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MUNDUS PATET.

24TH AUGUST, 5TH OCTOBER, 8TH NOVEMBER.

By W. WARDE FOWLER, M.A. D.Litt.

The *mundus* of Rome was believed to be a hole or underground pit or vault on the Palatine. It was said to be closed by a stone called the *lapis manalis*, which same name, oddly enough, is also given to an entirely different kind of stone, with which the *pontifices* occasionally worked some sort of magic in a drought.¹ Plutarch, in the chapter in which he describes the foundation of Rome,² says that the *mundus*, like the process of marking out a city, was of Etruscan origin; that firstfruits of all kinds were thrown into the pit, and that each new settler brought a bit of earth from his own country and cast it into the pit; he places the pit in the Comitium instead of the Palatine, but notes the word *mundus* as applied to it there, and the identity of this word with that for the heaven or universe.

Plutarch says nothing of another notion, namely that on three days in the year, those noted above, the *lapis* was removed to give egress to the denizens of the underworld. This we learn from Varro, quoted by Macrobius: “*mundus cum patet, deorum tristium atque inferum quasi ianua patet.*”³ So too Ateius Capito quoted by Festus⁴: “*Mundus ter in anno patere solet, diebus his: postridie Volcanalia (et a.d. III non. Oct.) et ante diem VI id. Nov. Qui quid ita dicatur sic refert Cato in commentariis iuris civilis: Mundo nomen impositum est ab eo mundo qui supra nos est. . . Eius inferiorem partem veluti consecratam dis manibus clausam omni tempore nisi his diebus qui supra scripti sunt maiores (censuerunt habendam), quos dies etiam religiosos iudicauerunt.*” Here it is necessary to note that the only words of Cato are those in italics:⁵ there are other words of his following these, to which I shall refer directly, but Cato had nothing to say of the *lapis manalis* and the ghosts, so far at least as we know: for these ideas Varro is our oldest authority, followed by Ateius Capito in the age of Augustus.

Since I wrote my book on the Roman Festivals I have often wondered why these three days, 24th August, 5th October, 8th

¹ See my *Roman Festivals*, 232.

² *Romulus*, 11.

³ Macrobius, i, 16, 18. He adds evidence that the days were *religiosi*: an army might not give battle, nor any military operation of importance be performed; nor might a marriage take place.

⁴ Festus, 154. Paulus, 156, gives the dates, which are mutilated in Festus, 142.

⁵ See the fragment in H. Jordan's *Catonis Libri Deperditi*, 84, with his note.

November were selected as holidays, so to speak, for the ghosts. If the old Romans really believed in their return to the upper world on those days, the days must have had some special importance in connexion with ghost-life; but no one, so far as I know, has ever yet discovered what this importance is. The days fixed in the old Calendar of Numa as those on which ghosts would be roaming about in apparent freedom, and on which they might be expelled from the house by the paterfamilias, were 9th, 11th, and 13th May (Lemuria), and the more civilised festival of the dead was in February (Parentalia). Why should three other days be allowed them for freedom in late summer and autumn?

In the book just referred to,¹ taking a hint from O. Müller's *Etrusker*, I suggested that the ghostly function of the *mundus* was an accretion, perhaps or probably of Graeco-Etruscan origin, on a very simple original fact. The pit might be the *penus* of the new city, i.e. the underground storing-place for the grain: and thus we can understand why it should be open on a day (24th August) which follows the Consualia, a festival which almost beyond doubt has reference to harvesting, and immediately precedes the Opiconsivia, which almost as certainly represents the storage of the grain as completed.² "Nor is it difficult to understand why, when the original use and meaning had vanished, the Graeco-Etruscan doctrine of the underworld should be engrafted on this simple Roman stem. Dis and Proserpina (Greek deities) claim the *mundus*: it is *ianua Orci*, *faux Plutonis*, fancies familiar to Romans who had come under the spell of Greek and Etruscan religious beliefs."

