

DISCREPANCIES WITHIN A CULT AND A MYTH: SOME ASPECTS OF THE FIGURE OF HERCULES IN THE ROMAN TRADITION

VIKTÓRIA JÁRMI

Several ancient sources discuss the cult of Hercules in Italy, and the deity himself honoured at the *Ara Maxima*. Most of the accounts relate the defeat of Cacus as being the *aition* of the foundation of the cult at the *Ara Maxima* in the area of the future Rome. In Propertius 4,9, however, a different element is added to the basic story: the cult of Bona Dea, the Women's Goddess. The paper examines the feature of the exclusion, which is a part both of the cults and of the legend of the Pinarii and Potitii. The *gens Pinaria* and the *gens Potitia* performed the rites at the *Ara Maxima* until Appius Claudius Caecus corrupted the Potitii in 312 BC in order to have public slaves instructed in the worship of Hercules. Discrepancies within the myth and the cult of Hercules result, in part, from the motif of exclusion.

The cult of Hercules was very popular in ancient Italy, which various temples and sanctuaries attest to.¹ An Italian Hercules was primarily the protector of commerce and trade particularly in relation to cattle markets. In Rome the worship of Hercules dated back to very early times. According to Livy for example, he was among the honoured divinities on the occasion of the *lectisternium*, which was a public ceremonial banquet for the gods in 399 BC.² One of the areas of Rome which had very strong connections to the cult of Hercules was the ancient cattle market, the *Forum Boarium* between the Tiber and the Capitoline, Aventine and Palatine hills.³ Several temples were dedicated to him here, such as the *Aedes Aemiliana Herculis* built by Scipio Aemilianus in 142 BC, or the temple of *Hercules Invictus* at the *Porta Trigemina* restored by Pompey the Great. At the mythological level, the connection between the *Forum Boarium* and the god is apparent in the story of Cacus and Hercules which

¹ WISSOWA (1912: 271–287), LATTE (1960: 213–221) and STEK (2009: 53–78) with further bibliography.

² Liv. 5,13,6. See OGILVIE (1965: 56).

³ LTUR (1995: 295) and COARELLI (1988).

is the *aition* of the foundation of the *Ara Maxima* and the Hercules cult. The story of the stolen cattle and the fight between the monster Cacus and Hercules is well-known, principally from the *Aeneid*, but a number of ancient sources also give an account of it.⁴

In these, Cacus is not always represented as a monster, for example, in Livy, he is a human shepherd.⁵ In the work of Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Cacus is a barbarous chieftain conquered by Hercules, who is the greatest commander of his age.⁶ Hercules the general is a civilizer as well: he defeats every despotism and every barbarian horde living in savagery without laws. Instead, he brings about lawful monarchy, well-ordered government and humane and sociable modes of life.⁷ So, the figure and role of Hercules is a constantly changing one on the records and Hercules can in fact be replaced by a local Italian hero as we see in the *Origo gentis Romanae*, where the Hercules-like hero's name is Recaranus.⁸ In this version of the story, Cacus is a servant of Euander, who steals the cattle of the local Italian hero.

There are common elements in the accounts: firstly the combat between Cacus and Hercules provides the *aition* to the foundation of the cult of Hercules at the *Ara Maxima*. Secondly, the setting of the tale is always a pre-urban one. Hercules arrives in the area of the future Rome long before Aeneas and Romulus and Remus and the foundation of the city. He meets the local inhabitant Cacus, who can appear as either a local pastor, or a human robber, or a barbarian chieftain, or an inhuman monster. All of these variants are related to the features of a pre-urban, nomadic pastoral culture.⁹ The figure of the monster Cacus, however, which emerges in the *Aeneid*, the *Fasti* and Propertius 4,9 evokes an image

⁴ Cacus as a monster: Verg. *Aen.* 8,184–275; Ov. *F.* 1,543–582; Prop. 4, 9, 1–20. In other written sources Cacus is a human robber: Dion. Hal. 1, 39 and *OGR* 7, 6–7 (as a servant of Euander). For a full collection of the ancient sources (without interpretation), see WHITAKER (1910).

