المجلة الليبية للدراسات الأكاديمية المعاصرة (Libyan Journal of Contemporary Academic Studies)
LJCAS, eISSN: 5970-3005
Volume 4, Issue 1, 2026, Pages: 316-331

From the Tombs of Osteria dell'Osa to the Legend of Romulus: Reassessing the Foundation Narrative of Rome

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من مقابر أوستريا ديل أوسا إلى أسطورة روموليوس: إعادة تقييم السرديّة التأسيسية لمدينة روما

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Received: 26-12-2025; **Accepted:** 03-03-2026; **Published:** 17-03-2026

Abstract:
This study examines the early history of Rome's founding, highlighting the contrast between the legendary narrative of Romulus and the archaeological evidence from the Osteria dell'Osa site, which indicates settlements dating back to the 10th and 9th centuries BC—well before the traditional founding date of the city (753 BC). The study also reveals a significant gap between historical and mythological accounts on one hand, and the material evidence showing the gradual development of Roman society from small agricultural villages to organized social structures on the other. Using a multidisciplinary approach, the study combines critical analysis of classical texts, archaeological methods, anthropological research, and ancient genetic data, while taking into account the symbolic dimension of the Romulus myth as a representation of emerging Roman identity. It concludes that the founding of Rome was not a sudden historical event, but the result of a cumulative, multi-dimensional process involving historical continuity, symbolic significance, and long-term cultural interactions. The study also emphasizes the need to reconsider the very concept of "founding," positioned between the actual historical event and its legendary portrayal of collective identity.

Keywords: Founding of Rome, Osteria dell'Osa, Bronze age, Iron age, Ancient Genome Sequencing, Palatine Hill.

الملخص :
تستعرض هذه الدراسة التاريخ المبكر لتأسيس روما، مسلطة الضوء على التباين بين الرواية الأسطورية عن روموليوس والأدلة الأثرية من موقع أوستريا ديل أوسا، والتي تشير إلى وجود مستوطنات تعود للقرنين العاشر والتاسع قبل الميلاد، أي قبل التاريخ التقليدي لتأسيس المدينة (753 ق.م). كما تكشف الدراسة عن فجوة معلوماتية بين الروايات التاريخية والأسطورية من جهة، والأدلة المادية التي تُظهر التطور التدريجي للمجتمع الروماني من قرى زراعية صغيرة إلى هياكل اجتماعية منظمة من جهة أخرى. تعتمد الدراسة على منهجية متعددة التخصصات، تجمع بين التحليل النقدي للنصوص الكلاسيكية، والأساليب الأثرية، والدراسات الأنثروبولوجية، والبيانات الوراثية القديمة، مع مراعاة البعد الرمزي لأسطورة روموليوس باعتباره تمثيلًا للهوية الرومانية الناشئة. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن تأسيس روما لم يكن حدثًا تاريخيًا مفاجئًا، بل كان نتيجة عملية تراكمية متعددة الأبعاد تشمل الاستمرارية التاريخية، والأبعاد الرمزية، والتفاعلات الثقافية الطويلة الأمد، كما تشدد أيضاً على ضرورة إعادة النظر في مفهوم "التأسيس" نفسه، بين الحدث التاريخي الواقعي وتصويره الأسطوري للهوية الجماعية للمجتمع.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تأسيس روما؛ أوستريا ديل أوسا، عصر البرونز، عصر الحديد، تسلسل الحمض النووي القديم، تل بالاتين.

-Introduction:

The aim of this study is to present and analyze the data and indicators relating to the early history of the city of Rome, while attempting to connect them with the city's foundation narrative, which has acquired a distinctly mythical character. This narrative has long served -and continues to serve- as the principal point of departure for scholars investigating the history of the city, its major issues, and its various chronological phases.

In reality, a clear informational gap exists between what has been transmitted in historical sources and what archaeological evidence has revealed in terms of concrete facts. This discrepancy poses a genuine challenge for researchers of Rome's early history, since the material and archaeological sources from that period do not fully illuminate the obscure aspects of the city's formative stages. Moreover, historical accounts frequently present this early history in mythical form. This may reflect the dominant literary conventions of the time and subsequent periods, or it may stem from limitations in the historical knowledge available to those historians.

The history of Rome's foundation remains one of the most debated subjects in classical studies, as it lies at the intersection of archaeology and myth, and of the material and the symbolic. Ancient historians—most notably Titus Livius and Dionysius of Halicarnassus—maintain that Romulus founded Rome in 753 BC after killing his brother Remus. In contrast, archaeological discoveries at Osteria dell'Osa point to evidence dating back

to the tenth and ninth centuries BC—predating the traditionally accepted foundation date. This chronological and informational tension compels scholars to reassess the conventional foundation narrative. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge a persistent research gap: archaeological sources provide only limited information on the matter, and there remains a lack of a comprehensive methodology capable of effectively linking historical events with archaeological and anthropological evidence in order to produce a more integrated and robust account of Rome's early history.

Overall, this study offers a chrono-historical examination of the information preserved in ancient writings concerning the historical, demographic, and ecological background that preceded the city's foundation. We argue that this background formed the structural foundation upon which Rome was established, expanded, and developed in the centuries following its traditional foundation date of 753 BC. The study further analyzes the historical material presented by ancient historians regarding the city's earliest phases and correlates it with archaeological findings, including burial sites, manufactured objects, and metal artifacts.

The study also addresses a central issue: the early history of the city and its foundation narrative still require further scholarly investigation. As noted above, archaeological sources provide only limited data and therefore cannot decisively confirm or refute the reliability of the historical accounts. The core problem lies in the tension between the mythical narrative that presents Romulus as the actual founder of the city and the archaeological evidence indicating a gradual process of formation and development—from agrarian communities to early Latin societies—reflected in their structural and functional organization.

1- Methodology:

The study adopts a multidisciplinary approach that integrates critical analysis of classical texts, archaeological methodologies, and structural-anthropological perspectives. Reconstructing the narrative of Rome's foundation does not entail dismissing the mythical dimension; rather, myth may be understood, in part, as a cultural discourse reflecting Roman society's self-perception. Between the graves of Osteria dell'Osa—offering material evidence of an organized, multi-ethnic community—and the legend of Romulus, which endows Rome with a heroic origin, emerges a field of inquiry that brings together archaeology, history, anthropology, and Indo-European linguistics.

Accordingly, the study of this topic invites a reconsideration of the very concept of "foundation": Is it a discrete historical event, or a narrative construct in which historical developments intertwine with the evolution of collective identity?

The study further proposes the application of an interdisciplinary methodology that incorporates ancient DNA sequencing and correlates genetic findings with historical processes potentially responsible for demographic and cultural transformations. In this light, rearticulating the narrative of Rome's foundation involves several interconnected dimensions that cannot be separated from the mythical account itself:

1. **Historical continuity:** Archaeological evidence from Osteria dell'Osa indicates the presence of stable social structures predating the emergence of Rome, suggesting that the city's foundation was the outcome of a gradual developmental process rather than a sudden event.
2. **Symbolic formation:** The figure of Romulus may be interpreted as a symbolic embodiment of the unification of Latin villages on the Palatine Hill, rather than as a strictly historical individual.
3. **Ethno-cultural interaction:** Burial practices and pottery forms at Osteria dell'Osa reveal early interactions between the Latins and their Etruscan neighbors, contributing to the eventual crystallization of Roman identity.

2- Sources:

In general, our knowledge of the early history of the city of Rome is primarily derived from literary sources, which are considered, both practically and objectively, the most important sources. These sources initially appeared as manuscripts and were later copied repeatedly over different periods, from antiquity through the Middle Ages and into the modern era. Scholars typically use the term *literary tradition* to summarize and interpret the body of data contained in these ancient texts, representing what the Romans knew—or believed they knew—about their past during the Republican and Late Imperial periods. Classifying and organizing this information within a chronological and informational framework is not straightforward and requires considerable time, as we often encounter a diverse and fragmented collection of historical materials.

