



Rivista di antichità - Anno XXIX - 2020

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Autorizzazione del Tribunale di Napoli n. 4321 del 30/10/1992

Registro degli Operatori di Comunicazione (R.O.C.) n. 6039 del 10/12/2001

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Not the Tomb of Romulus (but perhaps something more interesting)

T.P. Wiseman

It was probably in the late thirties B.C. that Horace wrote the despairing sixteenth Epode, in which he imagined Rome as a wilderness occupied by barbarians, and Romulus' bones sacrilegiously scattered¹. When he wrote, the bones were 'protected from the wind and sun', presumably in a tomb. At exactly the same time Livy was composing a narrative of the end of Romulus' reign in which no burial was possible: the king simply disappeared in a mysterious darkness, either restored to the gods or secretly torn to pieces by the senators². When Pomponius Porphyrio wrote his commentary on Horace in the third century A.D., he made the appropriate note on *Epod.* 16.13: "This is written as if Romulus were buried, not taken up to heaven or torn to pieces: Varro says Romulus was buried behind the Rostra"³.

The commentator simply states which of the three well-attested versions his author was following at this point; he does not, of course, pick out any one of them as 'true'. There were many mutually inconsistent stories about Romulus, not least who he was and when he lived. In Horace's time most Romans probably assumed, with their classic poets Naevius and Ennius, that Romulus' mother was the daughter of Aeneas⁴; for historians like Livy, on the other hand, she was the daughter of a deposed king of Alba Longa sixteen generations after the Trojan war⁵. There is no real history here, no single 'legend of Rome' that might perhaps reflect some genuine reality⁶. We are dealing with multiple stories, created at various times, for various audiences, with various motives, over a period of at least three centuries before Horace's time.

Romulus was not the only alleged founder of Rome, and certainly not the earliest⁷. The first literary reference to the origin of the city is detectable in the sixth century B.C., in the fragments of the Sicilian-Greek poet Stesichorus, who brought into his 'lyric-epic' poem *Geryoneis* a story that Hercules, returning through Italy, was greeted at the Palatine hill by Evander, an Arcadian exile who had founded a colony there⁸. Proof that the story was known in Rome by about 530 B.C. is provided by the great terracotta *akroterion* of Hercules and Pallas Athene from the Forum Boarium temple; Hercules' lion-skin is a specifically Stesichorean feature⁹.

In this period, and for the next two hundred years, there is no trace of Romulus. The first datable reference is in the late fourth century B.C., when the Sicilian historian Alkimos named Romulus as the son of Aeneas and Tyrrhenia and the father of Alba, who bore Rhodius, the founder of Rome¹⁰. The story of Romulus and Remus is not attested before 296 B.C., when the statue group of the she-wolf and twins was set up at the Lupercal. The first Roman coin-issues illustrate it a few years later – but they also show Hercules¹¹. The earliest Roman historian, Fabius Pictor, writing about 210 B.C., put the foundation by Romulus in what we would call 747 B.C., half a millennium before his own time – but he also reported the visit of Hercules to Evander's colony, another half-millennium before that, and his own patrician family claimed descent from a son of Hercules begotten on that occasion¹².

* * *

All that must be borne in mind when we consider the recent claim that Romulus' tomb has been identified¹³. On 18 February 2020 the Rome newspapers car-

¹ Hor. *Epod.* 16.11-14: *barbarus heu cineres insistet uictor et urbem | eques sonante uerberabit ungula, | quaeque carent uentis et solibus ossa Quirini | (nefas uidere!) dissipabit insolens.*

² Liv. 1.16.1-5; cf. Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.56.1-6, Plut. *Rom.* 27.3-9.

³ Porph. *ad epod.* 16.13: *hoc sic dicitur, quasi Romulus sepultus sit, non ad caelum raptus aut discerptus. nam Varro post rostra fuisse sepultum Romulum dicit.* For Varro's version of the Romulus legend (and others), see T.P. Wiseman, *Rome on the Balance: Varro and the Foundation Legend*, in D.J. Butterfield (ed.), *Varro Varius: The Polymath of the Roman World*, CCJ Supplement XXXIX, 2015, 93-122.

⁴ Serv. *ad Aen.* 1.273: *Nauius et Ennius Aeneae ex filia nepotem Romulum conditorem urbis tradunt.* Cf. also Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.73.1-2, citing unnamed Roman prose authors.

⁵ Liv. 1.3.6-11, Diod. Sic. 7.5.3-12, Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.70-1; cf. Virg. *Aen.* 1.266-74, Ovid. *Met.* 14.609-21, *Fasti* 4.39-54.

