

THE ROMAN LUPERCALIA

VUKOVIĆ (K.) *Wolves of Rome. The Lupercalia from Roman and Comparative Perspectives*. (Transregional Practices of Power 2.) Pp. xx + 320, b/w & colour ills. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2023. Cased, £83, €94.95, US\$94.99. ISBN: 978-3-11-068934-1.

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Using material drawn from the traditions of Indo-European speaking peoples, V. aims to show that at their origins the Lupercalia were a male initiation ritual. As far as this hypothesis is concerned, V.'s conclusions are more than convincing, but more problematic is his interpretation of the Lupercalia rites in themselves.

V. postulates the hypothesis that the Lupercalia are an 'entanglement between wolves, humans, and the divine' (p. 27) and believes that an understanding of the festival cannot be achieved without a study of the 'wolf in Roman mythology and ritual' (p. 27). But, given that rituals involving wolves and young men were most probably already practised in the Eurasian steppes by Indo-European ancestors of the Romans, V. supposes that some of the traditions concerning wolves in the Lupercalia could have been inherited by the Romans from their Indo-European forefathers. To test this hypothesis, V. analyses one of the oldest historically attested Indo-European cultures, the Vedic culture, and tries to establish the wolf's role in it. The wolf's role in Vedic culture is then used to illuminate the wolf's place in the earliest religious strata of Rome.

V. presents (Chapter 5) the data available for his hypothesis that the Lupercalia were derived from prehistoric Indo-European young male initiation rituals in which initiands formed a youthband and identified themselves with the wolf. V. collects evidence from early Indo-European speaking peoples about the wolf imitating young male initiation rituals, especially underlining the example of the Vedic *Vrātyas*, groups of unmarried young males who, before integrating into society, had to live in the wilderness and survive through cattle raiding. He mentions the Italic data (*ver sacrum*) and archaeological evidence from the Eurasian steppe that likely shows that the early Indo-European speaking peoples already practised male initiation rituals that implicated wolves.

Because of limited space, the review will focus on V.'s analysis of the main rites of the Lupercalia: (1) the so-called bloodrite; (2) the animal sacrifice; (3) the ritual run. For the bloodrite at the start of the Lupercalia, two adolescents were brought in front of the Lupercal where 'others' (probably older Luperci) touched their foreheads with a bloody knife and then immediately cleaned the bloodstains with wool soaked in milk (Plut. *Rom.* 21.6). Then the youngsters had to laugh. V. is right to define this as the initiation of the new members of the Luperci (Chapters 2–3). But he is wrong to estimate that 'the combination of knife and blood in the bloodrite recalls elements of animal sacrifice' (p. 71), because virtually nothing here corresponds to Roman blood sacrifice (see J. Scheid, *Quand faire, c'est croire. Les rites sacrificiels des Romains* [2005], pp. 21–57; *Rites et religion à Rome* [2019], pp. 44–7). The youngsters were not symbolically submitted to a blood sacrifice. As for the blood applied to the youngsters' foreheads, V. underlines that comparative evidence on hunting rituals shows that frequently, after their first kill, novice hunters are initiated into hunter status through the application of the slayed animal's blood to their faces; this frequently symbolises their identification with an animal predator, usually the wolf. Using this comparative material and the fact that *Luperci* most probably etymologically meant 'wolfmen', V. interprets the bloodrite as a ritual through which the

novice Luperci were assimilated with wolves. This is a brilliant interpretation that one can only accept.

A fundamental part of almost every religious rite was the sacrifice, which confirmed the respectful, but unequal relationship between Romans and their gods (see Scheid's works cited above). Therefore, it is most intriguing that, as Ovid gives us reason to believe, the main sacrifice of the Lupercalia, just before the ritual run, subverted the principles of the sacrifice: during the sacrifice the Luperci consumed the divine part of the victim, the *exta* ('entrails'), thus committing an act of sacrilege in the context of public cult (for the religious value of the *exta*, see J. Scheid [2005], pp. 182–3). As this is the only known case of such a subversion of sacrifice in a public festival (some exceptions were due to the Roman practice of the *ritus Graecus*: J. Scheid, 'Graeco Ritu: a Typically Roman Way of Honoring the Gods', *HSPH* 97 [1995], 15–31), it stands to reason that without analysing it, one cannot achieve a precise understanding of the Lupercalia. Still, V. avoids engaging with it seriously (pp. 109–12). Here one can give only an outline of the question:¹ the normative division of the victim – *exta* for the gods, meat for the humans – functioned as an enabler of civilisation, because in return for the concession of the most vital parts of the victim, the gods ensured a stable cosmological order and the efficiency of human legislation, two conditions without which Rome would not be an ordered society; without normative sacrifice the civilised society would fall back into primordial chaos with its savagery. This was the reason why the Luperci devoured the *exta* – assimilated with wolves, they *could not* respect the normative sacrifice with its civilising structure. They were agents of disorder who were bringing the world of savagery into the civilised space of Rome.

