

# Myths were primarily vehicles for communicating morals

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



Whilst myth today is often considered to be simply a collection of legends and folklore associated with a particular religion or region, at the time of the Ancients, it was a significant part of their everyday lives. As an element of their religion, it gave reasons for their rituals, explained phenomena that were otherwise not understood, and provided a basis for morality. There are numerous theories regarding the origins of myth. One such theory claims that myths are descriptions of actual historical events that have become so altered due to constant elaborations on the part of storytellers, that the characters in those descriptions eventually become gods (Bulfinch 194). Other theorists claim that myths began as metaphors for natural phenomena, or from the personification of inanimate objects. James Frazer believed a variation of the myth-ritual theory, claiming that man invented myths to explain the rituals associated with a previous belief in magic. (Frazer 711) Whatever the initial purpose of Roman Myth, it became an integral part of life, providing inspiration for theatre and art, and, providing an opportunity for those in power to increase their control and popularity. In this essay, I intend to identify and illustrate the uses of myth in order to reach a conclusion regarding the above statement.

Two principle sources of material regarding Roman mythology appeared during the empire's early years; Virgil wrote his epic, the Aenid, influentially linking the founding of Rome with myth, and Livy's history of Rome described such legends as seemingly true historic events. Virgil, Livy, and other writers at the time, seem to have been attempting to establish an 'official' Roman mythology to give Rome a legendary and venerable tradition.

The most famous of Rome's foundation myths concerns the twins Romulus and Remus.

After his father's death, Numitor became king of Albalonga. However, his brother, Amulius deposed him, murdered his sons, and forced his daughter, Rhea Silvia to become a Vestal Virgin, hoping to deny Numitor any heirs and so safeguard his own position as king. Rhea however, was loved by Mars, and subsequently gave birth to twin boys, Romulus and Remus. Amulius ordered his servants to kill the boys, and they were left by the River Tiber to die. They were found by a she-wolf who nursed them, and were later adopted by an old shepherd, Faustulus, and his wife. As adults, they were told the truth of their birth, and returned to Albalonga, killed Amulius and restored Numitor to the throne. Romulus and Remus planned to build a new city on the site where they had been saved by the wolf, and waited for an omen to tell them who was to rule this new city. There are differing versions as to what happened next; Ennius claims that the brothers watched from different parts of the Aventine, and the birds appeared only to Romulus, choosing him as ruler; later versions have Romulus and Remus stationed on different hills, with six vultures appearing first to Remus, followed by twelve appearing to Romulus. The circumstances of Remus's death also differ, with Ennius, Livy and Ovid claiming that he was killed by Romulus for jumping over the new city walls, an act that marked him as an enemy, whilst later accounts have Remus die at his brother's hand in the dispute over the winning omen.

Preceding the myth of Romulus and Remus, is the story of Aeneas. Aeneas, son of Anchises and Aphrodite, was a survivor of the fall of Troy; a popular image is of Aeneas leaving Troy, carrying his father Anchises on his shoulders, and leading his son, Ascanius by the hand. Having saved him from death at the hands of Achilles, Poseidon prophesises that, “ strong Aeneas and his children’s children will rule over the Trojans” (Homer XX 307-8). After many years wandering, Aeneas landed at Carthage. The Carthaginian queen, Dido, offered to reign jointly with Aeneas and allow his followers to settle at Carthage. However, Aeneas was reminded of his destiny by Mercury, and continued his journey, eventually landing in Latium. Aeneas’ subsequent marriage to Lavinia, daughter of Latinus, king of Latium, initiated a war between the Latins and Turnus, king of the Rutuli, to whom Latinus had previously promised his daughter. Aeneas’ forces were victorious in the battle, but Latinus was killed. Aeneas then founded the city of Lavinium, which he named after his wife. According to Virgil’s Aeneid, Romulus and Remus were maternal descendants of Aeneas, and Aeneas is considered the founder of the Romans. Over time, the two myths become one consolidated foundation myth, with Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, considered direct descendants of Aeneas, the founder of the Roman people. Rome’s foundation myth relates the city and its founders to some of the most celebrated deities and heroes of the age, establishing Rome as a legendary city, whose success is on account of such exclusive origins – for how could a city founded by demi-gods and heroes be anything but successful?

Livy's *Histories* offers some differences to the 'accepted foundation myth'. He rationalizes that writing about the origins of Rome is particularly difficult since it happened so long ago that it is almost impossible to know for certain what happened; for example, he questions the identity of Ascanius, declaring that "no one can pretend to certainty on something so deeply buried in the mists of time" (Tacitus 19). Livy's alternatives can be said to reveal a scepticism regarding "divine elements" (Budelman, Huskinson and Hughes 111) of the foundation myths. However, this scepticism seems limited to the mystical elements of the myth. Livy for example, offers an alternative to the miracle of the she-wolf, suggesting that 'Wolf' was in fact the nickname of a prostitute, and it was she who nursed the twins, not in fact, an actual wolf. Another alternative is offered in the death of Romulus, with Livy proposing that he may either have been taken to heaven in a cloud, or torn to pieces by the senators. All of these variations, to a modern reader, would appear to detract from the overall credibility of the myth, but perhaps to the Romans, were simply accepted embellishments, and added to the overall concept of a 'divine Rome'. Moreover, Livy himself says at the beginning of his *Histories*, "it adds dignity to the past, and, if any nation deserves the privilege of claiming a divine ancestry, that nation is our own; ... and all the nations of the world might well allow the claim" (Tacitus 17).

