



Myth at the heart of the Roman Empire

The House of Augustus

Rome Map: house of Augustus

Augustus was an emperor: Caesar Augusto, one of the emperors of Rome.
Augusto era imperatore: Caesar Augusto, era uno degli imperatori di Roma.
He was the first emperor. As a child he was also seen as the future saviour of Rome.

E' stato il primo imperatore che e' stato visto anche come il bambino che avrebbe salvato Roma.

The house of Augustus is right next to the entrance to the Roman Forum.
C'e' la casa di Augusto proprio nell'entrata del Foro Romano.

Chris Smith:

So this is the House of Augustus. It's an incredibly exciting site, because what we get to see here is the choices that an emperor has made about where he wants to live.

Chris Smith:

Through to the green that you can see underneath the archway here is effectively the end of the palatine, edge of the palatine. That leads you down into this incredibly rich sacral landscape. Which ultimately leads to the Tiber. And of course the Luperca. The Luperca, the place where Romulus and Remus wound up after they'd been put into a little boat and sent off to die. That's where they were suckled by a wolf, taken in by a shepherd and so forth, so there's a direct story of Romulus and Remus at the Luperca there.

Chris Smith:

At the same time, if we look down this line here, what we're effectively seeing is a row of temples, and there's another behind us over there, which contextualise this house in a highly religious topography from the middle republic to contemporary with Augustus.

Jessica Hughes:

He was called Octavian or, Octavius, before he came to power officially, and he changed his name to Augustus which means something like 'holy'. Now interestingly the imperial biographer Suetonius tells us that Octavian was offered the name Romulus because he was the second founder of Rome so this gives us a real clear insight into one of the reasons that the foundation narratives were so important to Augustus, because he was representing himself as a new founder of the city.

Chris Smith:

So we have this house in which Augustus combines both his private place to live with his public reception rooms and includes it within this mythical history of Rome, which he is directly connected to like a lightning bolt straight back to Romulus, but also in terms of the religion, religious topography of victory and success.

Jessica Hughes:

Now the house that we see today, the rooms that we can go into today on the Palatine Hill, are actually thought to have been built when Augustus was still Octavian, so actually in the period before he came to power, and this is really interesting because it shows us that this notion of connecting him to, himself to the divine and mythical ancestry of the Roman nation wasn't something that was suddenly invented when he became Emperor but something that had been with him since his youth.

Chris Smith:

So, here we are in one of the rooms of the house of Augustus. We know that Augustus had at the top of his house a study, his private place where he went to meditate and maybe this is it. Whatever, it shows a fantastic example of the kind of painting that surrounds an upper class Roman when he retreats into his house.

Chris Smith:

What do we see here, what is it that he surround himself with? We can see images of individuals, idealised individuals within a landscape, populated with statues and divinities. And what's going on here is the Romans contextualising themselves within a world that is very close to the gods. And that closeness to the gods is linked with their closeness to history.

Jessica Hughes:

Lots of writers during the time that Augustus was in power make explicit comparisons between the Emperor and either Romulus and/or Aeneas, and one example is the poet Ovid who in his *Fasti* tells us how Augustus is the new Romulus, he's surpassed Romulus 'cos he's built more magnificent city walls and he's more moral than Romulus was.

Chris Smith:

Now the House of Augustus is also interesting because it plays a really intriguing architectural and public game. It's well known through all the sources that Augustus claimed that his house was quite low scale, not terribly important, it was a small domestic building. But, look where it is, there is no way that you can mistake this house, either in terms of the luxury of its internal decoration, more importantly in terms of its location, as being of critical importance.

Chris Smith:

So that you have this really interesting play between Augustus saying, I'm not a tyrant, I'm not a dictator, I am an ordinary person, but an ordinary person who lives with the gods, lives surrounded by the gods, lives next door to the gods, and is descended from the gods. And in that way this house is a wonderful example of the way that Augustus plays these games against the backdrop of an understanding of a mission in Rome that is divinely inspired but fundamentally relevant to the future of the Roman people.