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# Bryn Mawr Classical Review

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Fabbri, Lorenzo, *Mater Florum: Flora e il suo culto a Roma*. Biblioteca dell'Archivum Romanicum. Firenze: Leo S. Olschki, 2019. xiv, 280 p. ISBN 9788822266194. €30,00.

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Little has been written about the Roman goddess Flora. Aside from passing mentions in works dedicated to other deities and Foulon's chapter on the depiction of Flora and the Floralia festival in Ovid's *Fasti* (V 159-373), there is very little on her role(s) in Roman and Italic religion.[1] Fabbri's monograph, the first book-length study on Flora, attempts to fill this gap. The author provides a clear rationale for why studying Flora is important for understanding how Italic populations dealt with crises during the growth cycle of critical crops. Fabbri contextualizes his work within a spectrum of studies dealing with single divinities in the classical world.[2] The work is divided into three parts: history and function (3-111), cult (115-198), and iconography (201-236).

In Part 1, Chapter 2, "The Goddess of Flowering: Flora of the Fields" (21-38), is crucial for understanding Fabbri's reading of Flora as a functional agrarian deity. It is worth particular attention because of the novelty of the content and its relevance for understanding ancient Italic society and religion more generally. The etymology of Flora's name *seems* to show an easy close link with the botanical world and in particular with flowers, but the reality is more complex. The nature of role is highlighted in several ancient authors and Fabbri's goal is to move away from vague conceptions of ornamental flowering to a pragmatic Flora, operational in her lived environment. Fabbri sees Varro, *De re rustica* I 1,1-6 as a *locus classicus* for interpreting Flora. At the beginning of that work, the Roman author addresses his wife, Fundania, who has acquired ownership of land that she wishes to bring under cultivation. Varro ostensibly writes to facilitate that pursuit and invokes the goddess Flora along with four pairs of divinities, all linked to agrarian concerns: Jupiter and Tellus, Sol and Luna, Ceres and Bacchus, and lastly Robigo and Flora. Fabbri emphasizes that thanks to the intervention of the last pair of divinities, the wheat rust (*robigo*) will ruin neither the wheat nor the trees and, relevant to Flora, that the wheat and trees will bloom on time in protected circumstances. These functions led to the creation of two public festivals at Rome to honour these two gods, the Robigalia and the Floralia.

Fabbri bases his reading on a host of Roman agricultural texts, attempting to understand Flora in terms of her agricultural relevance. For example, he takes a comment from Pliny the Elder as a useful vehicle for understanding Flora *qua* agricultural "risk manager". Pliny (*Naturalis Historia* XVIII 151) highlights three particularly dangerous moments in the development of plants, moments during which they were vulnerable to

external disruption: when they bloom (when inflorescences are most vulnerable), immediately after the fall of the flowers, and when the fruit begins to mature. Over these three moments groups of deities were given supervision to insure crop survival. This tripartite period of vulnerability, Fabbri suggests, is reflected in three subsequent agricultural festivals mirroring these phases: the Robigalia (25 April), the Floralia (28 April-early May), and the Vinalia (23 April). Importantly, Fabbri notes how this floral oversight function might have intersected with the grain supply of Rome and that of other Italic populations.

Furthermore, Fabbri points to a passage in Ovid's excursus on Flora (*Fasti* V 303-314) as relevant for understanding the original creation and cadence of Flora's worship. Ovid's Flora claims to have been neglected by the Romans, who evidently forgot to offer her due honours, resulting in her retreat into sorrow. The agricultural impact of such negligence was that winds damaged olive trees in bloom, crops in flower were damaged by hail, and vine branches were threatened by sudden rains and winds. Fabbri connects Flora's withdrawal to information contained in the *Fasti Praenestini* (ILS 8744), in which the rationale for the first establishment of the Floralia is recorded. In 241/238 BCE a severe period of famine occurred, and, *propter sterilitatem frugum*, a temple was dedicated to Flora and the annual Floralia was established. Fabbri (29) suggests that Flora was chosen to receive a festival and temple because that famine was a protracted one, which could not be alleviated through entreaties to other agrarian deities like Ceres, Tellus, or Ops. In the closing of this chapter (31-37), Fabbri explores the connection between Flora with Ceres and their Oscan counterparts, Flusa and Kerrí, a connection he resumes in greater detail in a discussion of the Agnone tablet (third-second century BCE) in which rituals concerning Kerrí and Flusa, and an Oscan Floralia, are discussed.

