

# Numa and the antiquarians

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## Abstract

A new analysis of Plutarch, Numa I, leads to a new understanding of Roman historiography.

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The opening of Plutarch's *Life of Numa* reads as follows:

ἔστι δὲ καὶ (as with Lycurgus) περὶ τῶν Νομᾶ τοῦ βασιλέως χρόνων, καθ' οὗς γέγονε, νεανική διαφορά, καίπερ ἔξ ἀρχῆς εἰς τοῦτον κατάγεσθαι τῶν στεμμάτων ἀκριβῶς δοκούντων. ἀλλὰ Κλωδιός τις ἐν ἐλέγχῳ χρόνων (οὕτω γὰρ πῶς ἐπιγέγραπται τὸ βιβλίον) ἰσχυρίζεται τὰς μὲν ἀρχαίας ἐκείνας ἀναγραφὰς ἐν τοῖς Κελτικοῖς πάθει τῆς πόλεως ἠφανίσθαι, τὰς δὲ νῦν φαινομένας οὐκ ἀληθῶς συγκείσθαι...

The Loeb translation runs: «There is likewise a vigorous dispute about the time at which King Numa lived, although from the beginning down to him the genealogies seem to be made out accurately». The translations in the Budé and Mondadori editions are similar<sup>1</sup>. But they do not make sense. How could a dispute about the date of Numa be based on genealogies «from the beginning down to him»? The beginning of what?

Modern translators appear to have been misled by the fact that in the books with which they are familiar family trees go down the page. But not only did family trees until the nineteenth century often go up the page, the lines which connected the *imagines* in the *atrium* of a Roman aristocratic dwelling surely went *up* the wall, with the *capostipite* at the bottom. Plutarch thus makes perfect sense: «[...] although the lines seem to lead correctly from the starting-point through to him». The starting-point is the starting-point of the attempt to calculate the date of Numa, by working backwards in time from the contemporaries of those who made the attempt.

1. R. FLACELIÈRE, *REG*, 61, 1948, 391-429, «Sur quelques passages des vies de Plutarque. II. Lycurgue-Numa», at 40-8, observes that the chronological uncertainty, for Plutarch, serves to leave open the possibility of influence of Pythagoras on Numa.

There is also now some point to what follows: the «certain Clodius», who composed an *elenkhos khronon*, claimed that the lines which existed before the Gallic sack of Rome had been destroyed and that pre-390 genealogies had been invented to flatter men who had no right to them. The inventions were presumably of the late Republic; and there is independent evidence of their occurring, for instance in the coinage of L. Pomponius Molo<sup>2</sup>.

The claim that *stemmata* on the walls of *atria* had been destroyed in the Gallic sack is obviously a rather limited claim<sup>3</sup>; it was no doubt made on purely general grounds, but it is inherently quite plausible. The ancient debate about pre-390 Rome begins to look rather more intelligent than it is usually taken to be.

It remains as uncertain as ever, however, whether Clodius is to be identified with Claudius Quadrigarius<sup>4</sup>, who began his history of Rome with the Gallic sack: any account Quadrigarius may have given of his reasons unfortunately does not survive. Could Plutarch have translated *libri annales*, the probable title of Quadrigarius, as *elenkhos khronon*?

2. M.H. CRAWFORD, *Roman Republican Coinage* (Cambridge, 1974), no. 334; for *falsi tituli*, see S.P. OAKLEY, *A Commentary on Livy Books VI-XI I-II* (Oxford, 1997), on Livy VIII, 40, 4.
3. Compare Livy VI, 1, 1-3: «[...] quae in commentariis pontificum aliisque publicis priuatisque erant monumentis incensa urbe pleraque interierant» (Plutarch, *Mor.* 325a, exaggerates what he found in Livy and claims total destruction). Our passage is wrongly read as a reference to the pontifical records by S.P. OAKLEY, *Commentary*, on Livy VI, 1, 1-3; R. FLACELIÈRE, l.c., remarks in passing that what Clodius doubted was pre-Gallic sack genealogies, but then mis-translates the passage in his edition. The view of B.W. FRIER, *Libri Annales pontificum maximorum* (Rome, 1979, 119-22), that the ἀναγγραφαί are the pontifical records is clearly wrong. There is no discussion of the passage in H. FLOWER, *Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture* (Oxford, 1996).
4. I am not even certain whether H. Peter was right to identify our Clodius with the Paulus (?) Clodius of Appian, *Celt.* 1, 8: *Historicorum Romanorum Reliquiae* I (Leipzig, 1914), CCXXXVIII-CCXXXIX, 178.