



[Arnobius, Against the Pagans VI.7](#)

The lack of Roman integrity regarding the Capitol

Name of the author: Arnobius of Sicca

Date: 3d CE to 4th CE

Place: Sicca Veneria (near Carthage, North Africa)

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Apologetic and Rhetorical treatise

Title of work: Against the Pagans

Reference: VI.7

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Arnobius and *Against the Pagans*, please see the commentary on [I.5](#).

In this extract, Arnobius draws upon a curious story told to differing degrees by various Roman authors, in order to critique the history of the Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus, and in turn question the integrity of the Roman people in relation to the pride that they hold in their supposedly great state. Arnobius begins by stating that it is common knowledge that the Capitolium is built upon the tomb of a certain Olus Vulcentanus, and proceeds to cite the following authors which related the story of how his head came to lie underneath the site of the Capitolium. Quintus Serenus Sammonicus was a scholar under Septimius Severus, who supposedly owned a library containing 62, 000 books, and was tutor to Geta and Caracalla (Macrobius, *Saturnalia* III.9). Granius Licinianus was a second century CE Roman author of historical and encyclopaedic literature, including an epitome of Roman history which drew on Livy and Sallust. Valerianus was thought by some older scholars to be Cornelius Valerianus, cited by Pliny at various points in his *Natural History* as a source for several of his books (for references, see George McCracken, *Arnobius of Sicca, Vol. II*, p. 591). However, it has been argued more recently that the individual referred to by Arnobius is actually Valerius Antias, an annalist from the first century BCE, whom Livy cites as a source in his *History of Rome* (J. W. Rich, *Fragments of the Roman Historians*, p. 638). Quintus Fabius Pictor, a senator born around 270 BCE, is considered the oldest Roman annalist. He originally wrote in Greek, but was eventually translated into Latin, and is used as a source by Livy, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Plutarch, and Polybius. It seems that at times, Arnobius confuses some elements of the story which he refers to, which makes his narrative somewhat unclear; however, the most complete tale is probably that told by Dionysius of Halicarnassus in his *Roman Antiquities* IV.59-61.

According to Dionysius, Tarquinius Superbus, the final Roman king, began building temples to Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva, in accordance with his grandfather's intentions. While digging on the Tarpeian Hill a head was found of a recently decapitated man, which Tarquinius perceived as an omen. His soothsayers, however, could not tell him what the omen meant, so he sent certain eminent individuals to Etruria to see if their soothsayers could do any better. The Etruscan soothsayer was very aware, however, that whoever was identified as the native country of this deceased man might be able to claim some sort of advantage, and so he attempted to trick the Romans into showing him on a map that the head had been found on Etruscan soil. The Romans had been warned of such potential trickery, however, and maintained that its location of discovery was the Tarpeian Hill in Rome. Eventually, the Etruscan soothsayer gave up, and interpreted the omen as indicating the spot that would become the head of Italy. According to Dionysius, it was from this point onwards that the hill was named the Capitoline (from the Latin *caput*, "head"). This story is mentioned more briefly by Livy, *History of Rome* I.55 (see also V.54, where Livy interprets the omen as a sign that Rome will be head of the entire world). Servius, in his commentary on the *Aeneid* VIII.345 identifies the head with that of a certain Olus.

Arnobius, in the middle of the passage, refers to the decapitated individual as Aulus, rather than Olus as he does elsewhere, and McCracken argues that he perhaps identifies the decapitated head as belonging to the son of the Etruscan soothsayer, the latter of whom Pliny, *Natural Histories* XXVIII.4, names as Olenus Calenus. Servius in his commentary on the *Aeneid* (see earlier citation) states that once the soothsayer realised that he could not fool the Romans, he asked them whether they had been pre-warned about being tricked, to which they admitted that they



had been warned by a certain young man. The soothsayer then rode out to find this youth, whom it turned out was his son, Argus, and killed him on the spot where Rome would later stand (see McCracken, *Arnobius of Sicca*, Vol. II, p. 592).

The essential importance of this story as Arnobius argues is that while the sordid tale ought to have been, and was for a while somewhat suppressed, due to the fact that the Capitolium's very name evoked the story, i.e. it is derived from *caput* and *Olus* ("Olus's head"), these unfortunate events have remained within the public consciousness. For Arnobius, this is extremely degrading for Rome, which prides itself on being "the great city/state" (*civitas maxima*). Rather than naming the temple on the Capitoline Hill after their own supreme god, Jupiter, Arnobius argues, the Romans have allowed its name to carry within it the memory of a tale involving a murdered foreigner. This fits in with a broader point being made within the treatise, that the Roman gods are so frequently dishonoured by those claiming to worship them, that they cannot exist, as otherwise they would surely punish their subjects for such impiety (see also, for instance, IV.34). Additionally, however, the argument of the present passage also reinforces a point made in the previous book (see V.24), that Roman collective self-definition itself is diluted due to the incorporation of foreign stories and traditions (largely religious rites) within its own. In the present case, a story about an Etruscan corpse (or rather, part of one) interpreted as an omen for the location of Rome's most prominent temple is utilised as a prime example of this, whereby the most important location in the city, the Capitol which symbolised the "imperial people" evokes a sordid and violent tale.

Keywords in the original language:

- [Capitolium](#)
- [civis](#)
- [civitas](#)
- [gens](#)
- [lovius](#)
- [natio](#)
- [patria](#)
- [populus](#)
- [regnator](#)
- [templum](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [Capitol](#)
- [Capitoline Temple](#)
- [cruelty](#)
- [imperial people](#)
- [Jupiter](#)
- [Roman people](#)
- [Roman religion](#)
- [Roman state](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)

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Realized by:

[Kimberley Fowler](#)



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