

Myth and the City: Foundation Stories

Learning Objectives:

- To understand the foundation myths of Athens and Rome
- To understand the use of these myths and their significance



Introduction

In ancient times, it was normal for cities and peoples to have a story about their origins which would tie in to mythology in some way, often involving the gods. These stories would form part of the identity of the city, and perhaps be used to explain a specific role that was fulfilled by the city.

Athens – The city of Athens was an important one in ancient times and at the height of its power dominated a large network of city states in the region. Athens is on the coast, and was famous for its navy, which was renowned as the best among the Greeks. Athens is also famous for being the birthplace of democracy, with all free adult male citizens having a say in the running of the city.

Rome – The city that birthed an empire that would last for hundreds of years and stretch across the whole Mediterranean. In its beginnings, the city of Rome was ruled by kings, but ultimately the monarchy was overthrown and replaced with the Republic that saw a sharing of power, though mainly among the upper sections of society. The Republic in turn gave way to the Empire after Caesar and Augustus managed to monopolise power.

The Naming of Athens: Poseidon and Athena

The story of the naming of Athens goes that when the city was in its infancy it did not yet have a patron deity, as was common. The growing city attracted the attention of gods and both Poseidon and Athena presented themselves as candidates for the role and this meant that a choice had to be made between them. It was decided that each god would provide a gift for the city and that the people would decide which one was better and thereby choose their patron deity. Poseidon went first and struck the earth with his trident, creating a spring and so providing the city with access to water, but also symbolising the potential for the city to become a naval power. However, the water was salty and the people couldn't drink it. Athena went next and made an olive tree grow in the city. The tree not only could provide food and fuel, but was a symbol of peace and prosperity. The people chose Athena as the winner of the contest and named the city Athens in her honour. Of course the gods can be jealous beings, and Poseidon was not happy that his gift was deemed worse. As a result, whenever the city suffered a misfortune at sea it was often attributed to the displeasure of Poseidon at not having been chosen as the city's patron deity.

The Significance of the Naming of Athens Myth

A lot of things would often be attributed in some way to the mythological origins of a city or people, and the wider stories associated with it. This myth serves to illustrate Athens as having a divine link, stronger than most as the city is directly named after a goddess. A piece of context here is that it was actually debated whether the city was named after the goddess or the other way around, with modern scholars preferring the latter explanation. In any case, there was a clear ability to link the city and its people to divinity, which could be used to justify the leading role that the city gained within the Greek world in the fifth century BC.

The Adventures of Theseus

Theseus was a mythical hero, whose father was Aegeus the King of Athens. However, some traditions maintain that his father was Poseidon. He was also a contemporary of Heracles. Like Heracles, he had many adventures, fighting monsters and bandits.

His most famous adventure was when he fought the Minotaur of Knossos, on the island of Crete. This story goes that due to the killing of the son of King Minos of Crete in Athens by those jealous about his victories in the games held in the city, Athens had to send every year seven young men and women as tribute, who would be fed to the Minotaur that lived at the heart of the Labyrinth in Knossos. At one such time, Theseus volunteered to take the place of one of the young men and try to kill the Minotaur. His father was distraught at the suggestion and asked Theseus to promise to fly white sails on his return if he had survived so that he could know from afar. When Theseus arrived in Knossos he met Ariadne, the daughter of Minos, who fell in love with Theseus and helped him by giving him a ball of thread with which he could trace his route into the labyrinth and so find his way back. Smuggling a sword into the Labyrinth, he found and managed to kill the Minotaur and used the thread to find his way back out with the other young Athenians. He then sailed from Crete and took Ariadne with him. Arriving on the island of Naxos on the way to Athens, Theseus stayed the night when he was instructed by Athena to leave the island quickly and abandon Ariadne on the island, because the island belonged to Dionysus and Ariadne was to wed the god. Theseus was upset but he did as he was told, but in his haste to leave and his distress at abandoning Ariadne, he forgot to put up white sails on his ship. As a result, his father, Aegeus, saw the black sails and, thinking his son was dead, threw himself into the sea. This gave the sea around Athens the name 'Aegean sea' after Theseus's father, King Aegeus.

