Missing Cosmogonies: the Roman Case?

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I am not saying that the Romans, in the course of their history, did not at some time compose works dealing with the origin of the cosmos and of Man: they did, of course – but only after their city had already been in existence for six centuries and its citizens had acquired a great empire. Only at this point did Lucretius write the fifth book of De rerum natura, Vergil the sixth Eclogue, and Ovid the first book of his Metamorphoses. Naturally, in order to have something to speak about, I could have chosen one of these poems. That I have not done so owes to my interest in another aspect of the question: namely, why did the Romans wait so long to compose works of this kind? Why did they not do so earlier? This is the question I will try to answer – in the conviction that in order to understand a culture, sometimes it is as useful to reflect on what is absent from that culture as to study what is actually present in it.

Surveying the most ancient Roman sources – or at any rate the texts describing the most ancient period of Rome – scarcely any reference at all can be found to cosmogonies, theogonies, or anthropogonies. The Etruscans, by contrast, have left at least one trace of a cosmogony.1 To explain this silence on the part of the Romans it may be tempting to follow the route once taken by Georges Dumézil, who suggested that the Romans – like other Indo-European peoples – did in fact once have myths of this kind. It is only that by the historical period they had forgotten these stories to such a degree that they were no longer recognizable.2 An explanation such as this can hardly be satisfying. If the scholar of ancient Rome were to accept this principle, he would have to become an expert in decoding “rebus” puzzles, capable of uncovering mythic


2 G. Dumézil, Archaic Roman Religion, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1996, 50: “Like all the other Indo-European peoples, the Romans at first loaded their gods with myths and based their cultic scenarios on the behavior or the adventures of the gods. Then they forgot all that. It sometimes happens, however, that we can discern the myths through the characteristic marks they left on the rites which they originally justified and which, after their disappearance, became insoluble puzzles, even for the Romans of the great era”.

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meanings in any story whatsoever. Furthermore, pretending to understand more about Roman culture than the Romans themselves seems to me somewhat extreme. In any case, even if we were to admit that the Romans forgot their own myths of the gods and of the creation of the world, we would still need to explain why they should have done so. Is it because they were a practical and concrete people? Or perhaps because they were too busy conquering Latium? Or because they preferred history to myth? It has always perplexed me that the Romans should have embraced such a catastrophic neglect of fantasy – while simultaneously adopting practicality, war and history. Actually, I don’t believe arguments like this have ever been convincing to anyone.3

Rather than trying to explain why the Romans forgot what they probably never had in the first place, we may more profitably assume that – for whatever reason – the Romans did not deem it necessary to have stories of an anthropogenic, theogonic, or cosmogonic sort. From this point of view, it is interesting to ask what it is that motivates us to believe that the Romans should have had such stories. Because other Indo-European peoples did? Yet the cultural differences between the various Indo-European populations are already huge. Or perhaps we, as inheritors (even unwittingly) of a certain brand of “creationist” culture, are unable to resign ourselves to the idea that any people – above all an ancient people – could do without a story about the origins of man and of the world? Regardless, let us try to imagine that in Roman culture the absence of “-gonic” stories (as it were) relates simply to the fact that the inhabitants of Rome thought in a different way than we might expect them to have done.

When I speak of anthropogony, theogony, and cosmogony, I mean – roughly – narrative describing the passage from a state of absence to a state of presence. After the flood, the earth was uninhabited. Then Deucalion and Pyrrha threw stones and clods of earth behind them, and, in that moment men and women came to be – the human race was born. First there was Chaos, then Gaia, then Eros, and later the other divinities came to be. First there was the giant Ymir, and then his body was dismembered, and from that moment the

sky, earth, rivers, and so forth came to be. In practice, the scope of such “-gonic” stories consists in projecting the circumstances of present time along a diachronic axis, articulating in narrative form the moment in which it all “began”. In this way, the stories have a sort of contrafactual aspect: they simulate the circumstances in which men, the gods, the cosmos – things whose existence are so taken for granted “today” it is hard to imagine their absence – did not exist, and then go on to explain how humans, the gods, the cosmos came into being, eventually giving rise to the current age.

Although they did not possess narratives of this “-gonic” kind, the Romans did however have stories touching on the theme of the “beginnings” of humans and the gods (we will deal with the cosmos momentarily). The Roman imagination was also disposed to projecting the “present” circumstances of men and the gods onto the axis of diachrony, giving it narrative form. For this reason, it is illuminating to see exactly what these stories deal with – or, better, what kind of “beginnings” they articulate narratively vis-à-vis the relationship of humans and the gods. This approach has the further advantage of providing us an opportunity to observe the Romans from their point of view, through their categories and their ways of thinking – thereby avoiding the problem of imposing on them our own categories, whether “Indo-European” or “post-creationist” or anything else derived from a different culture.

Men and Women

In the sources that describe the mythic past of Rome, there are no “anthropogonic” stories, no narrative reflections on the origins of Man. But there are stories – and they are actually quite numerous – that deal with the origins of the Romans as such. So if it is impossible to ascertain how the Romans imagined the origins of Man (or even whether they imagined this event at all), nevertheless we can try to understand how the Romans imagined their own “beginnings”. What immediately stands out from these stories is that the Romans, in creating and re-creating the legend of their origins across the centuries, consistently imagined themselves as a people that arrived late on the scene – very late, in fact. They never based their prestige or identity on the fact

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that they were the first anywhere, and they certainly never valorized the notion of autochthony. Quintilian states that “antiquity generates great authority, as happens to those who are said to have been born from the earth”⁵ – but this is a kind of auctoritas the Romans never thought to claim for themselves. On the contrary, in everyday Latin the expression terrae filius “born of the earth” was used to designate someone whose origin was unclear (generis incertus), an “unknown”, a “nobody”.⁶ The Athenians, so proud of their autochthony, would not have approved. Far from declaring that they were born of the soil of Latium, the Romans preferred to describe themselves as descendents of a group of Trojans, who, having arrived in Latium, integrated with the local population. Later, these descendents of mixed marriages founded their own city – Lavinium – and then another, Alba Longa. From a certain point of view, we could even say that the Romans had not one but many different “beginnings”.⁷ Later still, a pair of twins of unknown origin – perhaps they were divine, perhaps not – were driven from Alba Longa to found a new city, Rome. However, they populated this new city with men drawn from every part of the Italian peninsula, and indeed openly proclaimed their new city as an asylum. “From the neighboring populations”, writes Livy, “an indiscriminate horde flowed [into the asylum]. It mattered not whether they were freedmen or slaves. This group was eager for a fresh start (res novae), and this was the basis for Rome’s burgeoning greatness”.⁸ The robur of Roman magnitudo – the “greatness” corresponding, for the Romans, to their own identity – is openly based on the confluence of men from elsewhere. In short, the Romans identified themselves as the last link in a long chain. They considered themselves a people born from and mixed with other peoples. Using their cultural categories, we could say that they imagined

⁵ Quintilian, Institutio oratoria 3,7,26: multum auctoritatis adfert vetustas ut iis qui terra dicuntur orti; cfr. Livy, Ab urbe condita 1,8,5–7 (about the founders of cities qui obscuram atque humilem conciendo ad se multitudinem natam e terra sibi prolem ementiebantur).

