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Autor:	Hollemann, A.W.J.
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The 'wig' of Messalina and the origin of Rome

By A. W. J. Holleman, The Hague

In his notorious invective against the women Juvenal tells the repulsive story of the empress Messalina prostituting herself in one of the brothels of Rome (6, 115sqq.). He then says: *Sed, nigrum flauo crinem abscondente galero, / Intravit calidum ueteri centone lupanar, / Et cellam uacuam atque suam; tunc nuda papillis / Prostitit auratis, titulum mentita Lyciscae.*

The *flauus galerus* is generally accepted to be an "ash-blonde wig"¹, while the more informed reader may be apt to imagine it as made from the hair of German women. It certainly corresponds to the description of the *galerus* as given by the late Karl Meuli in discussing "Altrömischer Maskenbrauch": "und zwar so, dass die von hinten übergezogene Kopfhaut des Tieres (i.e. of the wolf) das menschliche Antlitz freilässt wie die Löwenhaut des Herakles und die Wolfshaut des etruskischen Hades"². It reminds us of Virgil's saying of Romulus: *lupae fuluo nutricis tegmine laetus* (Aen. 1, 275). Alföldi has shown that this *tegmen* is not to be taken as meaning a wolf-skin, a *pellis* (as still done by R. G. Austin in his 1971 edition ad loc.), but as a headgear, a *galerus* such as described by Meuli³. Unquestionably Romulus here proudly refers to his foster-mother, the *lupa*. Which reminds us again of Messalina acting as a whore under the name *Lycisca*, that is, Wolf-girl. So we may wonder whether the empress in her depravity as gleefully detailed by the satirist actually imitated that *lupa*, just as she in her almost unbelievable act of marrying Silius seems to have imitated the *inimitabilis uita* of her greatgrandfather Mark Antony⁴. At all events, the story as rendered by Juvenal is so consistent in its details as to ring completely true.

Meuli was the first to take it for granted that the Luperci at the Lupercalia were masked with a *galerus*. I think, he was right. In my dissertation on the Lupercalia I have circumstantially pointed out that from the 13th till the 15th of February the Luperci secretly visited women in order to do their fructifying work in their capacity of representatives of the dead ancestors ("wolves") – a belief widespread in ancient and so-called primitive culture⁵. Cicero, in defend-

1 Transl. of P. Green, *Juvenal, The sixteen satires* (Harmondsworth 1967) 131.

2 Mus. Helv. 12 (1955) 221.

3 A. Alföldi, *Die Geburt der kaiserlichen Bildsymbolik: Der neue Romulus*, Mus. Helv. 8 (1951) 197–198 (ill.).

4 P. Grimal, *L'amour à Rome* (Paris 1963) 309–310; A. Michel, *Tacite et le destin de l'Empire* (Paris 1966) 160 n. 163.

5 A. W. J. Holleman, *Pope Gelasius I and the Lupercalia* (Amsterdam 1974) ch. 4: "The Luperci". It explains e.g. Ov. *Fast.* 2, 305–358 on Faunus and Omphale.

ing his young and immoral client Caelius against the incriminating mention of his being a *Lupercus*, is anxious to explain: *quorum coitio illa silvestris ante est instituta quam humanitas atque leges* (Cael. 26). Thus he cleverly palliates the secret activities of those priests as a custom of prehistorical times, while in using the remarkable word *coitio* he may well allude to the erotic nature of it. The passage, otherwise, clearly suggests that everybody at Rome knew about that. Apparently, however, nobody cared to be quite plain on the matter involved. At the same time I felt able to confirm W. Schumacher in interpreting the flagellation scene on the sarcophagus of the Christian Elia Afanacia as a Lupercalia-scene⁶. In this scene, and beyond any doubt, the Lupercus is masked. So it seems now quite plausible that also when visiting the women secretly the Luperci were wearing the *galerus*. By so doing they performed as *Fauni* – and that is why *Fauni* came to be identified with *incubi* –, that is, as the representatives of Faunus, the great ancestor and fructifier himself of Rome. Angelo Brelich calls him: the “Heilbringer”, an “essere iniziatore semidivino e semi-umano”⁷. We remember that he is also called Lupercus.