Quite lately I have been able to develop this suggestion a little further. I think, unless I am under a delusion, that I can explain not only 24th August, but with some little probability, also 5th October and 8th November as days on which we might expect the *mundus* to be open, not for the egress of ghosts, but for a very practical purpose of the farmer. I conjecture that it was the place in which was stored, not, or not *only*, the grain of the last harvest which would be needed for food, and for which the storehouse (*penus*) would need to be frequently opened in the old farmhouse, but the place of safety in which the *seed-corn* was stored. This was a sacred treasure almost more precious than the grain destined immediately for food: and it must be housed securely and hidden most carefully from enemies of all kinds.

The *mundus* as Cato describes it, though on the Palatine in his day it would be only a symbolic survival from the original storing-place, seems to me strongly to suggest a use for human beings as well as ghosts. "Mundo nomen impositum est ab eo mundo qui

¹ P. 211. Cf. Müller-Deecke, *Etrusker*, ii, 100.

² See Wissowa, *Relig. und Kultus der Römer*, 168 (ed. 2, p. 203).

supra nos est : forma enim eius est, *ut ex his qui intravere cognoscere potui.*"¹ The *mundus* then was a place into which a man might descend : we may imagine it as a kind of cellar with an opening in the centre of its roof, which was closed, except on the three days, by a stone, after the fashion of a trap-door. On the top of this there was no doubt a covering of earth, for the sake of concealment, an obvious safeguard which seems to be reflected in the descriptions both of Plutarch and Ovid.² The poet wrote :

Fossa fit ad solidum. Fruges iaciuntur in ima
et de vicino terra petita solo.
Fossa repletur humo. . . .

But I must now go on to explain my justification for this very matter-of-fact conjecture.

In August the opening of the *mundus* took place the day before the Opiconsivia, i.e. the 24th ; and in the latter festival it is pretty well agreed that we should see a representation of the completed storage of the corn of the recent harvest. My conjecture is that on the previous day the seed-corn for the autumn sowing was separated from the rest of the grain, and deposited in an underground storing-place, for the security that was absolutely essential for the existence of the community. Varro tells us that in his time the finest ears were separated on the threshing-floor from the rest of the corn, in order that the *semen* (seed-corn) might be as good as possible.³ As a rule the corn seems to have been threshed as soon as it was brought home from the field : Varro and Columella imply this,⁴ though they do not state it in so many words ; and in primitive times, when your enemy might at any moment make a raid on you, this would be desirable in order to secure the precious treasure as quickly as possible. We know nothing from literary sources of the place of storage, but I venture to think that not only the curious underground altar of Consus, opened at the Consualia on the 21st, but also the opening of the *mundus* on the 24th, suggest the method that would obviously be the safest, that of concealing the treasure underground.⁵

It is of course possible that both the grain for food and the seed-corn were deposited in the same place. But apart from the extra security which two storing-places would give to the farmer,

¹ *Potui* is Scaliger's emendation for *potuit* of the codex.

² Fasti, iv, 821 : cf. Plutarch, *Rom.* 11.

³ Varro, *R.R.* i, 52, *init.* Quae seges grandissima atque optima fuerit, seorsum in aream secerni oportet spicas, ut semen optimum habeat (i.e. the farmer). Cf. Pliny, xviii, 195 ; Columella, ii, 9, 11 ; and also Virgil, *Georg.* i, 197, who says that the farmer must pick out the largest by hand, or they will degenerate in the keeping.

⁴ Varro, *R.R.* i, 50, 51 and the beginning of

52 already quoted. When the corn has been reaped, it must be brought to the area (threshing-floor), which Varro then describes in c. 51 : then, returning to the crop, he urges the separation of the seed-corn from the rest. The same is clearly implied in Columella, ii, 21.

⁵ See Mommsen's note in *C.I.L.* i, ed. 2, p. 326, followed by Wissowa *Rel. und Kult.* 167 (ed. 2, p. 201). As from 5 to 10 *modii* of various kinds of seed were needed for each *iugerum*, a fairly roomy receptacle would be necessary.

I think that the dates of the other two openings of the *mundus* may suggest that it was the receptacle of the seed-corn only.

