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March, October, the Yoke and the Arch: A Study of Boundaries in Ancient Roman Belief

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This study attempts an alternate look at what is sometimes a quick study of an ingrained "Roman aggression" placed in the opening chapter of a typical Roman history, re-evaluating the "us-them" element in Roman thinking during their primeval "homesteading" era, and some of the motived often imputed to tribal Roman culture that have been used to explain their expansion in Italy (and after). From the pomoerium, or spiritual/physical boundary of the farm or the community, the frequently cleansed and inspected line between the settled and peaceful homesteaded or urbanized place and the dangerous, unsettled outlands beyond, where potential raiders or enemies – hostes – and the spirit that animated them dwelt. Romans punctuated this boundary with shrines, openings (carefully guarded by archaic spiritual means) and, at key moments during the year, by religious activity intended to keep them safe. These activities and checkpoints are clues to the way Romans saw the boundaries, and may even correct some false impressions we have of important features in their urban landscape. The checkpoints of passage through this boundary between human community and outworld were gate-like temples (guarded by Janus) or a similar structure called a "iugum," and both underlie the structure we today call a "triumphal arch." Understanding how Romans (or archaic Italians) felt about community boundaries may help correct the image we have of this arch, and what it meant, and in fact our image of them. Early Roman boundary-passage customs use these artifacts for related forms of expiation, cleansing and pacification, a character shared by the treatment of defeated armies and in fected persons, even meaning in the triumphal procession, which had much more to do with cleansing the contagious guilt (or infected violence) of a returning army than it did with celebrating a victory. More than a century ago the Roman historian-anthropologist William Warde Fowler attempted clear modern perspectives on early Romans, aggression-defense, and their ideas of boundaries. This article is also a tribute to some of his key, forgotten insights.

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There was a wonted rite in Latium's realm
Hesperian, holy held from age to age
By Alba's cities, as today by Rome...
There are twin gates of War--so named and known--
By holy fear and terror of fell Mars
Made venerable: ...
Nor Janus on the threshold slacks his guard.

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> Here, be the father's will on battle bent,
> The Consul in Quirinal robe arrayed
> And Gabine cincture, the harsh-grinding valves
> Himself unbars, himself invokes the fray,
> Then all the war-host follow, and with one throat
> The brazen clarions blare their hoarse assent.
> (Virgil, *Aeneid* vii, 607 ff)

In the ancient agricultural world of old Latium and primeval Rome the month of March was a chancy one, full of the winds of beginnings and danger. The year began, the countryside thawed and began to reawaken and everywhere-- deep among the trees of the borderlands that surrounded the Latin farmland--the god who gave the month its name began itself to stir and move. His symbols woke with him: the forests, the wolves (if they had ever slept), the woodpeckers, and the spear.[1] The numen Mars itself was a *hostes*, a will in nature never (until the time of Augustus) worshipped inside the city wall of Rome (Wissowa 1912, p. 131 and sources in note),[2] and for reasons inexplicable unless some Roman had perhaps failed in due ritual or vow, the spirit of hostility began in turn to stir in some of the men or beasts outside the settled farmstead lands of the outpost town. Its farmers, priests, and warriors turned resolutely to the task of counteracting and defending themselves from those influences.

Lines of demarkation abruptly took on an unnerving importance. The Arval Brethren, whose duty during the year was to safeguard (and at certain times to purify and determine) the bounds of the settled lands of Rome (Henzen *repr* 2010, p. xxv of the exordium, and also Fowler 1920, esp. pp. 58–61), made their prayers to both the Lares that marked the line of the pomoerium and to the "outlander" Mars: "Neve luerve Marmor sins incurre in pleores, satur fu fere Mars!" (cf Henzen, *op cit,* p. 26)[3] Within the bounds of the pomoerium (that is from the shrines of the *lares compitales* inward) all gods--if the farmer and the priest had done their jobs justly--should have been naturalized, settled "homely" as *di indigetes* into the relationship between the Roman community and its land. The uncertain forces of the "outlander" Mars pressed in on this community as the farming months began. Cato in his *Res Rustica* describes how a farmer rather further from the city, faced with the necessity of turning his livestock into the neighboring forest to graze during the hot months, should conduct his purification of his own farm (especially the animals to be at risk in the forest). He is himself to go *in silva* after sacrificing the suovetaurilia (just as in Rome), and to pray "Martem Silvano in silva interdius in capita singula boum facito" (Cato, *Res*

