

CHAPTER 18

THE ROMAN VISION: GREEK MYTHS AND ROMAN REALITIES

MAIN POINTS

1. Roman culture, including Roman mythology, often borrows elements from other cultures such as the Etruscans and the Greeks.
2. From the Etruscans, the Romans borrowed elements of religion, government, and lifestyle. The Etruscans were also an important conduit of Greek influence on early Rome.
3. Roman myth is heavily patriarchal, befitting a society where, at least early and by law, the pater familias (male head of household) had power of life and death over everyone in his household.
4. The Roman emperor Augustus boasted that he had transformed Rome into a city of marble; the reconstruction did not involve demolition, however, but adding false-front marble columns to brick buildings.
5. The Romans, feeling culturally inferior to the Greeks, had adopted Greek literature and mythology, while changing names and adapting the concepts to fit their ideas and values.
6. Through the works of Roman writers such as Virgil and Ovid, classical mythology was transmitted to the later Western culture.
7. According to the myth of Romulus and Remus, Rhea Silvia was assigned to the office of Vestal Virgin by her uncle Amulius, a usurper of the throne who hoped to prevent her from producing heirs. Seduced by Mars, she bore twin sons, Romulus and Remus.
8. Amulius set the infants adrift in a basket, but they survived and were nursed by a she-wolf. When adult, they restored their father to the throne of his city, Alba Longa.

NOTE: Worldwide, myths about the birth and upbringing of culture heroes include stories about the child being put in a basket and set adrift on the waters of the river or the ocean, usually in order to save the child's life from persecutors; however, such stories also reflect a common custom of exposing unwanted babies, placing them in the hands of the gods. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the story of Moses is the most familiar one. The Norse and German tradition tells of Siegfried (Sigurd), whose mother placed him in a glass vessel, which accidentally fell in the river; the boy arrived safely on an island in the ocean where a doe nursed him along with her young. The Hindu tradition tells of Kunti, who threw her son into the river, where he was rescued by a charioteer who raised the boy as his own, calling him Vasusena, later known for his great generosity. The Polynesian god Maui was born prematurely, and his mother Taranga cast him into the sea to prevent him from becoming an evil spirit; the sea deities preserved the child and put him ashore, where he was discovered and raised by his ancestor Tama'rangi. Other children exposed—on mountains, not on the river—include Cybele and Oedipus. The release of the child into the river may represent a return to the protection of the Great Goddess and also a purification ritual; the hero loses ties with his original parents, is often nursed by animals representing nature, and is reborn to a unique existence.

9. Romulus and Remus later fought over which of them their own city should be named after; Remus was killed, and the city founded was named Rome.
10. The men who joined Romulus were without women, so he prepared a festival, inviting the residents of neighboring cities, including the Sabines. The Romans abducted and raped the daughters of the Sabines and later married them.