The oldest kind of grain used for food in Italy was that rough kind of wheat called *far*, which in historical times was used in the city only for religious purposes. But in some districts it was still grown, and Pliny tells us that the sowing went on through the month of October.¹ A date as early as the fifth, in the practice of the later people of the city, would suit well enough for the opening of the storing-place for the purpose of taking out the necessary amount of grain for sowing. But the third of the days of opening, November 8th, bears more remarkable testimony to their original meaning. All readers of Virgil will remember that in his first Georgic (219, ff.) he urges the postponement of the sowing of wheat (*tritium*) till after the setting of the Pleiades: and in this he is borne out by Columella.² No doubt Virgil represents the traditional practice of the Italian farmer. Now the apparent or cosmical setting of the Pleiades, i.e. that which alone can have been known to the husbandman throughout early Roman history, seems to have taken place on or about 9th November; different ancient authorities give different days, but all at the beginning of November, and the writer of the article *Astronomia* in the *Dict. of Antiquities* fixes the actual day of apparent setting as the 9th.³ That the opening of the *mundus* should have taken place on the 8th is thus a striking fact, and strongly suggests that the seed-corn of the better wheat crops, as distinct from the more ancient *far*, was at this time being taken out of the *mundus* for the November sowing.

Now supposing that our hypothesis is a reasonable one, and that the *mundus* was originally a receptacle for seed-corn, how are we to account for the accretion on this simple and useful practice of the doctrine of the *mundus* as *faux Plutonis*, *ostium Orci* and so on, and of the liberation of the ghosts when the stone trapdoor was removed?

In the first place, there is no difficulty in attributing a religious character with taboos such as Varro mentions⁴ to

¹ Pliny, *H.N.* xviii, 205: cf. Varro, i, 34.

² Ante tibi Eoae Atlantides abscondantur, Gnosiaque ardentis decedat stella Coronae, Debita quam sulcis committas semina quamque Invitae properes anni spem credere terrae." Varro, i, 34, rather vaguely describes sowing as extending from the equinox to the *bruma*; but Columella, ii, 8, quotes and supports Virgil: only in this passage he seems to be thinking of the *true* morning setting of the Pleiades, i.e. 24th October, though in other places he obviously alludes to the apparent setting. See *Dict. of Antiquities*, s.v. *Astronomia*, p. 227.

³ *Dict. of Antiquities*, loc. cit. "The true morning setting was at Rome at that epoch on 29th October, the apparent morning setting on 9th November." This date has been confirmed for the

time of the Roman kings by Dr. Fotheringham, who has most kindly made elaborate calculations for me. He sums them up thus in a letter: "Anyhow, you will see that the date given in the *Dict. of Antiquities* (9th November) appears to apply excellently to the time of the kings. It does not seem to apply so well to the time of Julius Caesar, to which it was intended (in the dictionary) to refer." In a later letter he wrote: "As the Roman 8th November did not occupy a fixed place in the natural year before the time of Julius Caesar, I presume that a general and not an exact coincidence with the cosmical setting of the Pleiades is all that is required."

⁴ Macrobius, i, 16, 18.

such receptacles of the means of man's subsistence: that is sufficiently well shown by the sacred character of the store-chamber of the house, which produced in time its own spirits or deities, the Penates: and the underground altar of Consus points in the same direction. Prof. Deubner has lately shown¹ that there are two main periods in early Roman religious thought, and that undoubtedly the purely ritualistic one is the oldest, when deities and a theology are only in the making, if as far advanced as that. To this older stratum belongs the original use of the *mundus* as I explain it. No deity is here concerned, unless it be the Ops Consiva of the day following that of the opening of the *mundus* in August, and that deity is plainly no more than the store itself with its religious character beginning to take tangible shape in a worship.

Upon this older stratum of religious ideas there lies what we can only suppose to be a later stratum deposited by another race, in which the idea of existence after death in an underworld was more important than the practical ideas of the pure agriculturist. Such a race was the Etruscan. In a valuable summary of our present knowledge of Mediterranean burial, kindly sent me by the author, Prof. von Duhn, he attributes a somewhat grossly material idea of the dead alike to the oldest population of Italy, and to the Etruscans, both of which races *buried* their dead and supplied them with such objects as they were supposed to need, in contrast to the true Italic peoples (Sabines excepted) who used cremation, and show signs of being the ancestors of those who developed the orderly, sensible ritual of the Parentalia. The conjecture in my recent volume² that the notion of an underworld and its horrors was Etruscan, but resting on a substructure of much more primitive belief, is not so wild as I feared at one time that it might be.

