



The Changing Concept of *Urbs Roma* in Late Antiquity:
Rome's Foundation Legends as Represented in the Arts of the
4th and 5th Centuries

Following the theory of “memory culture” promoted by Jan Assmann, we can note that every society has its cultural foundation in a monumental past, in which that society selects and interprets past events to legitimize its own contemporary values and behavioral norms.¹ While hermeneutics focuses on understanding by analyzing the texts of memorable events, “memory culture” investigates the conditions that enable these texts to be continually relevant. This paper examines the use in Roman art of the stories surrounding the city’s origins and attempts to document an ever changing use of the past to redefine what the city of Rome, the *Urbs Roma*, meant to different generations of the Roman elite. The primary focus is on the 4th and 5th centuries, a period marking the transformation of Rome from a Classical to a Christian society, when scenes commemorating Rome’s foundation ultimately disappear from the repertoire of art. The conclusion addresses the basic question why or what essentially happens when a society no longer finds its past relevant to its present and future.

Two major figures, Aeneas and Romulus, dominate the legendary history recounting the foundation of ancient Rome. By the 2nd century B.C.E and then throughout the imperial period up to and including the 4th century C.E., their exploits are recounted in art.² Aeneas

is most often shown escaping Troy, leading his son Ascanius and carrying his father Anchises on his shoulders (fig. 1). Aeneas' wanderings ultimately lead him to the shores of Latium, where he and his followers become the initial ancestors of the Roman people. Romulus is the direct descendant of the dynasty of Alban kings begun by Ascanius. The birth of Romulus and his twin brother Remus occurs following Mars' rape of the Vestal Virgin, Rhea Silvia (fig. 2). The most popular event of the Romulan saga is the *Lupa Romana*, the discovery of the abandoned infants by a she-wolf, who carries them to her cave and nurses them (fig. 2).³ As a young man, Romulus was to return to the site of his miraculous salvation and establish the city of Rome. His exploits as the city's first king are recounted in such events as the abduction of the wives and daughters of the neighboring Sabines (fig. 3), the treachery of Tarpeia, and Romulus' carrying of the armor of the vanquished King Acro in the celebration of Rome's first triumph.

The initial phase of the use of these motifs in Roman art covers the Late Republic and Julio-Claudian periods, from ca. 200 B.C.E to 68 C.E. During this period, scenes from Rome's legendary history are closely tied to the function of art as official propaganda and specifically employed by members of prominent Roman families to highlight the roles of their ancestors in the founding of the city, and thus indirectly legitimizing their own prominent political status.⁴ With the advent of Augustus and the Julio-Claudian dynasty, the representation of events from Rome's foundation remains a familial one. In this case, however, the deeds of Aeneas and Romulus are commemorated as those performed by these direct descendants of Augustus' family, the *gens Julia*.⁵

The concept of the city, *Urbs Roma*, plays no role in this initial application of history to art. This is to change dramatically during the second phase of this development, beginning in the early 2nd century and the reign of Hadrian. It is here that one witnesses the elevation of scenes from Rome's early history to the status of universal symbols. Scenes from Rome's past are now directly linked to the city of Rome, the *Urbs Roma*, and convey the theme of "eternity" (*aeternitas*), emphasizing Rome's divinely favored origins, its predestined rise to greatness, its current status as the political and cultural center of a great empire, and the continuation of this power. The catalyst is Hadrian's construction of the Temple of Venus Felix and Roma Aeterna on the Velian, consecrated in 121 and dedicated in 136 or 137.⁶ This temple marks the establishment of the first official cult of the city goddess in Rome. It is not a coincidence that the festival of Roma Aeterna occurred on the traditional birthday of the city, April 21, and in the same year as the consecration of the temple, the first state-sponsored festival of Rome's founding, the *Natalis Urbis*, was held on this day. The direct association of Rome's early history with the *Urbs Roma* is seen immediately in a program of coins, depicting fourteen different events from Rome's beginnings, all issued during the years 140-144 under Hadrian's successor, Antoninus Pius, and celebrating the upcoming 900th anniversary of Rome's founding.⁷

The elevation of these scenes as universal symbols of *aeternitas* is further supported by their dissemination into the private sphere, especially funerary art.⁸ The message of eternity, associated with *Urbs Roma* in a public context is easily transferred to a funerary context emphasizing an individual's hope to experience an existence after death. Also

notable during this period is the dissemination of these foundation stories to the arts of the provinces. In a sense, what was previously directed to a political elite centered in Rome now relates to a much wider audience. Residents of provincial cities came to view scenes from Rome's early history as a statement of their own *Romanitas*, a recognition of belonging to a stable social order maintained by the power of the Roman state, personified by the *Urbs Roma*.⁹ Essential for this dissemination is what Hadrian's founding of the cult of Roma Aeterna must have done - establish for the first time scenes from Rome's foundation as symbols of truly national significance, focusing on a concept of *Urbs Roma* that links the past to the present and the present to the future.