[1]Some good examples can still be usefully found collected in (Frazer 1913, iii, 123, n. 3). See also (Fowler 1911a, pp. 131–134). The name Mars is in fact found almost everywhere in ancient Italy, and usually connected to similar wild or woodland things; the confusion sometimes caused by trying to reconcile Mars and agriculture stems from a failure to recall that Latian (proto-Latin) farming relied far more on the herding of cattle, sheep, pigs, etc., than that of some other classical civilizations. On Mars and the springtime worries of the farmer see also Varro, *Res Rustica* ii, 2 ff.

[2]See also (Fowler 1899-2014, p. 39, n.) and (Fowler 1911a, p. 133). (Scullard 1981, 84–97), deals with the rural and then urban rituals separately, and emphasizes the festive nature of the "new year" setting, but concentrates on a later period in the Republic.

[3]Cf. the notes on the passage from Cato (in n.5) in (Beard et al. 1998, p. 152 ff.).

Rustica, ll. 141 ff.). It was the business of Mars thereafter to deal justly with the cattle.

And as with cattle threatened by wolves, so with the people of early Rome threatened by enemies. The story of the month March in the oldest layers of inscriptions making up the Fasti anni Romani (Fowler 1911a, p. 95 f, *& note here*),[4] is a tight weave of the two themes of war and lines of boundary. It has the authentic feel of an agricultural community learning to think like the military frontier-town Latium may have intended Rome to be.[5] The "gate" of Janus (I shall return to it in more detail later) stood off at the northeast entrance to the Forum, untouched by any wall but standing symbolically at the threshold of the city's heart. From the hearth-temple of Vesta (which, perhaps, was the heart) one could see if the twin openings beneath it stood open that the City felt a danger of some kind from outside. And Rome had hardly ever a year in which it could honestly close those gates.

Presuming the gates were open, the consul charged with leading an army to face Rome's enemies went to the Regia, very near the temple of Vesta, and entered a special room kept private and *sacer* to either Janus or Jupiter. He found there a set of special, antique Latin, combat regalia--spears and shields belonging to the warrior-priests of Mars. They were perhaps the one offense against the immemorial rule that the ritual of Mars be confined wholly outside the city. Clashing one of these spears and shields together he cried out "Mars vigila!"--meaning (as I understand it) not that he had "awakened" Mars (the numen would then have to have been disastrously resident within the city after all), but that "Mars was watching." Mars outside the bounds of Rome was awake and aware, the consul could in a sense feel the eyes moving now just beyond the veil of the *pomoerium* and he was himself moving to respond.[6] The spear he held was "sacred" in the Roman sense to the god (it was part of the ancilia belonging to the Salii) and the consul was now perhaps sacer himself. His business lay with Mars and no longer within the City. The campaigning year had begun.

The rest of the month of March then became (rather oddly for those who think of Romans only as a practical, judicial and hard-nerved people) a series of rituals by which Rome tried rather elaborately to press an army of its own folk and gods through a narrow aperture between its own soil and the outland world where its enemies lurked. Those "warrior-priests" of Mars (the Salii) went first into action, clashing their *ancilia* (the spears and shields taken from the Regia after the consul's visit). They both called the men of fighting age to report for muster and confused the eyes or spirits beyond the Ager Romanus.

The pageant then unfolded on the "Field of Mars," just north outside the walls, and on the side facing the direction from which Rome was generally

[4]The Fasti have been dated pretty securely since (Mommsen 1918 i.[2], p. 297 ff.) to between 31-51 AD in detail, which places them into the general range of the Augustan revival of authentic bits of the antique Roman religious system (at least as it was being rebuilt by antiquaries), and in their general form to a very early period of the Republic.

[5]See for example the *fasti* quoted by Wissowa (at the end of *Rel. und Kult.*) and by (Fowler 1911a, p.38 ff).