⁵ Liv. 1,7,3–15.

⁶ Dion. Hal. 1,42,2. Cacus seems to be a barbarian chieftain in the work of Solinus citing Gellius (1,7–10) too, where he is captured by the Etruscan king, Tarchon as the ambassador of the king Marsyas. Later he gets free from imprisonment and launches a campaign in Italy. When he overtakes the lands belonging to the Arcadians by right, he is defeated by Hercules. See also the discussion of COARELLI (1988: 132–139) and SMALL (1982) in general.

⁷ Dion. Hal. 1,41,1.

⁸ *OGR* 7,6,1–2. Servius (*Aen.* 8,203) in his commentary mentions another Hercules-like Italian hero called Garanus. For the interpretation of the figures of Recaranus and Garanus, see SMALL (1982: 26–29).

⁹ BURKERT (1984: 84–85).

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of chaotic power as well. In this regard, the fight between Cacus and Hercules purports to be a fight between chaotic disorder and established order. The defeated chaos, as well as the initiated *Ara Maxima* and the cult itself, belong to the time of a pre-urban, if not proto-Roman period, and from a religious point of view, to a time when the foundations of Roman religion have not yet been laid, at first by Romulus, and then by Numa.

The cult itself was performed *Graeco ritu*, with bared head¹⁰, and according to ancient literary sources, two patrician clans, the *gens Potitia* and the *gens Pinaria* held the priesthood at the *Ara Maxima*.¹¹ The legend relates, that these clans, who were the most distinguished families in the area at that time, were taught by Hercules himself with regard to how he should be worshipped. The Pinarii were late for the sacrificial banquet and did not come until the entrails of the victim were eaten. Hercules became angry at their tardiness, and determined that the Pinarii should be excluded from partaking of the entrails of victims and that they should always take second place to the Potitii in the sacred rites. Then Appius Claudius, during his censorship in 312 BC, transferred the presumably gentile private cult to public slaves. He bribed the members of the *gens Potitia* to instruct public slaves in how to perform the religious duties. The wrathful Hercules blinded Appius Claudius, who became blind (Caecus) by reason of sacrilege, and obliterated the whole *gens*, twelve families and thirty men. In addition, traders dedicated a *decima* to the god at the Forum Boarium, a tithe in thanksgiving for their profits, as elsewhere in Italy.¹²

The connection between commerce and the *decima* will be expanded in the second part of this paper; but for now, I will focus on the theme of exclusion, as it seems to be an elemental factor of the cult at the *Ara Maxima*. The Pinarii were excluded from a part of the cult (because they were not allowed to eat from the entrails), but they were not punished like the extinct *gens Potitia* in the story of Appius Claudius. Women were excluded from the rites also: it was an exclusively male cult.¹³ In elegy 4,9

¹⁰ WISSOWA (1912: 274), OGILVIE (1956: 56–57) and SCHEID (1995). For an interpretation of the practice in connection with Propertius 4,9, see WELCH (2004: 66–67).

¹¹ Verg. *Aen.* 8,268–272; Serv. *Aen.* 8,269; Liv. 1,7,12; 9,29,9–11; Dion. Hal. 1,40,4–6; Macr. *Sat.* 3,6,12–14; Val. Max. 1,1,17; Festus 270L; Aur. Vict. *Vir. Ill.* 34,2; *OGR* 8; Sol. 1,11–12; Lact. *Inst.* 2,8,15.

¹² WISSOWA (1912: 275–278) and LATTE (1960: 214, note 1).