Theseus also undertook six labours, and these occur before the more famous story of the Minotaur. Theseus's mother was the daughter of the king of Troezen, and she had been informed that Theseus should only go to Athens when he became a man and could move a rock under which Aegeus placed a sword and sandals. By these tokens Aegeus would recognise his son. When he had achieved this, Theseus had to choose whether to go to Athens by the easier sea route, or the treacherous land route where he would face six challenges. Brave and ambitious, Theseus chose the latter:

1. His first challenge was to fight the brigand Periphetes, who wielded a powerful club. Theseus overcame him and took his club.
2. The second challenge was to kill a robber called Sinis, who caught travellers and killed them by tying them to trees that were bent to the ground before letting the trees go, ripping apart his victims. Theseus killed him the same way.
3. Then he faced a giant pig called the Crommyonian Sow, which he killed.
4. Next was the robber Sciron, who pushed travellers of a cliff to be eaten by a sea monster below. Theseus used the same method to kill Sciron.
5. After this he faced King Cercyon, who would challenge travellers to arm-wrestling and, when he had beaten them, he killed them. Theseus beat Cercyon in arm-wrestling and then killed the king.
6. The final challenge was to kill the bandit Procrustes, who would offer one of two beds to travellers, only to either stretch them or cut off their feet to make them fit into the beds as they would never naturally fit in them. Theseus killed him by cutting off his legs and head.

Upon arriving in Athens, Theseus was involved in another adventure that he is associated with often. Medea, the consort of Aegeus, recognised who Theseus was before the king himself, and, fearing he would take her son's place as heir, sent him to capture the Bull of Marathon, hoping it would kill him. However, he succeeded and returned to Athens. It was after this that Aegeus recognised his son thanks to seeing the sandals and sword that he had left for his son. After this discovery, Medea fled the city while Aegeus was reunited with his son.

The Significance of the Adventures of Theseus

Theseus is an important founding figure for the Athenians. As a hero specifically of Athens, some elements of his story should be seen in how they suit Athens itself. The fact that he was a contemporary of Heracles is significant given Heracles' own importance. It makes Theseus also of the same 'age of heroes'. The parallels continue with him also having a set of challenges, also referred to as labours, just like Heracles. In addition, he used a club, just like Heracles. The story of Periphetes (where Theseus gets his club) was actually added at a later stage to his general mythology, suggesting that it was an intentional effort to increase his comparability to Heracles. This all makes it possible to compare him to Heracles. Heracles was famous and popular, but the Athenians could not claim him as their own – Theseus served this purpose. The fact that all six of his challenges occur in the area near Athens adds to this element of his identity. They also helped to explain certain political points too; for instance, Theseus's defeat of King Cercyon of Eleusis helps explain why this place was a part of Athenian territory. Of course, he only accomplished six labours rather than Heracles' 12, but this could be intentionally designed. Heracles was after all a demigod, unlike Theseus, and so perhaps it was fitting that a mortal completed half the number of great challenges of a hero who would become a god.

The Theseus Kylix

The above described six challenges of Theseus are depicted on the Theseus kylix (a kylix is a cup). They are illustrated around the edge in a circle. Only five are shown, however; Periphetes is missing as it appears this story was added to his challenges at a later time, a clear example of the evolution of myths. They are not the only adventures depicted, however; at the bottom is that of the Bull of Marathon. In the middle, Theseus's most famous exploit is depicted to immediately capture our attention: his killing of the Minotaur. His challenges are not shown in the same order as he completed them in, rather they are displayed to make the kylix more appealing. At top and bottom Theseus wrestles with an opponent, Cercyon and the Bull of Marathon respectively, for instance. It is interesting to compare this to the Temple of Zeus metopes that depict the labours of Heracles. While in both cases there is a clear image capturing a particular event, here the focus is exclusively on the action. In addition, Theseus himself doesn't change between the different events, perhaps just suggesting that they occurred over a shorter period of time.



The Theseus Kylix depicted his adventures. This was made in Attica (the region where Athens is) in Greece in the fifth century BC.

