

The Adaptation of Foundation Legend in Ancient Rome

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Abstract

Foundation legends are paramount to understanding the worldview of a culture, whether that culture is alive or dead. These legends speak of virtues valued and boundaries feared, and help both anthropologists and historians view a more fully painted picture of a society. Many foundation legends have survived their cultures, including that of Rome and the tale of brothers Romulus and Remus, descended from Aeneas, twin founders of the great civilization. New scholarship on this famous story has brought to light changes that occurred around the third century BC, including the important and unusual addition and death of the twin Remus. This discovery allows us the rare opportunity to examine how a foundation legend remains fluid throughout the history of its civilization, mutating and adjusting as needed to accommodate for societal changes and worldview adjustments. Using the anthropological insight of Elizabeth Wayland Barber and Paul T. Barber regarding mythology, the sociological view of Emile Durkheim regarding religion, and the groundbreaking scholarship of T.P. Wiseman on the legend itself, this paper will identify changes to the story of Remus and Romulus, and offer an argument that said changes occurred thanks to contemporaneous Roman society's need for a second founder to be legitimized in its foundation legend and, by extension, its civil religion.

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Foundation legends are an integral part of a culture's self-expression. Within their sometimes exceptionally fantastical lines, one can decode the unspoken realities and aspirations of the culture that has borne the legend. In present America, for example, we still consistently see politicians evoking the emotive images of the Founding Fathers and other Revolutionary War-era figures in attempts to connect with potential voters through appealing to this older, "purer" time and place, often simplifying and even manipulating historical reality, depending on the speaker's agenda. This is not a new phenomenon, but is far more difficult to study when dealing with a dead or ancient culture, even one that has left us as rich a legacy as Rome has. Yet recent archaeological evidence has provided a new window through which to analyze the famous foundation legend of Rome, that tale of the descendants of Aeneas and Troy: Remus and Romulus, who together founded the city and established the mores to which the Roman people would strive to hold themselves. The evidence uncovered reinforces the complex reality of foundation legends: that they are not always created by general public and that they are fluid creations which reflect the contemporary culture that created them, rather than tales fixed in stone and only repeated throughout the ages. Quoting Benedict Niese, "A foundation legend 'is the poetic expression of the beliefs, thoughts, and desires of the age that creates it.'"¹

When looking at the legendry of ancient cultures, it is useful to remember the theories on religion of anthropologist Emile Durkheim. While the story of Remus and Romulus may not strike modern readers as "religious," care must be taken to remember that ancient cultures had no concept of the separation of "secular" and "religious" matters. Particularly in Rome, the state religion was as much—if not more—an expression of civil matters as it was a conduit through which to reach the immortal gods. The legend certainly has its connections with the Roman gods and is meant to validate the existence and superiority of Rome in the minds of those gods. Thus, we can analyze it under the lens of religious literature with the reasonable expectation that such a lens will do justice to the legend's original intent. The legend is meant not only as a justification, but also as a system of classification for Romans, something Durkheim wrote was a presupposition for religious beliefs, usually divided in some degree "by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words

¹ T.P. Wiseman, *Remus: A Roman Myth* (Cambridge University Press, 1995). 102.

profane and *sacred*.”² For Durkheim, mythology and religious belief and experience represented the society that created it, becoming a reflective surface upon which boundaries for behavior could be drawn, virtues could be extolled, and reality itself could attempt to be organized and understood³. “In fact, these systematic classifications are the first we meet with in history, and we have just seen that they are modeled upon the social organization, or rather that they have taken the forms of society as their framework... It is because men were organized that they have been able to organize things, for in classifying these latter, they limited themselves to giving them places in the groups they formed themselves.”⁴

Rome’s complex, syncretic worldview comes from a rich lineage of customs tracing to the various hill tribes of prehistoric Italy, and early and detailed interaction with Hellenistic cultures which influenced a great deal of growth and evolution, leading Romans from an agricultural and illiterate state to become one of the greatest empires and military forces the world has ever known. Their worldview is based on a relationship with supernatural gods that inhabit various aspects of natural and man-made things. This relationship was inherited from their Etruscan ancestors, for whom religion had no ties to afterlife salvation or damnation: the world was only a visual representation of a fatalistic cosmic order that could not be swayed or bribed, but only understood through careful observation and interpretation, giving humans some semblance of future expectations, as well as potential to avert disaster.⁵ They did not create elegant backstories for the gods, unlike their Hellenistic counterparts. Roman gods had to be placated with tributes, temples, and sacrifices, to ensure good luck would fall upon the fatherland. The other large aspect of Roman religion is ritual, various forms of which were used to uncover the will of the gods. “Divine will define the scope of human initiatives, but by learning where the boundaries lie, one can determine the field of one’s freedom.”⁶ The drawing of boundaries represents one of the basest components of what we classify as religious behavior, and Rome’s mythology, as well as its history, is rife with this motif. One of the most evocative Roman scenes is the story of Caesar crossing the Rubicon, a transgression that was both

