

Also by Mary Beard

Laughter in Ancient Rome

The Roman Triumph

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It's a Don's Life

All in a Don's Day

The Parthenon

The Colosseum (with Keith Hopkins)

SPQR

A HISTORY
OF ANCIENT
ROME

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PROFILE BOOKS

We shall find many more of these political conflicts, disputed interpretations and sometimes uncomfortable echoes of our own times in the chapters that follow. But it is now the moment to turn back from the relatively firm ground of the first century BCE to Rome's deepest history. How did Cicero and his contemporaries reconstruct the early years of their city? Why were their origins important to them? What does it mean to ask 'Where did Rome begin?' How much can we, or could they, really know of earliest Rome?

CHAPTER TWO

IN THE BEGINNING

Cicero and Romulus

ACCORDING TO ONE Roman tradition, the Temple of Jupiter where Cicero harangued Catiline on 8 November 63 BCE had been established seven centuries earlier by Romulus, Rome's founding father. Romulus and the new citizens of his tiny community were fighting their neighbours, a people known as the Sabines, on the site that later became the Forum, the political centre of Cicero's Rome. Things were going badly for the Romans, and they had been driven to retreat. As a last attempt to snatch victory, Romulus prayed to the god Jupiter – not just to Jupiter, in fact, but to Jupiter *Stator*, 'Jupiter who holds men firm'. He would build a temple in thanks, Romulus promised the god, if only the Romans would resist the temptation to run for it, and stand their ground against the enemy. They did, and the Temple of Jupiter Stator was erected on that very spot, the first in a long series of shrines and temples in the city built to commemorate divine help in securing military victory for Rome.

That at least was the story told by Livy and several other Roman writers. Archaeologists have never managed firmly to identify any remains of this temple, which must in any case have been much rebuilt by Cicero's time, especially if its origins really did go back to the beginning of Rome. But there can be no doubt that, when he chose to summon the senate to meet there, Cicero knew exactly what he was doing. He had the precedent of Romulus in mind and was using the

location to make a point. He wanted to keep the Romans steadfast (to 'hold them firm') in the face of their new enemy, Catiline. In fact, he said almost exactly that at the end of his speech, when – no doubt gesturing to the statue of the god – he appealed to Jupiter Stator and reminded his audience of the foundation of the temple:

You, Jupiter, who were established by Romulus in the same year as the city itself, the god who, we rightly say, holds firm the city and the empire – you will keep this man and his gang away from your temple and the temples of the other gods, from the houses of the city and its walls, from the lives and fortunes of all the citizens of Rome ...

The implication that Cicero was casting himself as a new Romulus was not lost on the Romans of his day, and the connection could rebound: some people used it as another excuse to sneer at his small-town origins by calling him 'the Romulus of Arpinum'.

This was a classic Roman appeal to the founding fathers, to the stirring tales of early Rome and to the moment when the city came into being. Even now, the image of a wolf suckling the baby Romulus and his twin brother Remus signals the origins of Rome. The famous bronze statue of the scene is one of the most copied and instantly recognisable works of Roman art, illustrated on thousands of souvenir postcards, tea towels, ashtrays and fridge magnets, and plastered all over the modern city as the emblem of Roma football club.

Because this image is so familiar, it is easy to take the story of Romulus and Remus – or Remus and Romulus, to give them their usual Roman order – rather too much for granted and to forget that it is one of the oddest 'historical legends' of any city's foundation at any period, anywhere in the world. And myth or legend it certainly is, even though Romans assumed that it was, in broad terms, history. The wolf's nurturing of the twins is such a strange episode in a very peculiar tale that even ancient writers sometimes showed a healthy



7. Whatever the exact date of the wolf herself, the baby twins are certainly later additions, made in the fifteenth century explicitly to capture the founding myth. Copies are found all over the world, partly thanks to Benito Mussolini, who distributed them far and wide as a symbol of *Romanità*.

scepticism about the appearance of a conveniently lactating animal to suckle the pair of abandoned babies, right on cue. The rest of the narrative is an extraordinary mixture of puzzling details: not only the unusual idea of having two founders (Romulus *and* Remus) but also a series of decidedly unheroic elements, from murder, through rape and abduction, to the bulk of Rome's first citizens being criminals and runaways.

These unsavoury aspects have so struck some modern historians that they have suggested that the whole story must have been concocted as a form of anti-propaganda by Rome's enemies and victims, threatened by aggressive Roman expansion. That is an over-ingenious, not to say desperate, attempt to explain the oddities of the tale, and it misses the most important point. Wherever and whenever it originated, Roman writers never stopped telling, retelling and intensely

debating the story of Romulus and Remus. There was more at stake in this than just the question of how the city first took shape. As they crammed into Romulus' old temple to listen to the new 'Romulus of Arpinum', those senators would have been well aware that the foundation story raised even bigger questions, of what it was to be Roman, of what special characteristics defined the Roman people – and, no less pressing, of what flaws and failings they had inherited from their ancestors.

To understand the ancient Romans, it is necessary to understand where they believed they came from and to think through the significance of the story of Romulus and Remus and of the main themes, subtleties and ambiguities in other foundation stories. For the twins were not the only candidates for being the first Romans. Throughout most of Roman history, the figure of the Trojan hero Aeneas, who fled to Italy to establish Rome as the new Troy, bulked large too. And no less important is to try to see what might lie behind these stories. 'Where did Rome begin?' is a question that has proved almost as seductive, and teasing, for modern scholars as for their ancient predecessors. Archaeology offers a sketch of earliest Rome very different from that of the Roman myths. It is a surprising one, often puzzling and controversial. Even the famous bronze wolf is keenly debated. Is it, as has usually been thought, one of the earliest works of Roman art to survive? Or is it, as a recent scientific analysis has suggested, really a masterpiece of the Middle Ages? In any case, excavations under the modern city over the past hundred years or so have uncovered a few traces from maybe as far back as 1000 BCE of the tiny village on the river Tiber that eventually became Cicero's Rome.

Murder

There is no single story of Romulus. There are scores of different, sometimes incompatible, versions of the tale. Cicero, a decade after his clash with Catiline, gave one account in his treatise *On the State*. Like many politicians since, he took refuge in political theory (and some rather pompous pontificating) when his own power was fading. Here, in the context of a much longer philosophical discussion on the nature of good government, he dealt with the history of the Roman 'constitution' from its beginning. But after a succinct start to the story – in which he awkwardly evaded the issue of whether Romulus really was the son of the god Mars while casting doubt on other fabulous elements of the tale – he got down to a serious discussion of the geographical advantages of the site that Romulus chose for his new settlement.