Exactly how the new way of looking at the simple old practice came about it is impossible to say; but each of us can make some kind of a guess for himself if he pleases. My own guess is that the primitive storing pit was transferred from the farm or the pagus to the newly founded city, and the three days of opening were retained and fixed; that in due time its original meaning was lost, owing to the city ceasing to be a practical centre of agricultural operations: and that as this cessation happened about the same time as the Etruscan dominion in Rome, the *mundus* took on a new meaning connected with the Etruscan ideas of a nether world.³ The stone, of which we are told on a single authority that it was called *lapis manalis*, the same name as that of the stone of Jupiter

¹ In *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum*, 1911, p. 323.

² *The Religious experience of the Roman people*, 391, ff.

³ The best account of the word *mundus* known to me is in Nettleship's *Contributions to Latin*

Lexicography, p. 528. I have abstained from invoking the aid of etymology; but if Nettleship is right, the word may be developed from a root *mu*, meaning to enclose, or fence round. In regard to an Etruscan origin of a similar word see Müller-Deecke, *Die Etrusker*, ii, 100, n. 65a.

Elicius, took on the name of that other stone through a misinterpretation of the word *manalis*, which was wrongly supposed to mean "belonging to the Manes."¹

Now I may reasonably be asked why, if I make so much of the seed-corn and its place of deposit, we do not find more distinct traces of the importance of these among other peoples, Mediterranean or other. My answer is that I do so find them, though they seem to me to have lain unnoticed since Mannhardt developed his theory of the corn-spirit. For the animistic period that theory undoubtedly holds good, and has been confirmed by the immense mass of additional evidence brought together by Dr. Frazer in his *Golden Bough*, but I have for some time felt that there is a yet more primitive way of looking at the mystery of the renewal of vegetation; and in many of the examples of the familiar forms of the corn-spirit I am inclined to see traces of the sacred character of the seed-corn itself, and of the place in which it was stored. My friend Dr. Frazer has most kindly pointed me out a number of such unindexed examples in the second volume of the *Golden Bough* (ed. 2), though without expressing definite approval of my views on this subject; but in order to weigh the matter thoroughly, it is advisable to read the whole of chapter iii in that volume, as well as to let the mind dwell on isolated instances.

I think I see signs that the last sheaf of the harvest, which in innumerable instances is treated with reverence or made into human form, may represent the precious seed-corn set aside at the time of threshing. A good example is taken by Dr. Frazer from Mannhardt.² At Westerhüsen in Saxony the last corn cut is made into the shape of a woman, brought to the threshing-floor, and kept there till the threshing is done.³ Just below on the same page we have an example from Tarnow, Galicia, in which the last corn cut is made into a wreath and called the wheat-mother, etc.

¹ cf. Paulus, 128. In case the contrast between the original Latin meaning of the *mundus* and that here assumed to have been superimposed, should astonish any one, let me refer him to the remarks of Dr. J. B. Carter in Hastings' *Dict. of Religion and Ethics*, i, 464. He points out that the Romans do not seem to have been much interested in the lower world, and that every bit of description of it comes from writers under Greek influence, and all the details are identical with those of the Greeks. Hence it is probable that the Roman lower world was not mythologically adorned till Greeks (and Etruscans) did it for them. As we have seen, the idea of a stone covering the abode of the dead, the removal of which gave egress to the ghosts, is found only in Festus, 154, and nowhere alluded to in Roman literature. It has been compared to the Dillestein of German mythology (Preller-Jordan, ii, 67), but a perusal of the description of that mysterious stone in Grimm's *Deutsche Mythologie*, iii, 806 (Engl. trans.) makes it clear

to me that there is nothing in common between the two. The Dillestein was a ceiling or grating of the underworld, lying at the bottom of our earth. I may add to this note a few words of Dr. Frazer's, contained in a letter to me: "The ancient explanation of the *mundus* is perhaps not wholly irreconcilable with your theory. For observe that the spirits of the dead are often supposed to watch over or further the growth of the crops: that is why the firstfruits are often presented to them. For examples see the *Golden Bough* (ed. 2), ii, 459, seq." On the connexion at Rome between Tellus Mater, the dead, and the crops, see my *Religious experience of the Roman people*, 121, 138; cf. Dieterich, *Mutter Erde* cap. iv.