11. The Sabines warred against the Romans until the Romans' wives assured their families that they were content; the Roman and Sabine territories were combined, and Romulus ruled for thirty-eight years until his disappearance during a storm.
12. The myth of Romulus and Remus focuses on the city and its origins, and although it begins with mythic components, it quickly moves into actual history.
13. Scholars are very interested in the origins of Rome's foundation stories. Oftentimes in the writing of Roman history, present-day political concerns have been incorporated into stories of the early days: Remus may have been constructed as a plebeian foil for Romulus in the late third century B.C., when there were serious tensions between patricians and plebeians.
14. The myth's perspective is patriarchal; there is no trace of a feminine perspective left in the rape of Rhea Silvia and the Sabine women, contrary to similar Greek myths.
15. In the Greek myths, the abduction of Helen is a violation of the gods' will, and the centaurs' attempted rape of the Lapith women is punished by the gods; in contrast, the Romans are rewarded for similar behaviors.
16. Roman myth has fewer fantastic components than Greek myth; Thebes is founded by Cadmus sowing dragon's teeth, which turn into an army of men; the armed men of Rome are disgruntled farmers, shepherds, runaway slaves, and criminals.
17. Plutarch suggests a demythologizing explanation of the divine conception of the twins—a rape by Rhea Silvia's uncle.
18. Plutarch likewise demythologizes the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur.
19. Horace also reinterprets Greek mythology in a realistic vein, seeing Zeus's appearance to Danae as a shower of gold as an image of bribery.
20. The Romans create a Greek connection by portraying Romulus as a son of Mars (Ares) and his mother as a descendant of Aeneas of Troy, himself a son of Aphrodite. Another story linked Rome with Latinus, a descendant of Odysseus and Circe.
21. The Romans took over the body of Greek mythology but refocused the myths, historicized them, politicized them, and reinterpreted them to reflect Roman ideals.
22. The Roman pantheon is less dominated by abstractions than by practical concerns; Ceres becomes more important than Apollo and Minerva.
23. Hestia is unimportant in the Greek pantheon but as Vesta, becomes the central symbol of Eternal Rome.
24. The Romans trace their ancestry to Mars, whereas the Greek attitude toward Ares is ambivalent.
25. Whereas Greek myths may be loosely based on historical events, Roman mythology is tied to real names, places, and events. Thus, Julius Caesar and Augustus trace their ancestry to Aeneas's son, Ascanius, nicknamed Iulus (Iulus).
26. Roman works of art, like Trajan's column, were intended to instruct as well as delight; the more grounded in reality the myths were, the better they could perform their didactic function.
27. Myths were also used to justify contemporary political realities, illustrating the secondary character of private emotions and worship compared to public duty.
28. In the home, Romans worshiped the Lares, guardian spirits, the Penates, spirits of the pantry, and the Vesta, goddess of the hearth; their public counterparts were Jupiter, Juno, and Ceres. In domestic life, the Romans paid service to the state itself.
29. Whereas the gods of Greece were not typically nationalistic in their political aims, the Roman gods were exclusively Roman, predetermining Roman destiny.

30. The open-ended dynamic universe of Greek myth gives way to a teleological, goal-oriented Roman mythology of patriotism.
31. In Rome, though not in the small Greek polis, we can see the beginnings of the modern nation-state, with its heavy demands of patriotic submission, discipline, and loyalty to the state.
32. In order to maintain their ideal of the Pax Romana, the Romans had to rely on civic duty as a virtue, and patriotism became a survival tool. Defiance of the gods of Rome thus constituted treason as well as impiety.
33. From the gods' perspective, all events were part of a divine plan; such a universe recognized no tragedy, only history incompletely understood.
34. The ego-driven Greek hero was too self-centered for Romans. The Roman hero had to exemplify the ideal Roman soldier and citizen.
35. Three qualities nostalgically associated with the early republic are essential for the Roman hero: gravitas, pietas, and frugalitas.
36. Pietas did not really have the same sense as our term "piety." It was a virtue of acted-out responsibility, or loyalty to family, gods, and the state, which was reflected in actions.
37. Duty also requires the hero to control his passionate excesses so that his life and death can contribute to the triumph of Eternal Rome. Such a hero will be rewarded in the Underworld.

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Rhea Silvia, the mother of Romulus and Remus

Amulius, her wicked uncle

Numitor, her father, the rightful ruler of Alba Longa

Romulus, twin son of Rhea Silvia and Mars and founder of Rome

Remus, twin son of Rhea Silvia and Mars and victim of his brother Romulus's rash attack

Helen, Menelaus's wife, abducted to Troy by Paris

Centaur, half-horse, half-human creatures

Mars, the Roman god of war (Ares)

Aeneas, warrior of Troy, Romulus's ancestor

Jupiter (Zeus)

Juno (Hera)

Ceres (Demeter)

Minerva (Athene)

Vesta, the virgin protector of the hearth (Hestia)

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Virgil, Roman poet (70–19 B.C.)

Ovid, Roman poet (43 B.C.– A.D. 17)

Plutarch, Greek biographer (c. A.D. 46–120)

Horace, Roman poet (65–8 B.C.)