⁶ Cicero, Epistulae familiares 7,9,3; Epistulae ad Atticum 1,13,4; Petronius, Satyricon 43,5; etc. – A. Otto, Die Sprichwörter und sprichwörtlichen Redensarten der Römer (Leipzig: Teubner, 1890), s. v. terra, 344–345.


themselves as a population of *advenae*, of “newcomers”, people coming from abroad. In this perspective, it is worth recalling that Vergil describes the natives (*indigenae*) of Latium as a race of men directly born “from the trunks and the hard oak wood” (*gensque virum truncis et duro robore nata*).\(^9\) Whereas Trojans and Romans come from afar, the original population of Latium physically embodies the land in which they live; they are made of the same substance of which Latin oaks are made. Such a “vegetal” autochthony, so to speak, emphasizes by way of contrast the fact that Aeneas, the Trojans and their Roman descendants came from abroad.

Although the chain of which the Romans represent the final link is long, there is a point at which this chain completes itself, however: when the population of “newcomers” takes on an identity of its own – namely, the moment in which the city is founded. After this event, the “newcomers” not only receive a new, shared name – *Romani*, which connects them to their founder, *Romulus* – but also another name distinguishing them from what they were before: *Quirites*. Onomastically speaking, this name situates the Romans again in respect to their founder, as Romulus took on the title of *Quirinus* after his divinization.\(^10\) The name *Quirites* is interesting because it is a strictly *civic* appellative, defining the Romans as “citizens of Rome”. This term was so intertwined with notions of civic identity that it could be invoked in moments of crisis when civic solidarity was needed. When someone wanted to ask for help from his fellow citizens, the ritualized exclamation used in such circumstances was precisely *o Quirites!* “Help, Quirites!” This exclamation was so deeply embedded in the culture that there was a verb derived from it, namely, *quiritare*, “to ask for help”.\(^11\) Thus, the “beginning” of Roman Man, as the Romans themselves conceived of it, seems to correspond to a change of a *civic* nature. It is the foundation of the city that has the power to mark the “beginning” of a population which did not claim any other.

From this point of view, it is interesting to note that not only the name of the *Romani* and that of the *Quirites* – two absolutely key words in Roman culture – but the language itself of Rome is connected with the founder: in fact

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Latin was thought to have come from Romulus directly. This was the opinion, at any rate, of the greatest Roman linguist and antiquarian, Varro. In the *De lingua latina*, Varro claimed that whereas Latin “words” had been “created by king Latinus”, nonetheless Varro himself had received them “as an inheritance from Romulus”. For this reason, when he speaks of the “fourth level” of etymological research – the last and most important level, beyond which it is not possible to go – Varro solemnly defines this as “the *aditum* and the *initia* of the king”.

If the Romans did not possess any story we can rightly call an “anthropogony”, there are even fewer traces of a “gynaikogony”. In Rome there are no mythological tales narrating how Woman entered into the world, as Pandora or Eve did. This does not mean, however, that the Romans did not possess any tale talking about beginnings in regard to women. Livy narrates that after founding the City the first Romans soon realized that without women “a single generation was likely to see the end of Rome’s greatness”, because there would not have been any prospect of offspring. Then Romulus sent embassies around to all the neighboring populations to solicit *societas* and *conubium* with the new city. The answers were all negative, so much so that the young Roman males (*pubes*) decided to turn to violence. The next step was the rape of the Sabine women, as is well known. This celebrated episode did not simply provide a favorite subject for Renaissance and Neoclassical painters. In Roman culture, the rape of the Sabine women played the role of a true charter myth: it established marriage customs and affinity relations, defining the status of the woman in society in many regards. In other words, for the Romans this narrative had a cultural significance no less strong than the myth of Pandora did for the Greeks. But while the Greek myth represented the absolute beginning of Woman – defining her “natural” characteristics and warning males of the dangers she was doomed to cause them – the Roman tale deals with the beginnings of women inside Roman society. The story of the rape does not portray the advent of Woman in the world, but of women in a specific *civitas*;

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12 Varro, *De lingua latina* 5,7 ff.: *Quartus, ubi est adytum et initia regis: quo si non perveniam ad scientiam, ut opinemem, auctipabor, quod etiam in salute nostra nonnunquam facit cum aegrotamus medicus … Non enim videbatur consentaneum quaeerere me in eo verbo quod finxisset Ennius causam, neglegere quod ante rex Latinus finxisset … An non potius mea verba illa quae hereditate a Romulo rege venerunt quam quae a poeta Livio relicta?* The interpretation of this passage is discussed in B. Cardauns, *Marcus Terentius Varro* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 2001), 30–32.


and the cultural features defined by the narrative do not belong to Woman in general but to future Roman spouses and mothers. Just as for Man, also for Woman the Romans’ tales about “origins” make sense only in a civic frame.

The Gods

Having considered men and women, let us now turn to the gods. I do not need to stress that, if in the sources dealing with the earliest phases of Roman culture there are no traces of anthropogony or gynaikogony, we can hardly expect there to be traces of theogony. We can even say that in the opinion of the Romans, the gods exist – end of story. Or, perhaps better, that no Roman ever seems to have asked whether the gods had always existed; whether they had always been the same; or whether there had been successive generations of different gods. This does not mean, of course, that the Romans did not concern themselves with the issue of the gods’ “beginnings”. But what exactly do they mean – I should say, what exactly do they narrate – when they speak of these beginnings?