¹³ Macr. *Sat.* 1,12,18; Gell. 11,6,1–2; Plut. *Mor.* 278E–F; *OGR* 6,7; 8,5; STAPLES (1998: 15–17) *inter alia* interprets the mutual exclusion and the dichotomy of male and female as the opposition of fire and water. McDONOUGH (1999) discusses other restrictions at the *Ara Maxima* and in a later study he reveals that by the

Propertius gives one of the most elaborate explanations of the banning of women from the cult of Hercules. The elegy consists of seventy-four lines. In the first twenty lines Hercules arrives at the area of the future Rome with the cattle of Geryon whom he has recently killed. Cacus, a three-headed monster here, steals some oxen, therefore Hercules kills him; but the greater part of the elegy (the following fifty lines) narrates another episode. Hercules, after the fight, feels an overwhelming thirst. Wandering about in search of water, he hears the laughter of women, and follows the sound to a grove in which the worship of the Bona Dea is taking place. Arriving on the threshold of the sanctuary, he begs the women for water, but is refused because it is unlawful for a man to taste the water. Hercules gains violent access to the grove, drinks the spring dry, and in order to punish the women for their inhospitable behaviour, excludes them from his newly established rites for all eternity. At the end of the elegy, Propertius prays to Hercules to help him in his poetic work.¹⁴

Accordingly, in this version a further element is added to the basic story with regard to the exclusion of women from the cult of Hercules at the *Ara Maxima*. This element is the cult of the Bona Dea. Nowhere in his elegy does Propertius mention Bona Dea by this name. Instead, he calls her the Women's Goddess, *Feminea Dea* (the place of the Goddess in the cult is characterized as *femineae loca clausa deae*, 25). That the Women's Goddess is surely Bona Dea becomes clear if we read a passage in Macrobius (*Saturnalia* 1,12,28), which refers to Bona Dea and which contains a myth similar to the one in Propertius, which is made to account for the banning of women from the rites of the *Ara Maxima*.¹⁵

Unde et mulieres in Italia sacro Herculis non licet interesse, quod Herculi, cum boves Geryonis per agros Italiae duceret, sitienti respondit mulier aquam se non posse praestare, quod feminarum deae celebraretur dies nec ex eo apparatu viris gustare fas esset: propter quod Hercules facturus sacrum detestatus est praesentiam feminarum, et Potitio ac Pinario sacrorum custodibus iussit ne mulierem interesse permitterent.

fourth century A.D. the practice had been changed: women had been admitted into the cult of Hercules: MCDONOUGH (2004).

¹⁴ The interpretation of the last four lines of the elegy is not the subject of the present paper. For the composition of the closing hymn to Hercules, see MCPARLAND (1970), ROBSON (1973) and WARDEN (1982).

¹⁵ CAMPS (1965: 138, note 25) GALINSKY (1972: 153) and HUTCHINSON (2006: 205–206).

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Propertius and Macrobius are presumably referring to the same tradition, derived most likely from Varro.¹⁶ Macrobius just like Propertius also calls the goddess *dea feminarum*. Bona Dea, the Good Goddess, and her festival celebrated in December are mostly known from the famous scandal in 62 BC caused by Publius Clodius Pulcher, who disguised himself as a woman, thereby gaining entry to the rites of the Dea, which were held in the house of the Pontifex Maximus Caesar in order to meet his mistress Pompeia, who was the wife of Caesar at that time.¹⁷ It is not necessary to discuss the December cult and the goddess in every detail here, as from the viewpoint of the present topic only some aspects should be emphasized.

Firstly, Bona Dea was the daughter, or the wife of Faunus, an ambivalent figure in Roman mythology:¹⁸ according to Dionysius of Halicarnassus, he had been the king of the native inhabitants when Euander arrived in Italy¹⁹, but in Vergil we find Faunus as the father of Latinus and the grandson of Saturnus, and a prophetic deity at the same time.²⁰ Ovid makes him the god of the *Lupercalia* and links him to the mythical past of Latium.²¹ Both Faunus and Bona Dea were ancient deities of fertility, and Faunus was also the god of cattle.²² Like Hercules honoured at the *Ara Maxima*, they are strongly connected to the pre-urban, pastoral period. The setting of the Cacus-Hercules episode is the reign of Euander in most of the sources, but in the elegy of Propertius the Arcadian settlement and Euander are not represented. Here, other „inhabitants” are found in the area of the future Rome: Cacus, an uncivilised three-headed chaotic monster, and a secret female cult hidden in a grove.

