

DIANA GUARISCO

AUGUSTUS, THE LUPERCALIA AND THE ROMAN IDENTITY

Summary: It is widely agreed that Augustus dealt with the festival *Lupercalia*. However, the evidence about his intervention is scanty and discussable; in addition, both the reconstruction of the celebration and an outline of its historical development are almost impossible tasks. Nevertheless, ancient authors agree on placing the origins of the *Lupercalia* in the furthest antiquity, at the beginning of the town or at the beginning of mankind. Coherently, the descriptions which they provide suggest that the festival aimed at a temporary and ritually controlled regress to the primeval savagery. Therefore, the involvement of Augustus in the (re-)organization of the *Lupercalia* results to be consistent with his programmatic connection to Romulus, the founder. In fact, the representations of the pre-civic world at the festival and in the Augustan poetry (especially by Virgil) are consonant. It is worth noting that *Lupercalia* were celebrated for centuries after Augustus. It is possible to infer that the regress into the wild primeval world was essential to Roman identity, just like the stories about the founder. Since a festival *Louperkalion* was held in Constantinople, it can be supposed that *Lupercalia* were one of the identity symbols that the second Rome chose as heritage from the first one.

Key words: *Luperci*, festival, symbol, identity, Romulus, pre-civic world, Virgilian poetry, Augustus

It is widely agreed that Augustus dealt with the festival *Lupercalia*. In fact, Suetonius includes the *Lupercalia* in a list of decayed traditional religious institutions and rituals which Augustus restored (Suet. *Aug.* 31. 4):

Nonnulla etiam ex antiquis caerimoniis paulatim abolita restituit, ut Salutis augurium, Diale flamonium, sacrum Lupercale, ludos Saeculares et Compitalicios. Lupercalibus vetuit currere inberbes (...)

He also revived some of the ancient rites which had gradually fallen into disuse, such as the augury of Safety, the office of *Flamen Dialis*, the ceremonies of the *Lupercalia*, the Secular Games and the festival of the Compitalia. At the *Lupercalia* he forbade beardless youths to join in the running (...) (Trans. J. C. Rolfe¹)

¹ See Suetonius. With an English translation by C. J. ROLFE. Vol. I. London – Cambridge, Mass. 1912.

Suetonius states that Augustus forbade beardless boys to run during the festival. Scholars generally have inferred that he made the celebration more decent, therefore, on the basis of iconographical evidence, they have credited Augustus with having dressed the naked *luperci* (as Virgil and Ovid call them).² In the oldest supposed representation of *luperci* (a fragmentary clay slab from Palatine),³ they are naked, but the *luperci* depicted in a statue from Fondi (beginning I AD)⁴ and in two funerary reliefs (II AD)⁵ are wearing a kind of quite long loincloth, very close to the one that was worn by the *victimarii*.

Coherently to such an interpretation of Augustan restoration of the *Lupercalia* as a moral reform of the festival, it has been suggested that the prince introduced a nuance of moral punishment in the hits of the *luperci* to women.⁶ In fact, according to Ovid (who reports the foundation myth), brides who had not become pregnant yet, offered their shoulders to be beaten by the *luperci* (Ov. *Fast.* 2. 425–452). Plutarch states that women submitted their hands to *luperci* just like schoolgirls (*Caes.* 61). After all, it is well known that Augustus imposed a tax to not married people and awarded the most numerous families.⁷ In addition, a real fustigation is depicted in a mosaic from Thysdrus and in the sarcophagus of Aelia Afanacia (III AD)⁸. Finally, Pope Gelasius I in his letter against the proposal of reintroducing *Lupercalia* (496 AD) hints at this kind of rite stating that in the past the *matronae* themselves (and not trivial women) were stripped to be fustigated (c. *Andr.* 16).

To sum up, on the basis of Suetonius' passage and of a passage of Cicero's *Pro Caelio* (11. 26) in which he lampoons the savage bad ways of the *luperci* and recalls that their group "dates from before the dawn of civilization and law",⁹ it is quite accepted the theory that Augustus tamed *luperci*'s bad ways and "made them a respectable fellowship, acceptable to bourgeois standards of behaviour".¹⁰

Such a theory fits in very well with evidence that points to crediting Augustus with the transformation of the *luperci* into an equestrian priesthood: inscriptions dating from the I AD to the III AD record only equestrian *luperci*;¹¹ Valerius Maximus (II 2. 9) states that the *Lupercalia* and the *trasvectio equitum* were the two occasions in

² See Verg. *Aen.* 8. 663 and Ov. *Fast.* 2. 268.