An inscription of the Claudian period attests that at Lavinium, where every year the cult of the dii Penates populi Romani was celebrated, there were the sacra principiorum populi Romani Quiritium nominisque Latini, “the sacra of the beginnings of the Roman people and of the Latin name”. At the same time, Plutarch tells us that according to the Romans at Lavinium there were “the hiera of the ancestral gods and the beginning of their race”. Lavinium thus represents the location of the religious “beginnings” of the Roman people. But in what sense exactly? We know that Aeneas, reaching the coast of Latium, founded Lavinium and ritually deposited in that place the Penates that he had brought with him from Troy. No theogony at Lavinium, then, but only the simple installation of new divinities in a certain location: what is at stake here are the “beginnings” (principia) of a cult, not of a god. The Penates of Lavinium permit an observation, however. The gods who correspond to the “beginnings” of the Romans – the Penates – arrive expressly from elsewhere. This may seem paradoxical, but in the Roman scheme of things, it is not paradoxical at all. The gods of the “beginnings” of Rome are advenae “newcomers” just like the men who venerate those gods. And just like the men who venerate them, the

15 CIL X:1, 797: pater patratus populi Laurentis foederis ex libris Sibullinis percutiendi cum p(opuli) R(omano) sacrorum principiorum p(opuli) R(omani) Quirit(ium) nominisque Latini, quae apud Laurentes coluntur; cf. Plutarch, Coriolanus 29,2; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Antiquitates Romanae 1,55,2–1, 57,1; Asconius Pedianus, Commentarius in Ciceronis Pro Scauro 18–19, p. 21; Macrobius, Saturnalia 3,4,11; etc. See Thomas, op. cit. (above, n. 7); L. Castagnoli, “Lavinium,” Enciclopedia Virgiliana, III, 150–151; Dupont, op. cit. (above, n.7), 52–68.
“beginnings” of these gods are bound up with a foundation event. Let us look at another “divine” beginning at Rome, jumping somewhat ahead in the mythic history of the city. Consider the story of Romulus, who, after despoiling the arms of the king of the Caeninenses, traces out on the Capitolium a space to be kept sacred to Iuppiter – simultaneously giving this god the cognomen or epithet Feretrius. This is a “beginning”, to be sure, but what is at stake here is not the origin or birth of Iuppiter. The “beginnings” that Livy presents to us consist in the origins of a cult. This cult designates Iuppiter as Feretrius and localizes him in a specific space, the Capitolium.

Vergil gives us a revealing example e contrario, as it were. When Aeneas visits Evander, the Arcadian king who has built the city of Pallantium on the spot where one day Rome will be founded, Evander takes him to visit certain places destined to take on great relevance in the future topography of that city: the grove where the asylum will be; the cave of the Lupercal, the Argiletum, and so forth. When the king and his guest reach the Capitolium – in that period still covered only by forest – Vergil tells us that the place was subject to some dira religio “dire religious terror”, and that the local people were frightened of it. Evander himself explains these religious fears: on the hill lives a god – he says – which one is unknown, but the Arcadians believe they have seen Iuppiter there, shaking the black aegis and striking the clouds with his right hand. So Iuppiter is already up there on the Capitolium well before the foundation of Rome! Only, his identity is still obscure – the Arcadians merely believe that it is he. This mysterious presence, expressed in the form of signs and superstitions, evidently pre-dates the moment when Tarquinius Superbus would construct the temple of Iuppiter Capitolinus on the same hill: only after this beginning would Iuppiter “of the Capitoline” receive his own statue and his own identity. In short, in Roman culture, when considering the beginnings of gods, things function in the same way as when the “beginnings” of men are at stake: what is in play are the civic origins of men and gods, origins corresponding to an identity conferred by the civitas. This basically amounts to saying (as John Scheid has in fact claimed) that in Roman culture the gods were considered true and proper “citizens”, albeit divine ones.

16 At the beginning of the Aeneis Vergil states that Aeneas’ mission will be “to found the city and introduce the gods to the Latium” (5 f.: dum conderet urbem, / inferretque deos Latio).
17 Livy, Ab urbe condita 1,10: simul cum dono designavit templo lovis fines cognomenque addidit deo: “Iuppiter Feretri” inquit, “haec tibi victor Romulus rex regia arma fero, templumque his regionibus quas modo animo metatus sum dedico, sedem opimis spoliis quae regibus ducibusque hostium caesis me auctorem sequentur posteri ferent.”
18 Vergil, Aeneis 8, 347 ff.; Livy, Ab urbe condita 1, 55 f.; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Antiquitates Romanae 4,61.
19 J. Scheid, “Numa et Jupiter ou les dieux citoyens de Rome,” in Archives des Sciences Sociales des Religions 59:1 (1985), 41–53; see also A. Michels, Review of K. Latte,
In this light, there is a telling passage of Varro’s *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* worth citing. Augustine cites it, obviously to take issue with its author: “Varro himself affirms that he first wrote about human things, and then about divine things, because first the *civitates* came into existence and then things related to the gods were instituted by those *civitates*… The principle on the basis of which Varro admits he wrote first about human things and then about divine things – granting that divine things were instituted by men – is the following: just as the painter exists before the painting, and the builder exists before the building, so *civitates* exist before what is instituted by them”. Augustine disagreed with Varro and we can understand why: “True religion” – he objected – “is not instituted by any earthly *civitas*… it is inspired by the one true God”. In the eyes of someone participating in a culture that sees in divinity the creator of the universe, of man, and of all that exists, it is clear that Varro’s position should appear incomprehensible… to say the very least! But *pace* Augustine, the Romans thought in precisely this way: first there were *civitates*, communities of men, and then *res divinae* – which are nothing if not institutions created by the *civitas*, just as a painting or a building is the product of its creator. It is worth emphasizing that Georg Wissowa did realize the importance of the Varronian passage precisely in the perspective we are taking.

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20 Augustin, *De civitate dei* 6, 4, 11 f. = Varro, *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* fr. 5 B. Cardauns, *M. Terentius Varro Antiquitates Rerum Divinarum* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1976): *Iste ipse Varro propterea se prius de rebus humanis, de diuinis autem postea scripsisse testatur, quod prius exitterint civitates, deinde ab eis haec instituta sint …* Varronis igitur confessus ideo se prius de rebus humanis scripsisse, postea de diuinis, quia diuinae istae ab hominibus instituta sunt, haec ratio est: “Sicut prior est, inquit, pistor quam tabula picta, prior faber quam aedificium: ita priores sunt civitates quam ea, quae a civitatibus instituta sunt”. On Varro’s and the other Roman antiquarians’ commitment to preserving the memory of the Roman past, see the excellent essay by C. Moatti, “La crise de la tradition à la fin de la republique romaine à travers la littérature juridique et la science de l’antiquaire,” in M. Pani (ed.), *Continuità e Tradizione Fra Repubblica e Principato* (Bari: Edipuglia, 1991), 31–46; idem, *La raison de Rome* (Paris: Seuil 1997), 181; on a possible philosophical background for the *Antiquitates rerum divinarum* see P. Van Nuffeln, “Varro’s Divine Antiquities: Roman Religion as an Image of Truth,” *Classical Philology* 105 (2010), 162–168 (however, the author does not underestimate Varro’s sincere interest in Roman tradition: see in particular 185 ff.). In any case Varro explicitly declares that the goal of his work is “to rescue the gods from the downfall” caused “by the neglect of the citizens” and “to preserve them in the memory of the good citizens writing such books” (Augustin, *De civitate dei* 6, 2 = Varro fr. 2a Cardauns: *cum vero deos eosdem ita coluerit colendique censuerit, ut in eo ipso opere litterarum suarum dicat se timere ne pereant, non incursu hostili, sed civium neglegentia, de qua illos velut ruina liberari a se dicit et in memoria bonorum per eius modi libros recondi atque servari*).

namely the absence of a Roman cosmogony. Wissowa commented: “a cosmogonic myth ("Sage") could not be conceived by the Romans because the state gods ("Staatsgötter"), who would have been its subject, come into being only with and after the creation of the Roman state. Regarding what existed before, there is neither dogma nor myth ("Sage").” Thus also in the case of the “divine”, the Romans imagined “beginnings” in terms of the civitas which “instituted” or “set up” cult practices. This fragment of Varro’s thought in fact allows us make a comparison with the Greek world, to highlight the analogies – and also the disparities – that run between these two cultures in respect of divinity.

