

REVIEWS

T. P. Wiseman. **Remus: A Roman Myth**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. \$59.95 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Cynthia Bannon

Wiseman's study of the foundation myth of ancient Rome is named for the Roman twin who did not found the city. The title alerts readers to the unexpected perspectives opened by this book. Wiseman offers an intriguing new explanation of Rome's foundation myth, the historical events and cultural practices that shaped the Romulus and Remus story in the middle years of the Roman Republic. In *Remus*, Wiseman presents thought-provoking re-evaluations of the sources and the scholarship on the mythology of Rome's foundation. This is no mean feat since the sources for Romulus and Remus are notoriously difficult and the scholarship vast and diverse.

In the most familiar version of Rome's foundation, Romulus and Remus quarrel while building the city's first walls, Romulus kills his twin brother and becomes the eponymous founder. Some ancient cities were founded by twins, others by a single hero, but Rome's foundation arose from a violent transition from partnership to sole rule. Wiseman seeks a logic in Rome's dual origins, building his investigation around three related questions. "First, why a twin in the first place? Second, why call him Remus? Third, once you have him, why kill him off?" (17).

Before answering these questions, Wiseman collects and carefully analyzes both ancient and modern treatments of the Romulus and Remus story. He includes evidence scattered throughout ancient literature, even the most obscure variants of the story, and he makes this material accessible to an audience beyond classicists by translating all citations. Throughout this presentation of primary sources, Wiseman responds to earlier interpretations of the sources with a keen appreciation for the history of that scholarship; a final brief chapter focuses specifically on the twentieth-century preconceptions about imperial Rome and how this has skewed our perspective on the Republican era. Individual chapters are devoted to two especially influential theoretical approaches: comparative mythology (Chp. 2) and history (Chp. 7). From these first seven chapters emerge Wiseman's rationale for revising our explanations of the Remus story and his own interpretation (Chps. 8 and 9).

Wiseman argues that the creation of Remus belongs to the middle years of the Republic (342-266 BCE), “a period coterminous with the Roman conquest of Italy and the last stage of the ‘struggle of the orders’” (128). The Remus story arose as an expression of the plebeians’ desire for political equality. Remus’ death, later commemorated as a “foundation sacrifice,” had its origins in an actual instance of human sacrifice conducted by the Romans to mitigate threatening portents in 296 BCE during the Third Samnite War—the same year in which the Ogulnii brothers erected the famous statue of the she-wolf and twins on the Capitoline. Remus’ story was institutionalized in the celebration of games and dramatic festivals before it was authenticated and elaborated in literary histories. In the course of reconstructing Remus’ story, Wiseman also sheds new light on some puzzling aspects of Roman topography (e.g. the Remuria) and religion (e.g., the Lupercalia).

Writing about a familiar topic loaded with ideological baggage and a freight of scholarly opinion poses a special challenge to the scholar to “make it new.” Wiseman meets this challenge in several ways, first and foremost in the originality of his thesis. But he also offers us a new way of understanding the role of myth in Roman society through cultivating an awareness of the distance between ourselves and Republican Rome:

The challenge for the historian is to think away the mind-set of imperial Rome, and the accumulated preconceptions generated by our culture’s “reception” of the Empire, and to imagine, from source material which almost all post-dates the change, a Rome which still thought as a city-state and not as a world power. (155)

Wiseman’s approach combines imagination with rigorous criticism of the sources. Adapting the best methods from earlier scholarship, he integrates material evidence—art, architecture, topography—into his discussions of literary sources. Even where Wiseman’s conclusions are not entirely persuasive, his arguments engage the reader in the revisionist project.

In this slim and attractive volume, Wiseman packs several centuries worth of primary sources and scholarship into a delightfully written argument. Readers of the paperback will enjoy the cover illustration, a detail from Rubens’ *Romulus and Remus*. Wiseman provides helpful maps and plans of the archaeological sites he discusses. Black and white photos allow the reader to see the coins and artwork, essential evidence, especially for an era with scarce literary sources. Readers will also find helpful an appendix containing versions of the foundation of Rome. Wiseman’s *Remus* is required reading for anyone with an interest in Roman mythology, history, or literature.