

## At eye level with the Tiber

An essay by Claudia Acklin

The Red Arrow has just spat me out onto the platform at Roma Termini station. After dozing comfortably in the train's cushion, I suddenly find myself in a noisy crowd. People are shoving me from behind, the way is blocked at the front because someone has to light a cigarette right after their exertions on the train. Slowly, the crowd sucks me forward through various halls and finally to the bus park. When I finally arrive tired at my station on the edge of the Villaggio Olimpico, a heavy rain comes down, which soon turns into hail. It doesn't seem to want to stop. Uffah... I had not expected this stormy start to my long and meticulously planned trip to Rome. Later, I wander through the streets of the district where the Olympic athletes once lived in the early 1960s, until I finally find my B&B. No rest is possible there yet, because the hostess chats me full of regulations and explanations why neither the TV nor the blinds work.

My few things are quickly unpacked. I urgently need air so that my soul can catch up with my body. I walk through the village, along Via Argentina or Via Turchia or Via Olanda roughly in the direction of the Tiber. Close to the Villaggio Olimpico must be the Ponte Milvio, one of the oldest bridges in Rome. And there it is - steeped in history on rough bridge piers, made of ancient travertine at the bottom and renovated several times over the centuries at the top. I lean over the stone railing and look down at the Tiber. The river flows surprisingly lively and playful here, seagulls sit on small river banks and the sun casts reddish rays on the waves at dusk. I relax and let my gaze wander. I am full of anticipation when suddenly someone comes to stand next to me, closer than politeness dictates. I first see a pair of old wet leather shoes, then an equally wet pair of trousers, jacket, beard and dripping hair.

This old man must have got out in the rain and, not like me, got under. But honestly, everything about him is so wet, as if he had just showered with his clothes on. In one hand he is holding some reeds with which he must have tried to protect himself against the rain. Should I move further away, I ask myself? I decide against it, because having just arrived in town I don't want to seem rude. He looks calmly and proudly across the Tiber and says, "Without me, this city wouldn't exist." Surprised, I look at him again from the side and notice a certain paleness in his face and a coolness that seems to emanate from him. If that isn't a local patriot.... He notices my skeptical expression, but doesn't let it faze him and adds: "I helped build this city."

I don't really know why, but I feel a strong tugging in my stomach area. My heart also begins to beat faster. Even as the strange old man turns away and slowly walks away, I have a feeling as if I have seen a ghost. Against all logic, I deal with the madness he has just told me. - What was that? Who was that? And what exactly was he trying to tell me? - But then I stroll on and discover many "locchetti d'amore", locks left here by lovers, on an iron chain on this historic bridge further ahead. After all, Roma spelled backwards is Amor, the city of love. Of course, Paris or London or Amsterdam also claim that. But it's good to be back in normality. I aim in the direction of the pizzeria.

Apparently the "barbone", as I call him the next morning, the Italian term for homeless person, has kept me busy after all. He appeared in my dream the first night at the Villaggio Olimpico. Again, he is dripping with water, his soaked shoes gurgle as he walks and his skin has a marble radiance. In my dream – or nightmare, I suppose – it sounds spiteful when the old man says, "No Rome without me." As if he's frustrated that I don't believe him and as if my pitying smile on the Ponte Milvio has offended him.

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I came to Rome for a writing project. It's supposed to be a short story or a short novel. I don't know exactly yet. The outline of the story, which is supposed to be about a love, about Amor in Roma, already exists, but the places, the light, the smells and the tastes of this city are missing. Early in the morning, I set off for the city center, equipped with a notepad and camera and without a clear destination. My elation is short-lived, because this time I am irritated by the unpredictability of public transport. Finally, unnerved, I take the first bus that arrives at the stop after a long wait. Without further ado, I get off again a few stops later at Castel Sant'Angelo. Crowds again. A thousand (American) tourists are jostling at the pedestrian crossing. This is what "overtourism" feels like, mass tourism. And this in March, almost still in winter.

In front of the castle, a seagull sits calmly on the stone railing that separates the center of the city from the Tiber and watches the hustle and bustle. It knows that it is highly "Instagram-able" and allows photographers to get within 30 cm of it. To me, the seagull's position and gaze seem rather mocking, as if it were looking down on the everyday madness of the crowd. I flee down the stairs to the Tiber and – I am shocked. The artificial riverbed... High walls, probably a good twelve meters high... On both sides of the Tiber... Next to the river, there is just enough space for a walkway and bicycle path and for a lot of civilisation debris that gets caught in the bushes on its banks. The river is not only tamed and disciplined here. Even more: the Tiber seems unhappy and downgraded. Displaced from the lives of the Romans, it is a minor matter.

One day later, during one of my wanderings, I find myself at the crossroads of Via Quirinale and Via delle Quattro Fontane, where there is a fountain with a sculpture in every corner. My gaze is magnetically drawn to the niche with the image of a bearded man with long hair lying under a fig tree with a cornucopia in his arms. Grapes, as it were, are flowing down onto him from the vines above. In the background, the Roman she-wolf looks out from the sculpture. It is a majestic image of idleness and fertility.

My breath catches in my throat. With that beard and long hair, he looks like the younger version of my "barbone". But in this niche, a god lies symbolically on the banks of the Tiber. His name is Tiberinus, I read. He is not only younger, but also more than the one I met on the Ponte Milvio and in my dream. Here this man does not come to me as a poetic allegory for the Tiber. He is not just gurgling water from wet clothes, but a representative of the Tiber, its chief of communication, so to speak. When the sculpture was made, Tiberinus was probably still held in honour. Now I can imagine that the old man may have been right in his frustration. Perhaps Tiberinus helped to found a city and thus an empire?

For empires and nations, geography is destiny. A river carries water to a city, enabling the transport of goods and with it the buoyant trade with far-flung parts of the world. Often a river would safeguard a city. Without the river, there is neither power nor wealth. It irrigates the fields of farmers as well as the gardens of wealthy patricians, who in ancient Rome showed off their wealth with water features and nymphaea. But then I remember the experience at Castel Sant'Angelo and think abruptly: "Tiberinus, you helped build this city, but what has become of you?!" I would probably also be offended and understand: Tiberinus is fighting for his reputation.