The Founding of the Roman Race

Aeneas' leadership of the Trojans

According to Greek mythology, in the distant past there was a huge war fought between Greeks and Trojans, a people who lived in modern-day Turkey, on its western coast. Fought over 10 years after the Trojan Prince Paris had taken Helen, the wife of the King of Sparta, the war ultimately resulted in the destruction of the city of Troy. The Roman focus begins with Aeneas, another Prince of Troy, whose mother was the goddess Venus. As Troy was burning, Aeneas was ordered by the gods to flee because he had another destiny awaiting him: he was to found a new city. Aeneas, taking the household gods of Troy with him, led a group of surviving Trojans away to find their new home. Aeneas travelled across the Mediterranean in his quest to find the location for his new city. Aeneas came to Carthage, in modern Tunisia, where he was welcomed by the city's queen, Dido. There, the Trojans stayed for a year, and Aeneas and Dido had a love affair. Dido proposed that the Trojans settle in Carthage permanently and that Aeneas rule jointly with her over their people. Aeneas was tempted by the offer, but then the god

Mercury came to see him with a message from Jupiter and his mother, Venus, to remind him of his destiny to found a new city in Italy. Aeneas and the Trojans, therefore, left Carthage in secret and set sail once more. When she found out that the Trojans had left, Dido placed a curse upon them, that their people and hers would forever be enemies. After this, beside herself with grief, she killed herself.

Arrival and settlement in Italy

After leaving Carthage, the Trojans travelled to Italy and landed near the future site of Rome. There, they were welcomed by Latinus, who was king of the Latins, the people who inhabited the region of Latium in western Italy. He allowed Aeneas and the Trojans to stay in his lands. Due to a prophecy that his daughter would wed a man from a foreign land, Latinus married his daughter Lavinia to Aeneas. However, this caused the jealousy of the king of a different tribe in the region, called Turnus, who had originally been promised the hand of Lavinia. As a result, Turnus went to war with Aeneas, and in the ensuing battles, Latinus was killed. However, Aeneas came out of the war triumphant, and Turnus was killed. Aeneas went on to found a city called Lavinium in the region, named after his wife. Here, he placed the household gods that he had carried from Troy; legend stated that where these statues were would mark the centre of a great empire. He would go on to rule this city for the rest of his life. When Aeneas died, Venus requested that he be made into an immortal. Jupiter agreed to this request and proceeded to have him made into a god.

The founding of Alba Longa and the line of kings

The son of Aeneas, Ascanius, succeeded him as king. He would go on to found the city of Alba Longa due to overcrowding in Lavinium and settled many families there. Eventually, he would make this new city his capital. From Ascanius would begin a long line of kings that ruled Alba and the Latins, who would continue to grow in strength and maintain their lands and position in spite of the death of Aeneas.

The Significance of the Myth of Aeneas

Aeneas was seen as the ancestor of the people who would one day become Romans. The Romans received a lot of influence from the Greek world, and so it should not be a surprise that they too sought their origin in mythology. Virgil's *Aeneid* went one step further and legitimised not only the Roman people in myth, but also Augustus Caesar, the ruler of Rome at the time, himself. Ascanius, the son of Aeneas, is also called by the name Iulus, meaning of Ilium, another name for Troy, and which was taken to mean that he was the progenitor of the Julii clan, of which Julius Caesar and Augustus (by adoption) were part. Therefore, the *Aeneid* also serves to legitimise the rule of Augustus by attesting that he is descended from the hero Aeneas, and, therefore, is also a descendant of the goddess Venus.

The birth of Rome and its people had happened such a long time ago, even in the first century BC, when Virgil was writing the *Aeneid*, that the exact facts are unclear. This is especially true because the city was sacked in 390 BC by the Gauls, which resulted in the loss of all written records. However, not knowing where you come from is unsettling, which inspired such myths, though it must be noted that the legend of Aeneas was already familiar in Virgil's time.

