Rome in Fifteen Buildings I: The Hut of Romulus

For half a millennium, Rome's Palatine Hill was the center of the Mediterranean world. Home to the wealthiest and most eminent Romans of the late Republic, it came to be dominated by the residence of the Roman emperors – our word "palace," in fact, derives from Palatine. By the first century CE, the imperial palace covered virtually the entire hill. But the southwest corner was never built over. Here, where three small temples overlooked the Circus Maximus, a hut stood in the shadow of the palace walls.

The hut was more or less oval, about 15 feet long and 10 or 12 feet wide. Its walls were composed of dried mud and sticks, stiffened with a few posts; the roof was thatch. But for a thousand years, whenever this humble structure burned or fell down, as it seems to have done pretty frequently, it was rebuilt on the same site and with the same materials.

This was the casa Romuli, the House of Romulus, revered as the dwelling of Rome's founder and first king. Like us, the Romans were fascinated by the question of how a small and poor city-state could grow to conquer the Mediterranean world. Modern historians point to a number of geopolitical factors, which we'll discuss in a few minutes. The Romans themselves, however, attributed their rise to two factors: the virtues of the early Roman people, and the will of the gods. These explanations are intertwined in the story of Romulus.

Before we get into that story, it should be noted that our sources preserve several myths about the foundation of Rome, some very different from the familiar myth.

My favorite, which comes from Plutarch's life of Romulus, begins with an enormous phantom penis suddenly appearing in the fireplace of an Alban king. The penis refused to go away – I imagine the king swatting at it with a poker – and so the king consulted with the local oracle, who told him that the penis would only vanish if one of the king's daughters had sex with it. This seemed perfectly reasonable to the king, and so, at what must have been a very awkward family meeting, he convened his daughters and informed them of the oracle's advice. The princesses, understandably, were not enthusiastic, so they sent one of their maids to do the job. The maid complied; and nine months later – so the story goes – Romulus and Remus were born.

Even by the generous standards of classical myth, this is a weird story. But it does what a good foundation narrative was supposed to – that is, it presents the founders of Rome as both native and divine. Since the serving maid was a local girl, and since that was no mortal member, this story made Romulus and Remus indigenous demigods – tied to their land, but favored by heaven.

The more familiar story does the same thing. In that version, Romulus and Remus are the grandsons of Numitor, the rightful king of a small city named Alba Longa. Numitor had been exiled by his evil brother Amulius, who forced Numitor's daughter, Rhea Silvia, to become a priestess of Vesta. Vesta, the goddess of hearth and home, was a virgin, and her priestesses were supposed to follow suit. Rhea Silvia, however, became pregnant. She claimed the father was Mars, the god of War. Her uncle was skeptical; but just in case a god really was involved, he decided not to bury Rhea alive – which was the usual penalty for Vestals who broke their vows –

but simply to imprison her. After she gave birth to twins, Amulius commanded a servant to drown the babies in the Tiber. The servant, however, seems to have regarded infanticide as a little above his paygrade, and left the twins in a basket by the river.

There, they were discovered by a she-wolf, who nursed the babies in her den. Since the Latin for she-wolf – Lupa – was also slang for a prostitute, a few ancient authors speculated that it was actually a whore who rescued and nursed the future founders of Rome. The Romans themselves preferred the wolf story, and pointed to a small cave at the base of the Palatine – the Lupercal – as the site of the she-wolf's den. In later centuries, this cave was the starting point of the Lupercalia, a festival in which naked youths smeared with goat blood ran through the streets of Rome, walloping bystanders with strips of hide.

In any case, the twins were raised by the shepherd Faustulus, who named them Romulus and Remus. As demigods do, they grew into bold and strong men, whose weekend hobbies included capturing and beating on local bandits. After becoming involved in a squabble with shepherds employed by Amulius, their wicked great-uncle, Romulus and Remus learned the secret of their birth. A few days of heroic derring-do ensued, in which their great-uncle was killed, and their grandfather restored to his rightful throne. Then, still riding high from this success, they decided to found their own city.

The site they chose was the place where the she-wolf had nursed them: the future site of Rome. The brothers disagreed, however, over the exact location of their new city. Romulus pulled for the Palatine; Remus preferred the Aventine Hill. To resolve their dispute, they turned to the most reasonable solution they could think of: competitive bird-watching. The Romans, you see, believed that the will of the gods could be divined through augury, the art and science of interpreting birds in flight. An augur took up his curved wand and traced out a portion of the sky. Any bird that passed through that sector of the heavens was assumed to be significant. Strange though this practice might seem to us, it was at least cleaner than haruspicy, which involved slaughtering a sheep and poking at its organs until the will of the gods became clear.

Romulus and Remus took up their stations on opposite sides of a hill. Remus saw the first birds: six vultures flying in a line. Romulus, however, saw twelve vultures – or so he claimed. Remus thought that his brother was lying. Harsh words were exchanged. Remus mocked the low wall that Romulus had begun to build around the Palatine. Romulus breathed deep, counted to ten, and murdered his brother.