Then, at the beginning of the 4th century, specifically after the reign of Maxentius, the use of Rome's foundation stories in the arts is once again transformed. Two case studies will serve to illustrate this change.

The first example is a large polychrome floor mosaic representing a chariot race and circus, from a villa located outside of Gerona in Spain and dating to ca. 360-380.¹⁰ The right hand side includes the *carceres*, the starting gates, and the *pulvinar*, or magistrate's box, with the signature of the artist Cecilianus below (fig. 2). Within the *pulvinar* sits the magistrate, holding in his upraised right hand a *mappa*, designating his role as *magister ludens*, the sponsor and overseer of the games. On either side of the magistrate's box and above the starting gates are panels. In the left panel is a seated figure of Roma, serving as protectress over the twins nursed by the she-wolf. Represented within the right panel is the encounter of Mars and Rhea Silvia, the parents of Romulus and Remus. Mars

advances from the left towards Rhea Silvia, depicted in the traditional guise of sleep with one arm limp to the side and the other supporting her head. The poses of the individual figures and their arrangement in pairs suggest these scenes do not reflect permanent statuary groups but paintings, most likely actual works carried in the *pompa circensis*, the parade prior to the races.

The decoration of the *spina* on the Gerona mosaic identifies the setting not as a local, provincial circus but the Circus Maximus in Rome. The obelisk, a trophy, and statues of Cybele riding astride a lion, a bound prisoner, and Roma herself, are specific references to this circus.¹¹ The individuality of the race also confirms that the event represents specific games held within the venue of the Circus Maximus. The four individual charioteers are named (together with one horse of the quadriga and their factional colors). These charioteers – Limenius, Calimorfus, Torax, and Filoromus – are, in fact, actual people, who are mentioned either in contemporary historical texts or on contorniates and gaming tokens.¹² The panels above the starting gates referring to Rome's legendary history suggest the Gerona mosaic depicts an anniversary festival of the city, the *Natalis Urbis* of April 21, and a specific *Natalis Urbis* sponsored by the owner of the villa.

An examination of a second example from this period reveals the same pattern seen on the Gerona mosaic. Included within the series of bronze issues known as “contorniates” struck in the second half of the 4th century is a representation of the abduction of the Sabine Women, confirmed by the legend SABINAE in the exergue (fig. 3).¹³ The location of the event is again the Circus Maximus, with its distinctive three turning posts

visible in the background. In a recent article Antonia Holden argues that this contorniate illustrates a theatrical performance, specifically an historical play or *fabula praetexta*, held in the Circus Maximus and associated with the festival of the Consualia.¹⁴ Traditionally the Consualia was the occasion when Romulus invited the neighboring Sabines and instigated the abduction of their wives and daughters.

The Sabine contorniate belongs to a distinctive series of non-monetary bronze issues, struck in Rome from ca. 360 to 470. The scenes depicted on these contorniates are neither anti-Christian nor pro-pagan. They include events drawn from Roman history and mythology, but by far the majority refers to chariot racing, the *ludi* accompanying a religious festival. The prevalence of this motif suggests that contorniates were distributed primarily as gifts at public games and festivals, probably by the sponsors of those events.¹⁵ As with the contorniate of the Sabine abduction, other examples depicting Romulus and Aeneas (fig. 1)¹⁶ certainly refer also to the celebration of specific festivals in the city of Rome.