'How could Romulus,' Cicero writes, 'have exploited more brilliantly the advantages of being close to the sea while avoiding its disadvantages than by placing the town on the banks of a never-failing river that flows consistently into the sea, in a broad stream?' The Tiber, he explains, made it easy to import supplies from abroad and to export any local surplus; and the hills on which the city was built provided not only an ideal defence against enemy attack but also a healthy living environment in the midst of a 'pestilential region'. It was as if Romulus had known that his foundation would one day be the centre of a great empire. Cicero displays some good geographical sense here, and many others since have pointed to the strategic position of the site, which gave it an advantage over local rivals. But he patriotically draws a veil over the fact that throughout antiquity the 'never-failing river' also made Rome the regular victim of devastating floods and that, despite the hills, 'pestilence' (or malaria) was one of the biggest killers of the ancient city's inhabitants (it remained so until the end of the nineteenth century).

Cicero's is not the best-known version of the foundation story. The one that underlies most modern accounts goes back in its essentials to Livy. For a writer whose work is still so important to our understanding of early Rome, surprisingly little is known about 'Livy the man': he came from Patavium (Padua), in the north of Italy, began writing his compendium of Roman history in the 20s BCE and was on close enough terms with the Roman imperial family to have encouraged the future emperor Claudius to take up history writing. Inevitably, the story of Romulus and Remus features prominently in his first book, with rather less geography and rather more colourful narrative than Cicero gives it. Livy starts with the twins, then briskly follows the tale through to the later achievements of Romulus alone, as Rome's founder and first king.

The little boys, Livy explains, were born to a virgin priestess by the name of Rhea Silvia in the Italian town of Alba Longa, in the Alban Hills, just south of the later site of Rome. She had not taken this virginal office of her own free will but had been forced into it after an internecine struggle for power that saw her uncle Amulius take over as king of Alba Longa after ousting his brother, Numitor, her father. Amulius had then used the cover of the priesthood – an ostensible honour – to prevent the awkward appearance of any heirs and rivals from his brother's line. As it turned out, this precaution failed, for Rhea Silvia was soon pregnant. According to Livy, she claimed that she had been raped by the god Mars. Livy appears to be as doubtful about this as Cicero; Mars, he suggests, might have been a convenient pretence to cover an entirely human affair. But others wrote confidently about a disembodied phallus coming from the flames of the sacred fire that Rhea Silvia was supposed to be tending.

As soon as she gave birth, to twins, Amulius ordered his servants to throw the babies into the nearby river Tiber to drown. But they survived. For, as often happens in stories like this in many cultures, the men who had been given this unpleasant task did not (or could

not bring themselves to) follow the instructions to the letter. Instead, they left the twins in a basket not directly in the river but – as it was in flood – next to the water that had burst its banks. Before the babies were washed away to their death, the famous nurturing wolf came to their rescue. Livy was one of those Roman sceptics who tried to rationalise this particularly implausible aspect of the tale. The Latin word for 'wolf' (*lupa*) was also used as a colloquial term for 'prostitute' (*lupanare* was one standard term for 'brothel'). Could it be that a local whore rather than a local wild beast had found and tended the twins?

Whatever the identity of the *lupa*, a kindly herdsman or shepherd soon found the boys and took them in. Was his wife the prostitute? Livy wondered. Romulus and Remus lived as part of his country family, unrecognised until years later, when – now young men – they were accidentally reunited with their grandfather, the deposed king Numitor. Once they had reinstated him as king of Alba Longa, they set out to establish their own city. But they soon quarrelled, with disastrous results. Livy suggests that the same rivalry and ambition that had marred the relationship of Numitor and Amulius trickled down the generations to Romulus and Remus.

The twins disagreed about where exactly to site their new foundation – in particular, which one of the several hills that later made up the city (there are, in fact, more than the famous seven) should form the centre of the first settlement. Romulus chose the hill known as the Palatine, where the emperors' grand residence later stood and which has given us our word 'palace'. In the quarrel that ensued, Remus, who had opted for the Aventine, insultingly jumped over the defences that Romulus was constructing around his preferred spot. There were various versions of what happened next. But the commonest (according to Livy) was that Romulus responded by killing his brother and so became the sole ruler of the place that took his name. As he struck the terrible, fratricidal blow, he shouted (in Livy's words): 'So perish anyone else who shall leap over my walls.' It was an appropriate slogan

for a city which went on to portray itself as a belligerent state, but one whose wars were always responses to the aggression of others, always 'just'.

Rape

Remus was dead. And the city that he had helped to found consisted of just a handful of Romulus' friends and companions. It needed more citizens. So Romulus declared Rome an 'asylum' and encouraged the rabble and dispossessed of the rest of Italy to join him: runaway slaves, convicted criminals, exiles and refugees. This produced plenty of men. But in order to get women, so Livy's story goes, Romulus had to resort to a ruse – and to rape. He invited the neighbouring peoples, the Sabines and the Latins, from the area around Rome known as Latium, to come and enjoy a religious festival plus entertainments, families and all. In the middle of the proceedings, he gave a signal for his men to abduct the young women among the visitors and to carry them off as their wives.

Nicolas Poussin, famous for his re-creations of ancient Rome, captured the scene in the seventeenth century: Romulus stands on a dais calmly overseeing the violence that is going on below, against a background of monumental architecture still under construction. It is one image of the early city that the Romans of the first century BCE would have recognised. Though they sometimes pictured Romulus' Rome as one of sheep, mud huts and bog, they often also aggrandised the place as a splendid, preformed classical city. It is also a scene that has been reimagined in all kinds of different ways, and media, throughout history. The 1954 musical *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* parodies it (in this case, the wives are abducted at an American barn raising). In 1962, as a direct response to the terror of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Pablo Picasso reworked Poussin's version in

one of a series of paintings on the theme with a yet harsher violent edge (see plate 3).

Roman writers were forever debating this part of the story. One dramatist wrote a whole tragedy on the theme, which sadly does not survive beyond a single quotation. They puzzled over its details, wondering, for example, how many young women were taken. Livy does not commit himself, but estimates varied from just thirty to the spuriously precise and implausibly large figure of 683 – apparently the view of the African prince Juba, who was brought to Rome by Julius Caesar and spent many of his early years there studying all kinds of learned topics, from Roman history to Latin grammar. More than anything else, though, it was the apparent criminality and violence of the incident that preoccupied them. This occasion was, after all, the very first Roman marriage, and it was where Roman scholars looked when they wanted to explain puzzling features or phrases in traditional



8. This Roman silver coin, of 89 BCE, shows two of Rome's first citizens carrying off two of the Sabine women. The name of the man responsible for minting the coin, almost legible underneath the scene, was Lucius Titurius Sabinus – which presumably accounts for his choice of design.

On the other side is the head of the Sabine king, Titus Tatius.

wedding ceremonies; the celebratory shout 'O *Talassio*', for example, was said to come from the name of one of the young Romans at the event. Was the inevitable implication that their institution of marriage originated in rape? Where did the dividing line fall between abduction and rape? What did the occasion say, more generally, about the belligerence of Rome?