Broadly speaking, the source materials used to study the early history of Rome can be divided into two main groups. The first group consists of historians' writings—whether the authors were contemporaneous with the events or lived centuries later—producing works with historical and chronological accounts of events and their outcomes. The second group comprises archaeologists, who have gathered information about the past through various means, whether systematically or randomly. Archaeologists collect artifacts, classify them according to their stratigraphic and typological characteristics, and organize them into absolute chronological sequences. In many cases, artifacts have been attributed to different cultures and given names according to the peoples who made them or the regions in which they were discovered.

Among the earliest historians whose works we can still read is Titus Livius **(Titus Livius, I, VI)**, who began his *History of Rome* with the city's founding and continued up to 293 BC. Another major narrative source, which should be read alongside Livy, is the Greek historian Dionysius of Halicarnassus **(Dionysius of Halicarnassus, The Roman Antiquities, 1.71, 3–72),** a scholar and orator who lived in Rome under Augustus. His *Roman Antiquities* covered the period from Rome's origins to 264 BC in twenty books, though only the first eleven survive in full. Dionysius devoted more attention to the early period than Livy, beginning with Italy's prehistoric era, followed by three books on the kings, and eight books covering approximately the first sixty years of the Republic.

Livy and Dionysius narrate nearly the same sequence of events, and there is often close agreement on certain details, possibly because both historians drew upon similar sources. It is generally believed that Dionysius relied on shared sources rather than directly on Livy's work. In reality, it is impossible to know whether the two men were personally acquainted or whether either had access to the other's work. Nevertheless, their goals, methods, and approaches differed significantly, although both relied on the same body of materials, producing accounts that complemented each other.

Another significant source is the orator and statesman Cicero, in his work *The* Republic of Cicero **(Cicero, The Republic of Cicero, II–III)**. In it, he offers a concise account of the early development of Rome's political system, particularly in the second book, presented in the form of a dialogue on politics. Cicero's outline of early Roman history—which spans the period of the kings and the early Republic up to the mid-fifth century BC—represents, chronologically, the oldest continuous narrative available to us.

Other historians include Cassius Dio, a Greek writer who also served as a Roman senator and consul, active in the early third century CE **(Cassius Dio, Roman History, I).** The list further extends to Plutarch (46–120 AD)**, (Plutarch, Vol. 1. 39–40),** the Greek biographer whose works include the lives of numerous figures from antiquity, such as Romulus. Additional sources include Vergilius in the *Aeneid* **(Vergilius, VIII, 51),** Julius Solinus in Collectanea rerum memorabilium **(Solinus, I, 1)**, and Servius in his commentary on the *Aeneid* **(Servius, I, 273**), providing information that may overlap with or diverge from other historical accounts.

These historical sources provide a clear narrative framework, a defined chronological sequence, and a substantial amount of historical information. However, it must be noted that much of this information—for instance, the story of Rome's founding and its earliest stages—was written centuries after the events they describe. This raises questions regarding the accuracy of their accounts and the sources from which they derived their information.

Methodology provides part of the answer. Generally, Roman historians, unlike archaeologists, focused on interpretive perspectives and chronological narratives rather than investigating the mechanisms behind events or their consequences. Their writings often contain rhetorical, artistic, political, and moral elements. For example, Livy and Dionysius organized Rome's history according to the annual tradition (the annals), presenting events in a yearly sequence. Thus, their accounts reflect events as they were believed to have occurred, rather than necessarily as eyewitnesses observed them.

Some historians also followed the Greek epic model used by Homer in narrating Rome's founding and related events. The accuracy and chronological coherence of information in ancient sources remain a concern for modern researchers, particularly as archaeological surveys—enhanced by technological and methodological advances—have expanded our understanding of early Roman history. These studies have revealed extensive information about the region's inhabitants before Rome's founding, with detailed material classified under the Bronze and Iron Ages **(Iacono et al., 2021, 371–445)**.

In conclusion, the sources used to study Rome's early history illuminate only certain aspects of events, their stages, outcomes, and consequences. Although four types of materials were generally available to the earliest Roman historians—Greek historians' works, family records, oral traditions, and ancient documents and archives—they represent only one side of the picture, leaving much in obscurity. Therefore, research must follow two parallel lines: one relying on historical sources and the other on archaeological evidence, which provides essential epistemological and informational support. It is particularly important to recognize that the story of Rome's founding is not a single, fixed narrative but a complex interplay of events and details that can surprise even experienced scholars. Historical records and archaeological evidence are continually open to new discoveries, which can shift the narrative in unexpected directions.

3- The Founding Story:

Who founded Rome? Was it Romulus, Aeneas and his followers, or other unknown figures? These questions have long fascinated scholars and continue to do so, prompting them to seek precise and logical answers through the study of historical sources and the findings revealed by archaeological surveys and excavations. Regardless of the truth, the legendary story of Rome's founding begins in the plain of Latium. Despite variations in narrative and presentation across historical and archaeological literature, the core characters and events remain largely consistent, ultimately leading to a single conclusion: the twin brothers Romulus and Remus founded the city around 751 or 753 BC (**Merivale, 1877, 39–40).**

Most primary historical sources agree that Rome was founded by Romulus, who was eighteen years old in 751 BC. The historian Titus Livius (Livy) notes that after Romulus and Remus overthrew Numitor and reinstated their grandfather Amulius to the throne, they seriously considered founding a city for themselves on the site of their ancestral heritage, known as the Palatine Hill **(Titus Livius, I, VI**).

According to Livy, the story begins when Prince Aeneas died, leaving his son Ascanius too young to ascend the throne. Nevertheless, Ascanius reached adulthood without his kingdom being harmed, thanks to the strength and charisma of his mother, Princess Lavinia. Her guardianship of the throne was sufficient to preserve the power of the Latin people and the independence of her father's and grandfather's kingdoms. Later, when Ascanius saw that Lavinium continued to flourish, he left it prosperous under his mother's care and went on to found a new city at the foot of Mount Alba. Because the settlement extended along the length of the mountain, it was called Alba Longa, or "Long Alba."

No more than thirty-five years passed between the founding of Lavinium and Alba Longa. During this period, Alba Longa grew rapidly, especially after the defeat of the Etruscan army. No neighboring peoples dared to challenge its stability, and a peace treaty with the Etruscans established the Tiber River as a boundary. Twelve successive kings from the line of Ascanius, son of Prince Aeneas of Troy, ruled Alba Longa **(Titus Livius, I, VI).**

Dionysius of Halicarnassus recounts a similar story, with minor differences in detail. He notes that the indigenous inhabitants of the region, after uniting under the leadership of Romulus and Remus, founded the city of Rome at the beginning of the first year of the seventh Olympiad, around 751 BC **(Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 1.71, 3–72).** Moreover, Dionysius cites an earlier writer who claimed that the city was built in the second generation after the Trojan War by those who had fled Troy with Aeneas. According to this account, Aeneas had four sons: Ascanius, Iulus, Romulus, and Remus (**Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 1.72, 1–3).**

Similar information about the early history of the city of Rome and its foundation story can be found in the works of Cicero and Cassius Dio. Regarding Cicero, he briefly discusses this subject, noting that after Romulus achieved glory, he began considering the construction of a city, as well as the establishment of an army and a government **(Cicero, II, III).** Here, Cicero does not fail to evoke Roman admiration for Romulus when mentioning the geo-strategic considerations he took into account when founding the city. According to Cicero, Romulus adhered to certain principles and core elements that were among the most important factors supporting the city's position and its continued growth and development. For example, Cicero states that Romulus chose the site of the city with remarkable skill: on the one hand, it was far from dangers, and on the other, to ensure its sustainability, he made sure it was situated away from both the sea and the Tiber River. The reason is that a watery environment does not align with the requirements for a city that seeks to grow and develop into an empire. In such an environment, an enemy can launch a surprise attack more easily and quickly without being detected, whereas in a land-based environment, it is possible to observe the enemy, track their movements, and confront them **(Cicero, II, III).**

In the same context, Cicero extends his discussion of the dangers facing cities in maritime environments, stating that in such cities, not only goods and products are imported, but also morals, which change rapidly due to the migration of people, the mixing of languages, and the introduction of new customs and ideas that may alter the nature and behavior of the inhabitants (**Cicero, II, IV).** As for Cassius Dio, he asserts that Roman history begins with Numitor and Amulius, descendants of Aventinus and Aeneas, recounting the same story from that point, culminating with Romulus **(Cassius Dio, I).**

