

Is There a Relationship Between the Three Roman Priests Called the Flamines Maiores, the Three Planets Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, and the Altars of the Roman Circus?

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Introduction and Body

The Byzantine writer John the Lydian (*Ioannes Laurentius Lydus*, ca. AD 490-ca. 565) says that «there was in Italy a certain Circe [...] the daughter of Helios [...] and in honor of her own father; I suppose, she was the first in Italy to celebrate a chariot race, which indeed was named circus after her. [...] The aforementioned Circe first began the practice of chariot races in Italy, and established there a hippodrome, of four stades in length, and one [stade] in width. Its middle part she made of wood, calling this foundation “Euripus” [...] And also, there is a pyramid in the middle of the stadium; and the pyramid belongs to the Sun / Helios, since nearby, unshaded, [lies] that sort of altar. [...] And at the ends of this Euripus, on both sides, altars were erected—three above the pyramid, [namely those] of Cronus, Zeus, and Ares; and three likewise below [it, namely those] of Aphrodite, Hermes and Selene» [1].

The presence of the pyramid and the altars in the Roman circus is interesting not only because it shows the original sacral dimension of chariot races, but also because a precise distinction is made between the planets under the pyramid of the Sun, corresponding to those inside the terrestrial orbit, Venus-Aphrodite and Mercury-Hermes (while Selene, the Moon, is a satellite of the Earth), and the others, the outer ones: Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, whose respective altars were next to, and not below, the pyramid.

Making a comparison between these three outer planets and the three major *flamines*-Roman priests within the college of the *pontifices*-the *flamen Dialis*, *Martialis*, and *Quirinalis*, of Jupiter, Mars and Quirinus respectively, we note that Jupiter and Mars have the honor of a specific *flamen*: it is natural, therefore, to think that the *flamen Quirinalis* was associated with Saturn [2]. On the other hand, Saturn was given to preside over the *Consualia Aestiva* and the *Robigalia*, annual festivals with distinctly agricultural

characteristics, being linked to the wheat harvest [3]: but according to the myth it was he, arrived with a ship in ancient Latium and kindly welcomed by Janus, to teach the art of agriculture [4], many years before the foundation of Rome.

His mythological reign was depicted as a Golden Age of abundance and peace. Furthermore, Cronus, his Greek correspondent, the ancient lord of the golden age before being ousted by his son Zeus, also had an original agricultural dimension. This is clear from the fact that on the twelfth day of Attic month of *Hekatombaiōn* (at the end of July) in Athens the ancient festival of *Kronia* used to take place in Cronus' honor to celebrate the harvest, of which he was the patron (which goes well with the scythe with which Cronus is traditionally portrayed) [5]. On the other hand, at this point, even a hypothetical connection between Greek Kronos and Latin Quirinus cannot be ruled out *a priori*.

It is, therefore, probable that the major *flamines*, *Dialis*, *Martialis* and *Quirinalis*, were dedicated to their celestial correspondents, the three planets which, as we have seen, in Roman circuses were kept distinct from the others. Nor is it certainly a coincidence that the triad Saturn-Jupiter-Mars represented the lineage of the three major Roman male divinities, in strict order of age: the elderly Saturn (now dethroned by his son Jupiter), the middle-aged Jupiter, the *pater familias*, that is, the head of the family, who in ancient Rome held enormous power [6], and the young Mars, Jupiter's son, who after his father was the most important divinity of the Roman pantheon, father in turn of the twins Romulus and Remus. The triad, if not for kinship at least for their respective age characteristics, is found in many traditional situations, let's think of the Three Wise Men or the protagonists of the Finnic *Kalevala* (the elderly Väinämöinen, the middle-aged Ilmarinen and the young Lemminkäinen).

But what is the meaning of the connection between the chariot races and the sacredness of the circus altars? Perhaps an answer is offered by Homer, the poet of a world much more archaic than the Roman one. In fact, two chariot races are mentioned in the *Iliad*, both of which take place on the occasion of a solemn funeral: the main event is the one organized by Achilles for the funeral of Patroclus [7], while in a flash-back the old Nestor recalls a race he had taken part in when he was young, always on the occasion of a funeral [8].