Livy defends the early Romans. He insists that they seized only unmarried women; this was the origin of marriage, not of adultery. And by stressing the idea that the Romans did not *choose* the women but took them at random, he argues that they were resorting to a necessary expedient for the future of their community, which was followed by loving talk and promises of affection from the men to their new brides. He also presents the Roman action as a response to the unreasonable behaviour of the city's neighbours. The Romans, he explains, had first done the correct thing, by asking the surrounding peoples for a treaty which would have given them the right to marry each other's daughters. Livy explicitly – and wildly anachronistically – refers here to the legal right of *conubium*, or 'intermarriage', which much later was a regular part of Rome's alliances with other states. The Romans turned to violence only when that request was unreasonably rebuffed. That is to say, this was another case of a 'just war'.

Others presented it differently. Some detected right at the origin of the city all the telltale signs of later Roman belligerence. The conflict, they argued, was unprovoked, and the fact that the Romans took only thirty women (if thirty it was) demonstrates that war, not marriage, was uppermost in their minds. Sallust gives a hint of this view. At one point in his *History of Rome* (a more general treatment than his *War against Catiline*, surviving only in scattered quotations in other authors), he imagines a letter – and it is only *imagined* – supposedly written by one of Rome's fiercest enemies. It complains about the predatory behaviour of the Romans throughout their history: 'From the very beginning they have possessed nothing except what they have

stolen: their home, *their wives*, their lands, their empire.' Perhaps the only way out was to blame it all on the gods. What else could you expect, another Roman writer suggested, when Romulus' father was Mars, the god of war?

The poet 'Ovid' – Publius Ovidius Naso, to give him his Roman name – took a different line again. Roughly Livy's contemporary, he was as subversive as Livy was conventional – ending up banished in 8 CE, partly for the offence caused by his witty poem, *Love Lessons*, about how to pick up a partner. In this he turns Livy's story of the abduction on its head and presents the incident as a primitive model of flirtation: erotic, not expedient. Ovid's Romans start by trying to 'spot the girl they each fancy most' and go for her with 'lustful hands' once the signal is given. Soon they are whispering sweet nothings in the ears of their prey, whose obvious terror only enhances their sex appeal. Festivals and entertainments, as the poet wickedly reflects, have always been good places to find a girl, from the earliest days of Rome. Or to put it another way, what a great idea Romulus had for rewarding his loyal soldiers. 'I'll sign up,' Ovid jokes, 'if you give me that kind of pay.'

The girls' parents, so the usual story has it, certainly did not find the abduction either funny or flirtatious. They went to war with the Romans for the return of their daughters. The Romans easily defeated the Latins but not the Sabines, and the conflict dragged on. It was at this point that Romulus' men came under heavy attack in their new city and he was forced to call on Jupiter Stator to stop the Romans from simply running for their lives, as Cicero reminded his audience – without reminding them that the whole war was over stolen women. The hostilities were only halted in the end thanks to the women themselves, who were now content with their lot as Roman wives and mothers. They bravely entered the field of battle and begged their husbands on one side and fathers on the other to stop the fighting. 'We'll better die ourselves,' they explained, 'than live without either of you, as widows or as orphans.'

Their intervention worked. Not only was peace brought about, but Rome was said to have become a joint Roman–Sabine town, a single community, under the shared rule of Romulus and the Sabine king Titus Tatius. Shared, that is, until a few years later, when, in the kind of violent death that became one of the trademarks of Roman power politics, Tatius was murdered in a nearby town during a riot that was partly of his own making. Romulus became the sole ruler again, the first king of Rome, with a reign of more than thirty years.

Brother versus brother, outsiders versus insiders

Not far under the surface of these stories lie some of the most important themes of later Roman history, as well as some of the deepest Roman cultural anxieties. They have a lot to tell us about Roman values and preoccupations, or at least about the preoccupations of those Romans with time, money and freedom to spare; cultural anxieties are often a privilege of the rich. One theme, as we have just seen, was the nature of Roman marriage. Just how brutal was it destined to be, given its origins? Another, glimpsed already in the words of the Sabine women who were trying to reconcile their warring fathers and husbands, was civil war.

One of the big puzzles about this foundation legend is its claim that two founders were involved, Romulus and Remus. Modern historians have floated all kinds of solutions to explain the apparently redundant twin. Perhaps it points to some basic duality in Roman culture, between different classes of citizen or different ethnic groups. Or maybe it reflects the fact that later there were always two consuls in Rome. Or perhaps deeper mythic structures are involved, and Romulus and Remus are some version of the divine twins that are found in various corners of world mythology, from Germany to Vedic India, including in the biblical story of Cain and Abel. But whatever solution we

choose (and most modern speculation has not been very convincing), an even bigger puzzle is that fact that one of the founding twins really was redundant – since Remus was killed by Romulus, or in other versions by one of his henchmen, on the very first day of the city.

For many Romans, who did not sanitise the story under the label of ‘myth’ or ‘legend’, this was the most unpalatable aspect of the foundation. It seems to have made Cicero so uncomfortable that, in his own account of Rome’s origin in *On the State*, he does not mention it: Remus appears at the start, to be exposed with Romulus, but then just fades out of the tale. Another writer – the historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a resident of Rome in the first century BCE but usually called after his home town on the coast of modern Turkey – chose to depict Romulus as inconsolable at the death of Remus (‘he lost the will to live’). Yet another, known to us only as Egnatius, had a bolder way of getting round the problem. The only thing recorded about this Egnatius is that he overturned the story of the murder entirely and asserted that Remus survived to a ripe old age, actually outliving his twin.

It was a desperate, and no doubt unconvincing, attempt to escape the bleak message of the story: that fratricide was hard-wired into Roman politics and that the dreadful bouts of civil conflict that repeatedly blighted Rome’s history from the sixth century BCE on (the assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE being only one example) were somehow predestined. For what city, founded on the murder of brother by brother, could ever escape the murder of citizen by citizen? The poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus (‘Horace’) was just one writer of many who answered that question in the obvious way. Writing around 30 BCE, in the aftermath of the decade of fighting that followed Caesar’s death, he lamented: ‘Bitter fate pursues the Romans, and the crime of a brother’s murder, ever since the blood of blameless Remus was spilt onto the ground to be a curse on his descendants.’ Civil war, we might say, was in the Roman genes.

To be sure, Romulus could be, and often was, paraded as a heroic founding father. His unease about the fate of Remus did not prevent Cicero from trying to take over Romulus' mantle in his clash with Catiline. And, despite the shadow of the murder, images of the suckling twins were found all over the ancient Roman world: from the capital itself – where there was once a statue group of them in the Forum and another on the Capitoline Hill – to the far-flung parts of the empire. In fact, when the people of the Greek island of Chios wanted to demonstrate their allegiance to Rome in the second century BCE, one of the things they decided to do was to erect a monument depicting, as they put it, 'the birth of Romulus, the founder of Rome, and his brother Remus'. The monument does not survive. But we know about it because the Chians recorded their decision on a marble plaque, which does. All the same, there remained a definite moral, and political, edginess to the character of Romulus.

