

The Birth of Romulus, Remus, and Rome

By Dan Stahl

Rome is known as the Eternal City, but that's an exaggeration. Rome may be old, but it hasn't been around forever. It was founded in or around the 8th century BCE. According to legend, the date of its founding is 21 April 753 BCE.

Rome's age doesn't matter as much as its history. The city began as a village in western Italy. Over the following centuries it grew into an empire that stretched across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. A man who lived in Rome as it was growing wrote that its power was second to none except the gods.

That man, whose name was Livy, was a historian. He wrote 142 books about the history of Rome. He believed the city did not develop by chance but by fate.

Livy's books are a mix of fact and legend. What mattered to him was not whether every event he described happened. What mattered was the behavior of the people he wrote about. He urged his readers to study these people and learn from them.

Here is his account of how Rome was founded. You may believe it or not, as you like. What you should do is think about it and learn from it. Oh, and one more thing: enjoy it.

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Before Rome, there was Alba Longa. It was another city in the same part of Italy. The king who ruled it had two sons, Numitor and Amulius. He left his kingdom to Numitor, the older of the two. However, Amulius ousted his brother and took over the kingdom. He then had Numitor's sons executed. As for Numitor's daughter, he made her a priestess. He pretended it was an honor, but it wasn't. It was a ruse to stop her from becoming a mother.

She became a mother anyway. The father of her twin boys was said to be the god Mars, but even he could not protect her and her sons from Amulius. The king had her arrested and ordered that her baby boys be drowned.

Accordingly, the boys were taken to a river. This river, known as the Tiber, had overflowed its banks. The overflow had collected in pools that blocked access to the river. *The pools will do*, thought the king's servants. They left the boys floating in a basket on one of the pools.

Soon the water receded, leaving the twins on land. Nearby was a thirsty she-wolf, which heard the boys crying and veered toward them. She nursed them and gave them a tongue bath. At that point the three of them were discovered by a shepherd. The shepherd was Faustulus, the overseer of the king's flocks. He took the boys home and entrusted their upbringing to his wife.

Once the twins had grown up, they started hunting in the woods. They did not limit themselves to animals. They also attacked robbers, taking their loot and distributing it to neighboring shepherds. The shepherds then teamed up with the twins, forming a posse of youths.

The robbers disliked being robbed and wanted revenge, so they ambushed the posse of young men. One of the twins, Romulus, held his ground. The other twin, Remus, was captured. The robbers hauled Remus to King Amulius, claiming he was a criminal. *He took part in raids on the lands of Numitor*, they said. Accordingly, Remus was turned over to Numitor for punishment.

Concern for Remus led Faustulus to approach Romulus. Faustulus had suspected from day one that the twins were royalty. He knew about the king's order of infanticide, and he knew his discovery of the babies coincided with that order. He now shared this knowledge with Romulus.

Numitor also discerned the truth. While Remus was in his keeping, Numitor heard about the twin's brother. Learning of their age and nobleness, he deduced their identity.

Hence trouble awaited King Amulius on two fronts. First there was Romulus. He was organizing an ambush against the king with the shepherds. Meanwhile, Remus had formed another group at the estate of Numitor. When Romulus's group made its attack, Remus's group came to their assistance. In this way they struck down the king.

Upon the king's death, Numitor called a meeting of the people. In it he disclosed his brother's crimes and his grandsons' identity. At last he revealed the death of Amulius. Romulus and Remus then hailed their grandfather as king. Everyone present approved, and Alba Longa was restored to Numitor.

Now Romulus and Remus were itching to found a city of their own. It would be where they had been abandoned and brought up. The shepherds and others joined them.

The brothers' plans hit a snag, however. Ambition ran in their family, and now a rivalry developed between them. Because the brothers were twins, neither could claim superiority by age. How, then, to determine the ruler of the new city? Or which of them it should be named after? The gods would have to decide. To receive their answers, Romulus and Remus each went to a separate hill where they awaited a sign from the heavens.

A sign—six vultures—came to Remus first. Just as the sign was proclaimed, twelve vultures came to Romulus. Each brother was hailed by his followers as king. Remus's group justified its claim by the order of the signs, while Romulus's group cited the number of birds. The two groups started debating and wound up brawling. In the turmoil Remus got clobbered and dropped to the ground, dead.

There is another story of Remus's death. In this version, the walls of the brothers' city were under construction. Remus jumped over Romulus's walls to make fun of them. Romulus killed him in a rage, uttering these words: "The same to anyone else who trespasses on my walls!"

In this way Romulus became the sovereign of Rome. The city had been born and was named after its founder.

Note: The story of Romulus and Remus related here is an adaptation. Its source is Book 1 of Ab Urbe Condita by Titus Livius (Livy).