Instead in the *Odyssey*, and in particular in the games organized by the Phaeacians to celebrate Ulysses, this type of race does not take place. It could be argued that there was a precise relationship between chariot races and funerals, and assume that perhaps in very ancient times the funeral rites, celebrated in honor of illustrious people, were the way to reproduce on this Earth a sort of model of the celestial world, in which the planetary orbits were symbolized by the trajectories of the chariots, in order to allow the souls of the dead whose funeral was celebrated to orient themselves in the complex ways of the afterlife [9].

Indeed, the planets since the most remote antiquity have been the object of interest both by astronomers and astrologers and by sailors, also because of their apparent evolutions with respect to the fixed stars. A typical example is that of the periodic retrograde motion of Mars seen from the Earth (which happens about every two years, when there are a couple of months during which Mars appears to move from east to west), with trajectories that form characteristic “nooses” and which could perhaps explain the archaic dances in arms – think of the *Salii* of ancient Rome [10], a priesthood associated with the worship of Mars – inspired by the god of war, with which the “Red planet”, as we still call it, was traditionally identified. So, it is no coincidence that the *Salii* wore a red military cloak and that this type of dance in Sparta was called “pyrrhic”, from the adjective *pyrrhos*, «red», the color of the warrior-dancers’ tunics, whose movements clearly recalled the celestial twists and turns of the warlike blood-colored planet to which they were inspired [11]. On the other hand, the astronomical dimension of the god clearly appears in a passage from the *Homeric Hymn to Ares*: «Sceptred King of manliness, who whirl your fiery sphere among the planets/ in their sevenfold courses through the aether wherein your blazing/ steeds ever bear you above the third firmament of heaven» [12].

Conclusion

What is certain is that the racing cars that now run on the Indianapolis circuit totally ignore the fact that their distant

ancestors on two wheels took the trajectories of the planets along the paths of the sky as a model and, running on the track, pointed to the souls of the dead whose funeral was celebrated the paths of destinies assigned to them in the afterlife. Nor can it be ruled out that the popularity of this kind of race might be unconsciously linked to a mythical dimension that is still deeply rooted in our collective unconscious.

References

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4. On this point the reference to Ovid's Fasti is useful: cf D Preseka (2009) “Hac ego Saturnum memini tellure receptum”: Janus and Saturn in Ovid's Fasti, «Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae» 49(1): 453-466.
5. MP Nilsson (1951) The sickle of Kronos, «Annual of the British School at Athens», 46(1): 122-124.
6. C Cheung, P Mbote Mbote (2021) (eds) La figura e il ruolo del padre nell'antichità classica e cristiana, LAS, Roma.
7. Il XXIII. Cf. M Giordano (2020) La fine dell'Iliade. Il libro 23 tra agon, aethla e moemoria, «I Quaderni del Ramo d'Oro» 12(1): 105-130.
8. The reference is to the funeral of king Amarynceus at Buprasium (II XXIII, 630-642).
9. The chariots in Rome were a hypostasis of the solar chariot, and for this reason the races were held during the spring equinox, as well as, in the Republican age, seven times a year, as many as there were planets known at that time, including the Sun, and as many turns the chariots had to make: so, L. Zagherro, I cavalli del sole. Il sacrificio del cavallo nel contesto indoeuropeo. Nuove evidenze archeologiche e iconografiche dall'areale altoadriatico, in V Mariotti, D Neri, P Pancaldi (eds.), Phoenix Company, San Giovanni in Persiceto pp. 108-120.
10. The International Conference “Ritual Movement in Antiquity (and beyond)”, organized by G Ferri, Rome, 4-7 has focused on this point in detail.
11. For this reason, the Pyrrhic dance must be considered a simulation of war (I.E. Buttitta, La danza di Ares. Forme e funzioni delle danze armate, Gruppo Editoriale Bonanno, Acireale-Roma p. 35-45, with related bibliography).
12. Ἡνωρέης σκηπτοῦχε, πυραυγέα κύκλον ἐλίσσων/ αἰθέρος ἐπταπόροις ἐνὶ τεῖρεσιν, ἔνθα σε πῶλοι/ ζαφλεγέες τριτάτης ὑπὲρ ἄντυγος αἰὲν ἔχουσι (Homeric Hymn to Ares, 6-8).



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