In accordance with the typically Roman passion for historical setting the aetiological justifying of the ritual behaviour of the Luperci led to imagine a (pseudo-)historical Faustulus and ditto Acca Larentia as the foster-parents of Romulus⁸. In this setting of the myth the Wolf-element was not altogether eliminated: the tale has it that Acca Larentia once had been a *meretrix*, also called *lupa*. Though this tale surely is an invention of literary times – in which Acca becomes a *meretrix* of the “prostitute-saint” type⁹ –, the female nature of the Wolf-element may well be part of the original beliefs. For it would seem that in the myth of Rhea Silvia the god Mars is acting like the *incubus* of popular belief¹⁰, which means a sort of *lupus*¹¹, and that furthermore a woman who cannot name her consort (Livy 1, 4, 2: *auctor culpae*) became *lupa* too. We may compare Ausonius, Epigr. 24, 11–12: *Credo quod illi nec pater certus fuit, / Et mater est uere lupa*. However, the god-*incubus* par excellence was Faunus, alias Lupercus. Since the behaviour and activities of this character and of his representatives dated “from before civilisation and law” (Cicero)¹², Rhea Silvia

6 Ib. ch. 6: “Corroboration from archaeology”; W. N. Schumacher, *Antikes und Christliches in der Auspeitschung der Elia Afanacia*, Jb. f. Ant. u. Chr. 11–12 (1968/69) 65–75 (both ill.).

7 A. Brelich, *Tre variazioni romane sul tema delle origini* (Rome 1955) 64ff. 109ff.

8 Cf. M. Grant, *Roman Myths*, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth 1973) 239ff.: “Myth as Explanation and Para-History”. Faunus now becomes Faustulus, remaining Incubo.

9 Expression borrowed from Grant, ib. 117.

10 E. Crawley, *The Mystic Rose*, rev. ed. by Th. Besterman (London 1927) (= 1965) II 176, elucidates the widespread belief about twins: “... one of the infants is the offspring of a spirit or god” who “is supposed to consort with men and women during sleep, and so fulfils the function of the *incubus* and *succubus*”.

11 Cf. E. C. H. Smits, *Faunus* (Diss. Leiden 1946) ch. III: “De voorstelling van de nachtmerrie bij Grieken en Romeinen”.

12 Cf. also Virgil, *Aen.* 8, 314sqq.: ... *quis neque mos neque cultus erat*, said of the *Fauni*.

selected a *deus ... honestior: Martem incertae stirpis patrem nuncupat* (Livy ib.). In spite of her doing so Rome retained the memory of a she-wolf being at the root of its existence. To what extent Etruscan influences contributed to the making of and the tale about the "Capitoline She-wolf" it is hard to decide. But it may be clear that in the original popular beliefs the word *lupa*, or may-be *luperca*, did not have the connotation of later literature. Originally it rather referred to a mysterious and mystical act of fertility for the benefit of the people¹³. That must be why Caesar and (or?) Antony selected the Lupercalia for bestowing on Rome the benefit of a new Romulean (?) kingship. That is why the Lupercalia survived the doom of paganism by Theodosius and his successors to the throne. That might well be why Antony's greatgranddaughter, the empress Messalina, purposeful in her aberration, covered herself with a *flavus galerus* and selected the name of *Lycisca* (*Luperca*?). In sexual matters human imagination seems to have no limits¹⁴.

13 Cf. the tales about Acca Larentia, or Faula, or Fabula, as the mistress of Hercules (e.g. Plutarch, *Rom.* 5). A. Brelich, *Vesta* (Zürich 1949) thinks that the mythical function of a Vestal Virgin was to give birth to a city-founder by a more or less anonymous divine begetter. The later religious syncretism gave rise to a host of pictures of "hierogamies" and even sexual practices with a view to salvation and immortality. It affected, I think, the Lupercalia too. But from its very beginnings the festival contained the germ of this development. Cf. n. 6. (For Luperca as a name of the She-wolf see Arnobius 4, 3.)

14 Accordingly, in participating in the actions of the Luperci Roman women could imagine themselves as re-enacting the sacred *dromenon* of Rome's origin, presumably by playing the role of the Sabine Virgins, while their act of disrobing at the Lupercalia proper originally meant deterring the nightly spirits and driving them back to their Lupercal after having been purified with aeschrologies. Not until the disastrous year 276 B.C. did the purifying require an additional rite of lashing the women for purposes of fertility. In the Augustan reform this rite eclipsed the original scheme. It explains why *Fast.* 2, 425–452 has a rather loose connection with the foregoing (see also G. Binder, *Die Aussetzung des Königskindes* [Meisenheim 1964] passim). The later syncretism rekindled the belief in the purifying effect of the festival, recharging the sexual practices of old with a beneficial meaning. Human imagination, even of Christians, went as far as that.