

A WOLF IN WOLF'S CLOTHING: LUPA CAPITOLINA

Valentina Arena FSA and Antonino Pittá shine a light on Rome's greatest symbol



Lupa Capitolina: she-wolf with Romulus and Remus. Bronze, 13th-century AD (the twins are a 15th-century addition), image © Merulana via Wikimedia under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.

Along with the Colosseum and the Trevi Fountain, the bronze statue of a she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus in display at the Capitoline Museum is one of the most iconic symbols of the city of Rome. Used as a logo for the city's football club since 1927, drawn on the poster of the 1960 Summer Olympics, or sold as a small plastic reproduction by souvenir stalls in via dei Fori Imperiali, this image of the twin orphans adopted by the she-wolf, known as the 'Lupa Capitolina', acts as modernity's powerful link to the foundation myth of Rome and its ancient Roman uses.

In a speech against Catiline in 63BCE, Cicero attests that in his days a statue portraying the she-wolf suckling the twins was displayed on the Capitoline Hill, while in his Roman Antiquities the Greek scholar Dionysius (active in Rome a generation later or so), combining his interests in rhetoric and antiquarian research, reports that an archaic-looking statue, portraying this very scene, could be seen in a shrine at the foot of the Palatine Hill. Livy, approximately his contemporary, tells us that, in the 3rd century BCE, in the same area a statue representing the two founders of Rome as infants was added to the image of a she-wolf.

Something similar happened to the 'Lupa Capitolina'. When in 1471 Pope Sixtus IV gifted some ancient bronze

statues to the city of Rome, two statuettes of little babies were commissioned from the contemporary sculptor Antonio del Pollaiuolo to be added to the bronze she-wolf (at the time regarded an archaic work) to mark the continuity with Roman tradition by the use of this powerful imagery. The archaic origin of the wolf statue, however, firmly and authoritatively established by 18th-century scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann, has been called into question by recent chemical analysis of the material. According to these new studies, the wolf was crafted around the 11th/ 12th century CE. However, if the technique seems to be unknown to the Etruscan-Roman world, the style seems closer to Roman art works. The debate rages, the jury is still out.

Still, the fact remains that the very monument which, in the eyes of the world, evokes the legendary origin of Rome, is the result of a forgery: composed of a couple of plump Renaissance cherubs and, possibly, a medieval beast. It is a compelling reminder of how often a mythological past is so successfully re-invented to achieve contemporary ends.

This article arises from the European funded project FRRAnt, *'The Fragments of the Roman Republican Antiquarians'*, previously based at UCL and now in the process of being transferred to Oxford University.