Plutarch also provides information about the founding of Rome, though differently from the others. He begins his discussion of Romulus by noting that many historians disagreed on the origin of the city's name, reviewing several hypotheses. The first hypothesis is directly connected to the Pelasgians, who, according to his description, roamed the entire inhabited world at the time, then chose to settle in the region, naming their city Rome **(Plutarch, Vol. 1, 39-4).** The second hypothesis suggests that a group of Trojans—as we will explain later—managed to survive after their city was destroyed and conquered. Fortune provided them with ships, which the winds carried to the coast of Tuscany, where they landed near the Tiber River. At that point, their women—who had grown weary of the sea—held a meeting led by a woman named Roma and agreed to burn the ships and remain near the Palatium, where they found fertile land and generous inhabitants. Consequently, the city was named "Rome" after their leader Roma. Plutarch adds that the most credible view regarding the city's name is the one connected to the story of Aeneas, the city of Alba Longa, Amulius, and Numitor, culminating with the rise of Romulus—a hypothesis widely cited in classical literature **(Plutarch, Vol. 1, 41-42).**

Elsewhere, the same story recurs among other historians such as Vergilius, Servius and Solinus, with multiple accounts concerning the origin of the city and its founders, and with various names and figures. However, they agree that the area, i.e., Rome, was called Valentia before the arrival of Evander, after which its name was changed to Rome **(Vergilius, VIII, 51; Servius, I, 273; Solinus, I, 1).**

From a chrono-historical perspective, it can be observed that the founding story begins long before the appearance of Romulus and Remus, with Troy and the city of Alba Longa serving as its backdrop. Events gradually escalate, intertwine, and unfold dramatically until Romulus becomes king of the city and its surrounding territories. The overall scenario of this story positions Amulius, Numitor, and Rhea Silvia as the main protagonists who played the initial roles in the founding of the city.

At one point, Amulius deposed his brother Numitor in an attempt to prevent the emergence of any claimants or rivals to the throne (Titus Livius, I. I; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 1.71, 3–72). Around the same time, Rhea Silvia became pregnant by the god Mars, who violated her, and she gave birth to twins. When Amulius learned of this, he ordered his followers to drown the twins in the Tiber River (Servius, I, 273; Solinus, I, 1), intending to eliminate them as potential rivals, just as he had done with their grandfather. However, fate decreed that the raft carrying the twins did not sink and drifted to the shore at the foot of the Palatine Hill (Cassius Dio, I). There, according to Titus Livius and Dionysius, they were found by a she-wolf (Titus Livius, I. I; Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 1.71, 3–72), and according to Cicero, by a wild beast (Cicero, II. III), which took them to a cave and nursed them.

In many variations of the story, the scenario changes in some ancient sources, with alterations in characters and roles. In one account, a young shepherd named Faustulus was tending his flock near the Tiber when he found the raft carrying the twins. He took them to his wife, Acca Larentia—nicknamed "the she-wolf"—who was grieving because she had given birth to a dead child (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 1.79.9–11). He asked her to care for the twins, and she did so until they grew into strong young men, eventually helping their foster father with his work (Servius, I, 273).

During their youth, their courage and nobility became evident. They would venture into the forests together, confront bandits, and return stolen goods to their rightful owners, gaining fame throughout the surrounding region (Cassius Dio, I; Plutarch, Vol. 1, pp. 39–40). One day, they learned that they were descendants of Numitor, and the story took a new turn.

The exact event or circumstance that led Romulus and Remus to discover their true lineage, their origins, and Amulius' treachery remains unclear. Historical sources do not agree on a single version. Numerous accounts circulated in the ancient world: the first claims that their grandfather, King Numitor, revealed the truth to them; the second that the shepherd Faustulus informed them; and the third—most widely accepted among scholars—asserts that Romulus and Remus fought a battle against King Amulius' shepherds. Remus was captured, while Romulus gathered a group of men, attacked King Amulius, defeated him, freed his brother, and restored their grandfather Numitor to the throne (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 1.71, 3–72).

Afterward, the brothers decided to establish a city of their own at the site of their early hardships along the Tiber. Each chose a different hill for its foundation, which led to a fierce quarrel. They agreed to consult the gods for a sign (Cassius Dio, I). Romulus ascended the Palatine Hill, while Remus went to the Aventine Hill. The sign from the gods was to be indicated by the flight of birds in the sky. Remus reported seeing six vultures over his hill, while Romulus claimed that twice that number appeared over his hill, thus the omen favored Romulus (Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 1.86–3.87; Plutarch, Vol. 1, pp. 39–40; Servius, I, 273).

However, Remus did not accept his brother's claim, arguing that he had seen the birds first and therefore had the right to build on his hill. This dispute escalated into a conflict between the brothers, resulting in Remus' death (Titus Livius, I. VI; Servius, I, 273). Romulus then built the city where he wished, becoming the first king of Rome, which took its name from him. Romulus established laws and governance, built the city's walls and army (Cicero, II. X), and fought several wars. Regarding his death, some accounts claim that the gods took him to Olympus, while others assert that he mysteriously disappeared at the age of fifty-three or older.

From a mythological perspective, this story cannot be considered entirely independent or unique, as many of its events overlap with similar stories from myths, particularly Greek epic poetry. For example, it is believed that the ancient Romans, who composed the legendary founding epic of Rome over several historical stages, found that linking the founders of Rome to the princes of Troy would enrich the city's history. The story traces the lineage of Rome's founders back to Virgil's epic **(Roman, 2010, 25-26).**

The epic narrates the story of the Trojan prince Aeneas, who fled from Troy to the Italian Peninsula. He remained at sea for many years with another prince and some soldiers until they reached the island of Sicily. There, he allied with its king, Latinus, after initially fighting him. They concluded a peace treaty, which culminated in the marriage of the Trojan prince Aeneas to the daughter of King Latinus **(Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 1.72, 3-5; Solinus: I,1).** Aeneas then founded a city named after his wife and waged war against a king who had sought to marry her. The Trojan prince united the local inhabitants and Trojans under the name Latins. After Aeneas's death, his son succeeded him and founded the city of Alba Longa near the site where Rome would later be established. The succession of kings continued from the lineage of the Trojan prince who had escaped Troy **(Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 1.73, 3-4; Solinus: I,1).**

In any case, regardless of the varying accounts of Rome's founding—oscillating between mythological and historical interpretations—it should be noted that historians do not possess an alternative, definitive story about the founding of Rome or the peoples who established it. Moreover, while scholars vacillated between this myth and possible historical events, the American newspaper *The Telegraph* surprised the world with an article published on the morning of November 21, 2007, reporting the discovery of the cave where the she-wolf nursed the twins Romulus and Remus. Malcolm Moore, the article's author, stated that the cave is located opposite the Palace of Augustus in today's Rome archaeological reserve. Part of the cave is very ancient and was decorated by Emperor Augustus, who sought to establish a religious cult honoring the she-wolf in its center. There, a marble mosaic depicts the white eagle, the imperial symbol of Rome **(Moore, 2007).**

Functionally, Moore also notes that the cave played an important role in ancient Roman life, as dogs and goats were sacrificed there every February in honor of the goddess. Each time, two children of noble families were brought and their faces were smeared with blood as part of the ritual. Women also went there to pray for fertility **(Moore, 2007).**

We notice some unusual and mysterious variations in the traditional founding story. For instance, there are differences regarding the origin and lineage of the twins. In most accounts, their father was the god Mars, but other stories suggest that their mother conceived them from a spark from the hearth, while some historians claimed that their nurse was a local prostitute. There is also disagreement about the circumstances of Remus's death: in some accounts, Romulus himself was the killer, in others it was one of his companions, and some even claimed that Remus was never killed at all **(Moore, 2007).**

This discovery brought the story of Romulus and Remus back into the spotlight, opening the discussion to new directions and multiple interpretations. In 2020, researchers made what was described as an extraordinary discovery: a stone tomb associated with the cult of Romulus, uncovered in an underground chamber beneath the Roman Forum, dating back approximately 2,600 years **(Squires, 2011).**

