THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NUMA’S RELIGIOUS REFORMS

BY

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„Quis procul ille autem ramis insignis oliuae sacra ferens?“ 1)

So Anchises greets the appearance of Numa Pompilius among the future kings of Roma, and no Roman would have failed to recognize him instantly, for to the Romans Numa was the father of their religion and their laws. But to-day his reputation and even his existence are less firmly established. Half a century ago Warde Fowler could still describe Numa as ‘the king with whose name and personality the Romans always associated the redaction of the Fasti and the state-organization of their religion: a personality so clearly conceived by them as to bear witness at once to its own historical reality, and to their conviction of the vital importance of his work’. 2) Since that time, however, doubts have increasingly been cast on the reliability of the traditions regarding Numa and his reforms, until we have now reached a stage in which the question is apparently regarded as no longer meriting discussion, and the latest major work on Roman religion 3) disregards Numa entirely.

For this scepticism about Numa, and indeed about all the Roman kings, perhaps Livy was unwittingly to blame. When he referred to ‘quae ante conditam condendamue urbe poeticis magis decora fabulis quam incorruptis rerum gestarum monumentis traduntur’ 4), he obviously referred only to the legends connected with Aeneas, Evander and Romulus; but recent historians have been quick to extend his cautions to the whole account of the monarchy, and all too many scholars

3) K. Latte, Römische Religionsgeschichte (München, 1960).
4) Liv., Praef. 6.
have been eager to carry the process further. There has been general agreement that the Romans really knew nothing about their early history. Most historians, following Mommsen’s lead, have assured us that they deduced their early history from their later institutions. Students of religion have reduced it all to aetiological myths. Philhellenes have been encouraged to claim that all Roman traditions were invented by the Greeks; while other scholars, impressed by the spectacular archaeological finds in Etruria, have set out to prove that all Roman institutions were derived from the Etruscans. All this, of course, is gross exaggeration. Reconstructions and aetiological myths do appear in the traditional history of the monarchy, but they by no means account for the whole of it. And to be sure the Greeks did invent myths and legends on Roman subjects, but they were very different from the legends of the Roman monarchy, even from the confused and exotic legends of Romulus. If they invented stories for Greek consumption, they usually endeavoured to trace Roman greatness back to some Greek source, telling of Greek exiles like Evander bringing enlightenment to Italy; if they were bent on flattering some Roman patron, they brought some ancestor of the patron’s family into connection with the kings, as was done for the Iulii, the Mamerci and other patrician families; if they wrote purely for entertainment, they supplied Roman names for characters in old Greek stories, and left the results to be collected up by Plutarch. The legends of the kings are too full of non-Greek elements, such as Vestals, augurs, and institutions like the spolia optima, to have originated with the Greeks. As to the Etruscans, there is no doubt that there were Etruscan kings at Rome, that Roman art, architecture, public entertainments, and styles of dress owed a great deal to Etruria, and that the Romans derived their alphabet from the Etruscans; but there the influence of Etruria seems to have ended. Had it had a more profound effect on Rome, we should assuredly have found the Etruscans easier to understand. But their civilization is so strange and enigmatic to us that we can only conclude that it was quite alien to the Roman way of life; and the Romans tell us so little of their exotic neighbours that it would appear that Etruscan ways were almost as much a closed book to them as they are to us. Nor must we assume that the uncultured state of the Romans before they were Hellenized rendered them incapable of handing down oral traditions and later keeping simple records of events. They must have