² *Golden Bough*, ii, 172.

³ i.e. it is kept separate, as intended for seed-corn. Cf. Mannhardt, *Mythologische Forschungen* 334, translated in *G.B.* p. 181.

and kept till spring, when some of the grain is mixed with the seed-corn. The last sheaf is often larger and heavier than the rest, and this Dr. Frazer explains (p. 176) as a charm, working by sympathetic magic, to ensure a large and heavy crop in the following harvest. Is it not rather a survival of the selection of the finest ears to use as seed-corn? For it seems that this last sheaf is often taken from that part of the field where the corn is finest: examples of this practice will be found on p. 184 (from Kent), on p. 189 (Scotland), p. 193 (ancient Peru), a passage to which I will return directly, and p. 195 (ancient Mexico); p. 200 (Malay peninsula) and in Sumatra (p. 198), the best grains of rice are picked out to form the rice-mother, and are sown in the middle of the bed, with the common seed planted round them. When the time comes to transplant the rice from the nursery to the field, the rice-mother receives a special place either in the middle or in a corner of the field, and is planted with a prayer or charm.

Further, this last sheaf of fine grain is sometimes deposited in a special place, and even in an underground cavity or cellar, like the firstfruits which Plutarch tells us were deposited in the Roman *mundus*, a practice which I take to be the forerunner of those numberless instances in which the last sheaf or some puppet representing it, is kept stuck up on the farmhouse during the winter. The great care taken of the maiden, as this puppet, garland, or sheaf, is so often called, would be a survival of the care originally taken of the precious seed-corn. A good example of storage in a special granary occurs on p. 193 (*G.B.* vol. ii), from ancient Peru, described by the historian Acosta: a portion of the most fruitful of the maize is thus deposited with religious ceremony. So in *G.B.* ii, 459, a little hollow filled with grain is left on the threshing-floor, according to Frazer (or his informant Casalis), as a thankoffering to the gods. Is this explanation the right one? Again (p. 194), in Mexico the priests, with the nobles and people, went in procession to the maize fields, where they picked out the largest and finest sheaf, brought it home, and laid it upon an altar. "After sacrificing to the harvest-god, the priests carefully wrapped it in fine linen and kept it till seed-time. Then it was carried once more to the field from which it had been taken, and deposited in a subterranean chamber, which was closed and covered over with earth. Then followed the sowing, after sacrifice had been made for an abundant harvest; and finally, when the time of harvest drew near, the buried sheaf was solemnly disinterred by the priests, who distributed the grain to all who asked for it." This I take to be an animistic and magical development of the simple practice of storing the seed-corn. One more example: in Java (pp. 201-2), two garlands are made of ears of rice, and called the rice-bride and rice-bridegroom, whose wedding is celebrated just before harvest. "Later on, when

the rice is being got in, a bridal chamber is partitioned off in the barn, furnished with a new mat, a lamp, and all kinds of toilet articles. Sheaves of rice, to represent the wedding guests, are placed beside the bride and bridegroom. Not till this has been done may the whole harvest be housed in the barn. And for the first *forty* days after the rice has been housed, no one may enter the barn, for fear of disturbing the newly-married pair.”¹ I read this to mean that the sheaves here called wedding guests were really those reserved for seed-corn, only after which reservation the housing of the general harvest could begin.