I decide at that moment to go on a trail. I want to understand the influence of the river god on the founding history of Rome. Evidence for this can certainly be found. But Tiberinus' claim goes even further: he was not only a henchman and service provider, he believes that he was the trigger of this development, that he set the history of Rome in motion in full awareness of his role. Will I ever be able to say anything about this? – I don't know, I'm not a metaphysician by profession. And I don't want to drag a dripping river god through the city in tow like a madwoman. But I want to dare something new and change the perspective. I want to explore the Eternal City from the perspective of the river, the Tiber. – And suddenly I have the feeling of flowing with the events and more than just a

tourist. I will move somnambulistically, from experience to experience and from there on and maybe to realisation.

### No Rome without me

It is not unusual for the Tiber, or more precisely the river god Tiberinus who watches over it, to speak to people. He has done so many times in the past. He has given prophecies to legendary personalities or to the first kings of Rome and has even intervened directly in the founding history of Rome. By the way, it can be assumed that Tiberinus, the river god, who was definitely conscious of power, also talked to shepherds, fishermen or peasant women – or, as already mentioned, to unsuspecting tourists. For the spirit blows where it will.

I am immersed in an era when the gods still walked among the people, even guided and led them. A time teeming with demigods and heroines who had a showdown on the territory of today's Italy. Or so the storytellers and poets tell us. Vergil, for example: He had been commissioned during the early days of the imperial era – that is, after the first mythical kings and the Roman Republic – by one of the greatest, Emperor August, to write an epic for the glory of his reign. Vergil, however, wrote a multi-volume poem on the founding history of Rome. At the time, a creation myth was needed to assure the emerging Rome that it was not just a copy of Greek models, but that it had the makings of an empire of its own. Vergil worked on it for ten years from 29 BC and until his death. The mythical beginnings of Rome had already been around 725 years ago at that time.

Vergil reports that the river god Tiberinus appeared to Aeneas in a dream and told him that his son Ascanius would found Alba, the mother city of Rome, thirty years later. It would come to stand under those oaks of the banks of the Tiber where Aeneas had previously fallen into a deep sleep. He was, as we would say today, a war refugee from Troy and, like his erstwhile enemy Odysseus, had been hurled back and forth across the Mediterranean. Tiberinus announces in the dream that Aeneas, upon awakening, would find a wild sow with thirty freshlings under these very oaks as a sign of the accuracy of his prophecy. This is indeed the case, and Aeneas, at the behest of the river god, sacrifices the mother pig and all the young pigs to the goddess Juno, who has made his life hell since he left Troy.

I don't read Vergil's epic myself; the reading of a few hexameters and my memories of Latin lessons are enough to dissuade me. But later, at home, I take an old edition of Gustav Schwab's "Die schönsten Sagen des klassischen Altertums" ("The Most Beautiful Legends of Classical Antiquity") from my bookcase and go through the Aeneid again, with which Schwab has put Vergil's twelve books into a simplified form. In the preface of 1837, Schwab writes: "The Aeneid gave the author the most trouble. To cut off the lengths here without making the goal of the path itself inaccessible, to remove all those ingredients of imagined folk tale which, after an Iliad and Odyssey, should be palpable even to a child in their splendid glow, without the coherence of the most original and lovely inventions, The editor felt that this was no small task, especially since no modern narrator of the sagas of antiquity had yet attempted it. His endeavour was to give the artful works of the Roman a charm of novelty and, to a certain extent, of divertissement, which one seeks in vain in the original, by crowding together essential beauty."<sup>1</sup>

The fact that Schwab wrote for "women and children" conjures up a smirk on my lips, for then I am his target audience and am empowered to take his sagas from the bookcase. But I do find Schwab's reproach of Vergil somewhat impertinent, that the latter should have written for children. Why would he want to do this at all, since his intention was rather to write a political work that would present the hard-fought (divine) origins and outlines of the Roman Empire in legendary form.

I would like to highlight a few details from Schwab's summary. Firstly, the war of Aeneas and his Trojans together with his allies, the Arcadian Pelasgians against "all of Italy" is described by Schwab as

one of the "first offspring of the ancient heroic stories", "some of whose ancestors were gods and sons of gods". Many peoples have cosmologies or myths in which gods and goddesses instruct among humans until the latter can muddle on without divine intervention.

Secondly, Aeneas' mother is Venus, so he is half the offspring of a deity. He receives from his mother a shield made by her husband Vulcanus for the war against the Latins and Etruscans. The shield is decorated with beautiful scenes, which Aeneas looks at like a child looking at a picture book. But he cannot make sense of the pictures. For the shield is adorned with scenes of the future Rome, such as the story of Romulus and Remus, the battles of the first Roman kings, even the later Emperor Augustus can be seen on it. Thus, Vergil realised his emperor's wish to immortalise him as a hero after all.

Thirdly, the river god Tiberinus recommends that Aeneas ally himself with the prince Evander of the Pelasgians, who come from Greece and are also at odds with the tribes of the Italic peninsula. Tiberinus gives Aeneas strategic advice, which he follows. The river god thus intervenes in the fate of Italy, supporting two groups of people who do not originate from this land but have either migrated to Italy like the Pelasgians or are fleeing from distant lands like the Trojans. He does not seem to be afraid of Juno, the hero's enemy, or beholden to Venus, Aeneas' mother, but pursues an agenda of his own. The river god thus ushers in a future in which the river Tiber will continue to play a central role later on.

Fourth: After the sacrifice of the wild sow and her thirty freshlings, Aeneas continues his journey on the river. The Tiber, tamed by the river god, lies smooth and level like the mirror of a country lake. "The floods themselves marvelled, and the riverside forest wondered, when they saw colourful hoods and men with bright shields pulling up the stream almost without an oar stroke," writes Schwab. Other actors from nature enter the scene – the floods of the Tiber and the forest - and thus the personnel of the founding story of Rome expands. In addition to gods and demigods, princes and their subjects and river god Tiberinus, there is the river Tiber itself and the nature surrounding it. Like layers of sediment, different religious phases lie on top of each other, following different laws, matriarchal, patriarchal and human. At the base and as the lowest layer we find animistic deities for rivers and landscapes, plants and animals, heaven and earth. And I wonder if this oldest of all laws, the law of the land, does not have a rightful claim to have written history.

