

Romulus and Remus



Capitoline Wolf. Traditional scholarship says the wolf-figure is Etruscan, 5th century BC, with figures of Romulus and Remus added in the 15th century AD by Antonio Pollaiuolo. Recent studies suggest that the wolf may be a medieval sculpture dating from the 13th century AD.

Romulus and Remus are the twin brothers and central characters of Rome's foundation myth. Their mother is Rhea Silvia, daughter to Numitor, king of Alba Longa. Before their conception, Numitor's brother Amulius seizes power, kills Numitor's male heirs and forces Rhea Silvia to become a Vestal Virgin, sworn to chastity. Rhea Silvia conceives the twins by the god Mars, or by the demi-god Hercules; once the twins are born, Amulius has them abandoned to die in the river Tiber. They are saved by a series of miraculous interventions: the river carries them to safety, a she-wolf (in Latin, lupa) finds and suckles them, and a woodpecker feeds them. A shepherd and his wife find them and foster them to manhood, as simple shepherds.

The twins, still ignorant of their true origins, prove to be natural leaders. Each acquires many followers. When they discover the truth of their birth, they kill Amulius and restore Numitor to his throne. Rather than wait to inherit Alba Longa, they choose to found a new city. Romulus wants to found the new city on the Palatine Hill; Remus prefers the Aventine Hill. They agree to determine the site through augury but when each claims the results in his own favor, they quarrel and Remus is killed.

Romulus founds the new city, names it Rome, after himself, and creates its first legions and senate. The new city grows rapidly, swelled by landless refugees; as most of these are male, and unmarried, Romulus arranges the abduction of women from the neighboring Sabines. The ensuing war ends with the joining of Sabines and Romans as one Roman people. Thanks to divine favor and Romulus' inspired leadership, Rome becomes a dominant force, but Romulus himself becomes increasingly autocratic, and disappears or dies in mysterious circumstances.

In later forms of the myth, he ascends to heaven, and is identified with Quirinus, the divine personification of the Roman people. The legend as a whole encapsulates Rome's ideas of itself, its origins and moral values. For modern scholarship, it remains one of the most complex and problematic of all foundation myths, particularly in the matter and manner of Remus' death. Ancient historians had no doubt that Romulus gave his name to the city. Most modern historians believe his name a back-formation from the name Rome.

The myth was fully developed into something like an "official", chronological version in the Late Republican and early Imperial era; Roman historians dated the city's foundation to between 758 and 728 BC, and Plutarch reckoned the twins' birth year as c. 27/28 March 771 BC.

An earlier tradition that gave Romulus a distant ancestor in the semi-divine Trojan prince Aeneas was further embellished, and Romulus was made the direct ancestor of Rome's first Imperial dynasty. Possible historical bases for the broad mythological narrative remain unclear and disputed. The image of the she-wolf suckling the divinely fathered twins became an iconic representation of the city and its founding legend, making Romulus and Remus preminent among the feral children of ancient mythology.