V. goes on to present the ritual run and whipping (Chapters 2–3). Particularly convincing is his demonstration of how the whipping of women by the Luperci reinforced gender roles, while his hypothesis (p. 172) that the ritual race of the Luperci imitated the running of a wolf pack is persuasive. But V.'s analysis goes off track when, encountering mentions of the Luperci also whipping males, he writes: 'This does not imply that the role of the men who received a few blows in jest was equal to that of women' (p. 79). But there is overwhelming evidence that the Luperci were flogging everyone that happened to be in their way, female and male (e.g. Varro, *Ling.* 6.34; Ov. *Fast.* 2.31–2; Cens. *De die natali* 22.15; Festus [Paulus], p. 75 L.; Plut. *Rom.* 21.4; *Caes.* 61.2). This indicates that, contrary to what V. seems to believe, the whipping of the women for fertility was not the main aim of the run; the main aim was the purification of the community, so much so that at the end of the fifth century CE many Roman Christians still explicitly practised the rites of the Lupercalia to achieve the purification of the community (Pope Gelasius' letter *Contra Andromachum* 3; 11–15; see Y.-M. Duval, 'Des Lupercales de Constantinople aux Lupercales de Rome', *REL* 55 [1977], 250–5). Indeed, the running and flogging Luperci, assimilated, as V. has shown, with feral wolves, incarnated the chaotic powers of the wilderness and brought them into Rome; in this way, by introducing for a few hours the pre-civilised forces of the wild in the civilised space of the city, they accomplished the annual cleansing of the Roman community.

¹See especially the work by D. Briquel: 'Trois études sur Romulus', in: R. Bloch (ed.), *Recherches sur les religions de l'Antiquité classique* (1980), pp. 269–300; 'Rémus mangeur d'*exta*: chaos primitif et monde de la cité', in: M. Mazoyer (ed.), *Ville et pouvoir: origines et développement* (2002), pp. 209–17; 'Deux histoires de jumeaux qui finissent mal: Romulus et Rémus, Jacob et Ésaü', *REL* 91 (2013), 83–7; *Romulus. Jumeau et Roi* (2018), pp. 134–49. See also K.K. Vě, 'La cité et la sauvagerie: les rites des Lupercales', *DHA* 44 (2018), 163–79.

Notwithstanding the problematic character of the interpretation of several Lupercalia rites, on the whole V. has written a thought-provoking book. Especially valuable are two of his evidence-based conclusions: (a) the Lupercalia descended from prehistoric Indo-European young male initiation rituals; (b) the Luperci identified themselves with wolves and imitated their behaviour during the ritual.

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LIVED ANCIENT RELIGION IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

RÜPKE (J.), WOOLF (G.) (edd.) *Religion in the Roman Empire*. (Die Religionen der Menschheit 16.2.) Pp. 323, ill., maps. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2021. Cased, €89. ISBN: 978-3-17-029224-6.
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The study of religion in the Roman world has remained a topic of perennial interest among scholars. This collection of essays aims to provide an up-to-date introduction and overview of that topic. Needless to say, the volume joins an already extensive bibliography. The book is part of the wide-ranging series *Die Religionen der Menschheit*, which seeks to offer general overviews of humanity's various religious traditions and communities, from the prehistoric period to the present day. With that aim in mind, the editors Rüpke and Woolf have brought together seven other scholars to present ten essays that introduce a range of themes in the study of Roman religion.

In response to traditional emphases on the communal and collective qualities of religion in Rome, the editors and authors have chosen to emphasise 'lived ancient religion' and the ways in which individuals may have experienced it. They argue that such an emphasis allows for a more complete view of ancient Roman religious life, its variations and its transformations. Instead of chapters that follow a chronological narrative or treat a particular geographical domain or examine a particular cult, practice or community, the essays explore a series of themes across the broad chronological and geographic expanses that made up the Roman empire.

Rüpke and Woolf open the volume with an introductory essay, in which they argue for the emphasis on 'lived ancient religion', which they believe foregrounds the agency of ancient individuals. This emphasis in turn leads to what they see as three *foci*: first, on the ways in which individual actors and groups appropriated (or even eschewed) traditional religious norms; second, on the interactive nature of religion as an element of culture, what they describe as 'religion in the making' (p. 16); and, lastly, on changing symbols that manifested in varied configurations across time and space. These engagements of individuals with various norms and practices constitute what gives texture to religion in the Roman empire.

Next follow two essays that explore different cultural spaces – what the authors call 'field[s] of religious action' – in which ideas about religion existed and transformed. First, Woolf and M.J. Versluys, in 'Empire as a Field of Religious Action', examine the