Edgy in a different way was the idea of the asylum, and the welcome, that Romulus gave to all comers – foreigners, criminals and runaways – in finding citizens for his new town. There were positive



9. Romulus and Remus reached the furthest corners of the Roman Empire.

This mosaic of the fourth century CE was found at Aldborough in the north of England. The wolf is an engagingly jolly creature. The twins, apparently floating perilously in mid air, seem as much an afterthought as the Renaissance additions in the Capitoline group.

aspects to this. In particular, it reflected Roman political culture's extraordinary openness and willingness to incorporate outsiders, which set it apart from every other ancient Western society that we know. No ancient Greek city was remotely as incorporating as this; Athens in particular rigidly restricted access to citizenship. This is not a tribute to any 'liberal' temperament of the Romans in the modern sense of the word. They conquered vast swathes of territory in Europe and beyond, sometimes with terrible brutality; and they were often xenophobic and dismissive of people they called 'barbarians'. Yet, in a process unique in any pre-industrial empire, the inhabitants of those conquered territories, 'provinces' as Romans called them, were gradually given full Roman citizenship, and the legal rights and protections that went with it. That culminated in 212 CE (where my SPQR ends), when the emperor Caracalla made every free inhabitant of the empire a Roman citizen.

Even before then, the elite of the provinces had entered the political hierarchy of the capital, in large numbers. The Roman senate gradually became what we might now describe as a decidedly multicultural body, and the full list of Roman emperors contains many whose origins lay outside Italy: Caracalla's father, Septimius Severus, was the first emperor from Roman territory in Africa; Trajan and Hadrian, who reigned half a century earlier, had come from the Roman province of Spain. When in 48 CE the emperor Claudius – whose avuncular image owes more to Robert Graves' novel *I, Claudius* than to real life – was arguing to a slightly reluctant senate that citizens from Gaul should be allowed to become senators, he spent some time reminding the meeting that Rome had been open to foreigners from the beginning. The text of his speech, including some of the heckling that apparently even an emperor had to endure, was inscribed on bronze and put on display in the province, in what is now the city of Lyon, where it still survives. Claudius, it seems, did not get the chance that Cicero had to make adjustments for publication.

There was a similar process with slavery. Roman slavery was in some respects as brutal as Roman methods of military conquest. But for many Roman slaves, particularly those working in urban domestic contexts rather than toiling in the fields or mines, it was not necessarily a life sentence. They were regularly given their freedom, or they bought it with cash they had managed to save up; and if their owner was a Roman citizen, then they also gained full Roman citizenship, with almost no disadvantages as against those who were freeborn. The contrast with classical Athens is again striking: there, very few slaves were freed, and those who were certainly did not gain Athenian citizenship in the process, but went into a form of stateless limbo. This practice of emancipation – or manumission, to follow the Latin term – was such a distinctive feature of Roman culture that outsiders at the time remarked upon it and saw it as a powerful factor in Rome's success. As one king of Macedon observed in the third century BCE, it was in this way that 'the Romans have enlarged their country.' The scale was so great that some historians reckon that, by the second century CE, the majority of the free citizen population of the city of Rome had slaves somewhere in their ancestry.

The story of Romulus' asylum clearly points to this openness, suggesting that the diverse make-up of Rome was a characteristic that went back to its origins. There were insiders who echoed the view of the king of Macedon that Romulus' policy of inclusiveness was an important part of the city's success; and for them the asylum was something to be proud of. But there were also dissenting voices that stressed a far less flattering side to the story. It was not only some of Rome's enemies who saw the irony of an empire that traced its descent back to the criminals and riff-raff of Italy. Some Romans did too. In the late first or early second century CE, the satiric poet 'Juvenal' – Decimus Junius Juvenalis – who loved to pour scorn on Roman pretensions, lambasted the snobbery that was another side of life at Rome, and he ridiculed those aristocrats who boasted of a

family tree going back centuries. He ends one of his poems with a sideswipe at Rome's origins. What are all these pretensions based on, anyway? Rome was from its very beginning a city made up of slaves and runaways ('Whoever your earliest ancestor was, he was either a shepherd or something I'd rather not mention'). Cicero may have been making a similar point when he joked in a letter to his friend Atticus about the 'the crap' or 'the dregs' of Romulus. He was poking fun at one of his contemporaries, who, he said, addressed the senate as if he were living 'in the *Republic* of Plato', referring to the philosopher's ideal state – 'when in fact he is in the *faex* (crap) of Romulus.'

In short, Romans could always see themselves following in Romulus' footsteps, for better or worse. When Cicero gestured to Romulus in his speech against Catiline, it was more than a self-aggrandising appeal to Rome's founding father (though it was certainly that in part). It was also an appeal to a story that prompted all kinds of discussion and debate among his contemporaries about who the Romans really were, what Rome stood for and where its divisions lay.

History and myth

The footsteps of Romulus were imprinted on the Roman landscape. In Cicero's day, you could do more than visit Romulus' Temple of Jupiter Stator: you could enter the cave where the wolf was supposed to have cared for the baby twins, and you could see the tree, replanted in the Forum, at which the boys were said to have washed up from the river. You could even admire Romulus' own house, a small wood-and-thatch hut where the founder was supposed to have lived, on the Palatine Hill: a visible slice of primitive Rome in what had become a sprawling metropolis. This was, of course, a fabrication, as one visitor at the end of the first century BCE half hinted: 'they add nothing to it to make it more revered,' he explained, 'but if any part of it is

damaged, by bad weather or old age, they make it good and restore it as far as possible to what it was before'. No certain archaeological traces of the hut have been found, unsurprisingly, given its flimsy construction. But it survived in some form, as a memorial to the city's origins, until at least the fourth century CE, when it was mentioned in a list of notable landmarks in Rome.

These physical 'remains' – temple, fig tree and carefully patched-up hut – were part and parcel of Romulus' status as an historical character. As we have seen, Roman writers were not gullible dupes, and they queried many details of the traditional stories even while retelling them (the role of the wolf, the divine ancestry and so forth). But they expressed no doubt that Romulus had once existed, that he had made crucial decisions that governed the future development of Rome, such as the selection of the city's site, and that he had more or less single-handedly invented some of its defining institutions. The senate itself, according to some accounts, was the creation of Romulus, as was the ceremony of 'triumph', the Roman victory parade that regularly followed the city's biggest (and bloodiest) successes in war. When, at the end of the first century BCE, a monumental list of all the Roman generals who had ever celebrated a triumph was inscribed on a series of marble panels in the Forum, Romulus headed the roster. 'Romulus, the king, son of Mars,' ran that first entry, 'year one, on 1 March, for a victory over the people of Caenina', commemorating his speedy defeat of one nearby Latin town whose young women had been stolen – and not admitting a glimmer of public scepticism about his divine parenthood.