The Founding of Rome

Romulus and Remus

Alba Longa was an ancient town situated close to the future site of Rome. After the death of its king, his son Numitor inherited the throne. However, Numitor's younger brother Amulius did not accept their father's will and overthrew Numitor, making himself the new king of Alba Longa instead. He proceeded to have Numitor's male heirs killed and forced his daughter, Rhea Silvia, to become a Vestal Virgin, meaning that she could not have any children as she was now sworn to chastity. However, she was visited one night by the god Mars and conceived twins by him. When he discovered that Rhea was pregnant,

Amulius was furious. When the twins were born, Amulius ordered their death by exposure. However, the servant who was tasked with disposing of the twins was unable to bring himself to do it. Instead, he put them in a basket and set them on the bank of the River Tiber. When the river rose in a flood, it carried the twins away, but they remained unharmed. The spirit of the river, Tiberinus, stopped the basket at the foot of the Palatine Hill. Here, the twins were found by a she-wolf, who cared for them and suckled them, while a woodpecker fed them. In this way, they survived their childhood.

One day Romulus and Remus were found by a shepherd, Faustulus, and his wife, Acca Larentia, who raised them to adulthood. They were brought up as shepherds, and were unaware of their true origins. Nevertheless, both proved to have a natural talent for leadership and acquired many loyal followers. While tending their flocks on one occasion, they came into conflict with a group of shepherds working for Amulius. As a result of this, Remus was captured and brought before Amulius, who soon discovered the truth about Remus's birth. In the meantime, Romulus had raised a band of shepherds to liberate Remus, and in the ensuing fight Amulius was killed. With the truth of their birth revealed, the brothers were offered to be made joint kings by the people of Alba Longa. However, they declined this offer and instead chose to reinstall their grandfather, Numitor, as the rightful king of Alba Longa.

Romulus and Remus soon set out to found a new city for themselves rather than to wait to inherit Alba Longa. Both set out to find a good location for this new city. This led to an argument as Romulus wanted to found the city on the Palatine Hill, while Remus wanted to found it on the Aventine Hill. They determined to decide this by augury, which is the practice of determining omens or signs from the gods by the observation of birds. Romulus and Remus each climbed his chosen hill and waited for a sign. Remus was the first to see a sign, as six vultures flew over his hill. However, shortly afterwards, Romulus saw 12 vultures fly over his hill. Each argued that the sign was in his favour: Remus that he had seen the birds first; Romulus that he had seen more birds. This argument continued and resulted in a stalemate. Romulus and his supporters then started to dig a trench and build a wall around the Palatine Hill in order to mark and defend the boundary of his new city. Remus mocked Romulus's wall, first by insulting it and then by jumping over it. This latter action enraged Romulus, who slew Remus. Romulus was now, therefore, the sole founder of the city, and went on to name the city 'Rome' after himself and become its first king.



Panel from a Roman altar to Mars and Venus from the second century AD depicting Romulus and Remus discovered being suckled by a she-wolf.

Romulus finished building his city and started to organise his people. He divided his military into units, which were called legions. He then chose the wealthiest and noblest men of his people and designated them as the patricians, as they would be the fathers of the people, as well as senators, as they were the elders and so the leaders of the city. The city attracted many people to it: exiles, refugees, runaway slaves and criminals all came to call Rome home; and it grew accordingly. However, most of these new additions were men, and the city found itself short of women. To address this issue, the Romans first invited some nearby peoples, the Sabines and the Latins, to a festival. Once the men were distracted by games and booze, the Romans seized their women and took them back to Rome. The Sabines and Latins were enraged and prepared to respond with military action. Three Latin towns rose up and fought the Romans, but each was defeated. Romulus was fair in his victory and distributed the land gained among the Roman citizens and spared the vanquished from slavery. Then it was the Sabines who marched against the Romans. They fought each other to a stalemate, and in a lull in the fighting the Sabine women themselves went out and begged for the fighting to stop and for there to be unity between the two peoples. Peace followed, and Romulus and Tatius, the Sabine king, ruled together for five years. In this time the two peoples adopted some of each other's customs, and 100 Sabine noblemen joined the ranks of the Roman Senate. One day, Tatius sheltered some of his allies who had illegally plundered another town and killed ambassadors who came to seek justice. Romulus and the Senate decided that Tatius should go to said town and seek to make amends for his actions. When Tatius was there, he was killed, and this made Romulus the sole king. He proceeded to organise his people into tribes and determine that each tribe would be represented by a tribune. He also formed a personal guard and expanded his territory, including Alba Longa when Numitor had died, and the city of Lavinium. Towards the end of his rule, he became more autocratic, and did not consult the Senate before granting land to his soldiers. One day, he was caught up in a whirlwind and disappeared. Some claimed that he was called to the heavens and became a god.



