

Romulus and Remus

The Mythical Origins of Rome

Preface

The history of the origins of Rome are a blend of verifiable accounts and mythology. It's difficult to determine the validity of some aspects of its history due to an overall lack of proper primary sources covering the topic.

There are several different reasons for the union of mythology and history. As you learn the story of the founding of Rome, think of some reasons the Romans may have mythologized certain aspects of their history.

Trojan War – Aeneas

The legend of the founding of Rome begins with the end of the Trojan war and the hero Aeneas. Aeneas was a son of the goddess Aphrodite and was considered one of the greatest warriors of Troy. Only his cousin, Hector, was considered a stronger warrior! Aeneas receives a message from the gods telling him to gather a group of Trojans and flee Troy. It is unclear if Aeneas was a traitor to Troy or if he led a successful escape mission.

Aeneas leads the survivors, known as the Aeneads, to Italy where they eventually find refuge in Latium. The story of the adventure from Troy to Latium is detailed by the author Virgil in *The Aeneid*. Soon, the descendants of Aeneas would reign over the Latium city of Alba Longa as kings.

The Birth of Twins

Numitor was one of the descendants of Aeneas to be king of Alba Longa. His reign was short, as he was deposed by his younger brother Amulius. In order to keep power, Amulius kills Numitor's sons and forces Numitor's daughter, Rhea Silvia, to become a Vestal Virgin so that she would not bear children. As the name implies, Vestal Virgins would swear an oath of celibacy. Under mysterious circumstances Rhea Silvia became pregnant and gave birth to twin sons.

Sentenced and Spared

It is not clear who the father of the twin boys was. According to legend, Rhea Silvia claimed that the father was the god Mars. Other accounts state that it was the demigod Heracles (Hercules) that fathered the twins. Still others claim that she was simply raped by an unknown man. Regardless of the truth, Amulius was not willing to risk murdering the sons of a god or demigod.

Amulius ordered that the boys be drowned in the Tiber river. He believed that he would be innocent if the boys died of “natural” causes. The soldiers tasked with drowning the boys did not complete their tasks. Some accounts state that they took pity on the twins and set them in a basket in the river. Other accounts claim that the soldiers ignorantly left the boys close to the shore of the flooded river, not knowing that the water would soon recede leaving the boys on dry land.

Romulus and Remus

Legend says that the boys wound up (or were left) by a fig tree at the base of Palatine hill. A wolf found the twins and took pity on them. The wolf suckled them and a woodpecker brought the boys food. Eventually, a shepherd found the twins and adopted them. The shepherd, Faustulus, and his wife, Acca Larentia, named them Romulus and Remus.

The twins were raised to be shepherds but were gifted as leaders and warriors. They were able to organize a small band of fighters that defended the region from criminals and barbarians. With each victory the twins would divide the recovered goods equally with the shepherds of the region. One group of bandits grew tired of dealing with the vigilantes and reported them to King Amulius claiming that Romulus and Remus were leading a band of thieves.

Return of Numitor

Amulius sends soldiers to the region and they capture Remus after a fight. Afraid that Amulius would discover the truth about Remus, Faustulus confesses to Romulus that he has always suspected that the twins were really the decedents of Numitor. Having learned of Amulius’ treachery, Romulus decides to free Remus and kill Amulius. After mustering a small army, Romulus is successful in both missions. The twins then reinstate their grandfather, Numitor, to the throne.

The Founding of Rome

Some accounts claim that Romulus and Remus were never offered the throne and decided to establish their own city. Others say that Romulus and Remus wanted to start a city from the ground up, and that they willfully offered the throne of Alba Longa to Numitor.

The brothers argued over the location of their new city; Romulus thought Palatine Hill was the best choice as it was where they were first found, while Remus wished to found it on the Aventine Hill. Legend states that in the end Romulus kills Remus. Why Remus was killed is unclear, but all accounts state that Remus received an honorable burial despite the circumstances.

Romulus established his city on Palatine Hill. He named the city after himself. Rome. The death of Remus and the founding of Rome are believed to be April 21st, 753 BC.