³ See TORTORELLA, S.: Lastra Campana di rivestimento. In CARANDINI, A. – CAPPELLI, R. (eds.): *Roma. Romolo, Remo e la fondazione della città*. Milano 2000, 251.

⁴ See TORTORELLA (n. 3) 248.

⁵ See TORTORELLA (n. 3) 249–250.

⁶ See HOLLEMAN, A.W. J.: Ovid and the Lupercalia. *Historia* 22 (1973) 260–268; HOLLEMAN, A.W. J.: *Pope Gelasius I and the Lupercalia*. Amsterdam 1974, 27–28.

⁷ See Dio Cass. LIV 16. 1; Suet. *Aug.* 34.

⁸ See respectively TORTORELLA (n. 3) 252 and 253. To this documents should be added a relief bronze mirror probably depicting Venus fustigated by a god (Faunus or Lupercus) inside the *Lupercal*. See TORTORELLA (n. 3) 243–244.

⁹ Cicero aims at ridiculing Caelius's accusers who charged him with being a *lupercus* and were *luperci* themselves. However, it will be shown below (p. 227) that Cicero is playing on the actual symbolism of *luperci*.

¹⁰ See NORTH, J. A. – MCLYNN, N.: Postscript to the Lupercalia: from Caesar to Andromachus. *JRS* 98 (2008) 177.

¹¹ For a collection of the inscriptions, see SCHEID, J. – GRANINO CECERE, M. G.: Les sacerdoces publics équestres. In DEMOUGIM, S. – DEVIJVER, H. – RAEPSAET-CHARLIER, M.-TH. (eds.): *L'ordre équestre. Histoire d'une aristocratie (I^{er} s. av. J.-C. – III^e s. ap. J.-C.)*. Rome 1999, 129–134.

which young *equites* crowded the town by exhibiting themselves; in the two funerary reliefs that have been mentioned above, the depiction of the dead as a *lupercus* is connected to the delivery of the *equus publicus*.¹² It has been convincingly argued that this transformation aimed at completing the Romanization of Italy by increasing the importance of the role of the equestrian order in Roman religious and public life.¹³

As a matter of fact, the passage by Suetonius (*Aug.* 31. 4) is the only one testimony of an Augustan restoration of the *Lupercalia* and available evidence about the festival challenges its reliability.¹⁴ It is in fact problematic to state that the festival decayed before Augustus. It is well known that Caesar, coherently with his ideological self-representation as new Romulus,¹⁵ instituted a third team of *luperci*, the *Iulii* (Dio Cass. XLIV 6. 2). Moreover, the events occurred during the *Lupercalia* in 44 BC, when Antonius offered to Caesar the royal crown,¹⁶ although they are very problematic to interpret,¹⁷ prove at least that the festival was very popular. According to Cicero (*Phil.* 13. 31), after Caesar's death the *Luperci* did not receive the funds that he destined to them (*vectigalia Iuliana*) any longer, but this does not mean that the celebration vanished.

Furthermore, scholars' assertions, based mainly on Suetonius' passage, are discussable. As regards the dress of the *Luperci*, it should be retained that, since the statue and the reliefs are portraits, they do not show performing *luperci*, therefore they can not prove that Augustus dressed them for the festival. Secondly, not only do Virgil and Ovid, two Augustan poets, call the *luperci* naked, but they insist on *luperci*'s nakedness. For Virgil nakedness is *luperci*'s distinctive symbol, like the dance of *Salii* and the crest bound with wool for *flamines*.¹⁸ Ovid reports three aitiological tales for the nakedness as characteristic ritual feature of *Lupercalia*: two of them are Greek (related to the Arcadians¹⁹ and to Faunus²⁰) and one is Roman (related to the young Romulus and Remus).²¹ Thirdly, it is worth considering that nakedness could be sym-

¹² See VEYNE, P.: Iconographie de la *transvectio equitum* et des Lupercales. *REA* 62 (1960) 100–112.