Ensuuing chapters mostly add substance to Flora's agrarian role and synthesize a great deal of past scholarship for the first time in one place. Chapter 3 ("The Goddess of Flowering: Flora and Ornamental Flowers") (39-71) explores historical discussions of Flora in her relation to non-functional floral blooming. This chapter, like Chapter 4 (73-81), continues to make use of Ovid's excursus on Flora in *Fasti* V, including a discussion of Mars' birth by Juno through the help of Flora in that same work. Chapter 5 ("Some Open Problems") (83-111) reviews Flora's overall role in Roman religion.

Section II (115-198) focuses on the central festival of Flora, the Floralia, in great detail. The most essential chapter of this long section is the final one, which examines the cult of Flora *outside* Rome. That chapter (186-198) returns to the Agnone tablet, a central Oscan text which refers to a goddess similar to Flora, called Flusa, who bears the epithet *Kerríiai*. This epithet interestingly enough links her to Kerrí and to cereal production, also affected by damage to inflorescences.<sup>[3]</sup> By looking outward at other Italic populations, Fabbri offers us a far more nuanced Flora than previous scholarship had envisaged, and a way forward.

Section III (201-239) in two chapters deals with the surprisingly minimal surviving iconographic evidence concerning Flora and, for no reason that I can see, examines depictions of Flora in Renaissance paintings. This last chapter should have been omitted, while the iconographic evidence ought to have been included in the two preceding sections.

There are some issues with Fabbri's methodology that need to be addressed. Working with Flora seems to provide a great example of a central issue in studies of Roman

religion: can we trust Ovid? Fabbri thinks we can, and while he provides no explicit rationale for his stance, he probes Ovid's depiction of Flora by comparing it to other poetic versions and by using other categories of evidence. Still, some of the necessary scholarly context is missing. Among central works for navigating how to apply Ovid in scholarship on Roman religion is Feeney 1988, and more recently Baglioni's excellent 2017 article; both are missing from this work.[4] Sometimes, Fabbri seems reluctant to enter into a methodological discussion and merely expresses his opposition to the refreshingly skeptical approach of Murgatroyd (41, 75, 77).[5]

Fabbri's book will be useful to those interested in investigating the existence (or not) of an urban/rural divide in Roman religion of the type discussed in North's famous paper "Religion and Rusticity." [6] North suggested that the best way of debunking this divide was to look to the epigraphic landscape. Fabbri's work, contextualizing Flora as a deity intimately connected with the food supply through her protection of grain and the flowering process, connects Flora to concerns of both city *and* countryside, making her a political and economic goddess as well as a "rural" goddess.

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[1] Foulon, A. 2010. "Flora et les *Floralia* chez Ovide." In D. Briquel, C. Février, and C. Guittard (eds.), *Varietates fortunae. Religion et mythologie à Rome. Hommage à Jacqueline Champeaux*. Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne. 45-54.

[2] Le Bonniec, H. 1958. *Le culte de Cérés à Rome des origines à la fin de la République*. Paris; Spaeth, B.S. 1996. *The Roman Goddess Ceres*. Austin; Pouthier, P. 1981. *Ops et la conception divine de l'abondance dans la religion romaine jusqu'à la mort d'Auguste*. Rome; Dorsey, P. 1992. *The Cult of Silvanus: A Study in Roman Folk Religion*. Leiden (which is missing from the bibliography and only appears in a footnote); and Bettini, M. 2015. *Il dio elegante: Vertumno e la religione romana*. Torino.

[3] Vetter 1953, no. 227 (Vetter, E. 1953. *Handbuch der italischen Dialekte, I*. Heidelberg) = Rix 2002, 67 (Rix, H. 2002. *Sabellische Texte. Die Texte des Oskischen, Umbrischen und Südpikenischen*. Heidelberg (see especially Adams 2007:72-72 (Adams, J.N. 2007. *The Regional Diversification of Latin, 200 BC-AD 600*. Cambridge) for a linguistic assessment): *mesene / flusare / poimunien / atrno / aunum / hiretum*; *CIL IX 3513 = CIL I<sup>2</sup> 756 = ILS 4906* (Barisciano, S. Maria di Furfona / Furfo, Samnium).

[4] Feeney, D. 1988. *Literature and Religion at Rome: Cultures, Contexts, and Beliefs*. Cambridge (see especially 123-127); Baglioni, I. 2017. "I *Fasti* di Ovidio e la Religione di Roma Antica" in D. De Angelis (ed.), *In Albanum. Storia e trasformazioni di un territorio al centro dell'impero romano. Atti del 33° Corso di archeologia e storia antica del Museo Civico di Albano. Albano Laziale*. 109-122.

[5] Murgatroyd, P. 2005. *Mythical and legendary narrative in Ovid's Fasti*. Leiden.

[6] North, J. A. 1995. "Religion and Rusticity," In T. J. Cornell and K. Lomas (eds.), *Urban Society in Roman Italy*. London. 135-150.