[6]Servius, on the third line of *Aeneid* viii (*utque impulit arma*) seems to confirm this, though it may be a late account since Servius mentions a statue.

threatened rather than the side facing the heart of Latium. On the 14th (unless this is an error, and it also occurred next day with the Anna Perenna, per Wissowa, 1912, p. 131). Rome held the Equirria, at which it celebrated and purified the horses of the army (they were, like the cattle belonging to Cato's farmer, about to enter alien country (Fowler 1911a, pp. 96 ff. and n. 8; pp. 215 ff.).[7] On the following day it celebrated the new year by sending its working populace out onto the Campus Martius to rough it for a day in primitive huts (Ovid, *Fasti*, iii, 525 ff. Tibullus II, v, 89 ff. and perhaps Tibullus II, i, 1-24). On the 19th the Salii purified their *ancilia* (at the Quinquatrus, symbolizing perhaps the weapons of the army now beginning to form in outside the walls in the Campus Martius).[8] Finally, on the 23rd, the trumpets of the new legions got their own purification at the Tubilustrum (Fowler 1911b, pp. 96–97).

And then, having in some sense made every piece of the army *sacer* or private to the god Mars (the Campus Martius was beyond, though close against, the walls of Rome), the consul inserted his host into the world outside. After a ceremony at the Ara Martis (it will perhaps have been only a *fanum* with an altar of turf in the earliest centuries of the outpost town), the army marched across a hallowed running brook called the Petronia amnis (Von Domaszewski 1909-1975, pp. 222 ff, Jordan and Hülsen 1871-2015, iii, 494)[9] and through an opening--probably the left-hand opening--in another double gated and freestanding archway: the Porta Triumphalis (Josephus, *Jewish Wars*, VII, v, 4, Cf. Fowler 1913). The "gate of Janus" beside the Forum may have been the original of this (and perhaps the Porta Carmentalis, which was also double-arched, its immediate predecessor as the city grew), but the real curiosity of this whole elaborate process is often lost in scholarly argument about the meaning of the returning process of "triumph" later in the year. The army had to be made *sacrum* since it was now to risk its life (and perhaps the survival of its city) in the realm of the *profanum*. It had also become, by comparison in some sense with the city, itself profane.

The legions, while they defended the city in the regions outside the Ager Romanus were to be very likely involved in the business of killing, and killing (whatever one's opinion of later Roman character might be) seems rather to have unnerved the old and agricultural Latian psyche. I do not have time here to re-argue the point, once well-remembered in studies of Roman religion but now perhaps somewhat clouded by the popularity of Etruscan lore, comparative anthropological methods, and the gloom of Italian Romanists in the 20th century, that the primitive Romans had a strong distaste for blood, and bloody ritual, and for the bloody side of life in general. I leave some reference starting-point for those who doubt at this point (Phillipson 1979, vol. 2, pp. 253 ff).[10] Suffice it to say here that blood in a ritual implied something dangerous and unusual and

[7]The almost invariable rule of the fasti was that even-numbered days were *nefas*, and so unchancy choices for such a festival.

[8]See the article "Salii" in the *Dictionary of Antiquities* (which has the advantage of giving the bare data without immediately introducing arbitrary "parallels" in comparative anthropology as some online resources do).

[9]According to Festus (Lindsay edtn. 1913, p. 296), water must have been running direct from a spring if it were to be any use for purification. See Livy i, 45–46.

[10]For an example of the feeling, Livy ix, 3.

infectious to a Roman. The *di indigetes*--the naturalized gods of the Roman *ius divinum* -- almost invariably did not demand it. That Mars did demand such a thing as the suovetaurilia slain before allowing an army or a cattleherd safely into his territory was one of the things that made him a chancy (we might now say a *numinous*) god. Bloody ritual as a matter of ordinary business was the thing that distinguished Graecus ritus from the home-grown variety (Fowler 1911a, p. 180 ff. and 196 n. 36). And yet, if they were to defend their city, the legions of early Rome would be (unless they were destroyed in the field) unavoidably destined to come home tainted by violence and blood.