The American archaeologist Gretchen E. Meyers also concludes that the river god Tiberinus was an active shaper of Rome's genesis. She writes: "He is not simply an idle emblem of Roman power, but actively contributes to the creation of the Roman city and Romanitas."<sup>2</sup> In my reading: Tiberinus not only inspires Aeneas to ally with the Pelasgian Evander and fight for his place in the Italic peninsula as a Trojan refugee, but also wants to pave the way for his descendants.

Later, Tiberinus will also rescue Romulus and Remus, who had been abandoned in a basket in the Tiber. The basket remains hanging on the bank because the Tiber withdraws its waters in time after a flood so that the she-wolf can find the two infants. All mythology? Of course. But nevertheless, strong enough to form the cornerstone of Rome's identity – today one would probably speak of skillful branding. Not entirely unimportant is also who the parents of the twins Romulus and Remus are: Rhea Silvia was the daughter of Aeneas' elder son, Numitor. Her uncle Amulius forced her to become a vestal virgin. But the god Mars seduced the young woman, and Rhea Silvia was forced to abandon the demigods and twins in the Tiber.

Unlike me, Meyers has read her Vergil and points out that the poet presents three slightly different images of the river god Tiberinus in the Aeneid: One is by Vergil as author, one is Tiberinus' self-portrayal in Aeneas' dream, and a third describes the river god from the point of view of the just-awakened Aeneas. Meyer interprets that Vergil wanted to draw a bow to archaic prehistory from the Mediterranean region, from the time when river gods were still depicted as bulls with human heads,

to Hellenistic-Etruscan images of a god in human form with horns and finally to a Roman depiction of a human-like figure in which the horns, detached from the head and reversed, had become a cornucopia.

Virgil has spun a fine web from the prehistory of Rome and from the subsequent ambitions of a strengthening empire. For, "The emergence of Tiberinus on the Roman stage coincides with the emergence of Rome on the world stage." The period of the end of the Roman Republic and the first emperors represents Rome's ambition to become a world city of distinction like no other. "So, when visual representations of the Tiberinus, such as those described above, evoke the founding legend of Rome, they simultaneously point to the very real location of the river and its role in bringing both the mythological figures of the past and the international travellers of the present to the capital." So it is, even many centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire.

Tiberinus has recommended himself as my travelling companion through history and has become a tour guide through the city of Rome as it presents itself today. The dripping old man whispers to me on one of my walks that I should also speak to the nymph Egeria. Another one of those monosyllabic instructions. I have to make up the rest myself. As a willing student, however, I immediately sit down at the computer and find a reference to Egeria in the entry on the Vesta Temple on the Foro Romano. One mouse click leads to the next and I learn that the servants of the Temple of Vesta, the virgin Vestal Virgins, each marched about 1.2 km out of the city in the direction of the Via Appia to fetch water from Egeria's spring for the purification of their temple on the Foro Romano. It is easy to imagine that an eternally burning fire and its ashes cause plenty of dirt. Who is Egeria?

### [This plant on my spring pond](#)

I make a wonderful discovery: rivers may be guided and protected by male deities. But the world of springs belongs to nymphs. And while there are a variety of types and specialisations of nymphs, they are often tied to ancient matriarchal traditions and nature worship. Nymphs protect springs and wells, forests and trees, meadows and valleys or grottos and caves. In other mythological traditions they would be called fairies or simply nature spirits.

They are rather shy of humans, yet occasionally fall in love with mortals and vice versa. Under certain circumstances they take revenge and bring disaster on people. Especially if they have committed an outrage and, for example, have chopped down a tree. How do I become aware of this? Quite unexpectedly and in an unlikely place. Because of a "sciopero", a rail strike, I am forced to stay in a Roman B&B and spend a night in a room called "Amadriadi". When I look up who this name belongs to, I learn that this type of nymph dies with the tree when it is cut down or otherwise injured. Some nymphs are superior to others, others subordinate to others. It takes little imagination to imagine that behind our modern concept of habitats or ecosystems, there is a multi-layered parallel world of nature spirits, nymphs, fauns and fairies. They inhabit plants, animals, waters and landscapes.

In Roman mythology there are also four so-called *camenas* ("camenea" in Latin), which delimit the typology of the nymphs and expand it with further specialisations. The nymph Egeria, for example, protects a spring and thus belongs to a group of other guardians of the section of land where her spring originates. Beyond that, however, she became known for advising the second king of Rome, Numa Pompilius in political and religious matters. Besides her, there are Carmenta, Antevorta and Postvorta, who were responsible for good births or acted as muses or oracles. What they all have in common is their ability to inspire humans.

The nymph Egeria will now be discussed in more detail, because she also plays an important role in the early history of Rome. Like the male river god Tiberinus, this nymph spoke to a secular king and thus gave divine impulses to the history of Rome. But if the founding history of Rome with Aeneas

and with Romulus was warlike, the pendulum swung the other way with Numa Pompilius (715-673 BC). He is said to have brought peace among the quarrelling Italic peoples.

The spring once lay within a sacred grove, not far from the Colli Albani. Even today, the volcanic terrain of the hills ensures that the spring carries Egeria's mineral water, which is said to help with stomach ailments. The Colli Albani were also once the site of a sacred site of Diana, with whom the nymph Egeria had a relationship.

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At the beginning of April, I take a trip to a part of Rome that has the feel of a theme park and open countryside. The place is just off the ancient Via Appia. At the entrance there is sports equipment for the fitness-conscious, picnic zones for families or other Romans in need of recreation. There is a small river, the Almeno, streams, meadows, lots of wild rabbits in the bushes and wild monk and collared parakeets in the trees.

Anyone who has been to Rome recently may have wondered about the new arrival of these non-native birds. The parakeets often travel in groups, immediately visible and audible by a rather unpleasant cawing sound. They land above the heads of tourists and Romans in the treetops of the Villa Borghese as well as La Sapienza University. They are simply everywhere. I enjoy watching these colourful birds spread their long green tail feathers as they land. I hear that they have also appeared in Germany or on the coast of southern England. Their presence there would probably amaze me even more. But in Rome, the melting pot of the Mediterranean, so close to North Africa and the ancient Orient, the parakeets, spreading a light atmosphere of bustle, fit in perfectly.

