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The *Lucus Furrinae* and the Syrian Sanctuary on the *Janiculum*: Encroachment? Or Renovation and Transformation?

This paper examines the interaction of Roman religion and foreign cult using as its case study a multivalent cult site on the eastern ridge of the *Janiculum* hill. The remains, a green leafy zone on uneven terrain holding a conglomeration of ruined walls and foundations, were once host to several sacral structures - a grove, cult buildings, and a pool (fig. 1). It is visible today just above the Via Dandolo within the grounds of the Villa Sciarra in what was part of *Regio XIV* or the *Trantiberim* section of the ancient city. In modern discourse it is called either the *Lucus Furrinae* or the Syrian sanctuary depending on the approach, and whichever name is used as the primary identification, the second is almost always referenced as a related subject¹. The juxtaposition of the two cults is an odd one. The *lucus* was a



Fig. 1 – The *Lucus Furrinae*/Syrian Sanctuary today within the grounds of the Villa Sciarra on the southern edge of the ridge of the Gianicolo (R. Gee).

a grove sacred to Furrina, a deity whose connection to this place dates back at least to the regal period of Rome. At some point during the second half of the first century CE, persons unknown established a new sanctuary within the grove, and this addition was subsequently rebuilt and expanded (in size and apparently the number of deities who received dedications) in the second and fourth centuries. Epigraphic evidence connected to the second-century activity into the grove makes clear that the new activity marked the incursion of a Syrian cult into *Furrina's* space, and that on several occasions the Roman goddess and a Syrian god received joint dedications. In contemporary scholarship, the final short-lived fourth-century temple has received the most attention due in large part to its unusual architectural plan and the exotically

¹ There is an ongoing excavation of the site, beginning in 2005, under the direction of Christophe Goddard (CNRS Département des Sciences Humaines et Sociales, Université de Reims) with plans to publish the finds relating to a fourth-century shrine as well as Paul Gauckler's previously unpublished archival material. For a general description of the *Lucus Furrinae*, see GODDARD, in *LTUR*, *Suburbium*, II, 2004, 278–284; for the Syrian Sanctuary, CALZINI-GYZENS in *LTUR*, III, 1996, 139–143.

eclectic archaeological finds associated with the structure. My interest lies in the earlier point on the timeline when the devotees of Syrian deities first entered the grove and what can be determined about the relationship between the imported cult and the native one.

Any study encompassing both the *Lucus Furrinae* and the Syrian sanctuary contained within it is complicated by significant gaps in our understanding in a number of areas, including but not limited to the origins, nature and function of *Furrina* and the motivating forces behind the introduction of the worship of Syrian gods within this Roman deity's sacred grove. In spite of the difficulties, what makes an examination of the dual-cult site uniquely valuable is that it offers new information on points of direct contact between imported and native religion, information that does not fit models of how "eastern cults" entered and were subsequently established within the empire's capitol city.

It is useful to begin by giving a brief overview of the history of the site, which can be divided into four chronological stages. The earliest is the "unadulterated" grove with an adjacent cave/grotto and spring associated with *Furrina*, a Roman deity who possessed both a flamen and a festival on the state calendar, the *Furrinalia* on July 25.

An understanding of the exact nature and role of *Furrina* within the Roman pantheon is limited, to put it kindly; the scant literary sources range from disappointing to confusing. Varro sets the tone early, discounting her as nearly forgotten water nymph², and later writers characterize her in rather vague terms as an underworld deity conflated with the Furies by the imperial period³. Nicolas Goodhue, in his discussion of the nature of *Furrina*, cautions against moving beyond the conclusions that she was ancient and possibly Etruscan in origin⁴. More recently, the conversation concerning *Furrina* has been revitalized by Giulia Piccaluga, who proposes a relationship between the goddess and the *Janiculum* where she resided; she uses the history of this extra-mural hill and *Furrina*'s associations with water, the Furies and the underworld to locate her within that part of Rome's sacro-political structure created in response to negative, liminal and transgressive elements⁵. It is Plutarch who gives the location of the sacred grove of the goddess on the *Janiculum*, as part of his description of the flight and death of *Gaius Gracchus*, who sought refuge there (*C. Gracch*, 17.2).