Roman scholars worked hard to define Romulus' achievements and to reach an accurate chronology of the earliest phases of Rome. One of the liveliest controversies of Cicero's day was the question of when exactly the city was founded. Precisely how old was Rome? Learned minds ingeniously counted back in time from the Roman dates they did know to earlier dates they did not and tried to synchronise events in Rome with the chronology of Greek history. In particular they

tried to match up their history with the regular four-year cycles of the Olympic Games, which apparently offered a fixed and authentic time frame – although, as is now recognised, this was itself partly the product of earlier ingenious speculation. It was a tricky and highly specialised debate. But gradually the different views coalesced around the middle of what we call the eighth century BCE, as scholarly opinion reached the conclusion that Greek and Roman history 'began' at roughly the same time. What became the canonical date, and one still quoted in many modern textbooks, partly goes back to a scholarly treatise, the *Book of Chronology*, by none other than Cicero's friend and correspondent Atticus. It does not survive, but it is supposed to have pinpointed Romulus' foundation of the city to the third year of the sixth cycle of Olympic Games; that is to say, 753 BCE. Other calculations narrowed this down further, to 21 April, the date on which modern Romans still, to this day, celebrate the birthday of their city, with some rather tacky parades and mock gladiatorial spectacles.

There is often a fuzzy boundary between myth and history (think of King Arthur or Pocahontas), and, as we shall see, Rome is one of those cultures where that boundary is particularly blurred. But despite all the historical acumen that Romans brought to bear on this story, there is every reason for us to see it, in our terms, as more or less pure myth. For a start, there was almost certainly no such thing as a founding moment of the city of Rome. Very few towns or cities are founded at a stroke, by a single individual. They are usually the product of gradual changes in population, in patterns of settlement, social organisation and sense of identity. Most 'foundations' are retrospective constructions, projecting back into the distant past a microcosm, or imagined primitive version, of the later city. The name 'Romulus' is itself a give-away. Although Romans usually assumed that he had lent his name to his newly established city, we are now fairly confident that the opposite was the case: 'Romulus' was an imaginative construction out of 'Roma'. 'Romulus' was merely the archetypal 'Mr Rome'.

Besides, the writers and scholars of the first century BCE who have bequeathed to us their version of Rome's origins had not much more direct evidence of the earliest phases of Rome's history than modern writers have, and in some ways perhaps less. There were no surviving documents or archives. The few early inscriptions on stone, valuable as they are, were not as early as Roman scholars often imagined, and, as we shall discover at the end of this chapter, they sometimes hopelessly misunderstood early Latin. True, they had access to a few earlier historical accounts that no longer survive. But the earliest of these were composed in about 200 BCE, and there was still a great chasm between that date and the city's origins, which could be bridged only with the help of a very mixed bag of stories, songs, popular dramatic performances and the shifting and sometimes self-contradictory amalgam that makes up oral tradition – constantly adjusted in the telling



10. Found in Etruscan territory this engraved mirror (the reflecting face was on the other side) appears to show some version of the suckling of Romulus and Remus by the wolf. If so, dating to the fourth century BCE, it would be one of the earliest pieces of evidence for the story. But some, perhaps over-sceptical, modern scholars have preferred to see here a scene from Etruscan myth, or a pair of infinitely more shadowy and mysterious Roman deities, the twin 'Lares Praestites'.

and retelling to changing circumstances and audiences. There are a few fleeting glimpses of the Romulus story back to the fourth century BCE, but then, unless we bring the bronze wolf back into the picture, the trail stops.

Of course, to put it another way, it is precisely because the story of Romulus is mythic rather than historical, in the narrow sense, that it encapsulates so sharply some of the central cultural questions of ancient Rome and is so important for understanding Roman history, in its wider definition. The Romans had not, as they assumed, simply inherited the priorities and concerns of their founder. Quite the reverse: over centuries of retelling and then rewriting the story, they themselves had constructed and reconstructed the founding figure of Romulus as a powerful symbol of their preferences, debates, ideologies and anxieties. It was not, in other words, to go back to Horace, that civil war was the curse and destiny of Rome from its birth; Rome had projected its obsessions with the apparently unending cycle of civil conflict back onto its founder.

There was always the possibility too of adjusting or reconfiguring the narrative, even when it had reached a relatively fixed literary form. We have already spotted, for example, how Cicero chose to draw a veil over the murder of Remus, and Egnatius to deny it entirely. But Livy's account of the death of Romulus gives a vivid glimpse of how the story of Rome's origins could be made to resonate directly with recent events. The king, he explains, had ruled for thirty years when suddenly in a violent storm he was covered by a cloud and disappeared. The sorrowing Romans soon concluded that he had been snatched from them to become a god – crossing the boundary between human and divine in a way that Rome's polytheistic religious system sometimes allowed (even if it seems faintly silly to us). But some people at the time, Livy concedes, told a different story: that the king had been assassinated, hacked to death by the senators. Livy did not entirely invent either of these parts of his plot: Cicero, for example, had earlier

reported Romulus' apotheosis, albeit with a degree of scepticism; and an overambitious politician in the 60s BCE was once threatened with 'the fate of Romulus', and that, presumably, did not mean becoming a god. But writing just a few decades after the murder of Julius Caesar, who was both hacked to death by senators and then given the status of a god (ending up with his own temple in the Forum), Livy offers a particularly loaded and emphatic account. To miss the echoes of Caesar here would be to miss the point.

Aeneas and more

The story of Romulus and Remus is by turns intriguing, puzzling and hugely revealing of big Roman concerns, at least among the elite. And, to judge from the designs on coins or the themes of popular art, knowledge of the stories was widespread – even if hungry peasants did not spend much time worrying about the niceties of the Rape of the Sabines. But the extra complication, to be added to this already complex picture of the legend of Rome's origins, is that the story of Romulus and Remus was not the city's only foundation story. There were several others that existed side by side. These included minor variants on standard themes, as well as alternatives that seem to us frankly idiosyncratic. One Greek idea, for example, brought the renowned Odysseus and echoes of Homer's *Odyssey* into the story by suggesting that Rome's real founding father was a man called Romus, the result of Odysseus' affair with the witch Circe, whose magical island was sometimes imagined to lie just off the coast of Italy. This was a neat, although implausible, bit of cultural imperialism that gave Rome a Greek parentage.

The other legend that was equally firmly embedded in Roman history and literature is the story of the Trojan hero Aeneas, who escaped from the city of Troy after the mythical war between Greeks

and Trojans that is the backdrop of Homer's *Iliad*. After leading his son by the hand and carrying his elderly father from the burning ruins, he eventually made his way to Italy, where his destiny was to refound his native city on Italian soil. He brought with him the traditions of his homeland and even some precious talismans rescued from the destruction.