Lastly, I will just allude to a feature analogous to some of those just noticed, in the ritual of Demeter and Persephone at the Thesmophoria. Miss Harrison has described this and commented on it in her *Prolegomena to the study of Greek Religion*, chapter iv, translating a valuable passage from the scholiast on Lucian, *Dial. Meretr.* ii, 1. “At some time not specified” (so she sums up our information), “but during the Thesmophoria, women carefully purified for the purpose let down pigs into clefts or chasms called *megara* or chambers. At some other time not precisely specified they descended into the *megara*, brought up the rotten flesh and placed it on certain altars, whence it was taken *and mixed with seed* to serve as a fertility charm. As the first day of the festival was called Kathodos and Anodos it seems likely that the women went down and came up on the same day.” This account is curiously confirmed by a discovery of Sir Charles Newton at Cnidus, quoted by Miss Harrison on p. 125. There, in the sanctuary of Demeter, he found a crypt which had originally been circular, though later compressed by an earthquake, in which were bones of pigs and other animals, and the marble pigs which now stand near Demeter of Cnidus in the British Museum. This crypt seems to remind us of the *mundus*, and so perhaps do the *megara* described by the scholiast.² We do not know what the *mundus* contained, though the description of it given by Cato³ strongly suggests that it contained something, or was originally meant to do so. But the crypt at Cnidus, and the *megara* of Demeter, contained pigs, which in Greece were the special victims of the deities of earth and fertility, and these were used as a charm, mixed with the seed-corn, to obtain good crops. All this belongs, however, to an age of religion and fully developed deities; and I would here

¹ Does this mean that the first use of the grain for sowing occurred forty days after it was thus deposited? It is curious that the time between the Opiconsivia on 25th August, and the first opening of the *mundus* on 5th October, is almost exactly forty days, a coincidence which I do not in the least wish to emphasise, but the number forty has often a religious significance.

² In his *Modern Greek Folklore and ancient Greek Religion*, Mr. J. C. Lawson has some interesting remarks about the beehive structures at Mycenae, suggesting that they may possibly have been *megara*, “temples of Chthonian deities such as Demeter”: see p. 94, ff.

³ Apud Fest. 154.

again suggest that behind it there lies the simple custom of storing the seed-corn for safety in a subterranean crypt. The seed and the crypt are both holy, as we might expect, and as we gather from the fact that women alone, and fully purified, were allowed to descend into the crypt and bring up the necessary supply of seed. It is not without interest to note that the Thesmophoria, when this took place, is in autumn (11th Pyanepsion), and presumably about the time of the autumn sowing.

Dr. Farnell's more elaborate and judicious account¹ of the Thesmophoria and kindred festivals of Demeter and Persephone has also many points of interest in connexion with my subject, and I think it may be worth suggesting that experts in Greek religious usages should see whether my theory has any bearing on doubtful points. I note with interest his reference to a fragment of Anacreon² in support of the possibility that one early (and lost) meaning of *θεσμός* was *θησαυρός*. Is it remotely possible that the objects carried at that festival, as indicated by its name, were baskets of seed for sowing? Dr. Farnell tells us that Triptolemus was believed to have distributed the seed for this purpose.³ As so many strange explanations of this mysterious word have been suggested,⁴ I need hardly fear to suggest yet another. Dr. Frazer⁵ has hazarded the conjecture that the *sacra* were called *θεσμός* because they were the things *laid down*, or as I would add, put into a thesauros. I only go a step further and suggest that these *sacra* were originally portions of seed-corn: for the Thesmophoria was a late autumn festival and clearly connected with sowing.

In conclusion, all I have been doing in this paper is to turn over a stone to see if there is by any chance anything there. I am not at all sure that there is anything there really worth picking up; the explanation of the three days may lie somewhere else, and I do not forget that the beginning of November is a great time for ghosts in many parts of the world, a fact which is reflected in the Christian calendar. Or there may be some mysterious connexion between firstfruits and seed-corn, and between both of them and the dead, which has not yet been entirely fathomed. I hope I may be allowed to hazard a hypothesis without doing anyone any serious harm.

¹ *Cults*, iii, 105, ff.

² Bergk, *Poet. Lyr.* iii, 271.

³ *Cults*, iii, 184.

⁴ See e.g. Miss Harrison's *Prolegomena*, pp. 137 and 143.

⁵ See Miss Harrison, *op. cit.* 137.