

CHAPTER 1

66 VIRGIL, DIONYSIUS,
AND LIVY

WIVES, WOLVES, AND WILD BOYS

THE FOUNDING OF ROME

66 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, 19 BCE

I sing of war and of that man who first came in exile
from the shores of Troy to the coast of Italy.
He was battered on land and sea by divine violence, . . .
He had to suffer much in war until he built a city. . . .
From him came the Latin people, . . . and the high
walls of Rome.

With his homeland in enemy hands and his city in
flames, **Prince Aeneas**, son of the goddess Venus, **led**



The Roman wolf is feeding the two abandoned babies, Romulus and Remus, who founded Rome. This bronze sculpture, made about 500 BCE, is still a symbol of Rome.

a small group of Trojans to sea. After many months of being tossed about by fierce winds and storms, the travelers finally anchored their ships **near the mouth of the Tiber River in Italy**. Yet no sooner had they landed than the men began to plan another voyage.

This appalled the Trojan women. As the Greek historian Dionysius records the story, a **noblewoman named Roma** secretly took the women aside and suggested that they take matters into their own hands. "Tired of wandering," the others listened eagerly. "Roma stirred up the . . . Trojan women" and suggested a simple plan. They all agreed, and "together, they **set fire to the ships.**"

At first the men were furious, but pretty soon they realized that the women had done the right thing. They had **landed in a perfect spot**. With **mild weather** and **beautiful countryside—a cluster of hills just 15 miles from the sea**—why should they leave? The men were so pleased that they **named the place after Roma**, the rebellious wife.

The Roman historian Livy had also written down a **different legend** about two brothers who were sons of the king. Their names were Numitor and Amulius. When their father the king died, **Amulius grabbed the throne** and forced Numitor to leave the kingdom. But then Amulius worried that someone might try to overthrow *him*. What if Numitor's daughter, Rhea Silvia, had children who might try to take the throne? Amulius wasn't taking any chances. **He forced Rhea Silvia to join the Vestal Virgins**—a group of women who served in the temple of the goddess Vesta. The Romans believed that Vesta wanted the complete attention of her priestesses, so the Vestal Virgins were not allowed to marry or have children.

Poor Rhea had no choice but to obey her uncle. But things didn't go according to Amulius's plan. Somehow, despite her protected life among the Vestal Virgins, **Rhea** became pregnant and **gave birth to twins**—two strong, handsome boys. She named her sons **Romulus and Remus**. **Amulius** was outraged when he heard the news. He **ordered his servants to take the twins** from their mother's arms and **drown them** in the river. Rhea herself was bound and thrown into prison.

Trojan founding legend

66 Dionysius, *Roman Antiquities*, 8 BCE

THE FOUNDING OF A CITY

A city's founding is the time when the first settlers pitch their tents or build buildings and start to call it "home." The founder of a city or country is the person who makes that happen. Because Rome was founded and named in prehistorical times, we depend in part on legends to piece together its history.

A Greek poet named Homer composed the story of the Trojan War. For centuries, people thought he had made up an imaginary city and its people, the Trojans. Then in 1870, an amateur archaeologist, Heinrich Schliemann, astonished the scholars: he found the buried remains of Troy. The ancient city was real after all.

Remus & Romulus founding legend

“ Livy, *From the Founding of the City*, 25 BCE

Various stories



MEANWHILE IN SOUTH ASIA ...

In ancient societies there are many stories of unwanted children who were abandoned in baskets and set adrift on a river. The Indian god Krishna, the Mesopotamian king Sargon, and the Hebrew lawgiver Moses all suffered the same fate as Romulus and Remus, and all of them survived.

The servant couldn't bring himself to kill the babies, so he **put them into a basket and set it afloat on the river**. He was sure that the babies would be carried away and drowned as the king had commanded. But the river was kind and gently landed the basket on solid ground.