Thus, in the cases of the circus mosaic from Gerona and the contorniate depicting the abduction of the Sabine Women (and on contorniates in general), one sees emerging in the 4th century a rather narrow application of scenes from Rome's historic past – as a reference to a specific religious celebration taking place in the city of Rome and honoring the sponsor of this event. This then constitutes the third and final phase in a chronological evolution, where each phase possesses its distinct use of the **past** to communicate values important to the **present**, and the **future** if applicable:

I. Late Republic – Julio-Claudian, ca. 200 B.C.E. – 68 C.E.

PAST → PRESENT

Ancestors participating in these events → Promote the family and oneself as
a member of that family

II. Hadrianic to early 4th century, ca. 120 – 320

PAST → PRESENT → FUTURE

divinely favored origins → current status as the political → continuation of
and predestined rise to and cultural center this power
greatness of the empire

III. 4th century, ca. 320-400

PAST → PRESENT

religious festivals and games directly → promote the sponsor of those games
related to the city of Rome

Returning to the contorniates, the series seems to fall into two chronological groups: an initial group begun shortly after 357 and continuing to ca. 395, and a second series struck after 410 and continuing until 470.¹⁷ Those contorniates whose reverses depict scenes from Rome's foundation fall exclusively into the first group (figs. 1 and 3). The contorniates therefore provide the evidence which confirms that the scenes we have been

examining essentially disappear from the repertoire of Roman art by the beginning of the 5th century.

Some obvious explanations may be put forward for the ultimate disappearance of these scenes in Late Roman art. When Constantinople became the official capital of the Empire in 330, Rome's position of political and cultural authority steadily declined during the course of the 4th century. The significance of those stories surrounding Rome's origin would therefore have diminished as well. Also influential in this process, especially by the end of the 4th century, is the dominance of Christianity and a Roman state directed by Christian emperors.

However, an explanation of the demise of Rome's foundation legends as artistic motifs must take into account more than just the decline of Rome's political status and the rise of Christianity. One needs to reconcile the fact that many traditional pagan, state-sponsored festivals involving chariot races and theatrical performances, including the *Natalis Urbis*, continued well into the 5th century.¹⁸ The concept of *Urbs Roma* as "Eternal Rome" does not disappear with the coming of the 5th century. Claudian, Sidonius Apollinaris, Prudentius, St. Augustine, and Pope Leo I are among those who refer to "Roma Aeterna" in their writings,¹⁹ while personifications of the city continue to appear in art and on coinage.²⁰

What we can surmise, in the larger context of "memory culture," is that the idea of *aeternitas*, and thus the concept of *Urbs Roma*, were redefined in course of the 4th century

and by the 5th century Rome's historical past did not fit this new development. The anniversary festivals, and a concept of *Urbs Roma* as *Roma Aeterna*, to which these scenes had been strongly linked in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, underwent a change during the course of the 4th century and had become part of a new ideology, now focusing on the emperor.²¹ Traditional festivals were no longer about religion and an historical Rome; they were about a living emperor. They were celebrations of the present and the future, but were now specifically linked to the well being of the emperor and his role as the preserver of the Empire, not the past and the glorification of the city of Rome. Scenes commemorating those heroes associated with the founding of Rome were a memory of the deeds of the past, which clearly could not be assimilated into a new ideology honoring the achievements of contemporary rulers and the state they governed. In a private funerary context, the theme of eternity was easily supplanted by Biblical images favored by an ever increasing Christian population.

The context in the 4th century of those scenes discussed in this paper demonstrates an inability to adapt. There is apparently no longer a role for the deeds of a Romulus or an Aeneas to symbolize an *Urbs Roma* as the Eternal Rome. Their role is now to recall the origins of specific festivals associated solely with the *Urbs Roma* and to honor those individuals responsible for the staging of those festivals. But such a role is not "Eternal Rome." The scenes are left with a past, an ill-defined present, and no future.

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Photo Captions with On-line References:

Fig. 1 Contorniate (gilded), reverse with Aeneas, Anchises and Ascanius

Boston, Museum of Fine Arts acc. no. 66.278.

<http://old.perseus.tufts.edu/cgi-bin/image?lookup=1997.03.1294>

Fig. 2 Circus Mosaic from Gerona, depicting Roma with *Lupa Romana*, Mars and Rhea

Silvia. Gerona, City History Museum.

www.pecesdemuseu.com/mosaic-girona/el-mosaic.html

Fig. 3 Contorniate, reverse depicting abduction of the Sabine Women.

Glasgow, University of Glasgow, Hunterian Museum and Art Gallery.

www.ajaonline.org/index.php?ptype=content&aid=301

¹ Jan Assmann, *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und ulti-sche Identität in frühen*

Hochkulturen (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1992); idem, *Religion and Cultural Memory: Ten Studies* (Stanford, CA:

Stanford University Press, 2006).