A famous passage of Herodotus reads: “Until quite recently – almost until yesterday – no one knew from whom each of the gods was born, whether the gods had always existed, or what forms the gods took... It was Homer and Hesiod who put together a theogony for the Greeks, assigning epithets to the gods, parceling out their honors and attributes, indicating their appearance”. In this case too the “beginnings” of the gods – what epithets, forms and abilities each god has – are determined by Man. Augustine would not have liked Herodotus’ claim either! Only, the historian from Halicarnassus attributes this act to poets: it was Homer and Hesiod who told the Greeks what epithets, forms and abilities each god was supposed to have. Varro, on the other hand, attributes this to civitates. Whereas for the Greeks it was the word of the poets that “created” the gods, for the Romans it was the institutions of cities.

The Roman Cosmos, or the foundation of the City

The crucial importance of the civitas in the Romans’ definition of the “beginnings” both of humanity and of divinity invites us to consider the event representing the “beginning” of the civitas itself: namely, its foundation story. This will also give us an opportunity to take up the theme of the “beginnings” of the cosmos according to the Romans. Before going on, however, there is something that needs to be mentioned. The fact that the moment of foundation was conceived by the Romans as a profoundly “beginning” event is immediately clear from the name given to the furrow traced out by the founder by means of a plough. This was known as the sulcus primigenius “primitive furrow”. Properly

23 Herodotus, Historiae 2, 53; Josephus Flavius, Contra Apionem 251, considered it a “mistake” that the Greeks attributed this liberty in religious matters to the poets.
24 Festus, 237 Lindsay; cf. Pauli Festus, 274.
speaking, *primigenius* designates whoever (or whatever) is “first born” – for example, the goddess *Fortuna*, the “first born” daughter (*primigenia*) of *Iuppiter*. For this reason, the adjective can also designate what is “original” in the sense of being “born first” – such as the seeds that were first given spontaneously to man by nature; the basic elements that make up the universe; or even words that do not derive from any other. Thus the furrow traced out by the founder is the “first furrow”, the “original furrow”, before which there is no other. But let us not overlook another important aspect of this word: the element *-genius* following *primi-* within the compound correlates, also in an etymological sense, to the “-gonic” termination of anthropogonic, theogonic, and cosmogonic. Therefore if there is anything at all endowed by the Romans (including at the linguistic level) with some character of “origination”, it is this furrow traced out during the foundation of a city.

Let us take a closer look at the foundation of Rome itself. This is obviously a vast and widely studied theme that cannot be reduced to the analysis of a few pages, so we will limit ourselves to highlighting only what is most relevant to our discussion. Needless to say, we will not be using the corpus of material related to the birth of the city as direct “historical” evidence about this event; nor should we consider this to be how the “primitive” Romans conceived of their beginnings. We must not forget that we are dealing with a myth – a traditional story in which, over the course of many centuries, a community progressively inscribed (but also erased!) cultural representations relating to its own origins.

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According to Plutarch, Romulus founded the city of Rome as follows. First, he summoned augurs from Etruria whose expertise in rules and texts would allow them to explain what was necessary for him to do. “Then he dug a pit in the form of a circle where now the comitium stands, and into this pit were deposited initial offerings (aparchai) of all that is beautiful (kalos) according to custom and all that is necessary according to nature. Then each person threw into the pit a piece (moira) of the land from which he came, and afterwards they mixed them together. They give this pit the same name that they give the heavens (Olimpos), namely mundus. Then, using this pit as a centerpoint, they traced out the perimeter of the city in a circle. The founder placed a bronze ploughshare on his plough, yoked to it a bull and a heifer, and he himself guided it – tracing out a deep trench according to the lines of the boundary markers. It was the duty of those who followed him to place within the trench [that is, internally to the circle] any clods of earth dug up by the plough, making sure no clod remained outside. By this line they define the perimeter of the city wall, and the part (bóion) that stands behind and after the wall is called, by syncope, pomoerium.”

In this way Romulus, instructed by Etruscan augurs, first dug a pit called the mundus, destined to form the center of the foundation. Needless to say, this pit is endowed with great meaning. In it are thrown both the products of culture (“all that is beautiful according to custom”) and the products of nature (“all that is necessary according to nature”), to signify the creation of a new life – of a new, growing civilization. Moreover, into this pit are thrown the clods of earth brought from the respective “fatherlands” of those joining Romulus. The mixing of earth brought from elsewhere and fused with the soil of Latium corresponds to the mixing of “newcomers” we spoke of before: in being the receptacle of earth brought from other regions, the soil of Latium becomes a “land of asylum” in a very concrete sense. The strongly political significance of this representation is apparent. Describing the origins of the city both as a mixing of earth and a mixing of strangers coming from everywhere, the narrative emphasizes one of the fundamental features of Roman culture,
probably its most characteristic: its openness. Rome is the city in which not only foreigners, but even slaves can become citizens. This cultural attitude toward the “other” finds its narrative counterpart in a foundation story recounting how men and clods of earth freely intermingled. Again the difference from how the Greeks – and in particular the Athenians – conceived of “origins” is evident: whereas for the Athenians the earth produces men (according to their myth of autochthonia), for the Romans it is instead men who “produce” the earth.

What is most interesting, however, is the name of this pit – mundus – which in Latin (as Plutarch himself notes) designates the heavens. In this light, a fragment of Cato the Elder seems relevant. From this fragment we learn that the Romans called this trench mundus “from the mundus that exists above us, because its shape – as those who have entered it relate – is similar to that of the heavens: the lower part is consecrated to the Manes”.

The mundus thus consists of two opposing “poles”: “above” is a vault that resembles the heavens; “below” is the world of the dead. The pit dug by Romulus to become the “center” of his circular foundation therefore puts the terrestrial world into communication with what is above and what is below.

We are then informed that three times a year the mundus is opened to give free passage to the dead; similarly, we know there was also a mundus Cereris “pit of Ceres”, also opened three times a year. It is challenging to put this

30 As F. Dupont, op. cit. (above n. 7) 13, has efficaciously written: “Rome est une ville ouverte, toujours inachevée, à la différence de la cité grecque qui dès sa fondation était complète et autosuffisante”. Cfr. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Antiquitates Romanae 2,16–17; F. Hartog, Introduction to Denys d’Alicarnasse, les origines de Rome (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1999), XVIII.