In 1906, Paul Gauckler was invited to examine several ancient pieces uncovered by workmen within the grounds of the Villa Sciarra (then the Villa Wurts) on the southern side of the *Janiculum* ridge. Several of the inscriptions on the unearthed marble fragments and altars indicated both the existence of a sanctuary and the presence of *Furrina*, and Gauckler's conclusion that the grove of the goddess had been found was then and is now generally accepted. During the course of his own excavation between 1907 and 1910, Gauckler added significantly to the body of knowledge concerning the topography of the original cult site when he discovered an ancient well head with accompanying structural work which he dated to the pre-republican period. The well led into intersecting galleries oriented to the cardinal directions, and following the west gallery led him into what he poetically described as a grotto "all hung with stalactites, a dark and secret cavern in which the first explorers of the spring had without doubt believed themselves to be in the mysterious retreat of the divinity of the place"⁶.

A period of development or modification dated to the second half of the first century, gives archaeological evidence of the first movement of another deity into the grove in the form of an open-air structure oriented to the cardinal points (fig. 2). The structure consists of a north/south retaining wall (α , β), a man-made pond to the east of this wall, a second wall to the north/south wall to the west that divided the space into two levels (ω) and a northern boundary created by a row of upright wine amphora embedded partially into the ground (π , ρ). A marble altar dated to the Flavian period may belong to this stage. The altar is dedicated jointly to *Zeus Keraunios*, whose cult attracted a devoted following among Syrians, and the

² *Ling.* 5.84, 6.19.

³ For *Furrina*'s association with the *Furies*, Cicero, *De nat. deor* 3.46. Martianus Capella places the goddess on a list of underworld deities, 2.164.

⁴ GOODHUE 1975, 71–76.

⁵ PICCALUGA 1982, 77–82.

⁶ GAUCKLER 1912, 75; GOODHUE 1975, 18–19.

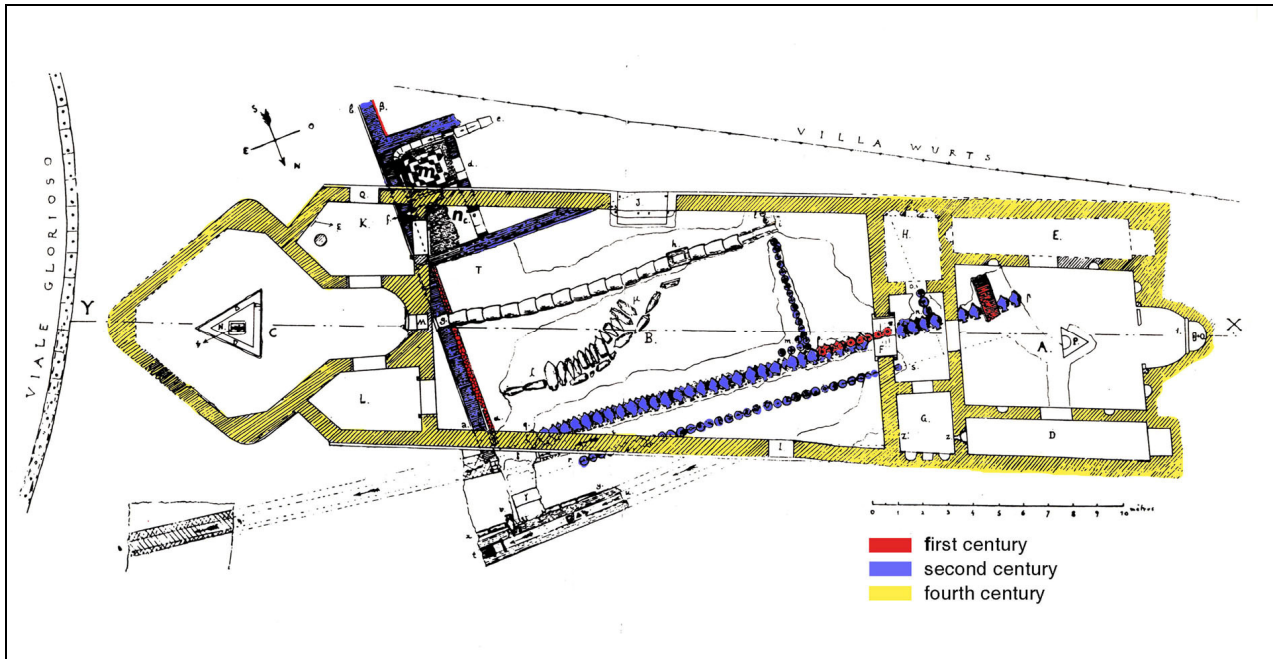


Fig. 2 – Plan showing the successive building stages within the *Lucus Furrina* in the first, second and fourth centuries (modified after GAUCKLER 1912).

nymphs of *Furrina*⁷. This period of development seems to be concerned mostly with the creation of clear boundaries that subdivide preexisting sacred space into smaller, discrete sections and provide a new architectural space, presumably for the introduction of new deities into the grove.