This is echoed by the way the tale of the month October in the Roman *fasti* reverses or mirrors the processes of March. At the end of the campaigning season the army returned in one manner or another (whether victorious or not) through that same free-standing gate in the Campus Martius, again probably by the opening on their left hand as they returned. The triumph itself, which they would have celebrated if they returned through victorious, I will defer for a moment. Let us simply bring them *intra pomoerium* again for a moment and follow the process. They recrossed the Petronia amnis and re-entered the city. Spoils (having been purified) were dedicated. Vows were paid. The movement with accompanying rites from the porta through the Campus Martius into the City and finally to the temple of Jupiter on the Capitol was one by which the various taints of blood shed during the season's campaign, and the unguessable hostile forces from the "outlands" beyond the boundary that have clung to the returning warriors, were gradually shed away.[11]

On October 15th (the Ides, recalling the Anna Perenna and the Equerria), after a horse-race in the Campus Martius, the winning horse was sacrificed to Mars in a primitive, perhaps cthonic ritual (which must have seemed at least as harsh and eerie to the livestock-herding Roman farmer in his way as it is to us in ours). It was made *sacer*, killed, and its tail carried by the fastest means possible to the Regia, where its blood was dripped onto the sacred hearth (Fowler 1911a, 241 ff. and also the discussion in 1911b, Scullard 1981, 84–97). Its blood, in fact, moved to the only religious place where the sort of violent objects proper to Mars were allowed within the city walls. The *ancilia* were very shortly about to be sealed away there for the winter again. Was this part of the process of sealing or protection?

In any case, on the 19th of October the army itself (which at this point is breaking up to return to its farms) had its weapons cleansed at the Armilustrium (Wissowa 1912 p. 131). The Salii, at the end of this ceremony, hid their own ceremonial shields back within the seclusion of that sacrarium or shrine at the Regia where the consul would go to find them next spring.[12] The army had in fact been reabsorbed from a very dangerous world back into the agricultural family and

[11]For the route into the city (Livy ii, 49). For items of the month in general (Scullard 1981, pp. 189–195).

[12]Which in fact causes one to wonder whether these spears (having been consecrated with so much energy early in the year and then put away with such ritual at the end of it) had not something to do in the intervening months. Might they (or something equivalent to them) have gone with the armies, or even formed the side-posts (when needed) of the *iugum* under which a defeated army might pass?

the carefully maintained *pax deorum* of the old frontier town of Rome. As a last act, if all went ideally (as it never seemed to do) the gates of Janus would have closed against the "vigilant" sight of Mars. The old and mysterious Roman god of entrances would have had for a short time been able symbolically to bar the uncanny and malignant forces of the outland from the heart and hearth of Rome.

The "Triumph" itself and the pageant of the triumphing consul is a rather trickier (though an even more intriguing) part of this whole process, but I can deal with it here only in passing. The issue can be followed in more detail in the religious studies of W. Warde Fowler and L. Deubner, and the thin and shifting hoard of raw material available on the topic mined in H.S. Versnel's rather newer (but otherwise less helpful) study *Triumphus* (Versnel 1970). It will be obvious even before I attempt a finishing word about the triumph that the picture toward which I am shading this sketch is one of a purification or expiatory rite (or "magical" if the reader prefers, given the culture in which early Rome developed). I must first quickly mention one or two other Roman rituals which seem to me – despite the recent re-emergence of some old objections – tied equally to the entry of blood-tainted or dangerously "infected" persons out of the realm of the *profanum* into that of the *sacrum*.

According to a legend preserved by bits and chunks in Livy (i, 26), Festus (Lindsay edtn. 1913 p. 380), and Dionysius of Halicarnassus (III, xx, 7), the antique Roman hero Horatius, returning over-proud from his victory against the Alban army (while, in fact, the danger and infection of the violence still clung to him), killed his sister in a moment of rage. The Roman people acquitted him of premeditated murder, but the taint of blood guilt remained and while it remained Horatius, though he was idolized as a hero, was nonetheless an infectious danger to every other citizen of Rome. After a variety of expiatory rites performed by his *paterfamilias*, Horatius was brought to a steep street on the slope of the Carinae, a little south of the heart of the old city, called the *vicus Cuprius*. A small beam or bar of timber had been slung there in the manner of a makeshift "gate" across two other upright staves of wood, and Horatius--his head covered in the Roman manner of civilized submission--passed beneath it and was cleansed of the remainder of the taint (*scelus*) that clung to him (Fowler 1920, pp. 71–72). According to Livy (i, 26), the Roman bystanders understood it as a form of the "yoke" of submission.