The foundation myths also served to bring a post-civil war Rome back together. Vergil's *Aeneid* presents a story that glorifies not only Rome, but its emperor, Augustus, as well. By portraying historical events as prophecies, he emphasizes that Roman domination is inevitable. After the civil wars,

Augustus needed to bring his people together, to unify them under a common belief; the foundation myths. In reminding the Romans of their shared heritage, the political disputes began to lose their significance. Augustus surrounded himself in imagery relating to Aeneas and Romulus to reinforce his authority. The Prima Porta statue for example (Budelman, Huskinson and Hughes Figure 2. 2), shows Augustus as a commanding and successful ruler, and presents him with a dolphin and cupid, which are considered to indicate Augustus' professed descent from Venus, through Aeneas. This not only links him directly with a goddess (a fashion that had become popular in the middle and late Republic (Champlin)), implying favour with the gods, but also with the founder of the Romans, suggesting that Augustus has an inherited right to rule. To further enhance his association with Romulus and Aeneas, he had statues of them constructed in the Forum, and, after it was destroyed in a fire, had the 'hut of Romulus' impressively restored. The foundation myths enabled Augustus to demonstrate that he valued both tradition and innovation; displaying a respect for Rome's history and traditions, but also suggesting that, as "second founder of Rome" (Budelman, Huskinson and Hughes 108) he could and would lead Rome into a new and more peaceful age.

A questionable part of the foundation myths, particularly to a modern reader, is the rape of the Sabine women. Two important accounts of the incident are from Livy and Ovid and offer conflicting accounts. A significant difference is the reason behind the rape, with Livy representing it as the solution to a political problem – Romulus' answer to a shortage of women in Rome – whilst

Ovid plainly believes it to be provoked by sexual desire. Whilst it clearly enraged the Sabines, it was seemingly accepted by the Romans, with the Sabine women themselves eventually bringing reconciliation by running into the battle and appealing for peace. Ovid's treatment of the rape of the Sabine women seems contrary to the careful depiction of Rome and its founders in the foundation myths; the legendary Romulus has been reduced to brutish sexual predator.

While Augustus had used the foundation myths to his own advantage, Nero seemed to take this a stage further. Whether it was a conscious decision or not, his choice to become so heavily involved with the arts would have made him more accessible to his subjects, as well as providing publicity in a time when television and radio did not yet exist. His choices of characters however, can be seen as peculiar, as Dio reveals, " his favourite roles being those of Oedipus, Thyestes, Heracles, Alcmeon and Orestes?" (Dio 45) The characters chosen by Nero are shocking, and one would imagine, not the type of character an emperor would want to associate himself with, yet Nero does. Champlin views his choices as deliberate and daring, explaining that in acting the parts of matricides and wife-killers, often wearing " a mask that bore his own features" (Champlin 149), Nero was controlling the " debate over his own guilt." (Champlin 149)

Both Augustus and Nero aligned themselves with the god Apollo. Nero declared at the beginning of his reign that he would model his reign on that of Augustus. As the god of the arts, Apollo was a particularly appropriate choice for Nero given his love of music and theatre; he even validated his

own singing by declaring that singing was “ sacred to Apollo” (Tacitus 39). Augustus used the symbol of the sphinx for his signet ring, and wore a laurel wreath in public, he also credited his victory over Antony and Cleopatra to the Apollo. Nero had constructed the Golden House, which Seneca described as, “ the sun-god’s palace”. (Champlin 161) The extent of Nero’s association with Apollo is illustrated by plate 2. 8 (Visual Sources 30), a coin of Nero, dated to 64CE. The obverse of the coin depicts Nero wearing a radiate crown, a symbol of Sol that had only previously been applied to images of the deified Augustus. On the reverse are Nero’s official titles and the image of either Apollo himself playing the lyre or, Nero in the guise of Apollo. The coin suggests the parallels between Nero and Apollo both physically and in terms of their mutual interests. Given that coins were so common, it is a very effective use of imagery that would easily reach a vast area. Apollo is an interesting choice for another reason, that he is the only god whose name remains the same in both Greek and Roman mythology; I don’t know whether this was part of the reasoning behind the emperor’s choice of god, but I think it provides another interesting dimension.

The myths surrounding Roman history revered the qualities that the Romans particularly valued: responsibility, self-sacrifice, integrity, bravery, and virtue. The influence of their mythology reached further, and endured for longer than the Roman Empire; temples, statues, art and literature connected to Roman mythology have been found a long way from Rome itself. The influence that Roman mythology had on all aspects of life was significant, and was exploited to the benefit of those in power. In my opinion,



myths were not initially intended as vehicles for communicating moral and/or political beliefs, but were manipulated by countless emperors, specifically Augustus and Nero, to maximize their own reputation, as Champlins explains, “ by appropriating the gods and heroes of myth and legendary history...politicians could present images laden with meanings which were quickly recognizable to a broad public” (Champlin 144).

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