



[Ovid, *Fasti* III.59-78](#)

Rome as the *urbs aeterna*, the "eternal city"

Name of the author: Ovid

Date: 1 CE to 8 CE

Place: Rome and Tomis

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Poetry

Title of work: *Fasti*

Reference:

III.59-78

Commentary:

This passage narrates the coming of age of Romulus and Remus, who having turned eighteen are informed of their true heritage. The twins learn of their origins, including their abandonment by the wicked Amulius (son of Procas and brother of Numitor), the father of their mother, Ilia, who hoped they would perish in the wild, leaving him to rule Alba Longa. Unsurprisingly, Romulus kills Amulius, thereby restoring the kingdom to the care of his grandfather, Numitor. The settlement of Alba Longa, which until now had been a collection of rural huts, is transformed into a city with walls – Rome. Romulus, the father of the “eternal city” (*urbs aeterna*) declares as the son of Mars, the Roman god of war, that he vows to name the first month of the Roman calendar after his divine father, an act of ancestral piety which greatly pleases Mars (see Molly Pasco-Prange, *Founding the Year: Ovid’s Fasti and the Poetic of the Roman Calendar*, p. 50, 69, 112, 46-47). Such pious veneration of one’s ancestry (both human and divine) was of course a central feature of Roman religious practice, exemplified, for instance, by Aeneas (the mythical ancestor of the Romans) dutifully carrying both his aged father and the Trojan Penates out of burning Troy, an image that was frequently reproduced in Augustan art.

This passage is one of the few instances where we see Rome referred to as the *urbs aeterna* (eternal city), a name which becomes absolutely central to the way it is understood as a long-enduring world power. For Philip Hardie, this exemplifies the Augustan notion of time as something stable – the eternal quality of the city of Rome transcends the chaos of constant change, which characterised the Pythagorean understanding of time. Ovid, however, seems to give space to both perspectives, and this can be seen through his presentation of the god Janus, who with his two faces both condemns the age of Saturn (Ovid, *Fasti* I.193-194) and admires it (I.223-225) (see Philip Hardie, “Augustan Poets and the Mutability of Rome,” 72-74). The new “eternal city” has come about via a huge overhaul of the corrupt rulership of Amulius, and so on the one hand celebrates change, yet its identification as “eternal” champions constancy and permanence.

The reference to Remus leaping the walls of the city (69-70) draws on the story related by Livy, *History of Rome* I.72-3, wherein Remus insults the walls that Romulus has built, and mockingly jumps over them, inciting his brother to murder him and exclaim that he will do likewise to anyone else who jumps the walls of Rome. The actual murder itself, however, is noticeably absent here. Ovid’s avoidance of the ugly fratricidal incident may be partly due to the comparison that the poet wishes to draw between Romulus and Augustus elsewhere in both the *Fasti* and the *Metamorphoses*. Book two of the *Fasti* (II.137-144), for instance, compares Romulus and Augustus in relation to the latter’s taking on of the title *pater patriae* (father of the country). This said, Ovid makes extremely clear that Augustus surpasses Romulus, the first *pater patriae*. Scholars such as Stephen Hinds argue that the occasions where Ovid does appear to speak less favourably about Romulus, such as in the opening passage of the *Fasti* (I.29-30) where he criticises his base intellect (see Hinds, “*Arma* in the *Fasti*”), are indicative of a pre-revision stage of the poem, before Ovid became more disillusioned with the regime following his exile.

Keywords in the original language:



- [annus](#)
- [arbiter](#)
- [mensis](#)
- [pater](#)
- [pietas](#)
- [Remus](#)
- [Romulus](#)
- [urbs aeterna](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [calendar](#)
- [eternity of Rome](#)
- [kingdom](#)
- [piety](#)
- [Remus](#)
- [revelation](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [Romulus](#)

Bibliographical references: Pasco-Prange, Molly, [Founding the Year: Ovid's Fasti and the Poetic of the Roman Calendar](#) (Leiden: Brill, 2006)

Hinds, Stephen, "[Arma in the Fasti](#)", *Arethusa* 25 (1987) : 81-153

Hardie, Philip, "[Augustan Poets and the Mutability of Rome](#)", in *Roman Poetry and Propaganda in the Age of Augustus* (ed. Powell, Anton; Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1992), 59-82

Other sources connected with this document: Text

[Ovid, Metamorphoses XIV.805-828](#)

The ascension of Romulus to heaven

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