The significance of this almost offhand (and apparently natural) connection ought to be quite clear before I go on. The version of the Horatius legend given in the rural Italian Livy feels very "Horatian." It spares the pulling of very few stops in its adulation for the victor at the bridge, and even manages almost to praise him for a murder about as shocking as a Roman could imagine, yet it is willing for a moment to picture Horatius subjected to an indignity which by its own testimony is equivalent to the treatment of a defeated foe, a *hostes*. And the story of the humbling purification was in fact apparently treasured, in particular by the family themselves. Thereafter the Horatii out of their own resources replaced the famous and expiatory beam across the vicus Cuprius whenever it decayed, allowing it to stretch between the walls of two houses when the street "built up" (Livy I, 26, Dionysius of Halicarnassus iii, 22, cf. Holland 1961, pp. 77ff), and Livy could say

it still existed (as an institution at least) in the time of Augustus. It was called the *tigillum sororium*.

It is also worth mentioning before leaving this "beam" or "crosspiece" that Janus, since he was god of all other entrances, was also god of this one, under the name Janus Curiatus (Scullard 1981, p. 190f, Marrett 1909-1914, p. 126 f, Marquardt 1885-2019, iii, 145, Fowler 1911a). Once again something caught into the world of the malevolent or "profane" had to find a point of entry where it could pass (by whatever humbling) back into the world of the safety.

So what in turn was the "yoke of submission" that the ancient Romans thought of so readily when confronted with a rite like that used to purify Horatius? It is not in fact mentioned very often in Roman records and most fully – when at all – in Livy (iii, 28; ix, 6; x, 36, cf. Van Gennep 1961 ch. 2. pp. 19 ff). The occasion seems most regularly to have been a Roman victory when by some chance a hostile army fell more or less entire into their hands (Livy x, 36, cf. Fowler 1911a, p. 126). The strong tradition against wholesale or unnecessary bloodshed would have prevented the Roman officials from outright slaughter of the captives, and yet a simple farming culture, surrounded (even among their more advanced neighbors) by fairly primitive economies, forbade either the enslaving of the entire host or selling them as slaves. The alternative seems to have been a regular process of rendering the army harmless and then letting it go. In each case (Livy gives a variety) the Roman commanders negotiated a surrender and terms binding on the opposing state. As in the case of Horatius' acquittal, this ought for a modern mind to be end of it. The opposing army were however still at least spiritually dangerous – remember the infection that clung to Horatius, a sort of *influenza* he caught from dangerous ground and events even though he was defending his people and victorious. Something had made the enemy "enemy" – *hostes* – in the first place, and that something might still cling to them and might just as likely be infectious to the legions of Rome still camped at the battlesite.

Two spears, as Livy describes it, were fixed vertically in the ground and a third fastened crosswise atop them. Beneath this makeshift arch or gateway the conquered army submitted to passing one by one, barely clothed and having first given up their weapons. Livy himself describes this only as a sort of pantomime degradation, though if that were the whole story one might expect to find at some point a discussion of whether such practice wouldn't likelier have sent home intact and hostile armies in a more warlike mood than before they were defeated. In fact, Livy says, it forced a "final confession of absolute defeat"—"*ut exprimatur confessio subactam domitamque esse gentem*" (iii, 28).[13]

Livy as a rural, but transplanted Latian northerner, is of course an excellent witness to the meaning this ceremony had for Augustan scholars or soldiers, and even to the meaning it likely had during the age of the Punic Wars when chronicles on such events were beginning to be written down, but I suggest that based on the sketch I have been building thus far that the "yoke" or "*iugum*" here in question was in fact an improvised but very real gateway. It was an entryway

[13]The images in the small Appendix are meant to suggest both the nature (and the confusion later classicists had about) the *iugum* and its formation. The image of the arch at Rimini is meant to illustrate the evolution of the improvised form into something permanent.

created (in several senses) by military means--and so a "military porta" if you will--by which a host of enemies that were formerly part of the dangerous and unruled outland surrounding the Roman world now entered the outskirt of the ruled and orderly universe of the City's *ius divinum*. They were stripped in the process (hopefully, though of course in the real world it seldom "took") of the contagion they had carried with them, or that had in fact carried them, into battle.

All this brings me round full circle back to the triumph and to the end of this sketch. What captives the victorious Roman commander did think he could afford to bring back with him came through the *porta triumphalis* with the celebrating army. So did the loot brought home, though a great deal of it in the early centuries would, from the same concern about contagion and the desire placate the hostile forces in the outcountry, have been dedicated and/or burned in the field (Reinach 1923 vol. iii, p. 233 ff). The feminine force who received such things was at least in the later years of the early Republic named Lua. What the commander did carry into the city often went in dedication or the payment of a vow to the temple of Jupiter on the Capitol, where the triumphal procession ended.