It seems that the figures of Romulus and Remus were themselves part of a story much broader than their individual narrative. Paradoxically, Roman history had begun long before Romulus. Solinus notes that the question of the city's founding dates is highly debatable, especially since some sites were already inhabited before Romulus appeared **(Solinus: I,1).**

4- Settlements and Residential Sites:

The earliest settlements in ancient Latium emerged on low hills. The site of Rome itself, occupying a group of hills overlooking the Tiber River, possessed many geomorphological features that made it suitable for human habitation: a defensible location with ample supplies of fresh water, and easy access to the sea **(Niebuhr, 2012, 159; Merivale, 1877, 38).** It also controlled the main natural communication routes in central Italy, such as the Via Salaria (the Salt Road), which ran along the Tiber Valley, connecting inland areas to the salt basins at the river's mouth, as well as the coastal road from Etruria to Campania. Furthermore, the hills at the Tiber's bend—including the Capitoline, Palatine, and Aventine—hosted a livestock market and a river port frequented by local inhabitants since the earliest periods of settlement in the region **(Boak, 1921, 4–5; Beard, 2015).**

Archaeological excavations have revealed a number of pottery shards dating to the mid-Bronze Age at various locations in Latium, including Pratica di Mare (Lavinium), Veii, as well as in Sabine territory at Palombara Sabina, Campo Reatino, and elsewhere. These shards—though significant—do not provide a complete or clear picture of the presence of permanent settlements in the region until the Iron Age **(Boak, 1921, 25).**

From a bio-historical perspective, evidence of early settlement at the site of Rome dates to around 1000 BC, with a series of obscure cemeteries found on several hill sites, along with scattered artifacts that scholars have identified as belonging to the Latin culture **(Sestieri, 1992, 99–114; Margarita, 2012, 215).** Additionally, the chronological-historical map of ancient Rome shows few defining features identifiable through early burial sites, which are practically the only material evidence of Latin culture **(Boak, 1922, 29; Sestieri, 2008, 135; Beard, 2015; Margarita, 2012, 216-217).**

The period from 1000 BC to 900 BC belongs to the late Bronze Age, during which crafted tools represented a local variant of the Proto-Villanovan culture. Burial customs indicate the use of a jar containing the ashes of the deceased along with some pottery and bronze items, placed in a large circular jar buried in a pit **(Sestieri, 1992, 103).** Although cremation was widespread in Italy during the late Bronze Age, appearing to be a characteristic feature of the Proto-Villanovan culture in general, such funerary practices—placing ashes in jars—were primarily limited to Latium. In many cases, a rudimentary human figurine was included in the funerary assemblage **(Sestieri, 2008, 137).** A particularly notable feature is a small jar for ashes shaped like a miniature house, known as a "hut urn," which appeared in some early cemeteries and later became standard equipment in cremation burials **(Sestieri, 1992, 103).**

Unfortunately, little is known about the nature and composition of the communities associated with early cremation practices, as no settlements have been identified from the early Latin period. Although Proto-Villanovan materials have been found in several habitation layers in Latium—for example, at Veii—and in votive deposits, their quantity is too limited to reconstruct the cultural structure of the communities of that period **(Boak, 1922, 11; Beard, 2015).**

By contrast, there is ample material evidence for the second phase, representing the beginning of the Iron Age in Latium, showing continuity with the previous period. During this phase, the quantity of archaeological material increases significantly, displaying variety across numerous sites, including Satricum, Antium, and Osteria dell'Osa **(Sestieri, 2008, 137).** Indeed, the discoveries at these sites, especially at Osteria dell'Osa, have transformed our understanding of the communities during this period.

For example, hundreds of tombs have been uncovered at Osteria dell'Osa, providing a wealth of valuable information about the communities of Old Latium during this distant period **(Cornell, 1995, 51–53) (Figure 1).** These tombs have been classified within what is known as the Second Latin Phase, dating from 900 BC to 830 BC. The use of cremation rituals involved several complex procedures, was applied selectively, and was primarily

reserved for males. It can be inferred that it was intended for a distinguished group rather than the general population. The process of cremation and the preservation of ashes required considerable effort and resources; cremating a body was not an easy task, and miniature artifacts had to be specifically crafted to contain the ashes. Therefore, it appears that those who were cremated belonged to the upper echelons of society **(Sestieri, 2008, 139–140).**

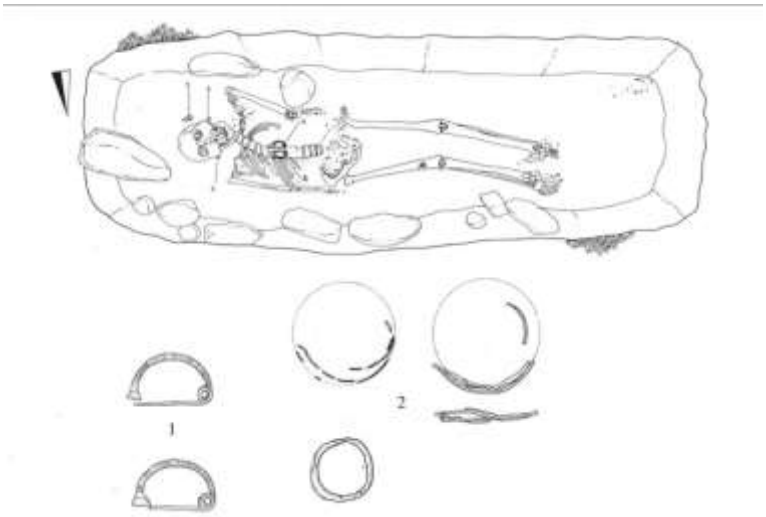

Fig. 1: Tomb from Osteria dell'Osa. Plan and funerary assemblage: 1, pair of small arch fibulae; 2, rings. (After Sestieri, 2008, 155).

The funerary assemblage, composed of pottery and bronze items, was consistent across all tombs and represented a clearly defined symbolic practice. It typically included three or four storage vessels for food and drink, along with cups, bowls, and other dishes **(Sestieri, 1992, 104) (Figure 2).** The crafted bronze items consisted of blades and miniature weapons, such as spears and swords. It can be inferred that the symbolic function of this assemblage was quite clear, as it undoubtedly signified the transition of the deceased from one life to another, providing them with the necessary equipment for the afterlife and enabling them to perform their social roles within the community in which they had lived (**Cornell, 1995, 52).**

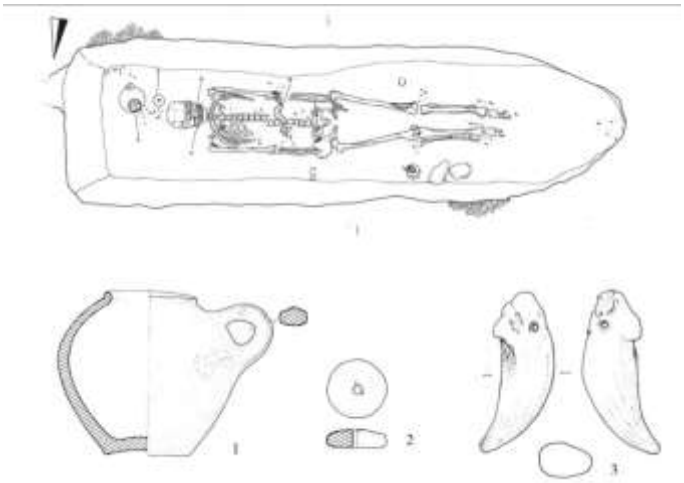

Fig. 2: Tomb from Osteria dell'Osa. Plan and funerary assemblage: 1, mug; 2, flat spindle whorl; 3, perforated bear canine (After Sestieri, 2008, 154)

Moreover, there is substantial evidence indicating the existence of more specialized functions. For example, one tomb contained a small statue of a person offering a sacrifice, a small bronze knife intended for slaughter, a broken ritual vessel, and several small pottery items of a type found only in votive deposits within sacred areas. It is clear that this type of tomb likely contained the remains of a priest or a holy man (**Cornell, 1995, 52; Sestieri, 1992, 99–114).** In another tomb, a large rectangular hut replaced the standard hut-shaped urn. This jar was six times the size of a normal hut urn and represented a more significant type of dwelling; it had two doors, implicitly suggesting that it was divided into multiple rooms. It is therefore reasonable to consider this unique tomb as belonging to the head or leader of the community **(Sestieri, 1992, 102).**