So Rome was founded. Romulus decided to attract settlers by declaring his new city a place of asylum for criminals and exiles. Desperate men flocked to Rome by the thousands. Romulus tried to keep things under control by creating the first Roman legion and the Senate. His long-term plans, however, were threatened by an apparently unsolvable problem: few of his fugitives were female, and the people of the surrounding districts refused to let their daughters anywhere near a city led by a murderer and inhabited entirely by criminals.

Romulus had two options at this point. He could either try to win the trust of his neighbors, and so secure rights of intermarriage. Or he could just abduct a bunch of women. Option B seemed easier, and so Romulus invited the Sabines – a neighboring people – to come to Rome for a

festival. Apparently expected nothing, the Sabines came to Rome on the appointed day. At a prearranged signal, the Romans seized every woman of marriageable age and drove the Sabine men from the city. This episode – the infamous Rape of the Sabines – strikes us as barbaric. Stories like this, however, are fairly common in foundation myths. Their purpose was to make the current inhabitants of a place seem autochthonous – that is, native products of the land. Since the first men of Rome were migrants, the story needed women who were local: therefore, enter the Sabines. The story may even have a kernel of historical truth, since archaeologists have uncovered evidence for a substantial Sabine presence in early Rome.

As might be imagined, the Rape of the Sabines did not endear the Romans to their neighbors. Years of skirmishing followed, which culminated in a massive Sabine invasion. The issue of the war came down to a final battle on the site of the Forum. Fighting was desperate. Men fell by the hundreds; Romulus and his followers were being driven back to the Palatine; and then, at the critical moment, the Sabine women ran onto the battlefield, carrying their half-Roman children and declaring that they would not be the cause of any more bloodshed. The men stopped fighting. The Roman and Sabine leaders stiffly shook hands and made a peace treaty on the spot. The Sabines were invited to live in Rome; and a story of abduction and rape ended, Livy assures us, about as well as it could have.

Romulus reigned as king of Rome for nearly forty years. He spent most of those decades attacking his neighbors, winning his city a modest but fertile territory in the Tiber valley. Back in Rome, he built the city's first temples. The gods smiled on these efforts – so much so that they granted Romulus the dubious honor of death by incineration. Romulus was drilling his legion just outside Rome when a sudden storm arose. When the storm cleared a few minutes later, Romulus was nowhere to be seen. Some declared that he had been translated to the heavens by Jupiter's thunderbolt. Others suspected that the senators – who had never liked Romulus – used the cover of the storm to murder the king, cut him into manageable pieces, and throw the chunks into the Tiber. The Roman people preferred the version of the story that did not involve their king becoming mincemeat, and so began to worship Romulus as the war god Quirinus. His hut was preserved as a shrine.

So much for the Roman foundation myth. Modern scholarship tells a very different story about the city's origins, pointing above all to geography. Rome grew up at the first ford of the Tiber River, a natural crossing of trade routes. The famous seven hills, rising from the riverside marshes, were easily fortified, and attracted settlers from the surrounding countryside. The largest of these hilltop villages, with perhaps three or four hundred inhabitants, arose on the Palatine. Around 700 BC, the village began to grow rapidly, apparently after a chieftain or king brokered a permanent alliance with the other villages on nearby hills.

There are clear correspondences between the Romulus story and the archaeological evidence. Both agree that Rome began on the Palatine Hill, and the chieftain who arranged the alliance between the Palatine village and the others may well have been the inspiration for Romulus himself. But the historical origins of the Romulus myth are less interesting than the ways later Romans used the myth to explain their past.

Our earliest sources for the foundation of Rome date to the end of the third century BCE, more than four hundred years after Romulus was thought to have reigned. Even in this early period, the Romans were well aware of how little they knew about their founder. They continued, however, to make Romulus the protagonist of their prehistory. Although Romulus was far from an ideal founding father, he seemed to represent a real connection with an already obscure past. As mentioned earlier, the Romans tended to ascribe their early success to their own virtues and to the favor of the gods. Romulus, for all his faults, could be presented as the first in a long line of exemplary leaders; and as the son of a god, he was clearly favored by Heaven.

The replica House of Romulus, continually rebuilt on the site of that first village, was a place for the Romans to reflect on their past. Rome may not have been founded at the House of Romulus, but Roman identity was founded on it.

Most tourists who visit the Palatine Hill make a beeline for the towering ruins of the imperial palace. But a few, more dedicated or more disoriented than the rest, make their way to the southwest corner. The probable site of the Hut of Romulus has been closed for years. But the House of Augustus, only a few yards away, is open to the public. In the floors of this structure, which have been excavated down to bedrock, the postholes of Iron Age huts are visible. Though not especially impressive – they are, after all, just slots cut into the tufa – these postholes offer a unique glimpse into the origins of Rome.