The Nymphaeum of Egeria is somewhat hidden, as if it doesn't want to be found at first go. In the days of Numa Pompilius' secret nocturnal visits, the source was probably, as it is today, a trickling something in a grove. However, the Nymphaeum of Egeria, whose relics can still be seen today, was not built until the 2nd century AD. What I encounter on my visit there is a niche set into a bushy hill within a larger marble structure, from which water trickles. This collects in the pond in the foreground of the nymphaeum, the surface almost entirely covered by the small light green leaves of a plant like those I have seen in Switzerland.

A low metal railing with a display board separates the sanctum of the spring from the visitors. Bending over the board, I see a young woman, dressed almost a little too summery for March. Something flowing in shades of yellow. She smiles at me, makes room by the display board and leans on the railing with her forearms. And she says the somewhat puzzling sentence: "Dear Egeria has done that very cleverly, hasn't she. That plant there on the pond is quite useful for you today." I look at her from the side and wait for an explanation, but somewhat abruptly she says I should think of her tomorrow when I eat my wild berry yoghurt. By now I am sensitised, as they would say in psychospeak. This time, too, this eccentric figure doesn't vanish into thin air, but puts on a somewhat old-fashioned straw hat and goes on her way at a walking pace. I shrug my shoulders and forget about it.

The next morning, when I reach into the fridge at the Villaggio Olimpico, I am surprised to discover that it contains a yoghurt in the flavour of "frutti di bosco", wild berries. How could she possibly know this, runs through my head, and now I am not only sensitised but highly motivated to solve the mystery. The yellow-robed woman must have meant the plant on the spring pond, the one with the very small leaves on the surface. On the internet I learn that it is the duckweed and that it is able to extract nitrogen, phosphate and other organic substances from the water. This property can be used to purify dirty water, such as that produced in pig farming. What Egeria has conjured up at its gate is a regenerative plant, as if the nymph knew what the quality of water is like today and how bitterly solutions are needed to deal with the unwanted pollutants from agriculture and sewage from settlements. Every attentive person will have understood in recent years that drinking water from

springs and rivers is our first and most important food and that above all industrial forms of agriculture regularly poison this water. Nota bene: The duckweed is not an expensive technical infrastructure; it purifies water free of charge. And what was the point of the "frutti di bosco" notice? Well – water seeps through hills and forest soils and is thus filtered, before it resurfaces as a spring. I can only hope that wild berries continue to be found in Egeria's grove, because this would suggest a sufficiently healthy habitat.

I also understand why Tiberinus sent me to Egeria. She is another proof, a repetition in the history of early Rome. As with Tiber, here a source speaks to a mythical figure from Roman antiquity. But while Tiberinus showed Aeneas the way to take his place in Italy and wage war, Egeria showed Numa Pompilius the way to more peace. The emergence of a Roman identity made this relationship a success story. For centuries, Pompilius was to enjoy an excellent reputation because of this. Inspired by Egeria, Pompilius built temples, introduced religious rituals and the proper order for sacrificial services, he divided the calendar into twelve months, and he established the administration of religion through priests and a pontiff. Egeria advises Pompilius and his Romans on a proper code of life based on a common religion and its rites. The river god and the nymph have been actors, inspiring and thus shaping, until the people were mature enough to take the wheel into their own hands.

Cicero (106 to 43 BC) later affirms the role that Egeria played for Rome. The historian and poet Livius (59 BC to 17 AD), on the other hand, who presents a history of Rome from its beginnings some 500 years after Numa Pompilius, sees it differently. Livius does describe the second king of Rome as the founder of a Roman religion, but he considers the whispers of Egeria to be an invention of Pompilius. His connection to a kind of divine internet was intended to give him legitimacy and an aura of the divine among his subjects. Like Moses, who descended from Mount Sinai with two clay tablets and demanded obedience, Numa Pompilius returned from his nocturnal excursions with clear ideas of how the tribes were to be united by religious ideals into a peaceful Rome.

Livius did not necessarily see anything objectionable in this, but a means to an end for Pompilius' reign of over 50 years. But Livius' critical approach displaces the depiction of a direct communication between nymph (sender) and king (receiver). He re-establishes the patriarchal hierarchy, because for him a source could never, ever hold a state-bearing role. If it did, it was only to be understood as a romanticised story of a muse or as an invention.

Given this discrepancy of opinion between Roman posteriors, I wonder what Egeria's version of history would be. I conjure up the image of the somewhat eccentric woman at the source, and she is happy to tell more: that she not only imparted a philosophy of state to the king so that he could make peace in the conflict-ridden early days. The new order based on religious rites and piety came with a strategy for its implementation. And with a smirk she adds that ancient matriarchal knowledge formed the foundation of Pompilius' religion, for a life in harmony with the laws of nature and with Roman's livelihood.

Egeria goes on to say that she not only regularly consulted Pompilius, but also the Vestal Virgins who visited her for their water needs. She was able to maintain a channel of communication so that matriarchal knowledge was not lost. For the Vestal Virgins, chosen from the best families of Rome, were indeed embedded in the patriarchal order of Rome. But they were also involved in the annual rituals in Egeria's grove, where homage was also paid to the goddess Diana. Both goddess and nymph helped women with fertility and childbearing issues.

She flippantly passes over Livius. But I take offence at the fact that this historian has adopted a cynical approach, even if this exposes me to the suspicion that the idyll of nature and romanticism are closer to me than the cool analysis of the historian from Rome. An evil image even suggests itself to me: Like a fountain poisoner, the sceptic and self-proclaimed realist creeps through Egeria's grove and pees into her sacred spring pond.

At least I am comforted by an article on Roman art<sup>3</sup>. During the republican and imperial periods, many authors, orators, philosophers, historians or poets evoke the simplicity of country life, the love of nature and the animacy of this very nature through gods, fauns, nymphs... Figures such as Cicero, Horace or Ovid create idyllic counter-worlds to the reality of the empire's striving for power or to the loose morality that is rampant in Rome in the era of the later emperors. I could cite Ovid's "Metamorphoses" as an example of this, which is still present in a corner of my brain. Ovid opens his poem with a description of a mythical Golden Age. "Aurea prima aetas que vindice nullo, sponte sua sine lege fidem rectumque collavit. – First arose the Golden Age, which, without an enforcer of punishment, voluntarily and without a law, always upheld honesty and right action."<sup>4</sup> This age is followed by significantly less glorious ones.