Burials were conducted by placing the deceased in full-length graves shaped like rectangular trenches. Typically, males were accompanied by two or three life-sized vessels and a set of tools, but without weapons **(Figure 3)**. Women, on the other hand, were buried with small vases and personal ornaments such as pins, rings, glass beads, and amber **(Cornell, 1995, 52).**

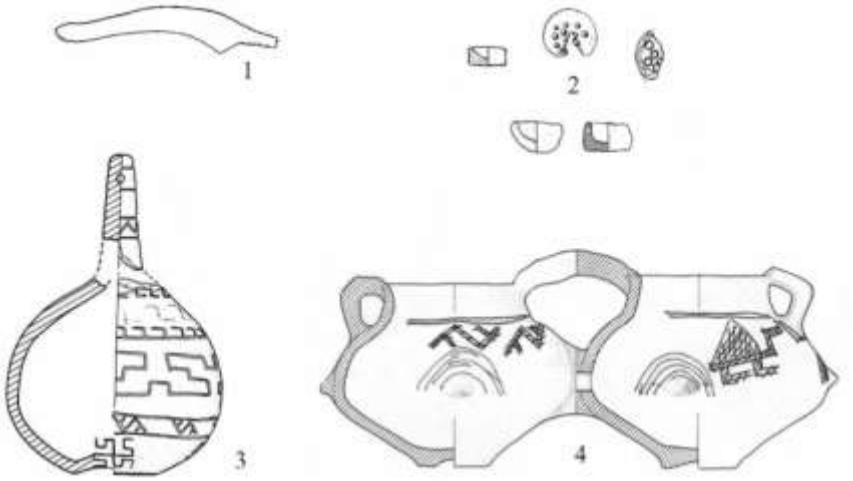

Fig. 3: Tomb from Osteria dell'Osa. Items and objects associated with various funerary practices:

1- Knife: a tool that may have been used in sacrificial rituals or specific ceremonial practices.
2- Miniature votive vessels: small containers offered as symbolic offerings, often associated with religious rituals.
3- Rattle: a sound-producing instrument, possibly used in ceremonial celebrations or religious rites.
4- Double amphora: a pottery vessel with two mouths or connected bodies, possibly used to store liquids designated for rituals or offerings (After Sestieri, 2008, 150).

At the Osteria dell'Osa cemeteries, two distinct groups of tombs can be distinguished, both belonging to the final phase of the Bronze Age **(Sestieri, 1992, 103–104).** Each group consisted of a small cluster of cremation tombs surrounded by a larger number of graves. The funerary assemblages and artifacts exhibit subtle differences in the shapes and decorations of vases, types of brooches, and the structure of the tombs themselves. The two groups were certainly contemporaneous, and the most plausible interpretation is that they represented distinct family units, each composed of several households **(Sestieri, 2008, 140; Margarita, 2012).**

In the final part of this period, the practice of cremation appears to have ceased entirely, and the Late Bronze Age phase, around 830–770 BC, is represented solely by inhumation burials. It is sometimes suggested that inhumation replaced cremation at this stage, but there is a peculiar characteristic of the Osteria dell'Osa cemetery, which seems to apply to other sites as well **(Sestieri, 2008, 141).** During the Late Bronze Age, the vast majority of graves were of adult females, and the ratio of adult male to female burials at this stage is similar to that observed in the subsequent phase. In other words, cremation tombs disappear from the archaeological record at the end of the Bronze Age, but they are not replaced by an equivalent number of inhumation graves in the Early Iron Age. This phenomenon strongly suggests that specific funerary rituals remained reserved only for men of high social status **(Killgrove et al., 2024, 4; Sestieri, 1992, 103–104; Margarita, 2012).**

Overall, expanding the scope of discoveries to obtain new evidence, along with redistributing and analyzing data from all the early cemeteries at Osteria dell'Osa dating to the Iron Age in ancient Latium, could help establish models for the historical reconstruction of daily life in early Latin communities.

5- Settlement Characteristics:

Archaeological evidence indicates a very simple social structure, where distinctions between groups were based on kinship, and the status of individuals depended on age, gender, and functional roles within the family and society **(Killgrove et al., 2024, 2–3).** Between the Early Bronze Age and the beginning of the Late Bronze Age (the Recent Bronze Age), developments in forms of inequality were observed in Italy, with a more organized and hierarchical social and political structure emerging, based on clear differentiation in social status **(Cardarelli, 2015).**

The economic patterns of Bronze Age cultures, especially the Apennine culture, have often been interpreted in a stereotypical manner, framed as part of a "pastoral system," portraying these cultures as primarily reliant on livestock-based economies **(Barker, 2014; Margarita, 2012).** However, excavations at Luni sul Mignone in northern Lazio revealed foundations of houses carved into soft volcanic tuff. Laboratory analysis of animal and plant remains indicated that the Apennine culture had a mixed economy based on both agriculture and livestock **(Barker, 2014).** There are very few markers of wealth, suggesting that these small rural communities produced little surplus. Evidence points to an economy based on the cultivation of cereals and primitive legumes

alongside animal husbandry. Analysis of plant remains from some cemeteries shows the presence of various cereals, such as wheat, barley, and emmer, as well as some legumes and peas **(Cornell, 1995, 54).**

Fossilized animal remains indicate a collection dominated by cattle and pig bones. Cemetery evidence does not provide sufficient information to determine whether animals were raised solely for meat or also for wool and dairy products **(Acosta et al., 2019, 4).** Wool production seems to have been a common activity during this period—as noted above, many female graves contained spindles and threads.

Much information about the economy of early Roman society remains obscure. To address this gap in the records, comprehensive analysis of plant and animal remains in their local contexts across multiple settlement sites is required **(Killgrove et al., 2024, 6–8; Acosta et al, 2019, 3).** Nevertheless, evidence from the Osteria dell'Osa site allows us to reconstruct some aspects of daily life in early Rome. Indicators suggest the existence of labor division and professional specialization. For example, pottery was produced manually and widely used to meet household needs **(Sestieri, 2008, 136 Margarita, 2012).** Meanwhile, the presence of spinning and weaving tools in nearly all female graves indicates local textile production (**Figures 4, 5**). The only specialized craft was metalwork, suggesting that the basic needs of small rural communities in the region were largely met by local artisans, who also traded with regions specialized in metal production, primarily Etruria and Calabria **(Sestieri, 2006, 137).**

Fig 4: Tintinnabulum from Bologna, Arsenale Militare, Tomba degli Ori, bronze, late 7th century BC:
(a) side A, with scenes of spinning (top) and dressing the distaffs (bottom).
(b) side B, with scenes of weaving (top) and warping (bottom). (After Margarita, 2012, 233).

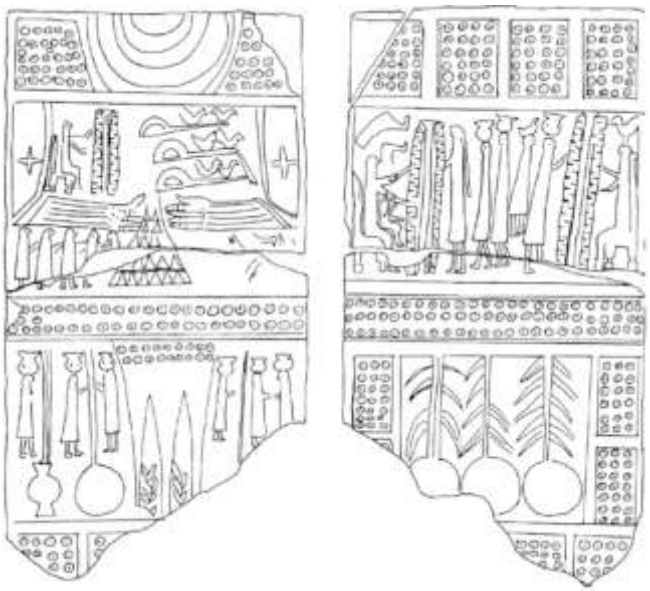

Fig 5: Daunian stele showing seated women at their looms in upper register of both sides, 7th–6th century BC. (After Margarita, 2012, 234)