31 Cato p. 14 fr. 18 Funaioli = Festus 144,18 ff. Lindsay (Grammaticae Romanae fragmenta collegit, recensuit H. Funaioli, Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1907); cf. Macrobius, Saturnalia 1,16,16 ff. On the relation between mundus and the underworld, see also Servius, Commentarius in Aeneidem 3,134 (the arae belongs to the dei superi, the foci to the medioximi, the mundi to the inferi). The bibliography dedicated to mundus is endless: see K. Latte, Römische Religionsgeschichte (München: Beck, 1960), 141–143 (nowadays it is difficult to accept his interpretation); essential data in H. H. Scullard, Festivals and Ceremonies of the Roman Republic (Ithaca NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), 180–181; see in particular F. Coarelli, Il Foro Romano (Roma: Quasar, 1983), 199–226; for the textual questions related to mundus, which are difficult and many, see C. Deroux, “Le mundus: images modernes et textes anciens,” in P.-A Deproost and A. Meurant (eds.), Images d’origines, origines d’une image. Hommages à J. Poucet (Louvain: Bruylant-Academia, 2004), 55 ff., in which all the evidence is accurately collected (with some exceeding scepticism?); Briquel, op. cit (above, n. 26). The etymology of mundus is unclear: cf. A. Ernout and A. Meillet, Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine (Paris: Klincksieck, 1959), s. v.; M. A. C. De Vaan, Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the Other Italic Languages (Leiden: Brill, 2008), s. v.

fragmentary evidence together in a coherent way (there is even debate whether the Romans had just one mundus or more than one). Yet one thing seems clear: the operation of a cultural configuration, called mundus, referring to a pit that brought three levels – the underworld, the terrestrial world and the heavens – into communication, perhaps also having some relation to harvests and their goddess, Ceres. In this regard, the idea of joining within one cultural configuration the three levels of underworld, terrestrial world and the heavens, seems to be a very Roman way of thinking: the notion of templum “defined area” was also apparently used of celestial, terrestrial, as well as infernal spaces. Obviously from our point of view the most relevant aspect is that this pit (mundus) had its “beginning” from the moment of the city’s foundation; in fact it constituted the very center of the city.

Let us proceed to the furrow traced out by Romulus and defined by the Romans as primigenius. This furrow was circular in shape, that is, it replicated the mundus on a larger scale: a smaller circle delimiting the pit yields a larger one, which in its turn has the smaller circle as its “center”. It is clear that this characteristic of “circularity” gives the moment of foundation a truly meaningful dimension. Comparing this with a different configuration in fact helps us understand what the function of “circularity” might be in this context. According to another tradition, Romulus’ furrow was quadrangular rather than circular. Dionysius of Halicarnassus narrates that Romulus “traced out a quadrangular shape around the hill, digging it out with his plough, to which had been yoked a bull and a heifer – a continuous trench, destined to receive the foundations of the city walls”. As has been suggested, the tradition attributing a square shape to the original foundation of the City was probably meant to account for the enigmatic expression Roma quadrata, which designated both the perimeter of early Rome and a specific place inside the city. But we cannot exclude that this divergent tradition offered a competing version of the foundation story, and as such provided it with a specific cultural significance. In this version, the foundation of the City could be assimilated to the creation of a sacred space. As we know, in order to define the templum the augurs made use of

33 See Deroux, op. cit. (above, n.31).
34 Perhaps this is why Ovid, loc. cit., affirms that fruges had been thrown in the pit dug by Romulus.
35 Varro, De lingua latina, 7, 6; Vergil, Aeneis, 6, 41.
36 Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Antiquitates romanae, 1,88,2; see also Plutarch, Romulus, 9,4. Cf. Varro, infra, n. 38; Festus 130 Lindsay; Ennius, Annales, 150 Skutsch. For discussion of this aspect of the foundation see Poucet, op. cit. (above, n.7), 233 (“combien d’interpretations modernes sur la Roma quadrata!”); Ampolo, loc. cit. (above, n. 26); Briquel, op. cit. (above. n. 26).
straight lines and right angles. In any case, there is an interesting explanation of the expression *Roma quadrata* given by Varro that is worth mentioning: “Rome was originally called *quadrata* because it had been founded in equilibrium (*ad aequilibrium*).” By this expression the author surely means to refer to the geometric characteristics of the square – namely that its sides correspond in length. There is no doubt, then, that – in referring to the *aequilibrium* of Rome’s foundation – Varro was emphasizing the symmetrical, harmonic character of the foundation. This is the same impression that emerges from the circular and concentric form stressed by Plutarch. We can suggest, therefore, that when a Roman thought of the foundation, notions such as spatial harmony and symmetry came to mind.

Circles, cities and curved ploughs

Let us now try to explore the other cultural models that come into play during this event. When defining the origin of the substantive *urbs*, Varro and other ancient etymologists relate it to *orbis*, “circle”, on the grounds that the foundation of a city (*urbs*) occurs “as a circle” (*orbis*). This connection not only confirms the importance of circularity in the foundation event, but also opens

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39 Varro, *De lingua latina* 5, 143: *post ea qui fiebat orbis, urbis principium ... Quare et oppida quae prius erant circumducta aratro ab orbe et urvo urbes; et, ideo coloniae nostrae omnes in litteris antiquis scribuntur urbes, quod item conditae ut Roma; et ideo coloniae et urbes conduntur, quod intra pomerium ponuntur*; Pomponius, *Digesta* 50,16,239; Servius, *Commentarius in Aeneidem* 1,12; etc. Cf. Maltby, op. cit. (above, n. 10) 655–666. On the etymology of *urbs* new (but highly hypothetical) suggestions in De Vaan, op. cit. (above, n. 31), s. v.; on the etymology of *orbis* see M. Weiss, “Latin orbis and cognates,” *Historische Sprachforschung* 119 (2006), 1–29 (exploring the possible existence of a PIE root common to Tocharian B *yerpe* and Latin *orbis*).
up another interesting perspective. As we know, the term orbis was used
elliptically by the Romans for orbis terrarum, namely the “circle of lands”
imagined to be surrounded by the river of Ocean.\footnote{OLD s. v. 12} With this in mind, let us
return to the pomoerium, the portion of land “that stands behind the wall” and
that comes into being at the moment of foundation. The pomoerium is a strip of
land that, at least according to the description of Plutarch, also has a circular
form, insofar as it comes into existence on the basis of the line traced out “in a
circle” by Romulus.