While the works of Ovid, Cicero, Horace or Tacitus – the latter wrote of the Germanic peoples as a noble people, in stark contrast to the depraved Romans and Romanes – may be considered naïve, backward-looking and saccharine, they are also testaments to these authors' implicit understanding of nature and the gods, fauns and nymphs that drive and protect them. Being in harmony with these forces is presented as the measure of a good and successful life. Knowing about the divine laws of nature is the better "benchmark" than the decadent life of the powerful in the city and the expansionism of the Roman emperors. The golden age should serve as a benchmark for later rusty ones.

### Remember me

One of my walks along the Tiber leads me to a small island in the middle of the city. I have viewed the Tiber Island from above, from the nearby bridge, on the occasion of other visits to Rome in the past. But this time, as I approach it at eye level with the river through the trough – by the derogatory term trough I mean the artificial riverbed through the centre of the city – I immediately understand why the Tiber Island has always been a place of healing. It's easy to close off the two bridges to the left and right banks. The island is virtually predestined for quarantine during an epidemic. Even today, there is still a hospital on it.

I cross the right-hand bridge from Trastevere and first go to the tip of the island, where the tides of the Tiber divide. Astonished, I feel that the current here creates a fine vibration that I perceive in my feet and legs. It is as if the Tiber is energising the island through the friction of the water. I hear Tiberinus say: "Remember me. Remember me as I am today. Remember us." At last, the river god explains himself and reveals his intention. It seems important to him to draw attention to his role on Tiber Island, wants to be remembered. For nowhere does this become more meaningful than here. But what does he mean by "us"? He doesn't explain it to me at first.

The Tiber Island was once the crossing point between the Etruscan and Latin sides of the city. That's why one of the few independent Roman gods, the two-faced Janus, guarded the bridges. This small island, which looks like a ship in the surf when viewed from the side, had several functions in antiquity: as a sanctuary and healing place, as a crossing point for food, as a traffic crossroads for the two tribes, which only really got together during Numa Pompilius' reign, and at times also as a prison.

The forerunners of today's hospital were already built three hundred years before Christ. At that time, a delegation was sent to Epidauros in Greece because of an epidemic – this was at the suggestion of an entry in the Sibylline Books. The delegation was to bring a sacred snake from the temple of Aesculapius, the god of healing, to Rome. The snake escaped on the Tiber, swam along the river and finally hid on the island. Therefore, a first temple of Asclepius was built on it and later cult places for the river god Tiberinus, Jupiter Iurarius or Faunus, the god of forests and shepherds, followed. River and island, one could say, formed the foundation for a Roman health service.



The island was also close to the first centre of Rome. Tiberinus had made real what he whispered to Aeneas in a dream, even if few remember it today. The river god and his river helped to found Rome and successively expand it: Portus Tiberinus was built on the left bank of the Tiber with corresponding protective shrines. The location between the Campidoglio, Palatino and Aventino hills provided good geographical conditions for the transport and trade of goods. In the Velabro plain, roughly between the Capitol and the Palatine, the Foro Boario, the cattle market, and other markets for the sale of vegetables, etc., were built. The fourth king of Rome, Anco Marzio, also built the first wooden bridge over the river, which was washed away by the Tiber many times and rebuilt.

To be honest: The Tiber gave, but it also took away. Recurrent floods and high water claimed lives, encouraged epidemics to break out despite protective temples and regular festivals for Tiberinus and the port, and caused constant repair work. Nevertheless, the Romans remained faithful to their Tiber for over 400 years.

But over time, the river and springs were no longer enough. Water played an increasingly important role in the rapidly growing Rome. When the waters were no longer able to meet the city's needs, they not only received competition from human buildings, but their aura as life-giving or healing agents was also battered, and even more, they forfeited their divinity.

Sextus Iulius Frontinus, a Roman senator, governor of Britain and three-time consul, became "curator aquarum", superintendent of the aqueducts of Rome, in 97 AD. In his inventory of the water supply of Rome, he writes: "For 441 years after the founding of the city of Rome, the Romans, men and women, were satisfied with the use of water they drew from the Tiber, from wells and springs. The memory of the springs has been cherished with religious veneration until now: They were believed to have a healing effect on the sick, such as the springs of Camena, Apollo and Interna."<sup>5</sup> These times are at least partly over. For: "Today, however, the following aqueducts lead into the city: the Appia, the Anio Vetus, the Marcia, the Tepula, the Iulia, the Virgo, the Alsietina, which is also called Augusta, the Claudia and the Anio Nova."<sup>6</sup> Frontinus, who today would probably be called a manager, after this historical footnote moves seamlessly on to the actual intention of the report as the basis for his administrative activity.

During the imperial period, Rome had a municipal hierarchy in which even wealthy individuals from the provinces could rise. The standard way for such a person to do so at that time was to join the army as a knight, endowed with command right from the start. Because a career in the army also ensured a person's corresponding social capital, it was only a small step from there to the imperial administration. Frontinus' "De aquis urbis Romae" was a working tool for the imperial administration, for which he soberly and systematically worked through the following topics: the construction and history of the aqueducts, the condition of the buildings, the quantities of water being transported and grievances or mismanagement. He also mentions that in the course of history there was resistance to individual constructions. The Marcia aqueduct, for example, was criticised by a ten-member panel of priests because it contradicted divine law. The priests had also taken from the Sibylline Books that no water should be led up to the Capitol. Other actors were also against this, but both times the then king Quintus Marius Rex prevailed.

Frontinus measured the flow of water in so-called quinars and found discrepancies with earlier measurements. There were 10,000 of them missing. Water was already being diverted for private use at the springs or aqueduct pipes were being drilled. The politician Marcus Caelius Rufus stated: "By rigorous investigation we have had to prove all that has been taken as if one had a right to do so: We find that running water has been installed in irrigated fields, in taverns, even eating-houses, and ultimately abbeys of ill repute." The so-called water masters did not always allocate water fairly.