Demographic evidence likewise suffers from similar limitations. During the early phases, communities consisted of small villages with an estimated population of approximately 100 individuals. The village at Osteria dell'Osa was one of several small settlements around the lake. In addition, a number of dwellings were located on the hills surrounding the Palatine, which at one stage appear to have accommodated more than one village **(Sestieri, 1992, 104).** Surface surveys have also identified comparable clusters of small rural settlements at Ardea and Lavinium, which may explain the presence of scattered burial groups across the hills **(Boak, 1921, 13; Sestieri, 1992, 103–104).**

Subsequently, during the Late Iron Age phase, a transformation occurred in settlement patterns. Groups of villages began to merge, forming larger units with more substantial structural and functional characteristics **(Gatta et al., 2022, 3).** For example, a large settlement began to emerge and expand at Lake Castiglione, while the settlement area of Rome extended beyond the Palatine Hill. Approximately a century later, a significant cultural development took place in Etruria: the introduction of Villanovan culture was associated with the formation of settlements characterized by large central nuclei at sites that later developed into major Etruscan cities **(Boak, 1921, 12; Sestieri, 1992, 141).**

Evidence also suggests population growth in ancient Latium, as indicated by the emergence of numerous new settlement sites. Surface surveys and incidental discoveries imply that many sites in the northern and eastern parts of the region—yet to be excavated—were already inhabited by the end of the ninth century BC **(Fabbri et al, 2022, 113–114).** By contrast, no comparable evidence of demographic growth can be identified in the Alban Hills region. The material obtained through exploratory investigations conducted over the past century provides only limited information. Nevertheless, the region appears to have experienced a form of cultural eclipse during the Early Iron Age. Although it likely did not become entirely depopulated, as scholars suggest, the pattern of small, isolated, and dispersed settlements persisted, with no significant advancement in urban development.

The immediate causes of the relative decline of the Alban Hills region, alongside the increasing development and prominence of other centers, may be explained as follows: studies of trade and communication routes in ancient Latium indicate that the Alban Hills occupied a strategically significant position during the Late Bronze Age **(Mandich, 2021, 1–2; Marra et al, 2011, 116–117).** In the ninth and eighth centuries BC, the region functioned as a central node within a communication network linking Etruria with the Latium coast, in addition to inland and coastal routes leading to Campania. Subsequently, however, the geopolitical importance of the Alban Hills diminished, as Rome emerged as the principal center. Other urban centers also developed, further contributing to the region's declining prominence. Although new settlement patterns are observable in the area, no profound transformations in social structure can be detected. Consequently, these communities may be described as proto-urban societies rather than culturally and economically complex urban societies **(Mandich, 2021, 1–2; Marra et al, 2011, 116–117).**

Settlements, much like the social structure, did not undergo any profound transformations. The construction of primitive huts with thatched roofs supported by wooden posts continued without significant modification. The remains of huts and wooden foundations discovered at numerous settlement sites in ancient Latium, dating from the ninth century BC onward, reveal no substantial differences in construction techniques or building materials. These structures appear to have remained largely unchanged from those used during the Apennine Bronze Age **(Gatta et al., 2022, 5; Cornell, 1995, 84).**

In the same vein, huts continued to constitute the primary form of habitation in subsequent periods. The foundation of a wooden hut discovered in Rome has been dated to the mid-eighth century BC, alongside evidence of fortifications from the same century on the northeastern slopes of the Palatine Hill **(Cornell, 1995, 84).** These discoveries prompted considerable enthusiasm among some scholars. For those mindful of the tradition that Romulus founded his city on the Palatine at precisely this time, the findings appeared to provide archaeological corroboration of the conventional narrative of Rome's origins. In any case, this traditional account—and the historical questions it raises—remains central to the study of early Roman history.

The foundation of the city is not portrayed as a singular event but rather as a gradual and cumulative process. In this respect, a clear contrast emerges between Greek foundation myths and the Roman conception of urban origins. Rome was not established in a single act by Romulus; rather, his role marked the beginning of a prolonged process of urban formation. The Romans conceived of the state as the outcome of this incremental development, to which each of the kings contributed. Similarly, Cato the Elder, Cicero and Polybius maintained that the Roman constitution was superior to those of the Greek states precisely because it was the product of the collective wisdom of successive generations rather than the creation of a single lawgiver **(Cato, VII, 13; Cicero, II, 37; Polybius, 16,10)**. In the same manner, the physical expansion of the city—from the modest Palatine settlement traditionally associated with Romulus—was understood as a gradual process, with each king enlarging the urban area and contributing to its consolidation. Thus, each of the early kings was regarded, in turn, as the founder of a distinct part of the city **(Titus Livius, I–II).**

This apparent contradiction cannot be resolved easily. The issue is not simply that individual sources offer divergent perspectives; rather, nearly all surviving accounts exhibit two competing interpretative tendencies. On the one hand, a "modernizing" tendency minimizes the qualitative difference between early Rome and the world of the late Republic. From this perspective, figures such as Aeneas, Evander, Romulus, and Numa inhabited

a landscape of fully developed city-states, complete with sophisticated political, military, and religious institutions. In this reconstructed vision, the cities of Latium—even at the time of the Trojan War—resembled those of the Hellenistic period, equipped with walls, streets, marketplaces, temples, and monumental public buildings **(Cornell, 1995, 85).**

On the other hand, this modernizing interpretation is counterbalanced by a contrasting tendency to depict the Rome of Romulus as a pastoral settlement of rural shepherds living austere lives in simple thatched huts. This romanticized image appears especially in poetic traditions. From an early date, Roman authors emphasized the stark contrast between the perceived simplicity and moral rigor of early Rome and the refined luxury and decadence of their own era (**Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 2.7–29).**

Ultimately, the Roman foundation myth offers insight above all into how later Romans chose to perceive themselves and how they wished to be perceived by others. The narrative conveys a powerful ideological message. One of its most revealing features is its portrayal of the Roman people as a composite of diverse ethnic groups and of Roman culture as the product of multiple external influences **(Mary, 2015, 42–44).** This stands in sharp contrast to the foundation myths of Greek cities, which emphasized the purity and continuity of their origins—sometimes, as in the case of Athens, asserting autochthony, the belief that the inhabitants were born from the very soil itself. Such claims were also mobilized in arguments seeking to assert a purely Greek ancestry for the Romans **(Rawson, 2008, 425).**

The Roman epic tradition was characteristic of a people who built their power through the expansion of citizenship and the continuous incorporation of new elements into their community **(Merivale, 1877, 41–43).** From this perspective, we may better appreciate the enduring appeal of the *Aeneid*, an epic poem that continues to resonate—particularly with immigrants and refugees—to this day. Moreover, Rome was distinctive among ancient societies in its practice of integrating freed slaves, who, over time, became Roman citizens. By the end of the Republic, many members of the Roman aristocracy had servile ancestry, and a significant proportion of the city's population consisted of slaves or freedmen. In this context, it is not surprising that the Romans did not hesitate to acknowledge that the followers of Romulus were fugitives and exiles drawn from various lands (**Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 2.4–24.4).**

The diverse and somewhat disreputable origins attributed to some of the earliest inhabitants constitute only one of several problematic elements in the story of Romulus and Remus. The she-wolf who nursed the twins, the killing of Remus, and the abduction of the Sabine women rank among the most controversial aspects of the legend. These motifs were exploited at various times by Rome's enemies and by Christian critics of its pagan traditions. Such considerations have led some scholars to argue that the story of Romulus was not an ancient indigenous myth but rather a construct shaped by anti-Roman propaganda. Servius, for instance, suggests that the tale of the she-wolf who suckled and raised the twins was a fictional device intended to obscure the moral disgrace associated with the founders of the Roman state. Since prostitutes were colloquially referred to as "she-wolves," the term *lupanaria* (brothels) emerged from the same linguistic association **(Servius, I, 273).**

The recurrence of similar narrative motifs across different periods cannot be sufficiently explained by literary or oral transmission, nor by a shared inheritance within a particular ethnic or linguistic family. These stories are neither uniquely Indo-European nor distinctly Semitic in character. Rather, they should be understood as expressions of universal human experiences and needs, emerging independently across diverse times and places—even in otherwise unconnected cultural settings. On this basis, it is reasonable to conclude that the myth of Romulus and Remus was both ancient and local in origin.

