Alex*. 1232. For further details, see Mora 1995: 159. This tradition is also supported by Cic. *Div*. 1.20.40 and, in Enn. *Ann*. 1.32-48, (Skutsch). Although the woman is not explicitly named, the line from Ennius' *Eurydica prognata, pater quam noster amavit*, allows us to identify her as Eurydice, based on Ilia's statement about her being the woman beloved by the father. This implies that Ilia's interlocutor was likely a stepsister, the daughter of Aeneas and Eurydice. Cf. Cornell 1975: 3.

[32] A comprehensive body of literature exists on the punishment of the Vestals. Noteworthy studies include Lovisi 1998: 699-735, Parker 2004: 563-601, and Cornell 1981: 27-37. For additional insights, see Fraschetti 1984: 97-128.

raising questions about narrative coherence and the symbolic role of this female figure in the construction of the legend. The silence or ambiguity of the account further reinforces Rea Silvia's subordinate function, reducing her to a mere instrument for the birth of the twin founders and, consequently, for the mythic legitimization of Rome's origins.

The punishment of Rea Silvia is attested exclusively in later sources and appears to be presented in an anachronistic manner. This is because the practice of live burial, typically associated with the punishment of Vestal Virgins who violated their vows, was not established in Rome until a significantly later period, specifically during the reign of Tarquinius Priscus. Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1.78.5; 3.67.3) reports that Amulius's advisers proposed flogging Ilia with rods until she died. However, neither of these scenarios is accurate, as the punishment for violating the vow of chastity was applied to Vestal virgins prior to childbirth, as soon as signs of transgression were evident.[33] This could not apply to Ilia, who was fated to give birth to the twins. More in line with the logic of the tradition, some sources suggest that, by Amulius's orders, Rea Silvia was either imprisoned or cast into a river, such as the Tiber or the Aniene, depending on the version.[34] However, in all cases, this event occurs after the birth of the twins, thus excluding it from being the ritual punishment for Vestals. The most widely accepted version in the historiography is the one where Ilia survives, spared from the death sentence by Amulius due to the intervention of her daughter Anthò, a name recorded only by Plutarch (*Rom*. 3.4). Ilia remained imprisoned until she was eventually freed by Romulus and Remus. There is some debate over the chronology of this variant, which is also found in Appian (*BCiv*. 1.6). According to Wiseman, this tradition was likely in circulation by the time of Diocles of Peparethus, while Carandini

[33] The punishment of death by flogging with rods was typically reserved for individuals found guilty of impurity (cf. Festus 277, Lindsay). In specific circumstances, this penalty could also be applied to a Vestal Virgin, although not to its most extreme consequence, in cases of serious negligence in the performance of her sacred duties. Details in Saquete 2000, 91. A comparable case of a Vestal accused of unchastity, as reported by Dion. Hal. 9.40.1-4 is that of Orbinia. However, flogging was generally a punishment administered by the *Pontifex Maximus* to Vestals who committed offences not warranting the death penalty. Evidence of this practice in Liv. 28.11.6; Dion. Hal. 2.67; Plut. *Num* 10.7. Cf. Fraschetti 1984, 103.

[34] According to some sources, Rea Silvia is said to have died in prison, as reported by Dion. Hal. 1.79.2, Just. 43.2.4, and the *Orig.* 19.6. Other accounts suggest she drowned in the River Tiber, as mentioned by Ennius cited in Porphyrio on Hor. *Carm.* 1.2.17; Ovid. *Fast* 2.597 while some traditions place her death in the Anio River, Serv. *Ad Aen*. 1.273. For further discussion, Carandini 2010: 296; Cairo 2016: 30; Martínez-Pinna 2011a: 121–122.

posits that it originated in the late Republic.[35] Among the various versions, the oldest and most coherent one, attributed to Ennius, appears to establish a direct connection between Ilia's fate and that of her sons. As already noted, the only consistent elements across all versions of the story are Rea Silvia's priesthood and her virginity. The absence of a direct correlation between Ilia's transgression and the punishment inflicted upon her is notably anomalous. Except for a late version preserved by Jerome (*Chron.* 85a), none of the extant accounts impose a penalty consistent with the traditional sanctions reserved for Vestal virgins who violated their vow of chastity. In this regard, Cairo suggests the existence of an earlier narrative tradition, predating the canonical version, in which Rea Silvia was not depicted as a Vestal. While the validity of this hypothesis remains open to debate, it offers valuable insights into the role of Mars within the myth. Indeed, although some of Cairo's arguments are compelling, one must consider that, had Rea Silvia not been bound by the obligations of a Vestal, the intervention of a deity such as Mars would have been superfluous. In this context, his presence serves to mitigate the gravity of the act, transforming what would otherwise be a criminal offence into a mythologically legitimised event, thereby safeguarding the sanctity of Rome's origins.[36]