So, water was managed, metered and stolen. It was a valuable resource and everyone wanted to enjoy it. In the best times of antiquity, 1.5 million people lived in Rome. At the time of Emperor

Constantine, there were 19 aqueducts for 200 fountains, 11 large imperial baths and for 900 public baths. The water was used 44% for public facilities - fountains, fountain houses, bathing pools, cisterns - 38% for private use in the houses and 19% for the imperial court. So, it stands to reason that the satisfaction of the population was linked to accessibility to this resource.

Sounds quite modern, actually. Even today's people take water for granted and, as it turns out in times of climate change, use it wastefully. But in the Roman Empire it becomes visible that with this development there is also a paradigm shift with regard to water. Those who appropriate water for a nymphaeum in their villa, for fields or pubs, have turned water into a commodity, objectified and functionalised it. Romans did not fear revenge from river gods or nymphs if they stole water or at least diverted it from the abundant supply. If they feared anything, it was more likely persecution by the emperor.

Augustus took care of the water supply personally. For its quality was a matter of reputation for him. Caesar's foster son is considered one of the greatest emperors of Rome because he was able to build up sustainable administrative structures as well as to extend the borders of the Roman Empire into undreamed-of expanses. Both may have contributed to Augustus' god-like status at the end of his life. The divine hierarchy had changed from the beginning to the imperial era. While in archaic times and for the founding history of Rome the nature deities were still central, they were first replaced by the Greco-Roman human-like gods and goddesses and finally by mortal emperors.

What did this development mean for the Tiber and the ever-watchful Tiberinus? – With the aqueducts, the river's role as a water giver had been clearly curtailed for the first time. However, the situation was to change drastically once again during the period of Rome's decline and the invasion of the bands of Goths, Vandals and Lombards. Aqueducts suddenly became ideal points of attack and entry routes for Rome's enemies. In some cases, the Romans even destroyed their aqueducts themselves. One of the Gothic leaders also had the idea of building watchtowers on the banks of the Tiber, outside the city, to control the flow of goods into the city. The greatly diminished population was forced to return to the Tiber and its fountains.

Another thousand years or so later came the second major cut. In 1870 – very close in time to the Risorgimento – the course of the Tiber was shifted through the centre of the city to the aforementioned trough, a low-lying stone riverbed. As already mentioned, the frequent flooding of Rome by the Tiber was a permanent stumbling block, which the founding fathers of Rome tried to avoid by deliberately building their city on higher hills. But by the 19th century, people had finally grown tired of nature's uncontrollability. An emerging guild of engineers and urban architects dared to tackle the complex project of taming the Tiber.

According to the architectural historian Segarra Lagunes, however, it was not only the Tiber that was curtailed in the course of the river correction, but an entire human ecosystem that had developed in symbiosis with the river and had existed for centuries. She writes: "The radical incision that the construction of the walls represented for these places swept away a universe of events and economic, social and architectural entanglements that enriched and enlivened a well-defined urban area and were linked to a dynamic of residential, commercial, productive and recreational character."<sup>7</sup>

As I walk along the Tiber once again on a cloudy March morning, there is a loud bang. A young woman coming towards me and I are just about to cross when something literally explodes besides us. I think it must have been a bottle. How dangerous! But when the two of us take a closer look, we realise that it was a plastic cup which, due to the height of the fall and the weight of its contents, has unleashed quite a force. Someone has carelessly thrown his still full drink over the stone parapet down to the Tiber. The person remains faceless. She does not realise that she could have hurt the young woman or me with her carelessness.

I realise, however, that the Tiber has not only lost its face in the depths of the riverbed. All respect for it and for Tiberinus seems to have been lost as well. At a time when we are increasingly aware that we have damaged and exploited nature, "Remember me" takes on a new meaning. What is so loosely dismissed today as the ecosystem services of rivers and springs is much more. Water is life and as such as alive as we are.

### My origins lie in the Apennines

The fascist Benito Mussolini, of all people, made a perverse return to the sanctity of the Tiber. But the Duce's intention was less to pay homage to the river god Tiberinus than to conjure up a twilight of the gods, to transform, realign and even save the whole of Italy. Part of this was the dim infatuation with the symbols of Rome's creation story that produced this empire.

Italy, humiliated in the First World War, was to go "back to the future", was to remember its origins, be hardened by war and draw from it a glorious future. Mussolini had previously incorporated the battle cries of Italian Futurism into his modernisation project: machines, technology and acceleration. Years earlier, the artist Umberto Boccioni, for example, had pictorially translated this general future direction in the bronze "Unique Forms of Continuity in Space". What I see in this sculpture, however, is considerably less abstract than the title suggests. It is the spatial representation of a warrior, not to say the god of war himself, Mars, who seems to stride through space in giant strides. The wind blows around his ears.

Mars has left many victims in his march to greatness in the long history of Italy. It may be a rather trivial observation of my stay in Rome, but nowhere have I encountered so many war memorials as in this city. For what feels like every success and defeat in the ancient history of the Roman Empire, the wars of the Middle Ages, the Risorgimento, the war in Ethiopia, the two world wars, etc., one finds inscriptions or plaques on buildings and monuments or many squares and streets have been named. Hero worship is particularly fervent during defeats. In the "Parco della rimembrancha", for example, there is not just one war memorial, but several. And it is with a certain disbelief that I read that the fallen soldiers and students of the University La sapienza of Rome were awarded a "laurea per onore", a posthumous honourable degree, after the First World War.

When I visit the grounds of the university in Rome, the first thing I notice is its sobriety with its many functional buildings. Nothing is grown and historically playful like in the British university city of Cambridge, for example. On the main square, a blank expanse of water glistens at me, not a pond but a neutral surface. Behind it, standing tall, is the bronze statue of a Minerva. At first it just seems very unusual to me: I had not associated Minerva with a snake and a small dragon emblazoned on her head. The shield and spear, on the other hand, do. For Minerva is not only the goddess of wisdom, she has also been the patroness of cities and many battles. Immediately behind there stands an architectural bar of limestone in the university grounds. In the middle of it, with large, high square entrance columns, is the rector's office, to the right of it the "Facoltà lettere e filosofia", to the left of it the "Facoltà di giurisprudenza". Clean and gigantic everything and as I immediately recognise: fascist.