In popular tradition, the story of Romulus was eventually fused with that of Aeneas. It is widely acknowledged that this represents an artificial synthesis of two originally independent myths; however, scholarly debate persists regarding when and how this synthesis took place. If Romulus was already recognized as the founder of Rome in the early period, it might appear that Aeneas was a relatively late addition. Yet the situation is more complex than such a linear interpretation would suggest. There are compelling reasons to believe that Aeneas, too, was acknowledged in Rome and Latium from an early date.

More broadly, the Trojan myth proved politically advantageous for the Romans, as it provided them with a prestigious identity within the wider *oikoumene* of the ancient world. At the same time, it could be strategically deployed in diplomatic and political interactions with the Greeks and with neighboring peoples. The political utility of the myth first became evident in 263 BC during the war against Carthage **(Polybius, I, 2.67),** when the inhabitants of the Sicilian city of Segesta allied themselves with Rome on the basis of their purported shared Trojan ancestry. The propaganda value of the myth assumed particular importance in the early second century BC, when Rome began intervening in the affairs of Asia Minor. Indeed, the story of Aeneas and the Trojans was already well established in Etruria in the sixth century BC: representations of Aeneas have been discovered at numerous Etruscan sites, not only on imported Greek vases but also on locally produced artifacts—especially red-figure amphorae and scarabs **(Rawson, 2008, 425).**

6- Looking Outward: The Historical Value of Myths:

Scholarly debates indicate that the traditional narratives concerning the origins of Rome can be interpreted historically and may provide valuable insights into the development of early Rome. Some scholars argue that the Roman foundation story—from Aeneas to Romulus—is purely mythical and has no legitimate claim to historical status. The name *Romulus* itself appears to be derived from the name of the city and may simply mean "the Roman"; in this view, it is plausible that no historical individual bearing that name ever existed.

Conversely, many contemporary historians—perhaps the majority—maintain that at least some myths may reflect or preserve echoes of actual historical events. The central argument is that there can be no smoke without fire: myths must, in some manner, rest upon historical realities.

In certain respects, the three core elements of the legend—colonization, political hegemony, and the city of Alba Longa—pose historical paradoxes. One point frequently cited as evidence of substantial agreement between mythic tradition and archaeology is the foundation of Romulus' settlement on the Palatine, which the Romans themselves dated to the mid-eighth century BC (**Niebuhr, 2012, 159).** The discovery of Iron Age huts belonging to the third phase of the *Cultura Laziale* was once thought to confirm this tradition. It is now clear, however, that permanent occupation of the site began much earlier and that the hut foundations do not represent the earliest evidence of settlement. Materials from the first phase were recovered from a deposit beneath the huts, and an isolated inhumation burial from the same phase was discovered beneath the House of Livia, between the Germalus and the Palatium **(Niebuhr, 2012, 219; Cornell, 1995, 87).**

The more recent discovery of an eighth-century wall on the northeastern slopes of the Palatine attracted considerable media attention. Yet the detailed evidence remains insufficiently clear, and it is therefore premature to draw firm conclusions regarding its significance. Any attempt to connect these findings directly to the foundation legend must confront the fact that the site was inhabited prior to the traditional date associated with Romulus **(Bannon, 1998).**

Moreover, the rationale behind the Roman dating of the city's foundation to the mid-eighth century BC remains uncertain, and there are compelling reasons to suspect that the chronology was, to some extent, arbitrary. The various dates proposed by ancient historians—Fabius (748 BC), Cincius (728 BC), Cato (751 BC), and Varro (754 BC)—appear to have been derived primarily from calculations concerning the total duration of the regal period and the estimated beginning of the Republic. Most likely, the date was determined by counting seven generations of thirty-five years each, thereby arriving at Varro's date of 754 BC (509 + [7 × 35]). It is therefore plausible that the chronology was the result of a largely mechanical calculation **(Cornell, 1995, 87)**.

Archaeologists have also been invoked to support the traditional account of the city's foundation and to confirm that the Palatine constituted the original nucleus of Rome. Yet the archaeological record presents a more complex picture. Numerous early materials and artifacts have been uncovered on the Palatine. On the basis of these findings, scholars have identified a pre-urban phase in Latium and confirmed that a system of dispersed and scattered villages characterized the region during the early Iron Age.

From a demographic and ethnic perspective, tradition suggests that the early population of Rome consisted of a mixture of Latin and Sabine elements. The narrative begins with the abduction of the Sabine women and culminates in the fusion of the two peoples under the joint leadership of Romulus and Titus Tatius. The belief that a substantial portion of the population was of Sabine origin was widespread. Of the first four kings of Rome, two were considered Latin (Romulus and Tullus Hostilius) and two Sabine (Numa Pompilius and Ancus Marcius)—or three, if Titus Tatius is included **(Cornell, 1995, 73).** More broadly, the foundation narrative contains numerous references to the blending of different ancient peoples. The Latins appear within a broader, multilingual proto-Etruscan milieu, speaking an Indo-European language distinct from Latin or Old Latin **(Fabbri et al., 2022, 111–113).**

The central issue concerns the extent to which these myths reflect the actual ethnic composition of early Rome. Some scholars have drawn upon linguistic and archaeological data **(Fabbri et al., 2022, 111–113),** occasionally relying on theories that carried racial overtones, in order to substantiate such claims. Distinct burial and cremation practices were interpreted as evidence of separate ethnic groups. However, archaeology has not conclusively validated this theory. In practice, it remains difficult to distinguish clearly between what was "Roman" and what was "Sabine" within early Roman society, which appears in historical literature as relatively open and cosmopolitan in character. Genetic research—particularly studies based on Y-chromosome and mitochondrial DNA analysis—may open promising avenues for future inquiry and provide more objective answers to this question **(Caramelli et al., 2021).**

7- Ancient Genome Sequencing:

Over the past three decades, a new generation of scholars has employed modern genetic technologies in an effort to provide objective answers to longstanding questions in history, archaeology, and anthropology concerning human migrations, population divergence and reconfiguration, adaptive responses to selective pressures, and the movement of peoples and ideas across the *oikoumene* of the ancient world. Central to this endeavor has been the sequencing of ancient genomes—particularly the analysis of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) and Y-chromosome markers—which has helped illuminate numerous complex and contentious issues in human

history **(Reich and Eugenie Reich, 2018).** As Mark Haber observes, ancient DNA offers powerful new evidence and methodological tools for investigating human migration, population admixture, and the formation of modern human groups **(Haber et al, 2016).**

Genomic research is currently experiencing unprecedented growth, driven by increasingly precise and rapid sequencing technologies, advances in computational algorithms, and refined extraction protocols capable of isolating minute fragments of human DNA from the overwhelming quantities of non-human genetic material present in ancient samples.