There are as many puzzles, problems and ambiguities in this story as in the tale of Romulus, and unresolved questions about where,



11. A fourth-century CE mosaic, from the floor of a bath-suite at Low Ham Roman villa in the south of England, was decorated with a series of scenes from Virgil's *Aeneid*: Aeneas arriving in Carthage, Dido and Aeneas out hunting and here the passion of the Carthaginian queen and the Trojan hero rendered as succinctly as could be.

when and why it originated. These are made even more complicated, as well as enormously enriched, thanks to the *Aeneid*, Virgil's great twelve-book poem on the theme, written during the rule of the first Roman emperor, Augustus, and one of the most widely read works of literature ever. This has become *the* story of Aeneas. And it has bequeathed to the Western world some of its most powerful literary and artistic highlights, including the tragic love story of Aeneas and Dido, the queen of Carthage, where Aeneas washes ashore on his long journey from Troy (on the coast of modern Turkey) to Italy. When Aeneas resolves to follow his destiny and leave for Italy, abandoning Dido, she commits suicide by throwing herself on a burning pyre. 'Remember me, remember me', runs her haunting aria in Henry Purcell's seventeenth-century operatic version of the theme. The problem is that it is often hard to know which elements of the story we owe to Virgil (including, almost certainly, most of the encounter with Dido) and which are part of a more traditional tale.

There is no doubt that the figure of Aeneas as the founder of Rome featured in literature – and made its mark on the landscape – well before the first century BCE. There are passing references to him in that role in Greek writers of the fifth century BCE; and in the second century BCE, ambassadors from the Greek island of Delos appealing for an alliance with Rome seem to have taken care to remind the Romans, as part of their pitch, that Aeneas had stopped off at Delos on his journey west. In Italy, Dionysius of Halicarnassus was convinced that he had seen the tomb of Aeneas, or at least an ancient memorial to him, at the town of Lavinium, not far from Rome: 'well worth seeing,' he observed. There was also a popular story that among the precious objects kept in the temple of the goddess Vesta in the Roman Forum – where virgin priestesses, like Rhea Silvia of the Romulus legend, guarded a sacred flame that was supposed never to be extinguished – was the very statue of the goddess Pallas Athena that Aeneas had brought from Troy. Or so one Roman tale had it. There were various

rival candidates for rescuing this famous image, and any number of cities all over the Greek world claimed to possess the real thing.

It goes without saying that the story of Aeneas is as much a myth as the story of Romulus. But Roman scholars puzzled over the relationship of these two foundation legends and expended enormous amounts of energy trying to bring them into historical alignment. Was Romulus the son, or maybe the grandson, of Aeneas? And if Romulus had founded Rome, how could Aeneas also have done so? The biggest difficulty was that there was an uncomfortable gap between the eighth-century BCE date that the Romans assigned to the origins of their city and the twelfth-century BCE date that they commonly gave to the fall of Troy (also taken as an historical event). By the first century BCE some sort of coherence was reached by constructing a complicated family tree, which linked Aeneas and Romulus, and at the 'right' dates: Aeneas became seen as the founder not of Rome but of Lavinium; his son Ascanius was said to have founded Alba Longa – the city from which Romulus and Remus were later cast out before they founded Rome; and a shadowy and, even by Roman standards, flagrantly fictional dynasty of Alban kings was constructed to bridge the gap between Ascanius and the magic date of 753 BCE. This is the version that Livy endorses.

The central claim of the story of Aeneas is one that echoes, or rather exaggerates, the underlying theme of Romulus' asylum. Where Romulus welcomed all comers to his new city, the story of Aeneas goes further, to claim that the 'Romans' really were originally 'foreigners'. It is a paradox of national identity, which stands in glaring contrast to the foundation myths of many ancient Greek cities, such as Athens, which saw their original population as springing miraculously from the very soil of their native land. And other variant accounts of Rome's origins repeatedly emphasise that foreignness. In fact, in one episode of the *Aeneid*, the hero visits the site of the future city of Rome and finds it already settled by primitive predecessors of the Romans. And who

are they? They are a group of settlers under a certain King Evander, an exile from the land of Arcadia in the Greek Peloponnese. The message is clear: however far back you go, the inhabitants of Rome were always already from somewhere else.

That message is most neatly summed up in a strange etymology recorded by Dionysius, among others. Greek and Roman intellectuals were fascinated by word derivations, which they were convinced gave the key not just to the origin of the word but also to its essential meaning. They were sometimes correct in their analysis, and sometimes extravagantly wrong. Their mistakes are often revealing, as in this case. Dionysius, at an early point in his history, reflects on yet another group of even more primitive inhabitants of the site that became Rome: the *Aborigines*. The derivation of this word should have been blindingly obvious: these were the people who had been there 'from the beginning' (*ab origine*). Dionysius, to be fair, does raise that explanation as a possibility, but – like others – he gives equal, or more, weight to the hugely improbable notion that the word derived not from *origo* but from the Latin *errare* ('to wander') and had originally been spelled *Aberrigines*. These people were, in other words, he writes, 'vagabonds of no fixed abode'.

The idea that any serious ancient scholars could turn a blind eye to the obviously correct etymology that was staring them in the face in favour of a silly idea that derived *Aborigines* from 'to wander' via a tendentious alternative spelling is not a reflection of their obtuseness. It shows just how ingrained the idea was that 'Rome' had always been an ethnically fluid concept, that the 'Romans' had always been on the move.

Digging up early Rome

The many stories of Romulus and the other founders tell us a good deal about how the Romans saw their city, their values and their failings.

They show too how Roman scholars debated the past and studied their history. But they tell us nothing, or at most very little indeed, about what they claim to: that is, what earliest Rome was like, the processes by which it became an urban community and when. One fact is obvious. Rome was already a very old city when Cicero was consul in 63 BCE. But, if there is no surviving literature from the founding period and we cannot rely on the legends, how can we access any information about the origins of Rome? Is there any way of throwing light on the early years of the little town by the Tiber that grew into a world empire?

However hard we try, it is impossible to construct a coherent narrative that could replace the legends of Romulus or Aeneas. It is also very hard, despite many confident assertions to the contrary, to pin precise dates onto the earliest phases of Roman history. But we can begin to get a much better idea of the general context in which the city developed and enjoy a few surprisingly vivid (and some even more tantalisingly elusive) glimpses into that world.

One way of doing this is by turning away from the foundation stories and seeking out clues lurking in the Latin language or in later Roman institutions that might point back to earliest Rome. The key here is what is often simply, and wrongly, termed the 'conservatism' of Roman culture. Rome was no more conservative than nineteenth-century Britain. In both places, radical innovation thrived in dialogue with all kinds of ostensibly conservative traditions and rhetoric. Yet Roman culture *was* marked by a reluctance ever entirely to discard its past practices, tending instead to preserve all kinds of 'fossils' – in religious rituals or politics, or whatever – even when their original significance had been lost. As one modern writer has nicely put it, the Romans were rather like people who acquire all kinds of brand-new kitchen equipment but can't ever bear to throw away their old gadgets, which continue to clutter up the place even though they are never used. Scholars, both modern and ancient, have often suspected

that some of these fossils, or old gadgets, may be important evidence for the conditions of earliest Rome.

