



A Painted Parody of Aeneas and Romulus as Dog-Headed Apes

Frieze of Aeneas group.jpg



[1]

[Frieze of Romulus the Ape.jpg](#) [2]



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A Painted Parody of Aeneas and Romulus as Dog-Headed Apes

Original Location/Place: Pompeii, zone of Masseria di Cuomo

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, inv. 9889 (Aeneas), inv. 8588 (Romulus).

Date: 14 CE to 79 CE

Patron/Sponsor: owner of the house?

Material: *secco* layer

Measurements: The whole frieze is 196 cm long. 20 x 24 cm for the Aeneas group.

Original Inscription/Graffito: ?

Name of the artist: ?

Description:

First painting: Caricature of the Aeneas group; each of the three characters are represented with an ape body, a dog's head, human legs, and for two of them (Aeneas and Ascanius) a huge phallus. Aeneas is represented wearing Roman armour and patrician foot-wear. He is carrying on his left shoulder his father Anchises, whose head is veiled and who is himself holding something. Aeneas is also leading by his right hand his young son Ascanius, who is represented as a Phrygian shepherd.

Second painting: Caricature of Romulus. Due to the damage of the wall painting, the head is erased and we can only guess that the character was holding a trophy on his shoulder (we can see part of a shield and a sword). Visible, however, are his two legs (human ones), his tail, his big penis, and, behind him, the tip of a lance.

Context: On a frieze exposed on the walls of a room of this house in Pompeii.

Commentary:

These paintings of Aeneas and Romulus were found in 1760 at Pompeii, in a zone called Masseria di Cuomo, in the area of VI, 17 *Insula Occidentalis* (De Vos, "La fuga di Enea," p. 113-114; Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, p. 152 and n. 39). These two images were part of the same frieze measuring around 2 m long. According to John Clarke's reconstitution, the frieze may have been located in the zone between the socle and the middle of the wall, or at the top of the wall. In addition the frieze represented other characters than Aeneas or Romulus; characters which can be identified in the following order (left to right): woman swimming to the right, probably Venus – Aeneas



group – Romulus – sea creatures, probably a marine *thiasos* (Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, p. 154-156; for a study of the whole frieze see also De Vos, “La fuga di Enea,” p. 114-116).

It is remarkable that these paintings parody the statues of Aeneas and of Romulus which were exposed face-to-face, in niches located at the centre of the two *exedrae* of the Forum of Augustus (Zanker, *The Power of Images*, p. 201-209). As these two statues are now lost, we can only imagine their looks thanks to the numerous statuettes, reliefs or wall paintings representing the same themes (see the list of all the representations of the Aeneas group in Spannagel, *Exemplaria principis*, p. 90-131; for Romulus with the trophy, *idem* p. 132-161). For example, two paintings, now destroyed, of the Aeneas group and of Romulus, represented face-to-face across the doorway of the Fullonica of Ululitremulus in Pompei (IX, 13, 5) give a good idea of the original aspects of these two themes. For the first one, that is Aeneas's escape from Troy with Anchises and Ascanius (Virgil, *Aeneid* II.705-725), Aeneas is represented wearing Roman armour and patrician foot-wear, respectively symbolizing the fact that he is a future Roman, and that he is an ancestor of the Julian clan. Aeneas carries on his back his aged father Anchises, who is himself holding the Penates, that is household gods. Anchises is the archetype of the pious old man, having his head veiled in a way which clearly echoes that of the priests at Augustus's time. Aeneas is also leading by hand his young son Ascanius, who is represented as a Phrygian shepherd (on the symbolic meanings of this representation, see Zanker, *The Power of Images*, p. 202). As Paul Zanker has rightly noticed, such representation of the Aeneas group has to be understood in “the context of the new official mythology” under Augustus; Aeneas being presented as “a paradigm of *pietas* towards the gods and his own father in time of need” (Zanker, *The Power of Images*, p. 202). For the second theme, Romulus is represented with a cuirass. In his right hand, he is holding a lance, and, in his left hand and over his left shoulder, a trophy (*spolia opima*), which has to be identified as being that of the king Acron of Caenina, that Romulus defeated in a duel (Livy, *Books from the Foundation of the City* I.10; Plutarch, *Life of Romulus* XVI). As Paul Zanker correctly writes, Romulus is here represented as “Rome's first *triumphator*,” some kind of “*exemplum virtutis*” going hand in hand with “the *exemplum pietatis*,” here embodied by Aeneas (Zanker, *The Power of Images*, p. 203; about the parallel with these wall paintings, see Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, p. 147-151; Zanker, *The Power of Images*, p. 201-203; for images, see <http://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R9/9%2013%2005.htm> [4]).

