

## The Secret Name of Rome: Religious Definitions of the Roman Community

Antiquarian writers from antiquity claim that Rome had a secret sacred name. According to them, its revelation could allow Rome's enemies to destroy the city and this threat was taken so seriously that Valerius Soranus, who had publicised the name, was crucified in Sicily. Rather than try to use these antiquarian texts to reconstruct the truth behind the secret name, I argue in this paper that talking about the secret name of Rome is one way for antiquarian authors to conceptualise the Roman community in religious terms. To elucidate these conceptions and their diachronic development, the paper examines the testimonies of the secret name from Varro (*apud Servius ad Aen.* 1.277) in the first century BCE; the Elder Pliny (*NH* 3.65; 28.18) and Plutarch (*Quaest. Rom.* 278f-279a) in the early Empire, and Macrobius (*Sat.* 3.9) and John Lydus (*Mens.* 4.73) in Late Antiquity.

The secret name of Rome has generally been dismissed as an oriental import or late invention (Latte 1960, 125 n.2; Rüpke 2007, 132-4), but, following Trevor Murphy's recent emphasis on the antiquarians' discussion of the secret name, regardless of the origin of the idea (Murphy 2004), I show how these authors use the secret name to offer two possible religious definitions of Roman identity, without necessarily foreclosing any particular solution to what it was to be Roman.

First, the paper demonstrates that the link that the antiquarian texts make between the secret name and *evocatio*, the ritual 'calling out' of the tutelary deity of a besieged city, implies an understanding that the religious basis for Rome is the walled city. The secret name only offers security to Rome *qua* urban community. The paper will show how Varro is implicated in this definition of Rome in the context of the Romanisation of Italy in the late Republic, while several hundred years later, Macrobius brings it up as an argument for the superiority of pagan religion for the protection of the city in the aftermath of the Gothic sack of the city in 410 CE (cf. Ando 2008).

The stories of Valerius Soranus' punishment for revealing the secret name in Pliny, Plutarch and Lydus suggest another way that these texts envision Roman-ness in religious terms. The plot of profanation and then death appeals to the culturally established narrative of profanation of mysteries. The antiquarian texts use of the vocabulary of mysteries when talking about the secret name and make odd claims that the secret name was spoken by the priests during secret rites. These texts depict the secret name as a Roman *mysterion* and suggest that the Roman community can be understood as a mystery cult community, an Italian Eleusis, structured around a piece of sacred knowledge.

The secret name of Rome provides no essential answer to the problem of defining Roman identity in religious terms, but it is one of the ways that Roman antiquarians posed that question and debated the possible answers.

## Bibliography

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