The next stage, roughly dated from the second to the first quarter of the fourth century, reads like a response and expansion of the first-century additions in the sense that it is built over it and retains the plan, orientation and pond of its immediate predecessor (fig. 2). The rows of empty wine and oil amphorae in rows to create boundaries were lengthened and elaborated (I, m and o, n). The epigraphical evidence is the richest from this stage, offering five (possibly six) dedicatory inscriptions that give the first epigraphical evidence of the presence of Syrian deities within the grove. The finds include two marble altars, one dedicated to *Hadad*, a Syrian god Lucian identifies with *Zeus*⁸ and the other to *Jove Maleciabrudes*, a local god of the Syrian town of *Jabruda*⁹. Three dedications were made by individuals to *Jupiter Heliopolitanus*, the principle deity of a Romanized-Syrian cult from the town of *Heliopolis* (*Baalbek* in Lebanon) not far from the military *colonia* of *Berytus*. *M. Helvius Rusticus*, who identifies himself as a soldier, dedicated a marble pillar to the Heliopolitan *Jupiter*¹⁰. One of these dedications, a marble mensa or slab, is one of three known offerings in and near Rome made by *Marcus Antonius Gaionas* to the Syrian god¹¹. Two of the dedications to the Heliopolitan *Jupiter* are jointly offered to members of the Imperial family. *Gaionas* additionally dedicated his mensa/slab in 176 to the victory of *Marcus Aurelius* and *Commodus*. A marble pillar given by *Lucus Trebonius Sossianus* also offers to the health of the emperor *Gordianus* (244-49)¹². A pedestal dedicated to *Jupiter Heliopolitanus* and the *Genius Forinarum*, found preserved within the medieval Church of the Forty Martyrs at the foot

⁷ Gauckler found the altar in what he labeled "Stage II", associated with the second-century development of the site, but its Flavian date indicates it was re-used. See GOODHUE 1975, 45.

⁸ *De Dea Syria* 30.

⁹ *CIL VI* 36803, 36792. For discussion and description see GOODHUE 1975, 5–6, 13–14.

¹⁰ *CIL VI* 36791. For discussion and description see GOODHUE 1975, 38; 53–55.

¹¹ There is also a colonette from an unrecorded site in Rome *CIL VI* 420 = 30764, and a column found in Portus, *CIL XIV* 24.

¹² The pillar given by *L. Trebonius Sossianus*, was excavated by Carlo Fea in 1803 but published by GAUCKLER 1912, 154–67, *CIL VI* 423. For discussion and description see GOODHUE 1975, 11, 23–24, 53–55.

of the *Janiculum*, probably belongs to this period of the cult site's history as well¹³. It is important to note that within the collection of dedications to Syrian deities found in or near the sanctuary, two of the offerings, the altar to *Zeus Keraunios* associated with the first-century entry of the Syrian cult and the pedestal to the *Heliopolitan Zeus* dated to the second stage, are also offerings to *Furrina*, albeit in a pluralized or degraded form¹⁴.

Around AD 361, after two decades of neglect, a cult revival of an undetermined type appears in the form of a building radically different in plan and orientation from its predecessors (fig. 2). The orientation of this complicated structure shifted to east/west. On the western end a central space flanked by aisles evokes a Christian basilica (fig. 3). A large atrium connects this space to the eastern end which features an



Fig. 3 – Remains of the fourth-century “basilica” within the *Lucus Furrinae*, view towards west end (R. Gee).

irregular octagon of a room accessed via flanking side chambers. In the center on the octagon space stands a triangular altar or covered basin that contained the best-known and most enigmatic find from this period of cult activity: a bronze statue of a youth encircled by the coils of a snake, buried with eggs, seeds and roots laid upon the image¹⁵. The statue is just one of the finds from an eclectic collection from this stage including a statue of *Dionysus*, and fragments of a statue of an Egyptian pharaoh¹⁶. A matter of some debate is whether the significant changes in this fourth and final stage represents the discontinuation of the earlier worship of the Syrian deities in favor of a new cult, or if they indicate a shift in the nature and practice of the Heliopolitan cult to include a broader range of deities, perhaps as a response to Christianity¹⁷.