The buildings were built in the early 1930s and opened with pomp in 1935. The Minerva, originally planned as a column, was realised as a sculpture in 1934/35, for which the goddess took on a column-like form. In an alarmist pose, she throws both arms in the air, one with a shield, the other with a snake and spear. This Minerva seems to be calling for something and looks into the distance with a stern gaze. It is clear that education had an important contribution to make to a "New Man", as Mussolini had in mind. As early as 1917, he had written in "Popolo d'Italia": "The Italian people at this moment is a mass of precious material. One must melt it, purify it of its impurities, work it. A work of art is still possible. It needs a government. A man. A man who has the tact of the artist and

the iron fist of the warrior. A sensitive and strong-willed man. A man who knows the people, who loves the people, leads them and subdues them – even by force."<sup>8</sup>

Even in our times, culture and identity battles are being fought again. Perhaps that is why I can understand how at that time the system of fascism tried to overturn all values and subjugate education. Mussolini's megalomaniac vision demanded the absolute obedience of its citizens. Of the 1200 professors at the time, it is said that only a group of twelve refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the Duce. The latter were all dismissed. But soon afterwards there was a "migrazione dei cervelli"<sup>9</sup>, as it is so nicely called in Italian. Scientists like the Nobel Prize winner Fermi used the Nobel Prize for Mathematics in 1938 to migrate to New York with his Jewish wife. Of course, there are gradual differences between fascism's attempt to create the primarily male "new man" and our society, in which the desire for diversity and individuality is targeted by conservative ideological world views. Nevertheless, the zeal of today's culture warriors should not be underestimated.

But now back to the question of what Mussolini's relationship with the Tiber was. In 1924, the Duce had the borders of the region where the Tiber rises redrawn and ensured that the source in the mountains of the Apennines was no longer in Tuscany but in Emilia-Romagna, where he had been born. Mussolini also erected a travertine column at the spring in 1934 with the inscription: "Qui nasce il fiume sacro ai destini di Roma. - Here springs the river sacred to the destiny of Rome." On three sides of the column are wolf heads. At the top, a mighty eagle is enthroned, looking towards Rome. Everything – both wolf and field eagle – are symbols of the Roman Empire and the Eternal City. Futurism had fired up the Duce, but even more so did the Empire under Augustus.

With a simple stroke on the map, Benito Mussolini equated his own geographical origin and that of the river, thus staging himself as the legitimate successor of Roman emperors. On the one hand, this gesture testifies to the Italian leader's immense vanity, but also to his propagandistic talent, almost his superpower, coupled with a penchant for historical slander. Incidentally, "Il Tevere" was also the name of a fascist daily newspaper that appeared from 1924 to 1943 and in whose political orientation Mussolini also had a hand.

Tiberinus may have accepted the functionalisation of water. He may have observed how man-made structures such as aqueducts took over a considerable part of his role for a greedy Rome. But if the river god could make himself heard, he would probably be significantly more negative about the instrumentalisation of his history for fascistic purposes. For Mussolini was never, ever about the Tiber or Tiberinus, about their achievement in the founding and rise of the city and the empire. He was concerned with the division of function and divinity. It was not the river but its sanctity that Mussolini wanted to include in his marketing mix. He wanted to inherit the god Tiberinus and Augustus on top of that.

In the course of my involvement with Tiber and Tiberinus, I have come to understand how important rivers are to their origins. In the case of the Tiber, it is the limestone of the Apennines. But rivers, no matter where they are in the world, represent the origin of landscapes, villages or cities. They rise from a source or a headwaters and flow downwards from there, always seeking a new path, fed by other waters that join with them, joining themselves with even larger streams until they finally merge into one of the world's oceans. Rivers are shaped by their origin and journey through the landscapes through which they flow and, conversely, have shaped them. So, when Tiberinus says, "Remember us", he is talking about a gigantic network of thousands of life lines on this planet. Let the Romans believe that the Tiber belongs to them alone. Or let Benito Mussolini adorn himself with other people's feathers.

If it were up to me, the river god would have had every right to turn the Duce into a pillar of salt. Or does this image belong to another mythological world?

## You will live on the oceans

Tiberinus piqued my interest and put me off my writing project. For he fascinated me for at least two reasons: A first is drawn from my family history, a second is more eco-philosophical. Through him I remember my own origins. They lie in a plain where two other rivers flow, the Po and the Piave. This part of my roots comes from my mother. Italy is my motherland and Italian my mother tongue, although I speak it more poorly than I should. In a somewhat meandering way, I have approached my heritage, my Etruscan, Sabine, Roman and probably also Langobard, Vandal or Gothic roots. But as unfathomable as the subterranean confluence of drops and rivulets of water is until it forms a stream, the journey of my ancestors through the centuries is ultimately incomprehensible. That is why I prefer to conclude here with some eco-philosophical thoughts inspired by Tiberinus and Egeria.

I first asked myself what use there might be in looking back into the prehistory or rather the mythology of early Rome and remembering a river deity and a nymph. Off the top of my head: not a direct one. But in view of climate change and the loss of biodiversity, don't we also need a "New Man", one might nevertheless ask, an ecological one who is aware of the importance of rivers, springs, groundwater or seas? – Perhaps so, but not a human being who subjugates the earth, not a egocentric human being who places himself at the centre of the universe. On the contrary, today it must be about co-creation between nature reclaiming its space and a humanity that places itself in the larger project of regenerating the planet.

The natural sciences have taught us how the biosphere and the atmosphere work. But purely cognitive knowledge and empirical data are not enough to light a fire and a desire to respect nature. If the Romans were the first to functionalise water on a grand scale, modern science has finally demystified it. In this context, a comparison of the past and the present can be productive. Just imagine that our leaders can be moved to socially, economically and ecologically profitable policies and measures by dreams or conversations with the essence of water, forests and meadows. For those who find dreams too diffuse and who do not want to believe in conversations with river gods or nymphs, history could inspire visions of the future.

Currently, however, the balance does not look good when it comes to a lived co-creation between humans and nature. Nature spirits still have their place in a millennia-old shamanic practice, carried on by a small group of oddballs and romantics, as they might be disparagingly called today. And of course, in legends, sagas and fairy tales for children, nature spirits play a role, there especially for their moral development. Deities and nymphs of all kinds are figures that haunt our pop culture, adapted to the respective trends by Walt Disney and Co. (As I write this text, a little black mermaid modelled on the Danish one is currently stirring things up. For even a well-intentioned appropriation of a white fairy-tale figure becomes an object of contention, as in the culture wars mentioned above). We mostly get along with symbols or natural metaphors. Many poets and poetesses have exemplified this to us. Singing about the beauty of nature is a good start.