That the first one should be defeated is easy to understand within the context of the dual opposites of chaos and order. The other „inhabitants”, however, are the partakers of the exclusively female cult of the Bona Dea,

¹⁶ BROUWER (1989: 237), SCHULTZ (2000: 292–293) and HUTCHINSON (2006: 205).

¹⁷ Cic. *Att.* 1,12 (with a marked political bias); Plut. *Caes.* 9–10; Dio Cass. 37,45; Suet. *Iul.* 6, 2. See BROUWER (1989: 261–266) in the case of Cicero and Bona Dea.

¹⁸ WISSOWA (1912: 208–219) and LATTE (1960: 228–231).

¹⁹ Dion. Hal. 1,31,2.

²⁰ Verg. *Aen.* 7,49 with ROSIVACH (1980: 141).

²¹ Ov. *F.* 2,271–282. Faunus is also represented as a prophetic deity in the *Fasti* (3,290sqq). PARKER (1993) sees a transformation from a humorous Greek minor divinity into a more serious Roman deity in Ovid’s Faunus, cf. GALINSKY (1972: 128–129). CYRINO (1998: 214–221) thinks that in some measure the Omphale-episode is an anti-Augustan gesture on the part of Ovid. About Faunus as the god of the Lupercal, see WISEMAN (1995).

²² Hor. *carm.* 3,18,1. See also HOLLEMAN (1972) about the role of Faunus in the poem and the dangerous side of the deity.

who was – just like Faunus – one of the most ancient divinities.²³ The fact that Hercules, who is not allowed to drink from the sacred water, violently breaks into the place of the female cult, is not narrated by Propertius as a sacrilege or an unlawful threatening deed such as the cattle-stealing appeared to be in the case of Cacus. Hercules has to use violence to break into the cult after all.

At first, however, he pleads for admittance in an ineffectual but peaceful way by an enumeration of his heroic acts (33–44). After that, a lesser heroic case is referred to in his argument: his affair with Omphale, the queen of Lydia (45–50). As was mentioned before, during the depiction of the Lupercalia, Ovid connects Faunus with the festival.²⁴ When Hercules and Omphale exchange their clothes and sleep apart for a night, Faunus tries to seduce Omphale. But, confused by the exchange of dress, he attempts to seduce the female-garbed Hercules instead of Omphale. The theme of the inversion of sexual roles associated here with gender boundaries is highly stressed in Propertius as well.²⁵ Boundary is denoted by the word *limen* in three lines within the Bona Dea episode: the *limen* of the solitary shrine is decorated with purple wreaths (*devia puniceae velabant limina vittae*, 27). Later, when the priestess of the female cult refuses to allow Hercules to enter the sanctuary, she admonishes him to stop violating the gender boundary (54–55):

*parce oculis, hospes, lucoque abscede verendo
cede agedum et tuta limina linque fuga!*

The admonishment is soon stressed again (60–61):

*Di tibi dant alios fontes: haec lymph a puellis
avia secreti limitis una fluit.*

The motif of boundary forms another essential dual opposite: the boundary between male and female.²⁶ The logical correlation between *tuta* and *secreti*, the attributes of the *limen*, seems to be noteworthy here. Separation ensues from the protection guaranteed by boundaries, but, in addition, elements have to be separated to ensure order. Separation gives protection against chaos. The boundary cannot be crossed lawfully – or at

²³ According to BROUWER (1989: 260–261) men were excluded from the Goddess's December festival and its particular rites, not from the whole cult.

²⁴ Ov. *F.* 3,305–358. See note 21 for further references.

²⁵ The gender categories in the elegy have been studied by DEBROHUN (1994), CYRINO (1998: 221–226), LINDHEIM (1998) and JANAN (2001).

²⁶ DEBROHUN (2003: 118–115).

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least, as we can see in the case of Faunus, cannot be crossed in a peaceful way. Hercules though, violates the boundaries temporarily before the foundation of his own exclusively male cult.