Within the empire, the city of Rome presents a special set of problems as the place where a sort of religious anabasis occurred, as the “periphery” religions of the empire arrived at the center and bumped up against native religion with its deeply-rooted connection to constructions of Roman political identity and power. Studies of imported cults within Rome tend to follow well-traveled paths using a few familiar examples. Traditionally, the discussion begins with the third-century official introduction of Cybele, the great Mother, via the instrument of the Sibylline Books, a religious import controlled and framed by her method of entry the traditional Roman practice of divination. A second area of examination offers examples that track a pattern of tension, perceived threat and suppression followed by state recognition and acceptance; the cults of *Bacchus* and *Isis* are the best-known cases. A final significant subset of the study of the importation of eastern cults into the city considers the process as a transmission carried in from outside, typically by soldiers and merchants, and subsequently embraced by those Romans who found these cults gave them something native religion was not conceptually equipped for. Belief in an afterlife is the most commonly cited, if not the only reason, and the cults of *Mithras*, Christianity, *Isis* and the Syrian deities are discussed as the best examples of this phenomenon. Shaping all three of these interrelated paths of inquiry is the overarching idea of Roman control of these cults through legal prescription forbidding their presence within the sacred city limits as defined by the *pomerium*. Accepting that these are all distinct traceable threads within the fabric

¹³ *CIL* VI 36791.

¹⁴ For the pluralization of *Furrina* during the imperial period, see GOODHUE 1975, 71–76.

¹⁵ The bronze is currently displayed at the *Museo Nazionale Romano* (Baths of Diocletian) and has most recently been identified as *Osiris*, GODDARD, 2006, 291–92, who also discusses the organic material placed around and on it, 296.

¹⁶ See GOODHUE 1975, 33–38; For the conversion of several rooms of a structure on the site into a cult site for *Osiris*, GODDARD, 2006, 291.

¹⁷ On the expansion of the Heliopolitan cult as a response to Christianity, see BEARD *ET ALII* 2004, 386.

of the religious history of Rome, the case of the *Lucus Furrinae* and the Syrian sanctuary does not precisely follow or fit these patterns.

It might be possible, as Savage did in her early and important discussion of the cults of Trastevere, to see the new activity on the *Janiculum* as part of the influx of Syrian deities into a neighborhood of Rome that drew a large Syrian population¹⁸. The Syrian religious presence Trans-tiberum is both striking and noteworthy, including as it does two important sites for the worship of Syrian deities found near the 17th century *Porta Portese* as well as numerous dedications to their gods throughout this neighborhood. Still, I hesitate to put the cult complex within the *Lucus Furrinae* in the same category as the activity of the Syrian and other imported cults associated with this side of the Tiber, including Jews, Christians and the worshippers of Cybele in particular. These groups are very much associated with the modern historical characterization of “fringe” cults lurking on the edges of the city, pushed to the margins to protect the sanctity and power of native Roman religious tradition.

As mentioned above, the site does not fit into the patterns historically used to describe the importation of “oriental” cults into Rome, and the differences begin to emerge if we compare the Janiculan cult to the one close to the river, in what is now *Trastevere*. The cult presence of Syrian deities in *Trastevere* is where one would expect it to be, close to the riverside tenement buildings in the neighborhoods of the Syrian merchants, soldiers and sailors who brought the gods they worshipped from their homeland to where they lived and worked¹⁹. Presumably these Syrians were included in the non-native group Lucan lamented as “dregs of the universe” filling his city (*Sats.* 3.58). In his examination of cults of the Roman empire, Robert Turcan describes this group as an immigrant subset who prospered by performing those jobs Romans did not care to do, including cleaning the city and undertaking²⁰.

While not far away in terms of distance, the Syrian sanctuary on the *Janiculum* is topographically and conceptually in a different place. In addition to containing the venerable cult of a Roman goddess, the hill is tied by historical and mythological narratives to the history of the city itself, including its foundation and protection. In contrast to the tenement apartments, foul-smelling tanneries and warehouses along the low-lying plain by the river, the elevated, green and quiet ridge of the *Janiculum* was viewed as desirable real estate and coveted by Romans of means for building villas to escape the dust and heat of the city²¹. When the building projects signaling the initial entry of an additional cult site appear within the *Lucus Furrinae* at the end of the first century, Syrians were not yet a politically powerful presence in Rome. The idea that this group could decide to enter the sanctuary housing a deity worshipped through government-sanctioned *feriae publicae* and set up camp, so to speak, is not tenable²². One possible counterargument, that Syrian worshippers took over the neglected site of an abandoned goddess, is entirely too dependent on the antiquarian Varro’s description of *Furrina* as almost forgotten.