For adults, however, and even more so for educated elites who have grown up with a Western understanding of science, Tiberinus and Egeria belong to the world of a mythology far in the past. After all, today an international community of conservationists recognises that indigenous peoples and tribes have traditions and the knowledge to manage natural resources sustainably. Many years ago, I met the Hopi Indians in the southwest of the USA in this context: Their "god" bequeathed prophecies to the tribe that reach far into modern times. For example, they were told that birds made of iron would fly in the sky. On the other hand, the tradition goes back to the origins of humankind. Our current world was preceded by three predecessors. In the 1960s, when the Hopi observed the first signs that nature was changing in an ominous way, they interpreted this as a harbinger of the coming end of this world. Apart from the fact that the Hopi are masters of a deeply ecological way of life, I found it remarkable that they derived a moral imperative from this and did not simply keep their findings to themselves: They tried several times to get to the UN and communicate their concern about the state of the planet.

What fascinates me so much is the unbroken temporal horizon. Tribes in South or North America, for example, have a home advantage that we in Europe hardly have any more. In Europe, we have all but lost touch with, let's say, Celtic or Roman knowledge. In the USA or Australia, on the other hand, the heritage of indigenous peoples is sparking a new understanding of nature. Even in the scientific communities of ecology, evolutionary biology, philosophy or anthropology, an exclusively dualistic view of science with its separation of the object of investigation and the subject of the researcher is being discussed and put into perspective.

Authors in the USA or Australia, for example, are reflecting on concepts of "kinship", the relationship of humans to animals, plants, waters or mountains. The river in one's own village is as close as an uncle or grandmother. Recently I heard the following story from an Australian eco-philosopher: she held her daughter's wedding on the banks of the local river. It had become second nature for her to consider the river as part of her family. When the river becomes a guest among other wedding guests, it is not far to take time to talk to it.

I am not saying that we should build temples or nymphaea to rivers or springs again. But to survive on this planet, we need to embrace the laws of nature at a profound level. We can all understand that we are 70 per cent water, that what is outside is also inside us. If we remove the separation described above, then a very different form of relatedness with the ecosystem we live in and participate in is possible. If we maintain a healthy environment for all, for animals, plants, fungi, waters and humans, then we are basically paying respect to a Tiberinus or an Egeria. Not because we want to submit to gods and goddesses, but because without functioning ecosystems, once protected by them, we endanger our own survival.

What if the Tiber, the Seine, the Aare or the Danube would not only speak to me, but to all who are willing to listen? How does someone go from being a walker with or without a dog, or a consumer of natural idylls for the purpose of relaxation, to being a partner of a river at eye level? Such a person enters, as it were, through the picture frame into the ecosystem he has just entered. She does not only observe, she participates. She thus crosses the threshold towards an experience of "hypernature". For if we grant all living beings, aliveness, consciousness and even the ability to act, and if we are a part of it, then the whole natural environment becomes more vivid, more gripping and bursting with points of connection to one's own self.

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The river Tiber has seen me watching it on my walks through Rome. In the same way, it has observed me and invited me into its world. The Tiber listens to the birds singing on its banks. It feels the wind glide over its surface and transforms it into waves. He knows where the fish swim, the seagulls fish and where a boulder or an island lies in his waters. He caresses both, sometimes gently, sometimes violently. He does not judge, he simply is.

In the same way, Tiberinus knows the "barboni", the refugees and homeless who camp makeshift in Rome on its banks. The river god Tiberinus can identify with the uprooted at the moment, he too liked to camp once on the banks of the Tiber. He adapts to the times. But he shows me that he too is versed in the field of prophecy. To my human ears, he makes a final pointed statement when I say goodbye to him at the Ponte Milvio: "You will live on the seas in the future. Until then, treat each other with respect."

I don't quite know whether this statement should reassure or worry me. In times of progressive heating of the atmosphere, the waters and seas play a decisive role. While whole swathes of land will dry out, others will receive an inordinate amount of rain. As the eternal ice melts, sea levels will rise and many coastal cities will sink into the seas. "You will live on the seas in the future", Tiberinus thus

paints a picture of the future that contains a grain of hope. Provided that humanity manages the transition to this future with less water in rivers and streams and settlements on the seas in mutual respect, life after climate change could succeed.

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<sup>1</sup> Schwab, G. (1958). *Die schönsten Sagen des klassischen Altertums*: Sonderausgabe des Buchclubs Ex Libris.

<sup>2</sup> Meyers, G. (2009). The divine river: Ancient Roman identity and the image of Tiberinus. In: *The nature and function of water* (pp. 233–247).

<sup>3</sup> Wren, L. (1987). Roman Art. In L. H. Wren & Wren. D J (Eds.), *Perspectives on Western Art*. Harper & Row.

<sup>4</sup> <https://lateinon.de/uebersetzungen/ovid/metamorphosen/goldenes-zeitalter-89-112/>

<sup>5</sup> Weck, W. (2013). Die Gestalt Frontins in ihrer politischen und sozialen Umwelt. In Frontinus Gesellschaft e.V. (Ed.), *Die Wasserversorgung im antiken Rom. Sextus Iulius Frontinus, sein Werk in Lateinisch und Deutsch und begleitende Fachaufsätze*. DIV Deutscher Industrieverlag.

<sup>6</sup> Dito.

<sup>7</sup> Segarra Lagunes, M. M. (2004). *Il Tevere e Roma. Storia di una simbiosi*. Gangemi Editore.  
(„Il taglio radicale che la costruzione dei muragli ha costituito per questi luoghi ha spazzato via un universo di eventi e di intrecci economici, sociali e architettonici che arricchivano e rendevano vitale un ambito urbano, preciso e ben delimitato, e che aveva attinenze con dinamiche di tipo abitativo, commerciale, produttivo, ludico.“)

<sup>8</sup> Betz, A. (2010). *Der "Neue Mensch" im Italo-Faschismus*. Deutschlandfunk.  
<https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/der-neue-mensch-im-italo-faschismus-100.html>

<sup>9</sup> brain drain