⁶ As is assumed in the four-volume *La leggenda di Roma*, a cura di Andrea Carandini (Mondadori 2006, 2010, 2011, 2014), in which the collected ancient evidence is broken up into arbitrary pieces and re-assembled as a structured mosaic in support of a particular vision of archaic Rome.

⁷ For a convenient collection of the evidence for other founders, see T.P. Wiseman, *Remus: A Roman Myth*, Cambridge 1995, 160-168 = *Remus: un mito di Roma*, Roma 1999, 150-156.

⁸ Stesichorus *Geryoneis* fr. 21 DF (Pausanias 8.3.2), with H. Usener, *Kleine Schriften* 1, Leipzig 1912, 330, and M. Davies, P.J. Finglass, *Stesichorus: The Poems*, Cambridge 2014, 290. Detailed discussion in T.P. Wiseman, *The House of Augustus*, Princeton 2019, 65-76.

⁹ M. Cristofani (ed.), *La grande Roma dei Tarquini*, Roma 1990, 119-120, tav. IX; see Athen. 12.512f-513a for the lionskin.

¹⁰ Festus 326-8L (FGrH 560 F4): *Alcimus ait Tyrrhenia Aeneae natum filium Romulum fuisse atque eo ortam Alban Aeneae neptem, cuius filius nomine Rhodius condiderit urbem Romanam.*

¹¹ Liv. 10.23.11-12 (296 B.C.); M.H. Crawford, *Roman Republican Coinage*, Cambridge 1974, 137, n. 20.1.

¹² T.J. Cornell et alii, *The Fragments of the Roman Historians*, Oxford 2013, 3.38-9 and 48-75: n. 1 T7 and F4-5. Proto-Fabius: Sil. Ital. 6.627-36, Plut. *Fab. Max.* 1.1-2, Festus (Paul.) 77L.

¹³ I am very grateful to William Harris and Carmine Ampolo for sending valuable information.

ried an announcement by Alfonsina Russo, Director of the Parco Archeologico del Colosseo. Re-excavating a site in the Forum first found in 1899 and then forgotten, archaeologists had made ‘an exceptional discovery’: an underground chamber containing a stone sarcophagus, datable to the sixth century B.C., and what looks like the base of a round altar, at a site corresponding to ‘behind the Rostra’, where Varro said Romulus was buried.

Naturally, journalists consulted Andrea Carandini, who has written so extensively on Romulus. He was sceptical, but not for the right reason: “È bene sottolineare che il corpo di Romolo, quando venne ucciso, venne sparso a pezzi per tutta la città”¹⁴. This reference is not to the story in the ancient sources, where the senators who tore Romulus to pieces buried the body parts in secret to hide their crime¹⁵, but to Carandini’s own belief that Romulus was a *dema*, a concept allegedly attested in New Guinea: a divine founder whose body parts were distributed throughout the community’s land, to guarantee its fertility¹⁶. The whole idea has been shown to be deeply implausible¹⁷, and in any case, even for those who share Carandini’s belief in Romulus as a historical figure, it is contradicted by Varro.

At the press conference a few days later Dr Russo was careful to explain that the rediscovered site was not a real tomb, but may have been a sort of cenotaph memorial, a hero-shrine for the city’s founder. When the RAI correspondent ventured to ask whether Romulus ever existed, she replied with the dogma that has become depressingly familiar in Roman archaeology in the last thirty years: “Tutti i miti e le leggende hanno un fondo di verità, e io sono convinta che sia esistito un eroe fondatore. Penso di sì, che qualcosa di vero ci sia”¹⁸.

Even the most sensible scholars seem to be unable to free themselves from this arbitrary belief¹⁹.

We need dates, and the only reliable ones are archaeological. Continuous occupation of the site of Rome goes back to at least 1400 B.C., but the earliest evidence for Rome as a city-state is the creation of the site for the Forum in about 650 B.C.²⁰. Why should we believe there was ever a ‘foundation’ that created the city in a single act? Even supposing there was, why should we make it correspond chronologically with one particular date (mid-eighth century B.C.) for one particular founder (Romulus), when the Romans knew stories of many other founders and many other dates? If you must believe in someone, why not Hercules and Evander, or the Romulus of Naevius and Ennius? That would at least make sense of the Bronze Age occupation levels. But of course there is no need to believe that *any* legendary story is historically factual.

When Giacomo Boni described this site in 1900, the name of Romulus seems not to have crossed his mind²¹. The sarcophagus is only 1.4 metres long, hardly adequate for the body of a warrior king. Once we ignore the current Romulus-obsession, we may wonder whether it is not a sarcophagus at all, but a chest or ‘strong-box’ to preserve some precious relic. A quite different explanation of this mysterious site may be available if we consider the scattered evidence for certain numinous objects that the Romans called *pignora*, ‘pledges’ of the gods’ favour²², on the safe preservation of which the prosperity of the city depended.