Within this framework, ancient genome sequencing can provide additional empirical support for reassessing the narrative of Rome's foundation and for addressing existing gaps in the evidentiary record. The foundation myth itself is rich in ethnic, cultural, and geographical references. Owing to its strategic geographical position, the Italian Peninsula has, since prehistoric times, functioned as a bridge between peoples, cultures, and gene pools. The dynamic interplay of migration, isolation, selective pressures, and environmental and cultural factors has produced a complex and distinctive pattern of ethno-linguistic diversity **(Anagnostou et al, 2022).** Genetic studies indicate that Italy underwent two major transformations in its gene pool: the first associated with the spread of agriculture during the Neolithic period, and the second occurring prior to the Iron Age. By the time of Rome's foundation, the genetic composition of the region broadly resembled that of contemporary Mediterranean populations **(Antonio et al, 2019).**

A separate study analyzing mitochondrial DNA from thirty Etruscan individuals dating between the seventh and third centuries BC found levels of genetic diversity comparable to those observed in modern populations. Genetic distance measures and affinity analyses suggest evolutionary links with populations along the eastern Mediterranean coasts **(Vernesi et al, 2004).** All analyzed mitochondrial lineages appeared typical of European or West Asian populations, and modern Tuscans were identified as the closest genetic relatives of the Etruscans. More broadly, the various Etruscan communities appear to have shared not only cultural characteristics but also mitochondrial gene pools. Evidence of trade between Etruscan ports and Asia Minor suggests that commercial exchange—often accompanied by intermarriage—may have contributed to measurable genetic affinities **(Vernesi et al, 2004).**

In a related context, genomic analysis was conducted on twenty-five individuals from imperial Rome buried in the cemetery of Quarto Cappello del Prete (QCP). Their genomic profiles revealed affinities with populations from the southeastern Mediterranean and funerary influences associated with central and western North Africa, suggesting that the individuals interred at QCP may have been genetically closer to groups of Punic (Carthaginian) origin **(De Angelis et al., 2021).**

Another comprehensive genomic study examined 136 individuals from the Balkans dating to the first millennium CE. The findings indicated limited genetic input from populations of Italian origin, while revealing substantial gene flow from individuals of Anatolian ancestry during the imperial period. Between 250 and 550 CE, several samples were identified as migrants with genetic origins in Central or Northern Europe and the Eurasian steppe. These results suggest that, despite the profound cultural influence exerted by the Roman Empire, its long-term genetic impact in certain regions was comparatively modest **(Inigo et al, 2023).**

In this sense, ancient genome sequencing may serve as a methodological corrective to biased or ideologically driven interpretations. It offers the potential to reassess entrenched assumptions that have shaped the study of human history. Many earlier interpretations were constrained by narrow frameworks and were sometimes influenced by political, ideological, or even racial biases.

For example, DNA analysis has demonstrated that two major ancient Greek civilizations were linked to ancestors who migrated from Anatolia. Scholars now maintain that both the Minoan and Mycenaean civilizations descended from early Neolithic farmers who moved from Anatolia into mainland Greece and Crete. Studies further indicate that modern Greeks are, at least in part, descendants of the Mycenaeans **(Iosif et al., 2019).**

In a related investigation, an international research team analyzed some of the earliest complete ancient genomes from Bronze Age individuals in Greece, Crete, and southwestern Anatolia. Researchers from the University of Washington, Harvard Medical School, and the Max Planck Institute for the Science of Human History collaborated with archaeologists to assemble and interpret the data **(Reich, 2018).** DNA extracted from the teeth of nineteen ancient individuals—identified as Minoans from Crete, Mycenaeans from mainland Greece, and individuals from southwestern Anatolia—was compared with more than 330 other ancient genomes and over 2,600 genomes from present-day populations worldwide **(Iosif et al., 2019).**

The results demonstrated that the Minoans and Mycenaeans were genetically similar, though not identical. Neolithic farmers had migrated from Anatolia to Greece and Crete millennia before the Bronze Age. Although these findings do not resolve every outstanding question, they provide substantial clarification. Most notably, they refute the theory that the Minoans originated in North Africa and challenge claims that modern Greeks are not descended from Mycenaean—and, by extension, ancient Greek—populations. These studies highlight the capacity of ancient DNA analysis to address persistent historical controversies and pave the way for further research integrating archaeology, linguistics, and population genetics **(Iosif et al, 2019).**

Since Sir Arthur Evans uncovered the Minoan center at Knossos, scholars have debated the origins of its founders. Evans himself proposed a North African origin, while others suggested connections with the Balkans, Anatolia, or the broader Near East. One study traced Minoan origins through mitochondrial DNA extracted from skeletal remains discovered in a cave on the Lassithi Plateau in Crete, dated to 4400–3700 BC **(Jeffery et al, 2013).** Haplogroup classification, principal component analysis, and pairwise distance measures refuted Evans' North African hypothesis. Instead, the results indicated strong genetic affinities between the Minoans and early farming populations of Anatolia and the Balkans. The data also support a model of local development of Minoan civilization from descendants of Neolithic settlers on the island **(Jeffery et al, 2013).**

In conclusion, prehistoric Italy was shaped by successive waves of migration, dispersal, adaptation, extinction, and admixture among diverse populations. Ancient genome sequencing enables a dynamic reassessment of the variables embedded in the foundation narrative by correlating literary sources, archaeological findings, and genetic evidence. This integrative approach allows for more precise and flexible interpretations, accommodating both horizontal and vertical patterns of variation within the historical, archaeological, and genetic record. Furthermore, research in ancient genomics opens new perspectives on our collective human past and provides substantial support to historical and archaeological scholarship—not only at the theoretical level but also through the advanced technical tools it offers.

- Conclusions:

In summary, the available archaeological evidence provides a coherent picture of the development of early Latin communities, from small villages to more socially and culturally complex settlements during the Early Iron Age. Some religious practices and rituals may also originate in this initial phase, reflecting the historical context in which Rome was composed of a collection of small, separate villages.

Archaeological and literary sources converge in indicating that the Palatine Hill was the site of a very early settlement. Some sources distinguish between the Palatine and the Quirinal Hills, which may relate to traditions suggesting that the city initially functioned as a shared community of Romans and Sabines. This tradition may align with linguistic evidence, but it cannot be directly confirmed; the archaeological record on this point remains ambiguous and neither fully supports nor refutes the traditional narrative.

Elements such as the she-wolf motif, the presence of two founders (Romulus and Remus), and the troubling details of murder, abduction, and sexual violence in the foundation narrative have elicited astonishment among some scholars, leading them to categorize these stories as part of anti-Roman propaganda campaigns. Yet Roman authors continued to recount and debate these stories with great enthusiasm.

These controversial aspects even prompted some modern historians to speculate that the entire narrative might have been counter-propaganda created by Rome's enemies or by the victims of its aggressive expansion. However, this interpretation is overly contrived—indeed, a desperate attempt—to explain the narrative's peculiarities, and it overlooks a crucial point: regardless of the story's origin or the time of its emergence, Roman writers persistently retold, elaborated upon, and debated it. Moreover, the figure of the Trojan hero Aeneas, who fled to Italy to found a "New Troy," remained a prominent presence throughout Roman history.

A multidisciplinary research approach—combining historical sources, archaeological data, and ancient genome sequencing—offers the potential to clarify many ambiguities in Roman history specifically, and world history more broadly. Even the foundation narrative itself can be reassessed, drawing on discoveries from sites such as Osteria dell'Osa and extending to the myth of Romulus.

Overall, the narrative accounts of Rome's origins, from Aeneas to Romulus, cannot be considered strictly historical. Rather, they constitute a complex blend of popular myth, folklore, conjecture, and imagination, which remains invaluable for understanding Roman historiography and the development of Roman self-awareness. They may also reflect, perhaps unconsciously, a tripartite functional ideology inherited from a prehistoric Indo-European past—a hypothesis that remains subject to debate. The tripartite functions are indeed evident in certain early Roman religious institutions, most notably in the priesthoods associated with Jupiter, Mars, and Quirinus, representing sovereignty, war, and production, respectively. Yet interpreting other Roman institutions and myths in terms of this tripartite framework remains highly debatable.

The study emphasizes that the founding of Rome was not a sudden event but a cumulative process with symbolic dimensions. In this context, Romulus is regarded as a symbol of the unification of the Latin communities, while Roman identity developed through historical continuity and long-term ethno-cultural interactions. The study also highlights the need to reconsider the concept of "founding" itself, situated between the actual historical event and its legendary representation of collective identity.

Archaeological evidence clearly indicates that the site was continuously occupied centuries before 754 BC. On the other hand, no substantial changes in social organization and structure occurred until much later—changes that can be legitimately associated with processes of urbanization and state formation. These developments, which may be accurately defined as the foundations of a city-state, cannot, based on current evidence, be postponed to after the mid-seventh century BC—over a century later than the proposed "traditional" date.

Acknowledgments: I wish to express my sincere gratitude to Ms. Elham Khalifa Nagi for her thorough review of the manuscript and her insightful comments. Artificial intelligence tools, including ChatGPT and Gemini, were employed solely for language refinement. The author has carefully reviewed, revised, and approved the final version of the manuscript and assumes full responsibility for all aspects of this study.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The author(s) declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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