Regarding the figure of the twins' father, the version that attributes Romulus and Remus' conception to the direct intervention of Mars appears reasonably older than the alternative tradition, in which Rea Silvia is assaulted by a mortal. Although the standard narrative identifies Mars as the progenitor, several authors express skepticism regarding his paternity, highlighting the implausibility of the divine conception. This ambiguity is evident in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, where he draws upon a range of sources to underscore the lack of consensus concerning the twins' parentage. Some versions suggest that the father was one of Rea Silvia's suitors, while others implicate Amulius himself. This multiplicity of interpretations reflects a rationalising impulse within the mythic tradition, an attempt to anchor the narrative in more human, historically plausible terms. Worthy of particular attention is the tradition

[35] On this matter, see Wiseman 1995: 131, which is based on the Greek origin of the character's name. Also relevant is Ampolo 1988: 281. Furthermore, Carandini 2010: 280 identifies a possible depiction of Anthò, alongside Rea Silvia, in the frieze of the Augustan tomb of the Statili Tauri on the Esquiline; Bonanome 1996: 164-165 identified Anthò in the Pompeian fresco from the House of Fabius Secundus.
[36] On the interpretation of passage mentioned, Cairo 2016: 33; cf. Martínez-Pinna 2011b: 104.

that ascribes responsibility for the assault to Amulius, a version attested by Licinius Macer and Marcus Octavius in *Origo Gentis Romanae* (19.5) and adopted by Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1.77.1). This version presents significant inconsistencies from a mythological perspective: it would have been counterproductive for Amulius to father offspring with Rea Silvia, as such descendants could potentially challenge his authority and reclaim the throne he had usurped from Numitor. It was precisely to avert this risk that Amulius had compelled Rea Silvia to serve as a priestess of Vesta, thereby binding her to a life of enforced chastity. One possible rationale for Amulius's alleged crime, at least within the internal logic of the narrative, might lie in his desire to consolidate his illegitimate rule by producing heirs with Numitor's daughter, thus creating a dynastic link that could legitimise his claim to the throne of Alba Longa. Particularly striking is Dionysius's account, which describes Amulius as fully armed during the assault, a detail that invites speculation about the symbolic overlap between Amulius and Mars. His military attire could have served both to instill fear and to obscure his identity, blurring the lines between the mortal king and the war god traditionally cast in this role. Nevertheless, it is plausible that the development of this variant was not merely the product of a rationalising tendency aimed at humanizing the myth. Rather, it may reflect a deliberate attempt to undermine Romulus's prestige by recasting his origins in a less favourable light.[37] Challenging the divine paternity of Rome's founder would have had far-reaching ideological implications, particularly for political figures who sought to align themselves with Romulus as a source of legitimacy. This interpretation is supported by the myth's internal inconsistencies: attributing the crime to Amulius, a close relative, introduces an element of incestuous scandal that seems calculated to discredit Romulus's legacy. Furthermore, this variant – likely a later development – is first attested in the works of Licinius Macer (*Origo* 19.5), whose narrative stance appears overtly hostile towards Romulus.[38] More specifically, it seems to target the "Romulism" associated with figures such as Sulla,

[37] According to Carandini 2010: 271, Amulius should be regarded as 'il rappresentante in terra del dio regio per eccellenza: Marte.' Similarly, the process that led to identifying another mortal as the father of the twins, within the framework of the second variant, appears to reflect a rationalising intent. However, although this version doesn't present narrative inconsistencies, it lacks the "mythical plausibility" found in the first account – that symbolic and supernatural dimension traditionally inherent in the narration of mythical foundations.

[38] For the negative tradition surrounding Romulus in Licinius Macer, and the references to his work in John Malalas, see the detailed study by Hodgkinson 1997: 85-92.

suggesting that the adaptation of the myth served not only to reinterpret Rome's legendary past but also to critique contemporary political ideologies.

Conclusions

The analysis of the variants concerning the conception of the twins and the ambiguity surrounding their parentage highlights the stratified and often contradictory nature of Rome's foundational tradition. In particular, the narrative attributed to Promathion, with its evident Etruscan resonances and its rich symbolic framework involving fire, prophecy, and ritualised sexuality, emerges as a purposeful reworking of the myth, likely developed within a later ideological context. This version does not merely deviate from the canonical tradition; rather, it actively engages with it, offering an alternative interpretive matrix that underscores the myth's adaptability. Similarly, the divergent accounts concerning Rea Silvia, and the contested divine or mortal paternity of her offspring, reveal a process of narrative recalibration. Far from being marginal or inconsistent, these discrepancies serve as key indicators of the myth's dialogic nature and its embeddedness in Roman efforts to negotiate identity, legitimacy, and divine favour. Ultimately, such variations should not be regarded as mere anomalies or remnants of archaic storytelling. Rather, they constitute meaningful expressions of the myth's vitality and its capacity to encode complex ideological tensions. The study of these peripheral traditions proves essential for grasping not only the inner workings of Roman mythography but also the broader cultural logic that guided the city's self-representation. In this light, the so-called minor versions of the legend acquire major significance as mirrors of Rome's evolving vision of its own origins.

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