² Emile Durkheim, "The Social as Sacred," in *In Introducing Religion: Readings from the Classic Theorists*, ed. Daniel Pals Pals (Oxford University Press, 2009), 103.

³ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵ Jean-René Jannot, *Religion in Ancient Etruria* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2005). 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

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politically and spiritually significant.⁷ The particular architecture of their temple spaces, also inherited from the Etruscans, uses details that “are deployed in order to articulate difference, this emphasis on the difference between spheres draws attention to the function of a temple as a bridge between spheres.”⁸ Even large-scale areas such as Rome herself were transformed into an expression of sacred space through the ritual of drawing a *pomerium*, a boundary around her walls—a boundary that, to no surprise, plays a major role in at least one version of the Remus and Romulus story.⁹

Rome’s foundation myth had already been altered at least once, tacking on an extended legacy to the Trojan Aeneas with generous use of the *compression effect*,¹⁰ erasing what would have realistically been centuries of distance between him and his great-grandsons Remus and Romulus (presuming, of course, that they all existed in the first place). The great dynasty of early Roman monarchs was begun through Aeneas’ two sons, the noble Numitor and the usurper Amulius.¹¹ Once he had stolen the throne, Amulius forced Numitor’s daughter, Rhea Silva, to serve the gods as a Vestal Virgin and this eliminate the possibility of legitimate competition for the throne. Nevertheless she became pregnant, raped she claimed, by Mars, the god of war and bore twin boys. With resembling elements of many other foundation legends, the babies were put in a basket and thrown into the Tiber River by **Amulius**; however, she survived and ran aground under a fig-tree. A she-wolf found them—a sign of Mars—who nursed them until Faustulus, the shepherd, recovered them. The twins were raised by humble folk, the salt of the earth, and when they came of age, began playing the veritable Robin Hoods by stealing from thieves and distributing the spoils among the poor and the shepherds. Faustulus, who has long known his adopted twins were special and has kept it secret, is forced into desperation when Remus is captured during a raid by Numitor’s men. Faustulus appeals to the exiled king and reveals how he found the twins, making Numitor realize his grandsons had survived the cowardly attempt on their lives. The twins, the shepherds, and Numitor lead a raid on Amulius’ palace; the usurper is

⁷ C. Suetonius Tranquillus, "The Life of Julius Caesar," in *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars* (Project Gutenberg), Chapter XXXI. (accessed 2 Jan 2014)

⁸ Frederick C. Grant, *Ancient Roman Religion* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1957). 9.

⁹ Vedia E. Izzet, "Form and Meaning in Etruscan Ritual Space," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 11, no. 2 (2001): 191.

¹⁰ Paul Barber and Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *When They Severed Earth From Sky: How The Human Mind Shapes Myth* (Princeton University Press, 2006). 129.

¹¹ Jane F. Gardner, *Roman Myths* (University of Texas Press, 1993). 31.

killed, and Numitor reinstates himself as the rightful king.¹² The twins then travel to found a new city, away from the crowded Alba Longa, and choose the area where they had been left to drown.

At this point, the legend begins to show signs of divergence. Most versions agree that a rivalry was lit between the twins over who would be its official founder and give his name to it. They decided to let the gods guide them, and each took positions on separate hills—Romulus on the Palatine, Remus on the Aventine—to participate in ritual augury, observation of bird flight. The results however were unclear; both brothers claimed the auspicious sign. In some versions, a fight erupts when Remus accuses his brother of cheating, enraging Romulus' followers. Both Remus and Faustulus are killed in the scuffle. Another version more commonly told is that Remus, having lost the augury contest, nurse's resentment, and when Romulus begins building trenches that will become city walls, Remus taunts his workmen that the trench is too narrow to keep enemies out. Angered, Romulus "orders all his 'citizens' to take vengeance on anyone who crosses [the trench]."¹³ However, Remus persists in his antagonism, jumping over the trench to demonstrate its fault. A workman named Celar murders Remus with a spade, as Romulus had ordered.