² Catalogue of examples in Fulvio Canciani, "Aineias," in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, vol. I (Zurich and Munich: Artemis, 1981): 381-396; J. Penny Small, "Romulus et Remus," in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, vol. VII (Zurich and Munich: Artemis, 1994) 639-644.

³ Cecile Dulière, *Lupa Romana. Recherches d'iconographie et essai d'interprétation*, 2 vols. (Wetteren, 1979). This essay excludes this scene, unique among the representations discussed here for its longevity, surviving even today as the symbol of the city of Rome.

⁴ In the Late Republic this process is most apparent in coinage; see, Jane DeRose Evans, *The Art of Persuasion. Political Propaganda from Aeneas to Brutus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992); Gary Farney, *Ethnic Identity and Aristocratic Competition in Republican Rome* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007).

⁵ Paul Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*. trans. Alan Shapiro (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1988), 193-208; Martin Spannagel, *Exemplaria Principis. Untersuchungen zu Entstehung und Ausstattung des Augustusforums* (Heidelberg: Verlag Archäologie und Geschichte, 1999), 162-255.

⁶ Mary Boartwright, *Hadrian and the City of Rome* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 119-129. The link to *aeternitas* is argued most strongly by Jean Gagé, "Le 'Templum Urbis' et les origines de l'idée de 'Renovatio,' " in *Mélanges Franz Cumont*, vol. 1, ed. Franz Cumont (Brussels, 1936), 151-187.

⁷ Jocelyn M.C. Toynbee, "Some 'Programme' Coin-Types of Antoninus Pius," *Classical Review* 39 (1925): 170-173; F. Barenghi, "Scene leggendarie della storia di Roma su alcuni medaglioni," *Rivista italiana di numismatica* 94 (1992): 113-120.

⁸ Peter Noelke, "Aeneasdarstellungen in der römischen Plastik der Rheinzone," *Germania* 54 (1976): 409-439.

⁹ C. Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 2000).

¹⁰ Gerona, City History Museum inv. 4114. Alberto Balil, "Mosaicos circenses de Barcelona y Gerona," *Boletín de la Real Academia de la Historia*, 151 (1962): 257-351; idem, *Mosaicos romanos de Hispania Citerior*, vol. I, fasc. 1. *Conventus Tarraconensis. Ager Emporitani et Gerundensis* (Santiago de Compostela: Universidad, Seminario de Arqueología, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, 1971), 23-49.

¹¹ John Humphrey, *Roman Circuses. Arenas for Chariot Racing*, (Berkeley, University of

California Press, 1986), 239-241.

¹² Aimé Gabillon, "Datation, d'après Ammien Marcellin et les contorniates, de deux mosaïques de cirque trouvées à Gérone et à Rome," *Recherches et travaux. Université Stendhal-Grenoble* 54 (1998): 69-77.

¹³ Andreas Alföldi, Elisabeth Alföldi-Rosenbaum, and Curtis Clay, *Die Kontorniat-Medaillons*, pt. 1 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1976), 56 no. 182.7, pl. 67.10.

¹⁴ Antonia Holden, "The Abduction of the Sabine Women in Context: The Iconography on the Late Antique Contorniate Medallions," *American Journal of Archaeology* 112 (2008): 121-142.

¹⁵ Michelle Salzman, *On Roman Time. The Codex-Calendar of 354 and the Rhythms of Urban Life in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 213-218.

¹⁶ Alföldi, Alföldi-Rosenbaum, and Clay, *Kontorniat-Medaillons*, pt. 2 (1990), 158-159 no. RS 90-91, pls. 143.1-4 and 145.4.

¹⁷ Alföldi, Alföldi-Rosenbaum, and Clay, *Kontorniat-Medaillons*, pt. 1 (1976), 217-232.

¹⁸ Salzman, 155; J. Curran, *Pagan City and Christian Capital: Rome in the Fourth Century* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2000), 218-259.

¹⁹ François Paschoud, *Roma Aeterna: Études sur le patriotisme romain dans l'occident latin à l'époque des grandes invasions* (Rome: Institut suisse, 1967); Michael Roberts, "Rome Personified, Rome Epitomized: Representations of Rome in the Poetry of the Early Fifth Century," *The American Journal of Philology* 122 (2001): 533-565.

²⁰ Kathleen Shelton, "Imperial Tyches," *Gesta*, 18 (1979): 27-38.

²¹ Salzman, 179-189.