Roman culture attributed huge significance to the pomoerium, as it
constituted the religious boundary of the city, particularly in respect to the
relationship between military and civic activities. A general’s imperium was valid
only outside the pomoerium, and the comitia centuriata, whose origins rest in the
military organization of the urban populace, were also held outside it.
Moreover, many foreign cults were located outside this strip of land.\footnote{Discussion of the Roman pomoerium is decidely vast: see in particular J. Linderski, “The Augural Law,” in Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt II:16:3 (1986), 2146–
2312; Magdelain, op. cit. (above, n. 37); id., “Le pomoerium archaïque,” Revue des
(above, n.26); G. De Sanctis, “Solco, muro, pomerio, “ Mélanges de l’École Française de
Religions of Rome II (Cambridge: University Press, 1998), 93 ff.}
The most
telling thing, though, is that according to an “ancient custom” (as Tacitus calls
it), a commander who had extended the boundary of the empire had the power
to extend also the boundary of the pomoerium – even if not all the victorious
generals availed themselves of this opportunity. Tacitus goes on to describe the
foundation of Rome, explaining that the Forum Romanum and the Capitolium
were joined to the original plan by Titus Tatius. He concludes by saying that
“the pomoerium grew in proportion to the fortunes (pro fortuna)” of Rome.\footnote{Tacitus, Annales 12, 23 f.: et pomoerium urbis auxit Caesar [Claudius], more prisco, quo iis qui protulere imperium etiam terminos urbis propagare datur. nec tamen duces Romani, quamquam magnis nationibus subactis, usurpaverant niss L. Sulla et divus Augustus. Regnum in eo ambitio vel gloria varie vulgata: sed initium condendi, et quod pomoerium Romulus posuerit, noscere haud absurdum reor. Igitur a Foro Boario … inde Forum Romanum;
Forumque et Capitolium non a Romulo, sed a Tito Tatio additum urbi credidere. max pro
fortuna pomerium auctum; cf. Livy, Ab urbe condita 1, 44, 3–5; Gellius, Noctes Atticae
13, 14.}
This is precious evidence not only for the historical information it provides
(even if this too has provoked much debate)\footnote{De Sanctis, op. cit. (above, n. 41).} What is interesting is the cultural
configuration that emerges from it: the pomoerium is placed in correspondence
with the boundary of the empire. The religious limit of the city, created together
with the *sulcus primigenius* traced out by the founder, obtains through a kind of proportional relationship with what stands *outside* – all the lands that the Romans are capable of conquering. In Roman conception, in marking out the *pomoerium* Romulus simultaneously anticipates – or better, predetermines – the external space the Romans are destined to gain control of, in proportion to their growing *fortuna*. Clearly this “scalar” relationship between *pomoerium* and conquered lands – in conjunction with the circular shape (*orbis*) attributed to the city – forms the background to the numerous declarations according to which the Roman *Urbs* is explicitly identified with the *orbis* (*terrarum*). It is sufficient to cite this emblematic distych of Ovid: “to other peoples has been assigned a territory marked by a certain limit; but the space of the Roman *Urbs* is the same as that of the *orbis*”. Through their mutual relationships, *urbs*, *orbis* and *pomoerium* describe a veritable cosmography in which the world and the city (or better, the world viewed through the eyes of the city) tend to become superimposed.

Moving on. The pairing *urbs* / *orbis* is frequently associated by ancient etymologists with a third substantive, *urvum*, from which the verb *urvare* derives: thus, *urbs* / *orbis* / *urvum* / *urvare*. What does *urvum* mean? To answer this question, we need to take a closer look at the Roman plough.

The act of ploughing completed on occasion of the foundation of a city is truly exceptional, and is suffused with religious meaning. The ploughman’s garment is ritually significant – he wears the toga with the *cinctus Gabinus*, the same worn, for example, by the military commander who is about to perform the ritual of *devotio*. The plough itself is pulled not by two animals chosen at random, but by a bull and a heifer, whose relative position under the yoke is ritually prescribed (the male on the outside, the female on the inside). Even the direction of ploughing is ritually determined, advancing from right to left. To

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45 Supra, n. 38.

return to urvum, this word designates a piece of the plough, specifically the “curvature” formed by the buris (the plough-beam) and the dens (the share-beam) – two pieces that, on the most basic kinds of plough, can be formed from a single piece of wood. Think of the Etruscan bronze statuette known as The Ploughman of Arezzo, of about 430–400 BCE, today housed in the Museo di Valle Giulia. In simple ploughs, the temo (yoke-beam), the ax departing from the yoke, the dens (share-beam), and the buris (plough-beam), were formed from a single piece of wood. In the most developed types of plough, on the other hand, the single parts of the implement were formed from distinct elements: from the iugum (yoke), to which the oxen are tied, departs the temo (yoke-beam), the plough’s ax, to which the buris is attached (plough-beam); the buris forms the curved piece by which the dens (sole or share-beam), i.e. the digging part to which the vomer (plough-share) can be attached, is secured to the rest of the implement. Cf. K. D. White, Agricultural Implements of the Roman World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 129; for the “bronzetto dell’Aratore” see M. Cristofani, I bronzi degli Etruschi. Con contributi di E. Formigli e di M. E. Micheli (Novara: De Agostini, 1985), no. 54 and p. 270: “allo stato attuale è stata eliminata la compagna femminile dell’aratore … si tratta di una Menerva … il dentale [dell’aratro] è fornito di un vomere applicato: si tratta dunque della riproduzione di un oggetto ligneo con vomere in ferro (G. Vitali, Studi Etruschi 2, 1928, 412)”; see also A. Cherici, L’aratore di Arezzo e altri monumenti. Per una storia della più antica economia aretina (Provincia di Arezzo, 1992); F. Paturzo, Arezzo antica (Cortona: Calosci, 1997), 109–112; P. Carafa in Roma. Romolo, Remo e la fondazione della città. Catalogo dell’esposizione, a cura di A. Carandini e R. Cappelli (Roma, 2000), 272–273, who thinks of ritual ploughing (improbable: see Briquel, op. cit. [above, n. 26], 28); see also the “rilievo con scena di aratura da Aquileia”, which possibly represents a foundation act (Carafa, cit., ibidem); picture of a foundation plough in Carafa, cit., 277; see also G. Camporeale, G. Firpo (ed.), Arezzo nell’antichità (Roma: G. Bretschneider, 2009).
implement on account of its being shaped “in a curve”, as we are told.\(^\text{48}\) One of our sources, Alfenus Varus, actually claims that this word was used specifically in reference to the “curvature” of the plough used for in the foundation event.\(^\text{49}\) From \textit{urvum} comes the verb \textit{urvare}, which means “to encircle”, “go around in a circle” – getting its meaning, that is, “from the furrow that is made by the \textit{urvum} of the plough on the occasion of a city’s founding.”\(^\text{50}\) So \textit{urvare}, “to use the \textit{urvum}” means specifically “to dig a curved furrow”.

