Mars was a major Roman deity, second only to Jupiter in the Roman pantheon. He began as a protector of agriculture but later became the god of war, honored throughout the realm of the conquering Romans. The Romans admired Greek culture and absorbed Greek deities into their own. They came to identify their own war god, Mars, with the Greek war god, Ares, but Mars was a more dignified and popular figure.

According to legend, Juno, the queen of the gods, gave birth to Mars after being touched by a magic plant. He was originally associated with vegetation and fertility. As the Romans became increasingly warlike, Mars gradually developed into a god of war, but he never lost his connection with agriculture and the plant world entirely. The Romans honored him with festivals in his month, March, which occurs at a time of the year when new growth begins in the fields and military campaigns resume after a winter break.

Mars’s high place of honor in the Roman pantheon comes in part from his role as an ancestor of Rome. According to the story of the founding of Rome, Mars was the father of Romulus and Remus, twin boys born to a human priestess and raised by a wolf. Romulus later founded the city of Rome, and the Romans believed that Romulus’s divine father would come to their aid in times of crisis or disaster. The wolf and the woodpecker, animals involved in the saving of the twins, were sacred to Mars. Picus, a Roman god who took the form of a woodpecker, was Mars’s companion.

One story about Mars relates that the god’s sacred shield had fallen from the sky in the time of the early Roman king Numa Pompilius. Believing that the shield was vital to the well-being of Rome, Numa had 11 identical shields made and hung all 12 of them in a shrine to confuse any thief who might try to steal Mars’s shield. Numa also established an order of priests called the Salii to guard the shields. For many years, Roman priests continued to wear the old-fashioned armor and to perform ritual war dances during the March festivals of Mars.

**deity** god or goddess  
**pantheon** all the gods of a particular culture  
**ritual** ceremony that follows a set pattern

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