Through deconstruction, we can see the reflection of the Roman worldview looking back at us through the story's components. There is the familiar story of half-divine sons born to virgin mothers through mysterious means, a foretelling for a great destiny. Their placement in a basket to be carried away by the river, like many other legendary ancient heroes, represents their unique journey to rediscover inherent divinity. That it was Mars, the god of war, who both fathered these twins and rightly kept them alive through his she-wolf representative, shows the value that Rome sees in martial domination, a value they would use to conquer the known world. The twins are a transformation into a new society, nourished by but abandoning the early agricultural beginnings of the ancient Italian tribes (Faustulus in the myth), as well as the brutality of the monarchy (Amulius and his illegitimate reign).

There are further oddities that represent the altering of this myth to fit a different era of time in Roman society. These elements have been the product of scholarship in recent years, and all eyes are on Remus. The

¹² Ibid., 27 - 29.

¹³ Wiseman, *Remus*: 9.

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questions raised are: Why are the founders of Rome twins? From where did the name Remus come? Moreover, why include him in the legend, only to have him killed?

Some scholars posit that Romulus was the sole founder of Rome at some point in the history of the legend's telling. Based on the most complete archaeological evidence available at the time of writing, we find no mention of the twins Remus and Romulus until the third century BC. An Etruscan mirror from the fourth century does show a familiar tableau of twins suckling from a she-wolf, but no other elements of the tableau lend themselves to Remus and Romulus. Instead, it seems to be illustrating an earlier story, that of the Lares Praestites, twin guardians of Rome, which could very well have been a precursor legend that was itself manipulated in later times¹⁴. "For if the [tableau of] twins suckled by the she-wolf could be recognized about 340 BC as the Lares Praestites, then it is hard to imagine that the Remus and Romulus story yet existed. As Albert Schweigler suggested long ago, that story may have been created out of pre-existing myth of Lara and the Lares."¹⁵

If we use this evidence as our best choice for dating, it suggests Remus and Romulus were brought into mythology in the third century BC. If this dating is correct, the most likely explanation for their creation is to account for the tumultuous political climate of the time. Following the destruction of the monarchy system, the elite patrician class ruled Rome until 367 BC, when reform allowed the plebeian class to assert (ideally) equally political power alongside the patricians. "The patricians, self-defined as the ruling aristocracy of Rome, had been forced to share power with their plebeian rivals on exactly equal terms."¹⁶ It is then through the pre-literate format of plays and dramas—a tradition they inherited from the Greeks—the foundation story of Rome began to be altered, mixing elements from both Aeneas' tradition and the Lares Praestites. For plenty of Romans, these dramas were the sole source of historical documentation regarding their country, left without access to documents or even literacy that would allow them to challenge the narratives. Consequently, the altering of the myth to include a representative of plebeian society in Remus demonstrates just how much power this non-elite group had truly gained at this stage in Roman history.

¹⁴ Ibid., 70.

¹⁵ Ibid., 71.

¹⁶ Ibid., 106.

There are several points in the tale that are analogous with this plebeian rise to power: the hill on which Remus performs his augury, the Aventine, is told by several traditions to be the place where plebeian populations seceded as a precursor to their power gain; Remus' name is taken from the word "slow," which could represent the longer track the plebeians took to gain power (conversely, Romulus is portrayed as hasty, an attribute that will lead to his brother's death).¹⁷ Hence, the foundation myth divides and justifies said division of Roman society and its worldview into the two existing factions of plebeians and patricians.

Remus' death is a very serious and strange part of a tale of such import. Afterlife for Romans did not exist, such as it does for Judeo-Christian traditions, as something rewarding to look forward to, nor did they have any belief in reincarnation or resurrection. Death was serious, and though they often had animal sacrifices to their gods, it was only in the direst circumstances that a sacrifice was human. This worldview can be seen in Caesar's reports of the Celts in Britain, and his reaction to the reality that Celts will sacrifice humans for their gods, not fully appreciating the fact that Celtic beliefs account for reincarnation, making death a less serious affair in their worldview.¹⁸ "The nation of all the Gauls is extremely devoted to superstitious rites. Because they think that unless the life of a man be offered for the life of a man, the mind of the immortal gods cannot be rendered propitious, and they have sacrifices of that kind ordained for national purposes... The principal point of their doctrine is that the soul does not die and that after death, it passes from one body into another...the main object of all education is, in their opinion, to imbue their scholars with a firm belief in the indestructibility of the human soul, which, according to their belief, merely passes at death from one tenement to another; for by such doctrine alone, they say, which robs death of all its terrors, can the highest form of human courage be developed."¹⁹

Therefore, the death of Remus can be read in several lights, depending on the time frame of the author reciting the legends. It could be seen as propaganda if the fratricide is treated as a bad omen, a poisoning of all Rome's descendants for spilling innocent blood on her walls²⁰. Still there is an argument that Remus' death was not meant to infer a negative view

¹⁷ Ibid., 110.