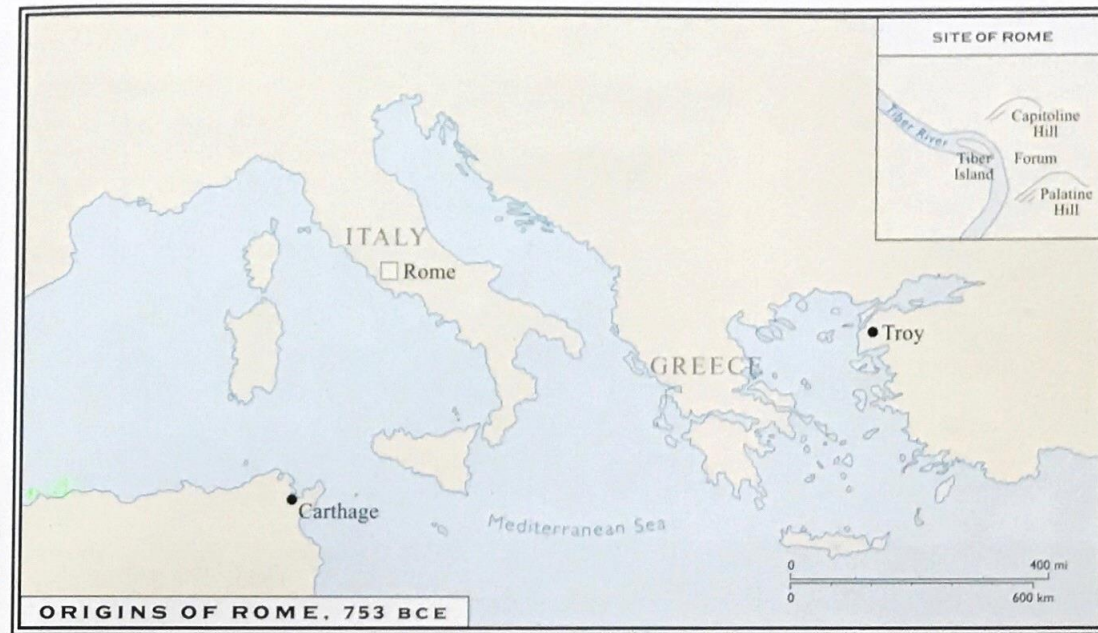
Although the twins didn't drown, they were still in great danger. If they didn't starve, wild animals might eat them. Miraculously, according to Livy, **"a she-wolf, coming down from the . . . hills to quench her thirst, turned her steps towards the cry of the infants, and nursed them so gently that the keeper of the royal flock found her licking them with her tongue."**

When the **herdsman found Romulus and Remus**, he took them home. He and his wife **raised the boys** as their own. The twins grew to be brave, manly, and noble. **They roamed the countryside like ancient Robin Hoods, often saving innocent people from danger and persecution.**

Romulus and Remus eventually **discovered who they really were** and decided to **found a new city near the Tiber River**, where they had been rescued as babies. But the brothers **didn't get along very well**, and they **disagreed about where the city should be built**. They tried to **settle their argument through divination**, using the path of birds in the sky to figure out the wishes of the gods. They decided to watch some vultures flying overhead. Romulus tried to trick Remus, pretending to have spotted more vultures than he actually saw, and then Remus made fun of Romulus. **The brothers got into a fight, and Romulus killed Remus.**

Romulus buried his brother and then, with his followers, **built a new city on the Palatine Hill and circled it with strong, stone walls**. As the city grew, it eventually enclosed seven hills and took the name of its founder, Romulus—or Rome. The Romans dated everything that happened after that **"from the founding of the city" in 753 BCE**. For more than a thousand years, they used a calendar that began in that year.

Some Romans claimed that Romulus and Remus were the sons of Mars, the god of war. Later Romans believed that this connection to Mars explained Romulus's cruel



attack on the Sabines, a tribe that lived in small, unprotected villages near Rome. Romulus was convinced that Rome would become great through war, so he pretended to invite his Sabine neighbors to a festival. But then he led the Romans in a sudden attack. The soldiers seized 30 unmarried women and ran off—taking the Sabine women home as their wives.

The reaction of the Sabine men is easy to guess: they set out to rescue the women. They attacked the walled city of Rome. A fierce battle between the Sabines and the Romans raged until a strange thing happened. Torn between love for their Sabine fathers and brothers and their love for the Romans who were now their husbands, the Sabine women ran onto the battleground. With desperate cries, hair tumbling to their shoulders, and infants in their arms, they begged the warriors on both sides to stop killing each other. Moved by the women's words and tears, the men called a truce, and the two peoples became one.

