



## **Myth at the heart of the Roman Empire**

### *Myth and the Roman Empire*

I'm Valerie Hope. I'm a Lecturer in Classical Studies at the Open University and I was Production Course Chair for A330.

This album looks at the city of Rome as a mythological centre. Rome was the capital of a vast empire and Rome's political leaders often looked to the past to justify their present, and integral to Rome's past were the myths of its foundation, centred on characters such as Aeneas and Romulus and Remus.

Rome's foundation myths were integral to the mission of the city to rule the world. The foundation myths helped to give the city, and also its rulers, a kind of divine aura.

Augustus was Rome's first emperor. He came to power after years of civil war and general disarray, so this time Rome needed a strong ruler, but also one who could justify his own position, so for Augustus the foundation myths were crucial. They allowed him to entwine his own family history with that of Rome's mythical founders, and therefore to look to the past, and there are mythical stories about Rome's original foundation, helped him to build an impression of himself as somebody who was also divinely connected, who was also going to be good for Rome, who was going to build a new future for the city.

What Augustus does can be paralleled by other families from the late republic. It was quite common for leading politicians prior to Augustus to look to the past, to look to Rome's myths, to try and find divine connections for their families, but what Augustus does is basically try to monopolise this system to connect his family all the way back to the initial founders of the city, and it's not to say that it becomes outlawed for other families to do this, but he is the person on whom the priorities and the interest now falls.

The Ara Pacis was an ornate, ceremonial altar dedicated to the Emperor Augustus which celebrated the peace brought by his reign. Now the outer walls of the altar precinct are covered in sculpture. There are images of vegetation, entwined acanthus and vines dotted with small animals and birds. There are also panels showing a religious procession including depictions of members of the imperial family, and there are also panels which show scenes from Rome's mythical past, including its foundation. So the altar thus conveys messages about peace, stability, fertility, abundance, all these sort of attributes and assets of things of the reign of Augustus has brought about, and the altar also portrays the same Augustus as a religious man, as a man connected to the gods, as a man who is related to Rome's mythical founders.

The Lapis Niger, literally 'black stone', was located in the Roman Forum, and in many ways it represents a bit of a mystery. This was a sacred and important site associated with Rome's early history and its mythical founders, but exactly what it marked or commemorated was unclear. So in some ways it provides a good illustration of how myth was entwined in Roman life in ways that we just don't get, that we no longer fully understand, and that it seems the Romans themselves no longer understood either.

The D'Arpino Fresco's move us rapidly forward in time, and these were large canvases commissioned by the popes in the 17th century, but they suggest even in Christian Rome these stories had relevance. On the one hand they were good stories to tell, to paint, to admire, but as in the Augustan era they were a way of connecting the past and the present, so for the papal leaders of Rome they could use the myths to create links between themselves and Rome's long history as a centre of power and influence, so depicting the myths helped the popes portray themselves as inheritors almost of power in Rome.

We all tend to look to the past to justify the present, to some extent, we're all products of the past, we're all products of recent history, but I think the difference between perhaps modern and ancient society was that we have, you know, lots of media, lots of different ways of communication available, whereas in the ancient world it was more limited, and therefore if you could present yourselves using symbols that were well established, that helped to cement and build up your position.

One of the things that continues to surprise me about myth was how it was everywhere, how it did surround people, and although you know this as a classicist, because you can't avoid myth, it's only when you begin to sort of pile evidence on top of evidence, coins, houses, political statues, fresco's, paintings that you, it really kind of underlines that perspective that we're all apt to forget sometimes.