While not dismissing the commentary of Varro on the loss of *Furrina*’s identity, I believe the goddess and her associated site maintained significant power within the native sacred landscape of Rome, shaped as it was so firmly by memory and tradition. To begin, *Furrina* possessed a flamen, one of the *flamines minores* to be sure, but still one those fifteen priests whose origins went back to the beginnings of Roman history and who were, as a group, part of the Roman convergence of political and religious authority. Having a dedicated flamen, *Furrina* was one of a group of deities the proper care of which was conceived of as being integral to the well-being of the state. Over time, it is quite possible that the knowledge of who she was diminished, but the need to maintain her cult as part of the larger system in place for the protection of the Roman people would have remained intact. The inscriptions dedicated to Syrian deities on the *Janiculum* refer to *Furrina* as late as the middle of the third century. While the word choice of Roman dedications are often justifiably described as formulaic, the choice of recipient(s) is not, in most cases showing a directed intent towards a

¹⁸ SAVAGE 1940, 55–6.

¹⁹ BEARD ET ALII 2004, 272.

²⁰ TURCAN 1996, 130.

²¹ Mart. *Epig.* 4.64; Symm, *Epist.* 6.58.1).

²² BAKKER 1994, 2.

named deity or deities. The inclusion of the *Furrinalia* on the ritual calendar of Roman festivals makes her feast day part of the larger rhythmic cycle created to orchestrate, in the form of a ritual meal that delineated the proper relationship between human and divine, the well-being of the larger community. The cycle of festivals of which the *Furrinalia* was a part remained officially sanctioned and on the Roman calendar until the end of the fourth century. Finally, the status of *Furrina* as a state deity suggests that her site of worship on the *Janiculum* would have been put into the special category of state property ownership of *res divini iuris*, a subcategory of *res publicae* subject to special rules²³. This evidence cumulatively argues against the initial first-century construction as evidence of “squatter’s rights” and the taking over of a sacred site suffering from neglect or disinterest. Some sort of official sanction clearly seems necessary. I would agree with those who put Nero forward as the candidate who instigated the inclusion and for the same reason, his brief but apparently intense flirtation with the Syrian goddess *Atargatis*, as described by *Suetonius* (*Nero* 56). Glen Bowersock has argued in his Sather lectures that one can look to *Nero’s* reign for an explosion in imaginative literature (romances, novels, religious texts, etc.) from the Hellenized “East” that broke with the imperial mentality that followed in the wake of the Augustan restoration and its appropriation of a Hellenic ideal of cultural superiority vis-à-vis the “other”. “Almost inevitably,” Bowersock writes, “after unification and coherence...the diversity of the empire would begin to assert itself—at first with reference to the so-called barbarians at its fringes but ultimately by affirmation of the widely differing traditions within the imperial fabric itself”²⁴. If the cultural climate under *Nero* is the point of origin, there is a certain symmetry between the preoccupation of writers and readers with “foreign” customs and remote places, and a similar or parallel intellectual absorption concerning foreign or remote religions. In other words, those who frequented this site may not have been just Syrians, nostalgic for the homeland. *Nero’s* possession of the position of *pontifex maximus* would seem to give him practical control (if he wished to exercise it) over both a state shrine and the *flamen* connected to it. If the origin of Syrian worship within the *Lucus Furrinae* can be traced to the desire of *Nero* to create an inviting home for *Atargatis*, it is tempting to speculate concerning the reasons behind his choice. The evidence of the spring and accompanying engineered water system uncovered by Glaucker and the strong association of *Atargatis* with watery places and a sacred fish pond is worth further exploration, as is the proximity of the *horti Neronis* to the sacred site.

The nature of the presence of the sanctuary of the Syrian deities within the *Lucus Furrinae* thwarts any attempt to place the dual-cult site within familiar categories of how and under what circumstance imported cults flourished in Rome. It also undermines a number of assumptions we make about how the religious “systems of operation” worked within the city. This is not a case of elision, assimilation, or syncretism, but of an imported cult inserted into a sanctuary with a deep and rich history, a sacred space that was part of the underpinning of Roman religious tradition, a juxtaposition that complicates contemporary ideas concerning the conceptual separation of *sacra publica* and *sacra privata* as well as the criteria for distinguishing between *loca profana* and *loca sacra*²⁵. This appears to be a site where the Roman cult, its rites conducted by a priest/official on behalf of the community, and imported cult, with voluntary private and individual dedications could co-exist, if not comfortably, seemingly uncontested and where the latter, having been introduced, could flourish and develop in different directions without fundamentally disturbing the original sacred space and its ideological role.

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²³ SCHULZ 1954, 341. For a discussion of changes of systems of power and administration in late antiquity concerning sanctuaries, GOODARD, 2006, 282–3.

²⁴ BOWERSOCK 1997, 31.

²⁵ On the distinction between *sacra publica* and *sacra privata*, see Festus, *De Verborum Significatione* 245, as well as BAKKER 1994, 1–4, for a discussion using archeological evidence from *Ostia Antica*.

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