



Myth at the heart of the Roman Empire

The wolf and twins sculpture

Jessica Hughes:

There's a great tradition in Italy when you've just got married to go around on a bit of a tour of whichever city it is that you're in, and if you go onto the Campidoglio on a Saturday it's really lovely to watch people come out of the registry office and make their way over to the replica of the she-wolf that stands in the piazza and have their photo taken there. For me, perhaps more than any other tradition, this shows how important the she-wolf is as a symbol in the lives of modern Romans.

Jessica Hughes:

This is the famous Capitoline she wolf and she's positioned in what's normally the busiest room of the whole Capitoline museum because people recognise this image that they've seen reproduced all over modern Rome.

The statue embodies the moment when Roman power was first established.

Jessica Hughes: If you look at the wolf, you can't help but be reminded that this is a fierce and a wild animal. She's got her mouth open and you can see those sharp teeth and you know that those are teeth that could do quite a lot of harm. But the twins are completely immune to that and you see them here and they're in almost this gesture of revelation as they look up and they get the milk that's going to nourish them and then they're going to grow up and found city of Rome.

Jessica Hughes:

The twins weren't originally part of this statue group, so you look at it and you think it's a coherent, whole statue group, but the twins were added in the C15th, in the Renaissance period. In recent years, the wolf has been the subject of quite a lot of controversy, because she's always been thought to date from the 6th or the C5thBC, she's thought to have been an Etruscan statue that's quite closely based on Greek models. But recently there have been attempts to re-date the wolf to the medieval period.

But whatever its age, the city of Rome and this sculpture are inextricably linked.

Jessica Hughes:

In 1471 Pope Sixtus 4th donated this sculpture to the people of Rome and it's possible that this is one of the reasons that people feel so strongly that this sculpture encapsulates their identity, it 's their heritage, their property because it was rightly given to them in the C15th.

Chris Smith:

But there's also something rather important now about adopting stories about Rome for the current day. It's a legitimising factor, it gives people some kind of sense of where they're coming from, and it is also a way of trying to say something about the kind of Rome that people want. Rome is a complicated city politically. It's part of a country which has only fairly recently been united, and for Rome itself to have that power is something that's still contested, so being able to draw on that history of Rome being the centre of a country is very important. It's interesting, of course, that Mussolini did this very, very powerfully, but it's still running today and it, I think, says something about the constant need for Rome to reaffirm its centrality in Italy as the seat of power.

The she-wolf is the symbol of Rome

La lupa e un simbolo di Roma.

The she-wolf remains the symbol of Rome because she nurtured the future kings of Rome.

It's as simple as that.

La lupa rimane sempre un simbolo di Roma perché proprio per questo motivo, che allatto' i futuri re di Roma. Tutto qua.

The she wolf can be seen as a maternal figure. It is very, very important.
La lupa nella società odierna la puoi pensare e' una figura tipo la madre. Per cui e molto molto importante.

Of course it's weird. Two twins, born from the gods and fed by a she-wolf? Come on, if that were true we'd all be immortal, wouldn't we?

Jessica Hughes:

The wolf and twins really embodies the sense of future as well as the sense of past. It's a moment that comes right at the beginning of the foundation narratives and the history of Rome, so you look at this group and even if you don't really know the stories of Rome's history, you know that this comes right at the beginning and that from this moment there's going to unfold this long and illustrious history. And so that's one reason why it's so powerful so potent a symbol, because you've got past and you've got future together in one sculpture.