Think about it: to dig a curved furrow with a plough is actually an extraordinary feat! In fact the act of ploughing is conventionally associated with the creation of \textit{straight} furrows – not curved ones. In Italian peasant culture, not coincidentally, there is a long tradition of competing for “the straight furrow”, that is, competing to see who can go “straightest” with the plough, this being the mark of a truly masterful ploughman.\(^\text{51}\) Metaphors taken from the act of ploughing also play on the image of the straight line: in Latin, \textit{exarare}, used in the sense of “compose”, is derived from the act of tracing letters with the stylus on a wax tablet. He who writes goes “straight” – his writing follows a straight

\(^{48}\) Varro, \textit{De lingua latina}, 5, 31: \textit{Qui quasi temo est inter boves, bura a bubus; alii hoc a curvo urvum, appellant}; 27: \textit{Amburvom factum ab urvo, quod ita flexum ut redate sursum versus ut in aratro quod est urvum; Festus 514, 22 ff. Lindsay: Urvat Ennius in Andromeda significat circumdat, ab eo sulco, qui fit in urbe condenda urvo aratri, quae fit processus semilibera curvatura buris et dentis, cui praeficitur vomer; Servius, Commentarius in Georgicon, 1, 170: \textit{In burim: in curvaturam, nam buris est curvamentum aratri … (Danielinus): alii burim curvaturam tenonis, quae supra est, et quod est infra, urvum dicunt: buris enim ut curvetur, ante igni domatur, id est amburitur; unde et quae naturaliter inveniuntur curvae, ita dicuntur. The terminology used by the Romans to designate the different parts of the plough has changed over time, according to the changing structure of the implement. It creates a certain confusion in our sources. The best explanations is White, op. cit. (previous n.), 123–145. 213–216, where unfortunately there is no mention of the \textit{urvum}; see also E. Saglio, \textit{Aratrum}, in C. Daremberg – E. Saglio, \textit{Dictionnaire des antiquités grecques et romaines}, I 353 ff.; A. G. Drachmann, “Pflug”, \textit{Realencyclopaedie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft}, 19:2, 1464–1466.; on the plough described by Vergil, \textit{Georgica}, 1, 169–175, in addition to White, cit., see R. A. B. Mynors, \textit{Virgil Georgics}, Oxford Clarendon Press 1990, ad locum. The “curved” nature of the Roman plough is emphasized also by Vergil, loc. cit.: \textit{continuo in silvis magna ui flexa domaturi in burim et curui formam accipit ulmus aratri}

\(^{49}\) P. 555, fr. 4 Funaioli = Pomponius, \textit{Digesta}, 50,16,239,6: \textit{Varus ait urbem appellari curvaturam aratri, quod in urbe condenda adhiberi solet} (no doubt Pomponius refers to Varus, not to Varro: see the arguments by Funaioli, ibidem); cf. also Festus 514, 22 ff. Lindsay (cit. n. 18).

\(^{50}\) Festus 514, 22 ff. Lindsay (cited n. 48).

\(^{51}\) A. M. Di Nola, \textit{Gli aspetti magico-religiosi di una cultura subalterna italiana} (Torino: Boringhieri, 1976), 279–280; in addition to folkloric sources, evidence of this practice can also be found in the \textit{Arcadia} by Sannazaro and the \textit{Stanze} by Doni (Di Nola, op. cit.)
line, not a curved one. No surprise, then, that going in a circular fashion with a plough, insofar as this would be contrary to normal practice, was designated with a special verb: *urvare*, derived from the substantive *urvum*, meaning precisely “curve”. So if the founder of a city must *urvare* in order to produce a curved furrow, we should probably assume he used some special method of maneuvering the *urvum*, to make the plough proceed in a circle.

This would not have been the only problem the founder of a city would have had to contend with, however. The Roman plough is an instrument whose *dens* – the “tooth” that actually enters the earth – is symmetrical in form: consequently, any earth dug out from the furrow is overturned on both sides, on the right and on the left of the furrow. Yet as we know from Plutarch, the foundation ritual prescribed that the clods overturned in this manner should always fall *within* the circle defined by furrow – that is, inside the circular space traced out by the plough – rather than *without* this space. The reasoning behind this rule is that the material dug out by the plough was intended to form the foundation of the city wall, and as such belonged ritually to the space of the city. This is why Plutarch makes mention of the fact that Romulus was followed by others whose task it was make sure that any clod of earth happening to fall *outside of* the circle be carefully placed back *within* the circle. Cato informs us that the founder of a city could obtain the same result without the help of others, simply by maneuvering the plough in a particular way: “founders… held the plough-handle crooked (*incurvam*), so that the clods of earth fell inside (*intrinsecus*)” – he means inside the circular space. By

52 Metaphorical creations grounded in the relation between writing and ploughing are numerous. See, for instance, the practise of so-called “bustrophedic writing” (*bous-trophedón*, Pausanias, *Graeciae descriptio* 5,17,6), whose name derives from the image of the ploughman who, having reached the end of the fied, “turns” the oxen and digs a parallel furrow moving in the opposite direction. Another interesting example is offered by the celebrated “indovinello veronese” (VIII–IX century: C. Tagliavini, *Le origini delle lingue neolatine: introduzione alla filologia italiana*, Bologna: Patron Editore, 1982, 524–527): *Se pareba boves / alba pratalia araba / albo versorio teneba / negro semen seminaba* (In front of him (he) led oxen / White fields (he) plowed / A white plow (he) held / A black seed (he) sowed: the writer traces / digs his line / furrow using his pen / plough, obviously describing a straight line of writing.

53 The Romans used the type of plough called “sole-ard” (cf. White, op. cit. [above n. 48], 126–128); by contrast, in the plough known as “turning or mould-board” the equivalent of the *dens* is asymmetrical in shape: this allows the ploughman to overturn the clods on a single side of the furrow (White, loc. cit.).

54 Plutarch, *Romulus* 11,3; Cato, *Origines* 1,18 Chassignet (in *Isidorus, Etymologiae* 15,2,3): “Qui urbem,” inquit “novam condit, tauro et vacca arat; ubi anaverit, murum factit; ubi portam vult esse, aratrum substollit et portat, et portam vocat”.

exercising a certain amount of pressure on the plough-handle and thus keeping it “crooked”, the founder was able to make all the clods fall inside of the line traced by the furrow, even if, technically speaking, his plough was not designed to operate in this way.