Sabines & Romans become one people

mors = "death"
Ordinary human beings are mortal because they can die. Immortal beings—gods and goddesses—never die.

So what do we discover about the ancient Romans from these stories? For one thing, they believed that many gods were involved in their lives. Often a hero or leader, such as Aeneas, is believed to have had one mortal parent and one immortal one. This would explain why the gods cared so much about Rome, its beginnings, and its continued success.

The first Roman histories give varying, sometimes contradictory, stories about the distant past—for example, the two very different legends about Rome's founding. That's because these tales began in prehistorical times, before people began writing down their histories. Storytellers passed the tales down orally for hundreds of years.

Family histories get passed down orally, too. And stories change and get better the more we tell them. Do members

In this 1633 painting, Romulus raises his cloak to signal the Romans to attack and seize the unsuspecting Sabine women.



Dates ↴

WHAT YEAR BECOMES "YEAR ONE"?

In the year 46 BCE, the Roman leader Julius Caesar created the calendar we use today. But this was not the first calendar. Many other peoples had developed ways to keep track of time. The most important difference among them is the starting date.

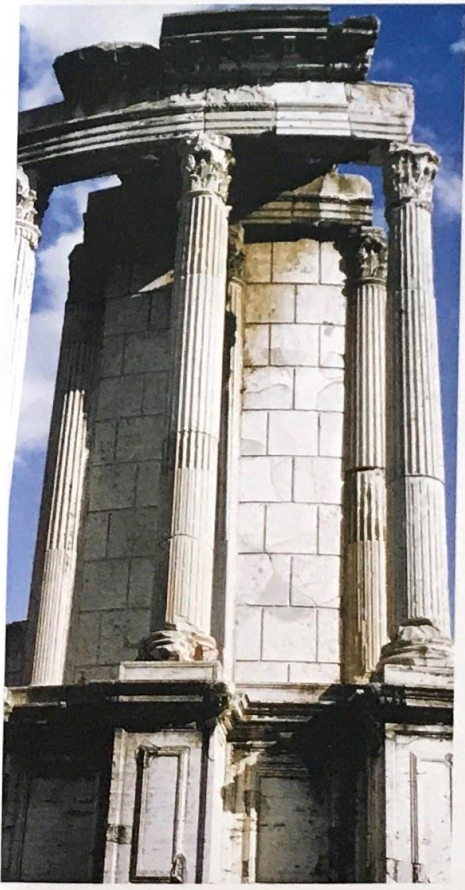
The ancient Greek calendar began with the first Olympic Games in 776 BCE. The Hebrew calendar begins with the traditional date of Creation, when God created the world. And in the Muslim calendar, Year One is when the prophet Mohammed left the holy city of Mecca.

Christians used Caesar's calendar, but the starting point became the birth of Jesus, which is a bit like point zero on a thermometer. The years before his birth were called "BC" (Before Christ) and the years after his birth were "AD" (Anno Domini, Latin for "in the year of the Lord"). Today, most historians use BCE (Before the Common Era) instead of BC, and they have replaced AD with CE (Common Era).

of your family have different versions of events that happened only 20 or 30 years ago? Do you exaggerate a bit when you tell your friends about your adventures? In the same way, the myths and legends of Rome "improved" through thousands of tellings over hundreds of years. But these stories may carry a part of the truth.

True

Although myth and legend cloud the founding of Rome, archaeology shows that there is a trace of truth in these accounts. Latin-speaking herdsmen and small farmers did establish a settlement and build huts on the Palatine Hill in the 8th century BCE. These archaeological findings agree with the legendary foundation of Rome around 753.



As for the mingling of the Roman and Sabine peoples, cemeteries in Rome give evidence for that. Each early civilization followed a particular set of rules for burying its dead. But in Rome, archaeologists have found the remains of buried bodies and the ashes of cremated bodies—proof that two different cultures existed side-by-side in early Rome. This is one of many ways that archaeologists have found evidence of a real world that mirrors the ancient myths and legends of Rome.

Vesta's temples were always round; this one—in the Roman Forum—stands next to the house where the Vestal Virgins lived. Inside were the treasures that the Romans believed Aeneas brought from Troy.