Recently, John Clarke has proposed to go deeper into the interpretation of these caricatures. First, the choice to represent each of the characters with an ape's body can be explained by the fact that during Antiquity, the island of Ischia, in the bay of Naples, had three different names, and two of them (*Inarime* and *Pitheussa*) meant “the island of apes.” The third name *Aenaria* – quite close to Aeneas – may have been associated with the idea that the Trojan hero landed on the island. The existence of these various names has led some scholars to suggest that for the inhabitants of the region Aeneas would have become some kind of “eponymous hero” of “the island of apes” (for the bibliography see Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, p. 152). Second, for what concerns the fact that the various heroes have dog heads, it has to be recalled that Cynocephali often embodied monstrous, half-human characters, and that dog heads (and huge penises) could be also interpreted as referring to the comic costumes of actors playing farces, especially Phlyax farces (see Maiuri, “La parodia,” p. 111-112).

The most hazardous question is of course that of knowing why such parodies had been painted in the house of a Pompeian. Recently, many scholars have tried to interpret these caricatures not only as accounts of the vitality of bawdy caricatures in Pompeii, or of the taste of the Pompeians for burlesque reinterpretations of the *Aeneid*, but more as paintings having a sarcastic dimension towards the Julio-Claudian dynasty (some of these interpretations, especially those of De Vos and of Kellum are presented in Chevillat, “La double distance,” p. 99-101). According to Paul Zanker, the main reason would be that the mythological imagery used on monuments, objects or on various supports produced under Augustus's reign to “suit the needs of the official mythology,” was “restricted to just a few individual scenes,” making thus that these scenes were constantly repeated (Zanker, *The Power of Images*, p. 206-207 for the quotation, p. 209). Just in Pompeii, the images of the Aeneas group and Romulus with a trophy were represented everywhere and on every support (terra cotta, wall paintings – as at the entrance of the Fullonica of Ululitremulus – or statues, as for instance in the entryway to Eumachia's building; see Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, p. 151, 153 and [Elogium of Aeneas, Pompeii, CIL X, 808 + 8348](#) [5]; [Elogium of Romulus, Pompeii \(CIL X, 809\)](#) [6]). Thus, our paintings reacted to the omnipresence of these “sacrosanct mythological images”; a practice which would have not been unique, as Paul Zanker quotes the fact that Winckelmann had already mentioned the existence of a bronze statuette representing the Aeneas group as apes with dog heads and huge phallos (Zanker, *The Power of Images*, p. 209).

John Clarke goes further into the interpretation, as he suggests that the person who ordered this frieze, probably the owner of the house, “harbored enough anti-Augustan sentiment to commission this dual spoof of Augustus's blatant use of Roman myth to bolster his dynasty” (Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, p. 153). Following such an interpretation, it seems hard to believe that this frieze would have been painted under Augustus's reign. If this



frieze was actually ordered between 14 CE and 79 CE, it is however impossible to have a more accurate dating, or to view it in the context of the various internal troubles which affected the city under Caligula or Nero's reigns. According to John Clarke, the existence of such caricatures would show that some Pompeians – as the owner of this house and his guests – were still tempted to resist the weight of Roman ideology, especially by making fun of imposed imagery (Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, p. 154, 156-157). Such ridiculous representations of the heroes of Virgil's famous epic reflect of course the voice of a minority, but it may show that among Romans citizens, the mythological images and narratives used so as to legitimize and glorify the Julio-Claudian dynasty were not unanimously accepted.

Thematic keywords:

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- [Ascanius](#) [9]
- [Romulus](#) [10]
- [Augustus](#) [11]
- [caricature](#) [12]
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- [trophy](#) [16]

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Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

[Elogium of Aeneas, Pompeii \(CIL X, 808 + 8348\)](#) [5]

Inscribed plaque honouring the achievements of Aeneas.

- [Read more about Elogium of Aeneas, Pompeii \(CIL X, 808 + 8348\)](#) [5]

Inscription

[Elogium of Romulus, Pompeii \(CIL X, 809\)](#) [6]

Inscribed plaque honouring Romulus.

- [Read more about Elogium of Romulus, Pompeii \(CIL X, 809\)](#) [6]

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- [4] <http://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R9/9%2013%2005.htm>
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- [22] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/exemplaria-principis-untersuchungen-zu-entstehung-und-ausstattung-des-augustusforums>
- [23] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/power-images-age-augustus>
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