In Macrobius's *Saturnalia*, Faunus tries to seduce his own daughter, and when she rejects him, in a futile effort to force her to submit, he beats her with branches of myrtle.²⁷ The feature of the beating with the motif of incest can be understood in terms of ritual violence – ritual violence against women in fact.²⁸ One of the earliest legends of Rome is the abduction of the Sabine women shortly after its founding by Romulus.²⁹ Violation is a necessary factor in the myth: Rome seems to be a place lacking women and the Sabines refuse a first peaceful proposal, so initially Romans are not allowed to make a peaceful union with them through marriage. Thus, they have to get their way violently, and they rape the Sabine women. This violent act is followed by union through legitimate marriage between the two nations, which is just the opposite of the incest apparent in the story of Faunus and Bona Dea.³⁰ It seems that Hercules, before the foundation of his cult, has to behave violently: violence is part of the foundation – the foundation of the cult and the city as well.³¹ In other words, there is no peaceful order without chaotic disorder: likewise, to differentiate between male and female, we need the category of gender.³²

As was mentioned before, Hercules is a civilizer: he defeats monsters like Geryon or Cacus and establishes cults like the one at the *Ara Maxima*, but during that time, he must act in an uncivilized way. He can only defeat Cacus with anger (*ira*, 14) – a characteristic attribute of the hero anyway – and the same angry thirst (*iratam ... sitim*, 62) makes him break into the Bona Dea shrine, as neither chaos, represented by the figure of the monster Cacus, nor an exclusively female cult, can belong to the future Rome. The mythical past together with the image of the future Rome, are depicted in the very beginning of the elegy in the picture of the *Velabrum* under water (1–6):

*Amphitryoniades qua tempestate iuencos
egerat a stabulis, o Erythea, tuis,
venit ad invictos pecorosa Palatia montis,
et statuit fessos fessus et ipse boves,
qua Velabra suo stagnabant flumine quoque
nauta per urbanas velificabat aquas.*

²⁷ Macr. *Sat.* 1,12,24.

²⁸ STAPLES (1998: 27–30).

²⁹ Liv. 1,9.

³⁰ Liv. 1,13.

³¹ Cf. LYNE (1987: 27–35) on *Aeneid* 8.

³² JANAN (1998: 207, note 30).

The *Velabrum* was a valley lying between the Tiber, the *Forum Boarium*, and the Capitoline and Palatine hills. It connected the *Forum Romanum* with the *Forum Boarium*.³³ Thus, before meeting Cacus, Hercules arrives at a place under water and he stops (*statuit*) the cattle there.³⁴ A remarkable dominance of the verb *sto, stare* can be noticed in the opening of the elegy (*stabulis, statuit, stagnabant*). The verb *statuit* ‘to set up’ connotes ‘to establish’ and is often used for describing the establishment of a city and even a cult. Besides, the picture of the *Velabrum* under water invokes an image of primordial chaos well known from cosmological myths, namely the state when there was just water, before the formation of the universe. The primordial state of things – the mythical past – with the images of water and chaos (symbolized by the monster Cacus), already includes the possibility of a well-established order in the future. That’s why the *Velabrum* is the place where sailors set sail upon urban water (*nauta per urbanas velificabat aquas*, 6). The phrase ‘urban waters’ clearly refers to a future Rome as we can see in another passage of the elegy, where Hercules, after the defeat of Cacus, tells to the recovered cattle that (19–20):

*arvaeque mugitu sancite Bovaria longo:
nobile erit Romae pascua vestra Forum.*

With this, Hercules claims that the pre-urban pastoral state of the past will be changed into the noble future of Rome. Before the foundation of the cult itself however, he has to prepare the boundaries of the future city from another aspect as well: and he does it through the ritualized violence against the cult of the Bona Dea. The boundaries between men and women are laid, and this implies the opposition between lawful marriage and unlawful incest also. Only the former belongs to the settled and civilized life. The Italian Hercules, although his rites were performed with bared head at the *Ara Maxima*, seems to be as much Italian as Greek.