One favourite example is a ritual that took place in the city in December each year, known as the Septimontium ('Seven hills'). What happened at this celebration is not at all clear, but one learned Roman noted that 'Septimontium' was the name of Rome before it became 'Rome', and another gave a list of the 'hills' (*montes*) involved in the festival: Palatium, Velia, Fagutal, Subura, Cermalus, Oppius, Caelius and Cispius (Map 2). The fact that there are eight names suggests that something has got confused somewhere along the line. But more to the point, the oddity of this list (Palatium and Cermalus are both parts of the hill generally known as the Palatine), combined with the idea that 'Septimontium' was the predecessor of 'Rome', has raised the possibility that these names might reflect the sites of separate villages that preceded the fully fledged town. And the absence of a couple of obvious hills from the list, Quirinal and Viminal, has tempted some historians to go even further. Roman writers regularly referred to both of those hills as *colles* rather than the more usual Latin *montes* (the meaning of the two words is more or less identical). Does that distinction point to two separate linguistic communities somewhere in Rome's early history? Could we possibly be dealing – to press the argument even further – with some version of the two groups reflected in the story of Romulus, the Sabines associated with the *colles*, the Romans with the *montes*?

Just possibly we could. There is little doubt that the Septimontium is related in some way to Rome's distant past. But in exactly what way, and quite how distant, is very hard to know. The arguments are no firmer than I have made them seem, probably even less so. Why, after all, should we trust that learned Roman's claim that Septimontium was the early name of the city? It was just as likely a desperate guess, to explain an archaic ceremony that baffled him almost as much as it does us. And the insistence on two communities seems suspiciously

driven by a desire to rescue at least some part of the legend of Romulus for 'history'.

Much more tangible is the evidence of archaeology. Dig down deep in the city of Rome, below the visible ancient monuments, and a few traces of a much earlier, primitive settlement, or settlements, remain. Beneath the Forum itself lie the remains of an early cemetery, which caused tremendous excitement when they were first unearthed, at the start of the twentieth century. Some of the dead had been cremated, their ashes placed in simple urns alongside jugs and vases which originally contained food and drink (one man had been given little quantities of fish, mutton and pork – and possibly some porridge). Others were buried, sometimes in simple oak coffins made by splitting a trunk and hollowing it out. One girl, about two years old, had been put in her grave wearing a beaded dress and an ivory bracelet. Similar finds have been made in other places all over the ancient city. Far below one of the later grand houses on the Palatine Hill, for example, lay the ashes of a young man, interred with a miniature spear, maybe a symbol of how he had spent his life.

The dead and buried are often much more prominent than the living in the archaeological record. But cemeteries imply the existence of a community, and traces of that are presumably to be found in the groups of huts whose faint outlines have been detected under various parts of the later city, including on the Palatine. We have little idea of their character (beyond their construction in wood, clay and thatch), still less of the lifestyle they supported. But we can fill in some of the gaps if we look just outside Rome. One of the best preserved, and most carefully excavated, of these early structures was found at Fidenae, a few miles north of the city, in the 1980s. It is a rectangular building, some 6 by 5 metres, made of wood (oak and elm) and rammed earth – so-called *pisé de terre* construction, still in use up to the present day – with a rough and ready portico around it, formed by the overhanging roof. Inside was a central hearth, some large pottery storage

jars (plus a smaller one, which seems to have been a container for potting clay) and traces of some fairly predictable foodstuffs (cereals and beans) and domestic animals (sheep, goats, cows and pigs). The most surprising discovery amid the debris was the remains of a cat, which died (perhaps it was tethered) in a savage fire that eventually destroyed the building. Its claim to fame now is as the earliest known domestic cat in Italy.

There are vivid glimpses of human and other life here, from the little girl laid out in her grave in her best dress to the poor 'mouser' whom no one let off his leash when the fire blazed. The question is what those glimpses add up to. The archaeological remains certainly demonstrate that there is a long and rich prehistory behind the ancient Rome we see, but quite how long is another matter.

Part of the problem is the conditions of excavation in the city itself. The site of Rome has been so intensively built on for centuries that we find these traces of early occupation only in spots that happen not to have been disturbed. The foundations dug in the first and second centuries CE for the vast marble temples in the Forum obliterated much of what then lay beneath the surface; the cellars of Renaissance



12. A typical cremation urn from the early cemeteries of Rome and the surrounding area. In the form of a simple hut, these houses for the dead are one of the best guides we have to the appearance of the accommodation for the living.

palazzi cut through even more in other parts of Rome. So we have only tiny snapshots, never the big picture. This is archaeology at its most difficult, and – although new fragments of evidence emerge all the time – its interpretation, and reinterpretation, is almost always contested and often controversial. For example, there is an ongoing debate about whether the small pieces of wattle and daub found in excavations in the Forum in the mid twentieth century indicate that there was an early hut settlement there too – or whether they were inadvertently introduced as part of the rubble used a few centuries later to provide a new raised surface for the area. It has to be said that, though fine for a cemetery, this would have been a rather damp and marshy place for a village.

Precise dating is even more contentious; hence my intentionally vague use of the word 'early' over the last few pages. It cannot be stressed enough that there is no certain independent date for any of the archaeological material from earliest Rome or the area round about, and that arguments still rage about the age of almost every major find. It has taken decades of work over the past century or so – using such diagnostics as wheel-made pottery (assumed to be later than handmade), the occasional presence in graves of Greek ceramics (whose dating is better, but still not perfectly understood) and careful comparison from site to site – to produce a rough chronological scheme covering the period from around 1000 to 600 BCE.

On that basis, the earliest burials in the Forum would be around 1000 BCE, the huts on the Palatine around 750–700 BCE (excitingly close to 753 BCE, as many have observed). But even these dates are far from certain. Recent scientific methods – including 'radiocarbon dating', which calculates the age of any organic material by measuring the residual amount of its radioactive carbon isotope – have suggested that they are all too 'young', by as much as a hundred years. The hut at Fidenae, for example, was dated around the middle of the eighth century BCE according to traditional archaeological criteria, but that

is pushed back towards the end of the ninth century BCE if we follow the radiocarbon. Currently, dates are in flux, even more than usual; if anything, Rome appears to be getting older.

What is certain is that by the sixth century BCE Rome was an urban community, with a centre and some public buildings. Before that, for the earliest phases, we have enough scattered finds from what is known as the Middle Bronze Age (between about 1700 and 1300 BCE) to suggest that some people were then living on the site, rather than just 'passing through'. Over the period in between, we can be fairly confident that larger villages grew up, probably (to judge from what ends up in the graves) with an increasingly wealthy group of elite families; and that at some point these coalesced into the single community whose urban character was clear by the sixth century BCE. We cannot know for sure when the inhabitants of those separate settlements first thought of themselves as a single town. And we have absolutely no idea when they first thought of, and referred to, that town as Rome.

