• The Roman Pantheon: Greek versus Roman Gods

• The Myths of Early Rome: Aeneas and the Origin of the Roman People
The Roman Pantheon

• originally, the Romans had their own gods, unique and distinct from those of the Greeks

• only fairly late in ancient history were these native Roman gods equated with Greek deities

• all too often, these equations have little real social or theological merit
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• but valid or not, these equations gained popularity and spread
• they forced indigenous Roman gods to conform to Greek standards to make the equations look valid
• the Greek gods were affected far less
• “Conquered Greece conquered Rome”
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• the habit of constructing “celestial similes” was common practice in antiquity

• Herodotus, for instance, equates Isis and Demeter, as well as Dionysus and Osiris, on rather flimsy grounds

• nevertheless, these equations worked and must be learned
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• strictly speaking, only two of the equations of Greek and Roman deities are valid:
  – Apollo
  – Heracles/Hercules

• the rest are based on superficial similarities
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**ZEUS = JUP(P)ITER**

- originally, *Zeus* and *Jup(p)iter* shared some similarities:
  - they were both sky gods associated with weather, especially thunder and lightning
  - their names are both based on the Indo-European root for “day”
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ZEUS = JUP(P)ITER

• but before being associated with Zeus, the Roman Jupiter is a rather colorless and bland

• the original Roman Jupiter was not necessarily even anthropomorphic
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HERA = JUNO

• originally, Juno was a goddess of women in all respects, especially childbirth and marriage

• but by being equated with Hera, Juno became only a “goddess of marriage”

• and because of his association with Juno, Jupiter’s importance grew
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HESTIA = VESTA

• originally, Hestia and Vesta shared some similarities:
  – both goddesses of the home
  – their names come from the Indo-European root for “hearth”
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**HESTIA = VESTA**

• but Vesta is much more important in Rome than Hestia is in Greece

• e.g. the Vestal Virgins who are keepers of the eternal flame

• but even as Vesta disappeared from myth, the Vestal Virgins remained at the center of Roman public life
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**HEPHAESTUS = VULCAN**

- the Roman **Vulcan** is another deity who suffered by comparison with his Greek “equivalent” **Hephaestus**
- **Vulcan** was originally a god of all sorts of fire, including destructive fire
- not just a subterranean god of the forge like **Hephaestus**
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ARES = MARS

• but Mars is the Roman god whose repute suffered the worst decline by being associated with a Greek god

• originally he was the Romans’ principal god, cf. names of months

• he was equated with the Greek Ares whom the Greeks detested
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**POSEIDON = NEPTUNE**

- conversely, the Roman Neptune thrived by comparison with Poseidon
- the early Romans were a land-locked people and had no god of the sea
- originally, Neptune was a god of sweet waters, worshiped in summer
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**APHRODITE = VENUS**

- similarly, Venus gained popularity after being associated with Aphrodite
- originally, Venus was a goddess of tidy gardens, i.e. fertility and beauty
- this was the closest the prim and proper Romans came to having a sex goddess
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ATHENA = MINERVA

• the Roman Minerva also thrived by comparison to the Greek Athena

• both were originally depicted as armed goddesses of war and also oversaw arts and crafts

• but Minerva was not the patroness of Rome, as Athena was of Athens
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**HERMES = MERCURY**

- originally, the Roman Mercury resembled the Greek Hermes as a god of tradesmen and profit
- but Mercury was never a god of death (*psychopompos*) — nor a messenger or musician — until he was associated with Hermes
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ARTEMIS = DIANA

• the Roman Diana was a goddess of the moon and childbirth like her Greek “equivalent” Artemis

• but Artemis’ other aspects (magic and hunting) were forced on Diana after their association
VERGIL

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**HADES/PLUTO = DIS**

- the original Roman gods of death resembled the Greek Furies
- the Romans had to import the idea of **Hades**, the "keeper of the dead"
- thus, they retained the name intact
- but translated **Pluto** ("Wealth") as **Dis** ("Rich")
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**DIONYSUS = BACCHUS/LIBER**

- The association of Dionysus and Bacchus is one of the least credible matches in the classical pantheon.
- Dionysus is a young, effeminate, Eastern god of ecstasy.
- Bacchus is an old, drunk fertility god, also called “(Pater) Liber”.
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**JANUS**

- there were several native Roman deities for which no clear equivalent existed in Greek religion and no possibility for making a match, e.g.
  - **Janus**, the god of doors and transitions
  - Flora, the goddess of flowers
  - Tiberinus, the god of the Tiber River
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**LARES and PENATES**

- the most important of these native Roman deities with no Greek equivalents are the Lares and Penates
- the Penates are domestic gods, the divine protectors of the house itself
- the Lares are the spirits of a family’s deceased ancestors
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- clearly, as Greek culture insinuated itself within Roman society, the pressure of this change was traumatic

- cf. Plautus' *Bacchides*:

