



[Cyprian, On the Vanity of Idols V](#)

Rome's shameful origins

Name of the author: Cyprian of Carthage

Date: 247 CE

Place: Carthage

Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Rhetorical treatise

Title of work: On the Vanity of Idols

Reference: V

Commentary:

For a general introduction to Cyprian, please see the commentary on his [Epistle LXXXI](#).

In the extract above, Cyprian argues for the violent and rapacious origins of Rome, and asserts that its people descend from criminals. As David Rankin has argued, when Cyprian speaks in the opening of this chapter of kingdoms which do not rise through their own merit, but rather through chance, he snipes indirectly (first citing the examples of the Assyrians, Medes, Persians, Greeks, and Egyptians) at the Roman empire, although it is unmistakably clear that this is his true target (see *From Clement to Origen*, p. 76). In his other writings (see [Address to Demetrianus V](#) and [VIII](#)), Cyprian has criticised Rome for failing to recognise God's role in its success, a position which differs from that presented here, which purely seeks to quash any claims Rome might make of piety. The passage proceeds to outline examples of the murderous and corrupt beginnings of the empire, drawing on popular criticisms of Roman history, which Christian authors such as Tertullian and Marcus Minucius Felix also utilise (see, for instance, Tertullian, Apology XXV.12-17; [Marcus Minucius Felix, Octavius XXV](#)). Indeed, the words of Marcus Minucius Felix in his *Octavius XXV* are extremely reminiscent of those given by Cyprian above: "Did they not in their origin, when gathered together and fortified by crime, grow by the terror of their own fierceness? For the first people were assembled together as to an asylum. Abandoned people, profligate, incestuous, assassins, traitors, had flocked together; and in order that Romulus himself, their commander and governor, might excel his people in guilt, he committed fratricide."

The Roman people as a whole are branded by Cyprian as tainted with the sins of their founder, Romulus, who both murdered his brother Remus and ordered the rape of the Sabine women in order to address a shortage of wives for Roman men, which resulted in fighting between Roman men and the fathers of these violated women (this is what is referred to by "he makes a beginning of that affair of concord by discords"; for an account of this story, see Livy, *History of Rome* I.9). We read that "the king himself may have a superiority (*principatus*) in crime" with *principatus* here employed to suggest that he is preeminent in corruption and immorality, something which has trickled down to his subjects. Next, Cyprian attacks the consulship, which he recognises as the "highest degree in Roman honours." Similarly to the empire's population itself, this, he claims, also began with violent corruption. Cyprian uses the example of Lucius Junius Brutus, whom tradition held as one of the first consuls in 509 BCE. Brutus had led the revolt against Tarquinius Superbus, Rome's last king, and during his time as consul, an attempt was made to re-establish the monarchy, with Brutus's two sons a part of the effort. He subsequently witnessed their execution (see Livy, *History of Rome* II.3-4).

Roman religion is the final casualty of Cyprian's attack, with the author claiming that superstitious religious practices such as auguries and auspices played no part in the successful growth of the Roman empire. Rather, it merely "keeps its appointed time within a definite limit." Here again, Cyprian alludes to the fact that Rome, like other empires before it, has had its period of glory, and should not think itself unique because of any special piety or favour from the gods. He uses the example of Marcus Atilius Regulus, a consul of the Republic in 267 BCE, and again in 256 BCE, who was taken prisoner at Tunis the following year during the First Punic War. Other figures brought in for support here are Gaius Hostilius Mancinus and Lucius Aemilius Paulus (Paullus). The former was consul in 137 BCE, and after a defeat to the Numantines, was tried by the senate and given over to the Numantines in shame. Paulus, consul in 219 BCE, was defeated at the famous Battle of Cannae in the Second



Punic War. These individuals are utilised as examples of Romans who had supposedly observed the auspices and auguries, yet been unsuccessful in their endeavours nonetheless. They are contrasted with Caius Caesar, who it is stated took no notice of these superstitions suggesting that he should delay the launching of his ships, and was successful in his campaign anyway. Essentially, Cyprian wishes to show not only that Roman religion is useless superstition, but also that all Roman glory is a temporary pleasure, and should not be taken for granted.

Keywords in the original language:

- [asylum](#)
- [augurium](#)
- [auspicium](#)
- [bellum](#)
- [Brutus](#)
- [Caius Caesar](#)
- [Cannae](#)
- [consulatus](#)
- [crimen](#)
- [dignitas](#)
- [ferocio](#)
- [honor](#)
- [imperium](#)
- [impunitas](#)
- [Mancinus](#)
- [noceo](#)
- [origo](#)
- [Paulus](#)
- [populus](#)
- [potestas](#)
- [principatus](#)
- [rapio](#)
- [regno](#)
- [regnum](#)
- [Regulus](#)
- [religio](#)
- [rex](#)
- [Romanus](#)
- [Romulus](#)
- [scelero](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [auspice](#)
- [Brutus](#)
- [consulship](#)
- [cycle of empires](#)
- [Gaius Hostilius Mancinus](#)
- [Lucius Aemilius Paulus](#)
- [Marcus Atilius Regulus](#)
- [Regulus](#)
- [Roman criminality](#)
- [Roman domination](#)
- [Roman fides](#)
- [Roman honor](#)
- [Roman origins](#)
- [Roman people](#)



- [Roman piety](#)
- [Roman religion](#)
- [Roman violence](#)
- [Romulus](#)
- [Sabines](#)
- [superstition](#)
- [translatio imperii](#)

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Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Marcus Minucius Felix, Octavius XXV](#)

Roman success is due to ferocity, not religious piety

- [Read more about Marcus Minucius Felix, Octavius XXV](#)

Text

[Cyprian, Address to Demetrianus V](#)

The suffering of the empire is due to Roman religious ignorance

- [Read more about Cyprian, Address to Demetrianus V](#)

Text

[Cyprian, Address to Demetrianus VIII](#)

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