Archaeology is not, however, just about dates and origins. The material dug up in the city, the area around it and even further afield has important things to tell us about the character of Rome's early settlement. First, it had extensive contacts with the outside world. I have already mentioned in passing the ivory bracelet of the little girl in the cemetery and the Greek pottery (made in Corinth or Athens) that turned up in Roman excavations. There are also signs of links with the north, in the form of a few jewels and decorations in imported amber; there is no clue of how these reached central Italy, but they certainly point to contact, direct or indirect, with the Baltic. Early Rome, from almost as far back as we can see it, was well connected, as Cicero hinted when he stressed its strategic location.

Second, there were similarities, and some important differences, between Rome and its neighbours. The Italian peninsula between about 1000 and 600 BCE was extremely mixed. There were many different independent peoples, with many different cultural traditions,

origins and languages. The best documented are the Greek settlements in the south, towns such as Cumae, Tarentum and Naples (Neapolis), founded from the eighth century BCE on by immigrants from some of the major cities in Greece – conventionally known as 'colonies' but not 'colonial' in the modern sense of the word. To all intents and purposes, much of the southern part of the peninsula, and Sicily, was part of the Greek world, with a literate and artistic tradition linked to match. It is no coincidence that some of the earliest specimens of Greek writing to survive, maybe the very earliest, have actually been discovered there. It is much harder to reconstruct the history of any of the other inhabitants of the peninsula: from the Etruscans to the north, through the Latins and Sabines on Rome's doorstep to the south, to the Oscans, who formed the original population of Pompeii, and Samnites beyond them. None of their literature, if they had any, has survived, and for evidence of them we depend entirely on archaeology, on texts inscribed on stone and bronze – sometimes comprehensible, sometimes not – and on Roman accounts written much later, often tinged with Roman supremacy; hence the standard image of the Samnites as tough, barbaric, non-urbanised and dangerously primitive.

What archaeological finds do show, however, is that Rome in its early days was very ordinary indeed. The development, from scattered settlements into an urban community, that we can just about detect in Rome seems to have happened at roughly the same period throughout the neighbouring region to its south. And the material remains in the cemeteries, local pottery and bronze brooches, as well as more exotic imports, are fairly consistent there too. If anything, what has been discovered in Rome is less impressive and less suggestive of wealth than discoveries elsewhere. Nothing has emerged from the city to compare with, for example, the finds from some extraordinary tombs in nearby Praeneste – though that might just be bad luck or, as some archaeologists have suspected, a case of some of the best finds from

the nineteenth-century excavations in Rome having been stolen and directed straight to the antiquities market. One of the questions we shall have to address over the next couple of chapters is: when did Rome cease to be ordinary?

The missing link

The final question for this chapter, however, is whether the archaeological material must remain quite as separate from the mythic traditions of Romulus and Remus as I have presented them. Is it possible to link our investigations into the earliest history of Rome with the stories that the Romans themselves told, or with their elaborate speculations on the city's origins? Can we perhaps find a little more history in the myth?

This is a seductive temptation that has influenced a lot of modern work on early Rome by both historians and archaeologists. We have already spotted the attempt to make the story of the Septimontium reflect the dual nature of the city – Roman and Sabine – which the myth of Romulus emphasises. Recently the discovery of some early earthwork defences at the foot of the Palatine Hill has prompted all kinds of wild speculation that these were the very defences over which Remus jumped, to meet his death, on the city's foundation day. This is archaeological fantasy. There is no doubt that some early earthworks have been discovered, and that in itself is important – though how they relate to the early hut settlement on the top of the Palatine is puzzling. They are nothing whatsoever to do with the non-existent characters Romulus and Remus. And the attempts to 'massage' the dating of the structure, and its associated finds, to end up on 21 April 753 BCE (I am exaggerating only slightly) are special pleading.

There is just one location in the whole of the city Rome where it is possible to link the early material remains directly with the literary

tradition. In so doing, we find not agreement and harmony between the two but a wide and intriguing gap. That location is at one end of the Forum, close to the slopes of the Capitoline Hill, a few minutes' walk from where Cicero attacked Catiline in the Temple of Jupiter Stator, and just next to the main platform (or *rostra*) from which speakers addressed the people. There, before the end of the first century BCE, in the pavement of the Forum was set a series of slabs in distinctively black stone forming a rectangle of roughly 4 by 3.5 metres, marked out with a low stone border.

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the archaeologist Giacomo Boni – a celebrity at the time to rival Heinrich Schliemann, the discoverer of Troy, and with none of the dubious reputation for fraud – excavated below the black stone, where he found the remains of some much earlier structures. These included an altar, part of a large free-standing column and a short stone pillar that is covered in mostly unintelligible early Latin, probably one of the earliest texts in the language that we have. The place had been intentionally buried, and the fill included all kinds of extraordinary as well as everyday finds, from miniature cups, beads and knucklebones to some fine pieces of sixth-century BCE Athenian decorated pottery. The most obvious explanation, to judge from the finds, which seem to include religious dedications, is that this was an early shrine, possibly of the god Vulcan. It was covered over when the Forum was repaved sometime in the first century BCE – but to preserve the memory of the sacred site underneath, the distinctive black stone was laid above.

Later Roman writers were well aware of the black stone and had various ideas about what it signified. 'The black stone,' one wrote, 'marks an unlucky spot.' And they knew that there was something underneath it, going back centuries: not a religious shrine, as archaeologists are now fairly confident it was, but a monument connected with Romulus or his family. Several assumed it was the tomb of Romulus;

others, perhaps worried that, if Romulus had become a god, he should not really have a tomb, thought it was the tomb of Faustulus, the foster father of Romulus and Remus; still others made it the tomb of one of Romulus' comrades, Hostilius, the grandfather of one of the later kings of Rome.

They also knew, whether because they had seen it before it was covered or from hearsay, that there was an inscription down there. Dionysius records two versions of what it was: the epitaph of Hostilius, 'documenting his bravery', or an inscription 'recording his deeds' put up after one of Romulus' victories. But it was certainly neither of those things. Nor was it, as Dionysius claims, 'written in Greek letters': it is bona fide early Latin. But it makes a marvellous example of both how much and how little Roman historians knew about the buried past – and how they so liked to imagine the traces of Romulus still present on, or just below, the surface of their city.



13. A diagram of the remains of the early shrine excavated by Giacomo Boni underneath the black stone in the Forum. On the left is an altar (a squared U-shape structure found elsewhere in Italy at this period). On the right stands what is left of the column, and just visible behind it is the inscribed pillar.

What this text actually says – so far as we can make any sense of it – takes us into the next phase of Roman history and the series of almost equally mythical kings who were supposed to have followed Romulus.