  **YOUNG MAN**: Love, Desire, Venus, Grace, Joy, Joke, Fun, Gab, Blissfulkissification (in Latin, *Suavisaviatio*)!

  **TEACHER**: If those are gods, you should not have anything to do with them.

  **YOUNG MAN**: *(obviously quoting his tutor's own words)* "Evil the man who evil of good men does speak." Your answer is not correct. *(shaking his finger)* That's two points off.
The Roman Pantheon

- clearly, as Greek culture insinuated itself within Roman society, the pressure of this change was traumatic
- cf. Plautus’ *Bacchides*:

  TEACHER: There is a god called "Blissfulkissifiction"?
  YOUNG MAN: Oh, so you've never heard of her, have you?
  Well, I used to think you were an educated man. But this proves you are a barbarian, Mr. Greek. And not even a senior barbarian but a freshman! To think, at your age, someone can't even name the gods!
The Myths of Early Rome

- the earliest Italian ancestors of the Romans were Indo-European invaders.
- they settled in Latium (west central Italy) along the Tiber River.
- there are no real historical records from Rome before the 200’s BCE.
- later Romans did not even know that the Indo-Europeans had ever existed.
The Myths of Early Rome

• instead, the Romans subscribed to a series of “invented histories” (myths)
• these legends are not even native Roman tales but were borrowed from the myths of other Mediterranean civilizations, especially the Greeks
• obviously, the allure of Greek culture goes back very far in Roman history
The Myths of Early Rome

• the “oldest” attested Roman myth concerns Aeneas, a fugitive from Troy
• according to legend, Aeneas and other Trojan refugees fled their homeland after the Greeks destroyed it at the end of the Trojan War
The Myths of Early Rome

- these refugees included Aeneas’ son Ascanius, who is also called Julius
- Julius is the namesake of the Julian clan (gens) to which Julius Caesar belonged
- thus, Caesar and his family claimed ancestry going back to Aeneas’ son
The Myths of Early Rome

• Aeneas, Ascanius and their fellow Trojans spent many years wandering the Mediterranean, looking for a place to settle

• eventually they landed in Italy and colonized the area around Rome

• but they did not found the city of Rome itself
The Myths of Early Rome

• the Romans were somehow aware that their city was really not that old
• it did not go back further in time than the eighth century BCE and had a traditional founding date of 753 BCE
• but Aeneas had to have lived around 1200 BCE, leaving a gap of 400 years
The Myths of Early Rome

• this meant Aeneas could not have been the builder of Rome, only the father of the Roman people

• there had to be a different foundation myth for the city itself

• that myth was the story of Romulus and Remus
The Myths of Early Rome

- Romulus and Remus were twin sons of the god Mars and Rhea Silvia.
- Rhea Silvia’s uncle, Amulius, was the king of Latium and wanted to make sure she had no sons so he forced her to become a Vestal Virgin.
- but she was impregnated by Mars and gave birth to twin boys.
The Myths of Early Rome

• Amulus exposed the babies by putting them in a basket and floating them down the Tiber River

• They washed up on the banks of the river where a she-wolf found and nursed them
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• the she-wolf is sacred to Mars

• eventually, a farmer discovered and raised the boys as his own children
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• when grown, the boys overthrew their despotic uncle Amulius and restored the throne to their grandfather Numitor, the rightful king

• because they now had no city of their own to rule, they set out to found their own city
but as they were building their city, they got into a fight and Romulus killed Remus

thus, the new city was named for the surviving brother: Rome (not Reme?)
The Myths of Early Rome

• note the parallels to other foundation myths in Mediterranean cultures, e.g.
  – the baby in a basket on the river:
The Myths of Early Rome

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  – the baby in a basket on the river: Moses
  – the murderer who builds a city:
The Myths of Early Rome

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  – the baby in a basket on the river: Moses
  – the murderer who builds a city: Cain

• on the surface, this tale seems like a native “Roman” legend: Tiber River, Vestal Virgin, the god Mars
The Myths of Early Rome

- but, in fact, the story is concocted of myths found in other cultures
- there is no evidence that the Romulus and Remus myth existed before the fourth century (300’s) BCE
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The Myths of Early Rome

• that is the period when the Romans first began interacting with Greek travelers, merchants and colonists

• also it is very close to the Greek myth of Amphion and Zethus, the twin brothers who founded the city of Thebes (originally called “Cadmeia”)

The Myths of Early Rome

• Amphion and Zethus’ mother Antiope was impregnated by Zeus
• her evil step-mother Dirce forced her to flee Thebes
• she gave birth to Amphion and Zethus in a cave and abandoned them
• shepherds rescued and raised the boys
eventually, Amphion and Zethus returned to Thebes and killed Dirce
they, then, built the walls of the central fortress of their homeland
they then renamed Cadmeia “Thebes” (after one of their wives)
The Myths of Early Rome

• clearly, the Romulus and Remus myth is modeled on this older legend about the twin-founders of Thebes

• the Roman features and customs (Tiber River, Vestal Virgin, Mars and she-wolf) are only a crude whitewash of “local color” meant to make the myth look Roman