¹⁸ Julius Caesar, "Caesar's Commentaries on the Gallic and Civil Wars," (University of Virginia Electronic Text Center).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Wiseman, *Remus*: 15.

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of Rome, but to signify the ultimate sacrifice to protect the city—in an ironic reflection of Celtic doctrine—a sacrifice “ordained for national purposes.”

During the war against the Samnites and Etruscans in 296 BC, a temple was built to the goddess Victory. To ensure that the continuing battles would tip in Rome’s favor, and to push against bad omens that had arisen during the temple’s construction, archaeological evidence has discovered a human had been interred in a grave below Victory’s altar during construction, an anomaly in the Roman world²¹, the timing of which could suggest that such an anomaly was then justified through the foundation legend as a necessary step in protection of Rome, altering Remus’ death into a more martyr-like role and explaining why there exist different, probably older versions, of his death. “Remus is killed at the foundation of Rome, as the trench is being dug, or the wall constructed. As Propertius puts it, Rome’s walls were firm thanks to the slaying of Remus; in Florus, we read of Remus as the first sacrificial victim, who consecrated with his blood the defenses of the city.”²²

We see then how complex it is to study foundation myths, particularly when its culturally-mandated alterations survive in the record. Stories and myths in Rome and other cultures—including religions—were constantly altered and updated and used to reflect present political climates, or to rally the people around a certain cause. “These myths... did not come up from among the ordinary people, as it has often been believed a decent myth should. They were produced, instead, by a whole series of different pressures coming, roughly speaking, from above.”²³ This could only be accomplished so thoroughly in a pre-literate society, or one in which literacy was rare and guarded by powerful elites, with texts and libraries unavailable to the common people to verify the stories being told. With no concept of separation of religion and politics, religion was built to enforce their political state; Rome was a city built and continually blessed by the gods, with a great destiny to rule the world (a feat it would, arguably, accomplish for thousands of years). The Romans saw themselves in a very particular worldview, a very particular light, and they built their myths to reflect the foundations of this singular character, which each Roman citizen hoped to display. There was no honor higher to a Roman than loyalty to the state; before even family and gods, a

²¹ Ibid., 121.

²² Ibid., 125..

²³ Michael Grant, *Roman Myths* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971). xv.

Roman must protect Rome, and do everything in her power to benefit her city above all else. As a simplified explanation, Romulus built Rome and its timeless foundations, and Remus with his blood sacrifice defends it. "... Roman mythology occupies a very special position among the mythologies of the world, because to a considerable extent we can watch it being built up....we can watch the process actually happening and even sometimes say why."²⁴

Roman mythology is rich and complex, and even in their pre-literate eras provided incredibly thorough and interesting answers to the existential questions all human beings have. Romans from a very early time had a distinct place in the cosmos; like many other cultures they believed themselves chosen or special in view of the gods, and believed they could fall out of favor if they were to slip up in their behavior or fail to divine the will of the supernatural forces which controlled the universe. Lineage and ancestry were very important to them, and so their foundation mythologies reflect this, altering in successive political ages to account for the greatness of Romans of all classes, to demonstrate their descending from the gods and great heroes of the past, thereby solidifying their destiny to achieve honor and greatness in their own time. Roman myth illustrates their belief that while nature is not controllable, it is readable, and it is this supreme talent that keeps their people safe from the chaos and darkness that would otherwise engulf it. The foundation myth of Romulus and Remus also demonstrates how social structure is inherently intertwined with the creation of cosmology: while the twins are not deities (at least not until Romulus is deified some centuries later), they are as important as gods in the Roman worldview, and their story reflects the different important aspects of successful Roman society, which requires an equal contribution between the two (occasionally feuding) factions of plebeians and patricians.

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²⁴ Grant, *Roman Myths*, xvii.

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