¹³ See FERRIES, M.-C.: *Luperci et Lupercalia* de César à Auguste. *Latomus* 68.2 (2009) 391.

¹⁴ Scholars such as J. A. North and N. McLynn have not any doubt in qualifying Suetonius' passage as an "infamous summary"; see NORTH-MCLYNN (n. 9) 177.

¹⁵ See at least ALFÖLDI, A.: Die Geburt der kaiserlichen Bildsymbolik. *Kleine Beiträge zu ihrem Entstehungsgeschichte. MH* 8 (1951) 190–215; BURKERT, W.: Caesar und Romulus-Quirinus. *Historia* 11 (1962) 356–357.

¹⁶ See Cic. *Phil.* 2. 85–87; 3. 12; 13. 31; Nic. Dam. *Vit. Caes.* 21. 71–75; Plut. *Ant.* 12; *Caes.* 61; Dio Cass. XLIV 11. 2–3.

¹⁷ For some different interpretations, see BIANCHI, U. (Cesare e i lupercali del 44 a.C. *StRom* 6 (1958) 253–259) who stresses the identification of Caesar with Romulus; M. SORDI (Opposizione e onori: il caso dei Lupercali. In SORDI, M. [a cura di]: *Fazioni e congiure nel mondo antico*. Milano 1999, 151–160), who insists upon the political aspects; G. DUMÉZIL (*La religion romaine archaïque*. Paris 1974³, 355) who reads the events as a revival of an ancient coronation ritual; A. FRASCHETTI (Cesare e Antonio ai Lupercalia. In FALES, F. M. – GROTTANELLI, C. [eds.]: *Soprannaturale e potere nel mondo antico e nelle società tradizionali*. Milano 1985, 165–186) who stresses the calendar features of the *Lupercalia* as frame for the event; J. A. NORTH (Caesar at the Lupercalia. *JHR* 98 [2008] 114–160) who thinks that the attempt had been planned by Caesar and Antony in advance as a demonstration of Caesar's refusal of the role of *rex*.

¹⁸ See Verg. *Aen.* 8. 663.

¹⁹ Ov. *Fast.* 2. 283–302.

²⁰ According to Ov. *Fast.* 2. 303–359.

²¹ According to Ov. *Fast.* 2. 358–380.

bolic, that is, the absence of the Roman citizen's dress, the *toga*.²² Finally, it must not be forgotten that Suetonius did not write that Augustus dressed the naked *luperci*: he wrote that he forbade beardless youths to join in the runners. It has been correctly argued that such a prohibition had probably nothing to do with decency, but was the indication of the lowest age limit for participation.

As regards women, the picture of their ritual role at the *Lupercalia* is anything but clear. According to some authors such as Nicholas Damascenus, Plutarch and Valerius Maximus, running *luperci* hit everybody they met. Plutarch adds that women did not avoid the hits and that they offered their hands to be beaten like schoolgirls. According to Festus and Servius only young women were beaten. According to another gloss by Festus, during the *Lupercalia* women were purified with the Juno's mantle, that is the goat skin. It is tempting to identify Juno's mantle with the strange hairy hood that is worn by a woman depicted in a gem exhibited at the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Wien. It is in fact possible to suppose that she is participating in the *Lupercalia* because in the gem there are also a smaller Faunus' head and an object which resembles to the typical whip of *luperci*.²³ In addition there are the late fustigation scenes and the passage by Gelasius I that have been mentioned above. Therefore, it is impossible both to identify any Augustan intervention and to define its aim.

What is more, no evidence suggests that Augustus tamed the bad manners of the *luperci*. As far as ancient authors describe the festival its features are always the same: *luperci* run disorderly, they are naked, they hit citizens and *matronae*; the main ritual instruments are goat skin, blood and milk; the tamed dog is sacrificed, the festival symbolically refers to wolves; *luperci*'s route is outside the inaugurated Romulean town; in the myth (and perhaps in the rite) the winner is Remus, who lost the competition to be Rome's founder; the deities of the festival are the *semicaper* Faunus who lives in the woods and speaks through them (Verg. *Aen.* 7. 81–95) and a Juno who speaks through the trees of her sacred wood as well (Ov. *Fast.* 2. 437–440) and who is strongly connected to goats (Festus s.v. *Februarius*, goat skin as Juno's mantle). It is worth noting that some of these details are provided by authors who live during and after the Augustan age: Virgil describes the oracle of Faunus, Ovid that of Juno; Ovid again reports the mythical victory of Remus; Plutarch describes the rite with goat blood, milk and wool and reports the sacrifice of the dog (*Rom.* 21. 6–8).