As may be seen, in foundation practice the act of “curving” was fundamentally important: the plough had to proceed along a curve not only to produce the necessary circular outline, but also to guarantee that whatever earth was dug up in that process would fall within the defined space. It may actually be that the verb urvare designates both these actions prescribed by the ritual. Whatever the case, we can conclude by saying that for the Romans the religious character of the foundation event corresponded not only to the ploughman’s cinctus Gabinus, to the bull and heifer ritually yoked, and to the movement from right to left; but also to the plough itself “going in a circle”.56 This specialized movement of the plough was the crucial connection between urbs, urvum, the act of urvare deriving from it, and the furrow in the shape of orbis.

The plough, the sky and the beginnings: Roman representations

We have now reached a point where we can try to synthesize the various facts collected into evidence so far. We can say that the act of foundation presents the following constellation of cultural models: when the Romans imagined the “beginnings” of their city (urbs) they made a connection between – on one hand – a circular pit called mundus capable of relating the celestial vault, the earth, and the realm of the dead; and – on the other – the image of a circle (orbis), characterized by harmony and symmetry, that along with the pomoerium indicated that portion of the world (or even the entire world) surrounding the city as conquered (or conquerable) territory. At the same time, urbs and orbis both make reference to a specific part of the plough (urvum) characterized by “curvature”, a feature permitting the founder to undertake a specific act (urvare).
that consisted in tracing a circular furrow called the *sulcus primigenius* – and also necessary for guaranteeing that all the clods of earth fell within the circular space defined by that furrow.

The plough holds other surprises in store for us, however. There exists in Latin another term designating a part of the plough that appears to belong to the same family of cultural configurations: *cohum*. According to Varro, this word designates “the groove at the center of the yoke blocking the end of the *buris* (the plough-beam): it is called *cohum* because it is *cavum* (hollow)”.  

The *cohum*, then, is properly the groove or depression that enables the ploughman to keep the end of the *buris* in place: in other words, a part of the plough that, at its more “curved” section, also bears the name of *urrum* and relates specifically to the foundation act. Why do I think *cohum* belongs to the same configuration that includes *mundus, urbs/orbis, urrum* and the act of *urvare*, which produces the *sulcus primigenius*? Because “according to the ancients” *cohum* was also used to refer to the “celestial vault”, or what in other contexts was called *mundus*.  

If this were not enough, from *cohum* also comes the word *incohare* – conventionally used in Latin to mean “begin”. Servius tells us that *incohare* belonged specifically to the religious vocabulary, however: it was a *verbum sacrorum*. 

Here we are once again confronted with a configuration associating the plough, the celestial vault, and “beginnings” in a religious sense. If *cohum* corresponds to *urrum* on one hand (as a part of the plough) and to *mundus* on the other (as celestial vault), *incohare* (“to begin”, with religious connotations) recalls the *sulcus primigenius* and the entire foundation ceremony.

To conclude. Although the Romans did not have their own cosmogony, they did have their own “Urbigony,” so to speak – in the sense that they attributed “cosmic” meaning to the birth of the *urbs* that signaled the beginning of their own *civitas*: that *urbs* and that *civitas* also defining the “beginnings” as far as both men and gods are concerned. The descendents of Romulus were not

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57 Varro, *De lingua latina* 5,235: *sub iugo medio cavum, quod bura extremam addita oppilatur, vocatur cohum a cavum*. According to Ernout–Meillet, op. cit. (above n. 31) s. v., *cohum* is a simple “doublet dialectal” of *cavum* (*caum > coum*: the –h- is only a graphic device to signal that the two vowels do not form diphthong, as in *ahenus*).  

58 Diomedes, GLK, I,365,18: *Verrius et Flaccus in postrema syllaba adspirandum probauerunt. cohum enim apud ueteres mundum significat, unde subtractum incohare*.  


60 In this perspective, we can recall what has been written by B. Lincoln (op. cit. [above, n.4] 42–50. 62 following W. Burkert, “Caesar und Romulus-Quirinus,” *Historia* 11 (1962), 356–376, partic. 365 f. and J. Puhvel, “Remus et frater,” *History of Religions* 15 (1975), 146–157) about the dismembering of the body of Romulus as a fragment of an early cosmogonic myth: although the dismembering of the founder took place long after the foundation of the city.
interested in describing the birth of the cosmos in myth. But they created a cosmogony in virtue of the *mundus*, which related their city to the celestial vault and to the realm of the dead, while the circular form of the furrow, together with the *pomoerium*, recalled the form of *orbis* that the city of Rome in some way reproduced. Through their Urbigony, the Romans recounted not how the world was born, but rather how they themselves made their world by digging a *mundus* and tracing out a *sulcus primigenius*.

However, I have no intention here of evoking images such as that of the *axis mundi*, which simultaneously orients the cosmos and the city. Nor do I feel any particular need to repeat phrases of the type “[every construction reproduced the creation of the world] n’importe quel établissement humain nouveau est… une reconstruction du monde” or “[the cosmogony is the paradigmatic model for all creation] la cosmogonie est l’exemplaire type de toutes les constructions”,\(^6\) as Eliade asserted. In fact, other considerations apart, Marcel Detienne’s comparative research on the theme of foundations has underscored the great multiplicity of forms in which the foundation act may be elaborated. It may be totally absent – as in Japan; or may be hardly recognizable – as in India of the Vedas; or it may receive decisive articulation through a founder who sanctions the birth of a city by means of a furrow, a wall, and the spilling of blood – as at Rome, or in China or the kingdoms of Kotoko of Camerun. And I am not counting here the cases in which it is not a boundary that defines a village, but the village that creates the boundary – as in Brahmanic India.\(^7\)

In our case, we have tried to identify the cultural models proper to one culture – Roman culture – forging our difficult route through antiquarian fragments and grammatical glosses. So what sense would there be in reducing all this to some scanty paragraphs of Eliade’s *Traité*? It is the specificity of the Roman models that interests us. For in fact in the foundation of Rome there is not only the *mundus* – the point of analysis at which scholars sometimes stop – but also other cultural configurations in operation. And these configurations are very Roman ones – like the *urvu* of the plough and its relationship with the *urbs*, the circularity of the *orbis* that recalls the *pomoerium* in expanded form, and so forth. But even as concerns the *mundus* itself, we should not forget that while this “pit” sets the *urbs* in relation to the celestial vault and the realm of the dead, it also represents a place where the cultures that preceeded the birth of Rome are fused (“all that is beautiful according to custom and all that is

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\(^7\) M. Detienne, “Qu’est-ce qu’un site?”, in *Tracés de fondation*, op. cit. (above, n. 4) 1 – 16.
necessary according to nature”), just as within it are mixed the soils of other “fatherlands”. Besides constituting a means of communication with the heavens and with the underworld, the *mundus* is a place of fusion and harmonization of all that is different – capable of integrating the entire experience of a people that wished to “take its beginning” only from the foundation of their city. And we are talking about a specific people – the Roman people – not “any” people whatsoever (“n’importe quel peuple”), from India or Mesopotamia or the Urals.

Translated by William Michael Short.