

Numa's Religious Settlement

Source: Livy 1.20–21. Translated by William Masfen Roberts. In *The History of Rome*. London: J.M. Dent, 1912.

Numa Pompilius, according to legend the second king of Rome, was credited with laying down the foundations of the Roman state religion. He is supposed to have been a Sabine and to have eschewed luxury.

Next he turned his attention to the appointment of priests. He himself, however, conducted a great many religious services, especially those which belong to the Flamen of Jupiter.¹ But he thought that in a warlike state there would be more kings of the type of Romulus than of Numa who would take the field in person. To guard, therefore, against the sacrificial rites which the king performed being interrupted, he appointed a Flamen as perpetual priest to Jupiter, and ordered that he should wear a distinctive dress and sit in the royal curule chair. He appointed two additional Flamens, one for Mars, the other for Quirinus, and also chose virgins as priestesses to Vesta. This order of priestesses came into existence originally in Alba and was connected with the race of the founder.² He assigned them a public stipend that they might give their whole time to the temple, and made their persons sacred and inviolable by a vow of chastity and other religious sanctions.

Similarly he chose twelve "Salii" for Mars Gradivus, and assigned to them the distinctive dress of an embroidered tunic and over it a brazen cuirass. They were instructed to march in solemn procession through the City, carrying the twelve shields called the "Ancilia," and singing hymns accompanied by a solemn dance in triple time.

The next office to be filled was that of the Pontifex Maximus.³ Numa appointed the son of M., one of the senators—Numa Marcius—and all the regulations bearing on religion, written out and sealed, were placed in his charge. Here was laid down with what victims, on what days, and at what temples the various sacrifices were to be offered, and from what sources the expenses connected with them were to be defrayed.

He placed all other sacred functions, both public and private, under the supervision of the Pontifex, in order that there might be an authority for the people to consult, and so all trouble and confusion arising through foreign rites being adopted and their ancestral ones neglected might be avoided. Nor were his functions confined to directing the worship of the celestial

gods; he was to instruct the people how to conduct funerals and appease the spirits of the departed, and what prodigies sent by lightning or in any other way were to be attended to and expiated. To elicit these signs of the divine will, he dedicated an altar to Jupiter Elicius⁴ on the Aventine, and consulted the god through auguries, as to which prodigies were to receive attention.

The deliberations and arrangements which these matters involved diverted the people from all thoughts of war and provided them with ample occupation. The watchful care of the gods, manifesting itself in the providential guidance of human affairs, had kindled in all hearts such a feeling of piety that the sacredness of promises and the sanctity of oaths were a controlling force for the community scarcely less effective than the fear inspired by laws and penalties. And whilst his subjects were molding their characters upon the unique example of their king, the neighboring nations, who had hitherto believed that it was a fortified camp and not a city that was placed amongst them to vex the peace of all, were now induced to respect them so highly that they thought it sinful to injure a State so entirely devoted to the service of the gods.

There was a grove through the midst of which a perennial stream flowed, issuing from a dark cave. Here Numa frequently retired unattended as if to meet the goddess, and he consecrated the grove to the Camaenae, because it was there that their meetings with his wife Egeria took place. He also instituted a yearly sacrifice to the goddess Fides and ordered that the Flamens should ride to her temple in a hooded chariot, and should perform the service with their hands covered as far as the fingers, to signify that Faith must be sheltered and that her seat is holy even when it is in men's right hands. There were many other sacrifices appointed by him and places dedicated for their performance which the pontiffs call the Argei.

The greatest of all his works was the preservation of peace and the security of his realm throughout the whole of his reign. Thus by two successive kings the greatness of the State was advanced; by each in a different way, by the one through war, by the other through peace. Romulus reigned thirty-seven years, Numa forty-three. The State was strong and disciplined by the lessons of war and the arts of peace.

¹ A flamen was a priest devoted to a particular god. The three described as being created here—the Flamen Dialis, Flamen Martialis, and Flamen Quirinalis—were the only important ones, though a dozen minor flamines were created later.

² The Vestales, or Vestal virgins, were the virgin priestesses of Vesta who ministered in her temple and watched the eternal fire, its extinction

being considered as the most fearful of all prodigies, and emblematic of the extinction of the state.

³ Chief priest. The origin of *pontifex* is disputed; it may relate to *pons* 'bridge,' so to archaic sacrifices made on the Sacred Bridge.

⁴ Jupiter in his aspect as god of thunder and lightning.