Therefore, it is worth wondering whether it was necessary for Augustus to tame the *luperci* or their savagery was fully coherent with his ideological programme.

An important element to be considered to answer the question is the date of the *Lupercalia*, 15th February, that is during the *Parentalia*, the public celebration of the ancestors which lasted from 13th to 21st February. In those days ancestors were thought to come back to the town through the *mundus*: public activities were suspended, no marriages were celebrated, officials put their symbols down. It has been suggested that the *luperci* themselves represented the returning ancestors because in the Etruscan

²² See FRASCHETTI, A.: *Romolo il fondatore*. Roma–Bari 2002, 21–22.

²³ See TORTORELLA (n. 3) 243.

and Italic tradition wolf is strongly connected with the Underworld.²⁴ At least, they represented the world in which *parentes* lived. All the features of the festival look like an inversion of the ordinary way of life of citizens. But all the foundations myths recall a time in which citizens did not exist yet. Many authors state that the rite came from Arcadia, a primeval land. According to Ovid (*Fast.* 2. 289–290) the Arcadians who followed Evander “possessed their land before the birth of Jove” and were “older than the moon”.²⁵ Saint Augustine (*Civ. Dei* XVIII 12) reports that the route of the *Lupercalia* was interpreted as a reminder of the salvation from the primeval universal deluge. But most authors set the world of *luperci* at the origins of the town of Rome by referring their institution or the institution of some of their rituals details to the life of Romulus and Remus before the foundation. *Luperci* actually dated from “before the dawn of civilization and law” (Cic. *Cael.* 11. 26).

It is well known that Augustus created lots of connections between his person and Romulus: his first consulate started with the same *auspicium* which appeared to Romulus before he founded Rome,²⁶ he chose Romulus as neighbour during his lifetime and after. He built his house near the place where Romulus lived,²⁷ he restored the *Lupercal* and, according to A. Carandini, included it in his *Palatium* together with the *Roma quadrata*, the Romulean foundation pit.²⁸ He also built his mausoleum in a topographical connection to the *Pantheon* which stood in or near the place of Romulus-Quirinus’ apotheosis.²⁹ Finally, *Romulus* was also the *cognomen* that he wished to receive or that the Senate proposed him.³⁰ Therefore, Augustus’ involvement in the

²⁴ See MASTROCINQUE, A.: *Romolo (la fondazione di Roma tra storia e leggenda)*. Este 1993, 137–197.

²⁵ For translation, see *Ovid in Six Volumes. Vol. V: Fasti*. With an English Translation by J. G. FRAZER. Repr. Cambridge, Mass. – London 1976.

²⁶ See Suet. *Aug.* 95; App. *BC* 94. 388. Other authors split the event into different occasions: Dio Cass. XLVI 46. 2–3; Iul. Obs. 69.

²⁷ See Dio Cass. LIII 16. 5. For topographical problems, see at least COARELLI, F.: *Palatium. Il Palatino dalle origini all’impero*. Roma 2012, 129.32. Compare CARAFA, P.: Il Palatino messo a punto. *ArchClass* 64 (2013) 731–738.

²⁸ See CARANDINI A. – BRUNO, D.: *La casa di Augusto dai “Lupercalia” al Natale*. Roma–Bari 2008. Compare the criticism of COARELLI (n. 26) 394–395 and the retort of CARAFA (n. 26) 752–753.