One of the many coins depicting the she-wolf and Romulus and Remus. The frequency with which this appears on official coinage suggests the great importance of this event to the sense of Roman identity.

The Significance of the Myth of Romulus and Remus

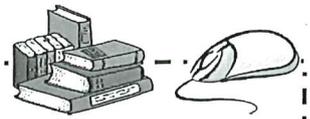
While Aeneas was seen as the ancestor of the people who would one day become the Romans, Romulus is credited with the actual founding of the city of Rome itself and the subsequent naming of the people as Romans. The figure of Romulus and the story of origin surrounding him and his brother are as much myth as those of Aeneas. The myths of both the brothers and Aeneas were central to the Roman identity. This is shown in their inclusion in more historical works as well as poetic ones. The history of Livy, called 'from the founding of the city', begins with the stories of Aeneas and Romulus before going through the more 'historical' parts of the Roman story.

**A mythical link is suggested between the two legendary founders. Numitor, Romulus's grandfather, is of the line of kings started by Aeneas and who trace their descent back to him. This is the link between Romulus and Aeneas.*

Comparison of Theseus and Romulus

The Greek writer Plutarch wrote a series of 'lives', where he compared a prominent figure from Greek myth or history with a Roman counterpart. His work must be considered in the context of the time it was written to be fully understood. Much of the Greek world was rapidly falling under Roman control and influence in Plutarch's time, and so the lives serve a purpose of equating Greek figures with Roman ones to justify the success of Rome, but also to restore pride in Greece by reminding it of its past. The work was not intended as history, which he says himself at its outset, but rather to investigate the characters in question and show that Greece had just as impressive figures as Rome. The accounts as a result are quite often favoured towards the Greek in the comparison, as his audience were primarily Greek.

Plutarch makes several points of comparison. He notes that Theseus achieved great things of his own accord while Romulus only did so out of necessity. He applies this to how they dealt with tyrants, considering Theseus better as he dealt with tyrants because they were tyrants, while Romulus did so only if they were a direct problem to him. The examples he gives are interesting, however, as he lists the likes of Sciron and Sinis as 'tyrants' but these were just the bandits (though fearsome) that Theseus faced on his way to Athens, which he in part chose to do for the glory. Whereas the tyrant Romulus is said to have dealt with was the ruler of a city – a much harder task. Plutarch also discusses the respective origins of the two, pointing out how Romulus rose up from almost nothing to become king.



Independent Research

There are many other myths associated with Theseus and Aeneas. Research one or two of the following myths, focusing on how they represent them as well as any differences that might exist between the ways that Greeks and Romans portrayed their respective founding heroes:

1. Aeneas leading the attack on Idomeneus at Troy
2. Aeneas and his relationship with Dido during his time in Carthage
3. The conception and birth of Theseus
4. Theseus's abduction of Helen (Not to be confused with Paris's abduction of Helen that incited the Trojan War – this is a separate myth that involves the abduction of Helen)

Consolidation Questions

- a) Why did Theseus have to complete six labours?
- b) Why did Romulus kill his brother?
- c) Briefly explain one thing that the Athenian and Roman founding myths have in common.

Source Questions

Classical source-based units include **unseen sources**. These are sources you are not expected to have seen before as they are not on the prescribed list. However, you will be expected to discuss them using the skills you have.

- 1) Look at the source below.



Now answer the following questions:

- A. Which part of the Romulus and Remus story is being depicted here?
- B. Apart from the twins, which other important symbolism is depicted, and why is it important?

- 2) Read the source below.

*Yet destiny wouldn't allow Troy's hopes to be overturned
Along with her walls. Aeneas, the hero whose mother was Venus,
Rescued his household gods and through the flames on his shoulders
He carried a burden as sacred, his venerable father Anchises.
These with his own dear son Ascanius formed the spoil
Which Aeneas the dutiful chose to salvage from all his possessions
Fleeing across the sea with his people in ships...*

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 13.623–628

Explain three ways that this source presents Aeneas as a great and heroic figure.