



Myth at the heart of the Roman Empire

The D'Arpino frescoes

Jessica Hughes:

Wow these are absolutely stunning.

By the seventeenth century the political power in Rome had shifted to the church.

Jessica Hughes:

In this room we've got a series of episodes from the first book of Livy, which give exemplary pictures of the virtues and vices of early Rome. And they really show richness and abundance, there's no mistaking that the people who commissioned this room have an awful lot of money and power.

Statues of Pope Urban VIII and Pope Innocent X dominate the room.

Jessica Hughes:

When you look at this scene today, you can't help but notice the enormous statue of Pope Innocent X that's underneath it. This was added after the paintings were completed, but Pope Innocent would have been very pleased with the connection that was being made between himself and the foundation myths because in the C17th it was very important for the leading families of Rome and the cardinals and the popes to associate themselves with the episode that Livy recounts in his Histories. The Pamphili family to whom Pope Innocent belonged wasn't originally from Rome, they'd recently arrived, and so they thought it was really important to stress their continuity with ancient Rome, particularly as they saw themselves as descended from Rome's legendary founders, so Aescanius or Iulus and Aeneas.

Why did these pagan myths still have so much relevance in a Christian era?

Chris Smith:

One of the great things about the foundation myths is that they are extraordinarily dramatic and you have a wonderful confluence, I think, of two different things. You have popes and political leaders who are desperate to show the way that they're connected to the past and the great history of Rome; you also have painters who want interesting things to paint. What always remains fascinating about the Renaissance and Baroque Church is its continued fascination with the pagan past, even in its own Christian existence, and you see this clearly with the mythological figures. One advantage of the Roman historical myths is that well, they can at least be told simply as history, and they don't have the overtones of pagan sensuality, and so forth, that some of the stories of the deities have, and so they may be a little safer for the public rooms.

Jessica Hughes:

This fresco that I'm looking at now shows Numa Pompilius who was the 2nd king of Rome after Romulus, and he's in the act of instituting the Roman state religion. We know that the council that commissioned these paintings were really keen to show that Rome wasn't only a place of military valour but also incredibly religious city and it had been right from the beginnings.

The popes were picking up on ancient Rome as a seat of spiritual power.

Jessica Hughes:

So Numa's pointing at the altar, and the eternal flame, that it was the vestal virgins job to keep alight. And we see the Vestal Virgins, most of them are dressed in white and they are gesturing towards the flame. One of them is dressed in red, and she's turning to look down at the only area of the wall in the room that isn't covered in painting. Now, we think that was left

blank because it was originally intended for the statue of Urban the 8th, the colossal marble statue that's now under the scene with the Sabine women. And so, if the statue had been put in that place then it would have been a very nice touch because the woman in red would have turned her head to look down at the Pope and this would have made the very strong visual connection that he was rightful inheritor of the religion that was initiated by Numa.

The seventeenth century popes claimed the power of Rome's mythical founders

Jessica Hughes:

You see on the sides of the painting that there are these bronze coloured nudes that are drawing back a heavy red curtain. And that's very interesting because it really shows that this is almost the opening scene of Rome's history, it's like a visual way of representing a prologue, and it makes the viewer feel that they're looking through a window or onto a stage and they are privileged to look into the world of history, another world, a world that hasn't been forgotten.