²⁹ See COARELLI, F.: *Il Pantheon, l’apoteosi di Augusto e l’apoteosi di Romolo: Città e architettura nella Roma imperiale*. *Atti del Seminario del 25 ottobre 1981 nel 25° anniversario dell’Accademia di Danimarca* [ARID Suppl. X]. 1983, 40–46; SIMPSON, CH. J.: The Northern Orientation of Agrippa’s Pantheon. *AC* 66 (1997) 173–174; THOMAS, E.: The Architectural History of the Pantheon in Rome from Agrippa to Septimius Severus via Hadrian. *Hephaistos* 15 (1997) 175–176; HESBERG, H. V.: Das Mausoleum des Augustus. In STEIN-HÖLKESKAMP, E. – HÖLKESKAMP, K.-J. (Hrsg.): *Erinnerungsorte der Antike. Die römische Welt*. München 2006, 349; CARANDINI, A.: *Cercando Quirino. Traversata sulle onde elettromagnetiche nel suolo del Quirinale*. Torino 2007, 55; LA ROCCA, E.: Dal culto di Ottaviano all’apoteosi di Augusto. In URSO, G. (a cura di): *Dicere laudes. Elogio, comunicazione, creazione del consenso. Atti del Convegno Internazionale Cividale del Friuli 23–25 Settembre 2010*. Pisa 2010, 185. Compare ZIOLKOWSKI, A. in LTUR IV (1999) 56–57 s.v. *Pantheon* and ZIOLKOWSKI, A.: Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics on Agrippa’s Pantheon. In LEONE, A. – PALOMBI, D. – WALKER, S. (a cura di): *Res bene gestae. Ricerche di storia urbana su Roma antica in onore di Eva Margareta Steinby*. Roma 2007, 465–475.

³⁰ According to Dio Cass. LIII 16. 6–7 Octavianus wished to be called Romulus, but accepted to be called Augustus because he was aware of the negative nuances of the name Romulus. According to Suet. *Aug.* 7 some senators proposed the name Romulus.

(re-)organization of the festival *Lupercalia*, which was so strongly connected to Romulus, is far from surprising.

The ideological meaning of such a program is quite clear: like Romulus founded the town by separating definitely it from the savagery through the inviolable furrow, Augustus rescued it from the disorder of the civil wars, that, as the *Epodos* 16 by Horace lively shows, took Rome very closely to the primeval savagery: the dissipation of the rests of Romulus (13–14) is a unique and powerful symbol of the cancellation of his foundation work. Coherently, Augustan poets such as Virgil and Ovid insistently provide impressive representations of the savagery of the primeval time. For example, according to Virgil, Latinus (*Aen.* 7. 170–181) lives in a palace which inspires awe and fear because of the surrounding woods and of the images of the ancestors. In fact, he is the last and most human king of his dynasty.³¹ His father was Faunus, who was not fully human and who is still present just as a voice among woods. His grandfather was Picus, the woodpecker. It has been suggested that the myth about his transformation into the bird reported both by Virgil (*Aen.* 7. 187–191) and by Ovid (*Met.* 14. 320–434) is a rationalizing tale created to cancel his genuine theriomorphic nature: an odd unique plastic Etruscan vase which depicts an half man and half woodpecker being suggests that stories about hybrid beings could have been told.³²

The savage origins of the town and of its founder should not be forgotten because they are part of Roman identity. *Lupercalia* served exactly this purpose: once a year Romans were ritually taken back to the world of their *parentes*, ancestors, in order to strengthen their civic awareness and pride. The identity power of the celebration is a good reason to explain its very long duration. Not only had Pope Gelasius I to stop Andromachus' attempt at celebrating the festival in the last years of the fifth century AD, more than a century after Theodosius' interdiction of pagan cults. A festival called *Louperkalion* was celebrated in Constantinople still in the tenth century AD on the last Carnival day (Const. VII *De caer.* II 82). It was very different from the Roman one: it was held in the circus, it aimed at honouring God and the emperor at the beginning of springtime, no naked young men ran, even though at the end of the last chariots race, charioteers had to pull their charriot by their own. It would be too much to state that this joke was an heritage of the race of the *luperci*, but it is enough to see that *Lupercalia* were a symbol that the new Rome chose as heritage of the old one. Therefore, when Augustus dealt with the *Lupercalia*, he got possession of a very strong Roman identity symbol that was already fully coherent with his very pondered and balanced ideological programme.

Diana Guarisco
University of Bologna
diana.guarisco@libero.it

³¹ See BRELICH, A.: I primi re latini. In BRELICH, A.: *Tre variazioni romane sul tema delle origini*. Roma 1976², 57–103.

³² See CAPANNA, E.: Vaso a forma di picchio. In CARANDINI–CAPPELLI (n. 3) 225.