The most famous of them is the *Palladium*, brought from Troy by Aeneas and kept safe in the temple of Vesta²³. Almost equally well known is ‘the shield that fell from heaven’, sent by Jupiter as a sign to king Numa and kept in the chapel of Mars in the Regia²⁴. But there were many other such talismans, and some of them were evidently concealed in secret underground chambers. One such chamber was in front of the temple of Saturn in the Forum: it contained the bones of Orestes, brought from the cult-site of Diana at the lake of Nemi after he

¹⁴ Quoted by Paolo Conti in *Corriere della Sera*, 18 Feb. 2020.

¹⁵ Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2.56.4, γῆ κρούσαι κατὰ τὸ ἀφανές.

¹⁶ A. Brelich, *Quirinus: una divinità alla luce della comparazione storica*, in SMSR XXXI, 1960, 63-119, whence A. Carandini, *Remo e Romolo: dai rioni dei Quiriti alla città dei Romani*, Torino 2006, 325-327, 377-378, 382-394.

¹⁷ See J. Poucet, *Andrea Carandini, Romulus et les dema: Naissance, diffusion et ravages d'un produit ethnographique toxique*, in A. Meurant (ed.), *Routes et parcours mythiques: des textes à l'archéologie*, Bruxelles 2011, 215-249.

¹⁸ Quoted in RAI *News*, 21 Feb. 2020.

¹⁹ See for instance A. Grandazzi, *La fondation de Rome: réflexion sur l'histoire*, Paris 1991; A. Fraschetti, *Romolo il fondatore*, Rome 2002; F. Coarelli, *Palatium: Il Palatino dalle origini all'Impero*, Rome 2012, 127-189 (‘la città di Romolo’).

²⁰ For an excellent recent synthesis see John North Hopkins, *The Genesis of Roman Architecture*, Yale 2016, 27-38.

²¹ G. Boni, *Roma. Nuove scoperte nella città e nel Suburbio*, in NSA 1900, 299-300, with the section drawing at 298 fig. 4: as Dr Russo noted at the press conference, ‘non ne diede nessuna interpretazione’ (quoted by Andrea Manessi in *TG Tourism*, 24 February 2020).

²² E.g. Cic. *Scaur.* 48, Liv. 5.52.7, 26.27.4, Ovid. *Fasti* 3.346, 3.422, 6.365, 6.445, Flor. 1.2.3, Serv. *auct. ad Aen.* 7.188.

²³ Ovid. *Fasti* 6.419-36, *Trist.* 3.1.29; for the complexity of the story see T.P. Wiseman, *The Myths of Rome*, Exeter 2004, 18-21.

²⁴ Ovid. *Fasti* 3.327-92; Serv. *ad Aen.* 8.3 (*sacrarium Martis*), cf. Aul. Gell. 4.6.1.

had fled there with his sister Iphigeneia from the land of the Taurians²⁵. There was another in front of the great temple of Jupiter on the Capitol: it contained the head of 'king Olus' (perhaps the Etruscan hero Aulus Vibenna), which had appeared when king Tarquin's men were surveying the site²⁶. These treasures had to be kept safe and secret, or the gods' goodwill towards Rome would be in jeopardy.

The newly rediscovered site was first found by Boni beneath the steps of the recently expropriated church of S. Adriano. The building was originally the imperial Senate-house, first constructed by Julius Caesar, and we have no idea what was there five hundred years before Caesar's time. Perhaps an archaic temple, with a secret underground chamber in front of it? The Parco Archeologico hopes to open the site to the public before long. When that happens, visitors will deserve better guidance than a mere anachronistic guess about a 'founder' whose name and story had not yet even been invented when this 'sarcophagus' was made. It might even be appropriate, once the pandemic has passed, to present it as one of the places where the Romans remembered what they owed to their gods.

²⁵ Serv. *ad Aen.* 2.116: *Orestis uero ossa ab Aricia Romam translata sunt et condita ante templum Saturni.* Cf. Euripides *Iphigeneia in Tauris*.

²⁶ Arnob. 6.7: *condiscetis etiam, quamuis nolle istud publicare se fingant, quid sit capite relecto factum uel in parte qua areae curiosa fuerit obscuritate conclusum, ut immobilis uidelicet atque fixa obsignati ominis perpetuitas staret.* Cf. Serv. *auct. ad Aen.* 8.345 and the 'Chronographer of AD 354' (Th. Mommsen, *MGH Chronica minora* 1.144).