Finally, if we consider all these aspects, the semi-mythic *exemplum* about the end of the private cult of Hercules at the *Ara Maxima* can be interpreted as well. The *exemplum* was about two clans, the *gens Pinaria* and the *gens Potitia*, who performed the rites at the *Ara Maxima* until Appius Claudius Caecus corrupted the *gens Potitia* in order to have public slaves instructed in the worship of Hercules. Hercules blinded Appius

³³ LTUR (1999: 101–108). HOLLEMAN (1977) thinks that there was a ‘pre-Romulean’ New Year rite at the *Velabrum* with Hercules and Acca Larentia.

³⁴ The *Velabrum* was under water in the early times (*suo ... flumine*, 5). See, CAMPS (1965: 136) and HUTCHINSON (2006: 208). The same picture is depicted in the elegy of Tibullus (2,5,33–36).

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Claudius and extirpated all members of the *gens Potitia* out of revenge. It was striking that the other *gens*, the Pinarii were excluded from a part of the cult, because of their tardiness. Even so, they did not receive a cruel punishment as did the Potitii.³⁵ The feature of exclusion was part of the cult: at the mythological level, exclusion ensures the boundaries between opposites such as chaos and order, men and women, lawful and unlawful, marriage and incest.

The motif of hospitality fits well into this line of reasoning; it is a constant element in the accounts of the Cacus myth.³⁶ In the elegy of Propertius the motif is also present: Cacus is an unreliable host (*infido... hospite Caco*, 8), but the sanctuary of the Bona Dea is designated as hospitable (*hospita fana*, 34) and Hercules himself is called as a guest by the priestess (*hospes*, 53). The change in the usage of *hospes* in Propertius follows from the double meaning of the word: it means 'guest', 'host' and 'stranger' at the same time. Hercules arrives as a guest to the area of the future Rome long before its foundation. Hospitality is a part of the civilised world, so Cacus cannot be Hercules's host. In the case of the partakers of the Bona Dea cult, a male *hospes* can only be a 'stranger', not a 'guest'. If we consider that Hercules was worshipped by traders and merchants and that the god was honoured with *decima*, a tithe of profits, the motif of hospitality seems to be easier to understand. The myth of Hercules and Cacus provides models of behaviour to be avoided and to be followed. Cacus is punished with death because he robbed a stranger. Although Hercules himself acts violently when he breaks into the place of the female ritual, he also becomes a civilizer, and introduces correct behaviour happening at the first banquet in his newly established cult. The success of the commercial connection depends on the institution of hospitality: foreign merchants have to be accepted with hospitality at the *Forum Boarium*, have to be defended from stealing, and their goods and a

³⁵ The Pinarii survived into classical times and inscriptions are attested that the Potitii may have been an historical family too. See OGILVIE (1965: 61). Scholars tend to accept the name of the *gens* as a formation from the perfect passive participle of the verb *potior*, 'to master, to enslave'. The Potitii would thus be 'the mastered, the enslaved' or, more plainly, 'the slaves'. For this opinion, see VAN BERCHEM (1959–1960: 64) and PALMER (1965). MUELLER (2002) regards both of the clans as historical and suggests that the *exemplum* reflects the extinction of the *gentes*.

³⁶ The relation between Hercules and Euander (or the Arcadians) is characterized with hospitality: Verg. *Aen.* 8,188; Ovid. *F.* 1,545; Dion. Hal. 1,40,3; *OGR* 7,6 (here the Hercules-like hero is Recaranus mentioned above). Cacus is dangerous for the inhabitants and his *hospites* too: Ovid. *F.* 1,552.

decima of their profit has to be offered to the deity in return, who protects both them and their goods.³⁷

Thus, when the *gens Potitia*, who held the priesthood at the *Ara Maxima*, is corrupted by Appius Claudius, that is an offence against a fundamental element of the cult. Offering the *decima* from profit is a correct religious behaviour towards the god, and salutary for the state.

Accepting money is just the very opposite of that: the Potitii net their own profit and, in doing so, they endanger the cult, the success of commercial transactions in the future, and the state.

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³⁷ FORSYTHE (2005: 120).

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