The "*triumphator*" himself came through the porta in the Campus Martius and on into the city in royal regalia, his face painted with red minium or lead pigment, and the meaning of it, accompanied by the fact that the Jupiter he went in to pay his vows to at the end of the procession had its face reddened in like fashion (Versnel 1970, pp. 56–58, Reid 1916, pp. 177 ff, Fowler 1916 (30), pp. 153 ff). The fact is that upon the completion of this ceremony the paint came off, and the *triumphator*, having himself been cleansed and admitted (beneath an arch) back into the body politic and *ius divinum* of Rome, went home a famous but still a very human figure. He would even, by the nearly invariable rule of the old Republic, have to wait some ten years before he could again hope for a chance to gain such a victory as allowed a "triumph" in the field.

The reason, I suggest (somewhat timidly, for a storm of controversy brewed by scholars with real auctoritas is always blowing round this topic) might be a fairly simple one. Warde Fowler laid the groundwork for it years ago by proving quite compellingly--so far as I can still see--that an antique Roman commander cannot, on the evidence we have, be supposed to have been imitating or play-acting the part of Jupiter (as he is supposed to in Versnel 1970 pp. 78–84). H. Wagenvoort put a good course of stone on that pavement by noticing the general agreement among many of the ancient sources that a certain amount of blood had to be shed in the field before a "triumph" would be allowed (Wagenvoort 1947, p. 167). I suggest that the words "would be allowed" be changed to "need be allowed" (in the culture of early Rome, remember), and that therein lies a clue. We are dealing not with exultation but with the laying to rest of a spiritual anxiety.

The returning consul had taken an army into the wild borderlands of the Roman world and brought it back victorious but contagious until it were cleansed. He had himself exercised in its most classic and old-fashioned form the right of imperium, which in such cases (and put simply) is the right under the *ius* to shed blood. He carried that blood-right and bloodstain back with him, and as he returned by various stages and rituals of entry into the bounds of the city of Rome he carried in himself momentarily the flush of his army's success, and on himself

(momentarily) the weight and contagion of his army's bloodshed.

Wagenvoort (1947) also suggested, as one or two others have, that the red pigment on the face of was meant to imitate, or to have been a substitution for, or symbolic of, blood (Fowler 1911a, pp. 33–34, 180–181, cf. Williams 1969, pp. 119–122). There is no need, though--given the very Roman attitude toward blood which makes this suggestion plausible in the first place--to suppose that actual blood would ever have necessarily been a part of the ritual. The red lead pigment was the symbol of the contagion of the blood, at least until the triumphator were cleansed and had paid his vows. The deity to whom he paid them as consul and leader of his state was Jupiter, and in the last of the rites of re-entry into the life of the city, the statue (or form, if it were not at first a true statue) of the god wore the stains of the blood for the moment as well as his dedications and payments were accepted.

The state, and consul, and god, bore for a moment the weight of the death they had dealt in surviving for the moment against the forces that pressed in from outside the *pomoerium*, and then they went (purified) back each to their business. Relationships were restored, community re-established, anxiety laid to rest, though only for the winter. March would come too soon again.

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(with a particular nod to the value of rediscovering the work of William Warde Fowler)

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Appendix

Figure 1. *The Arch Constructed by Augustus at Rimini*

Note: Almost certainly the oldest authentic "triumphal arch" remaining to us from the Roman era. Its construction is far simpler than that used in later arches, and emphasizes a pair of vertical "posts" connected by a "lintel."
Source: From the *Phaidon Cultural Guide*.

Figures 2-3. *Early Modern Depictions of the Archaic "Iugum" in Action*

Note: The first shows a Roman army being made to "pass under the yoke" by Italian (Samnite) mountaineers after the defeat at the Caudine Forks. It was with the primeval natives of central and highland Italy, not with the more sophisticated (and academically seductive) armies of Etruria that Rome shared the rudiments of this custom. The second is an early 19th century impression, confusing the religious device with an agricultural yoke, though the artist of the third image (same era) has depicted it correctly. This image (of the Horatius story) allows the main figure his armor.