

The Founding of Rome

GEOGRAPHY:

Italy is a peninsula jutting out into the Mediterranean west of Greece. Unlike Greece, Italy is poor in mineral resources and surprisingly devoid of useful harbors. However, the most stunning difference between Greece and Italy is the larger amount of fertile land. While Greece is poor in fertile land, Italy is wealthy in both land and precipitation. So the two peoples developed very differently; the Italians began and remained largely an agrarian people. Even in its latest stages, Roman culture would identify its values and ideals as agrarian.

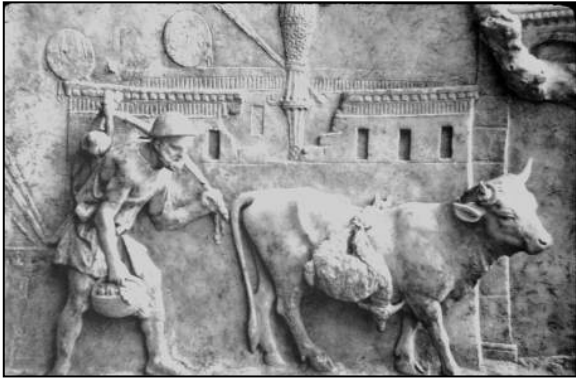
Italy had one other significant difference from Greece: it was easily accessible from Europe to the north. The Greeks lived behind a formidable mountain range; the Alps to the north of Italy were not quite as invulnerable. The Greeks also had a warlike Greek population to the north, the Macedonians, to serve as a buffer between themselves and other Europeans. The Romans had no such buffer civilization. As a result, conflict was a fairly constant affair on the Italian peninsula and the Romans, along with other peoples on the Italian peninsula, developed a military society fairly early in their history.

According to Roman legend, the city was founded in 753 BCE by Romulus and Remus, twin sons of the god Mars and a Latin princess. The twins were abandoned on the Tiber River as infants and raised by a she-wolf. They decided to build a city near the spot. In reality, Rome developed because of its strategic location and its fertile soil. Rome was built on seven rolling hills at a curve on the Tiber River, near the center of the Italian peninsula. It was midway between the Alps and Italy's southern tip. Rome also was near the midpoint of the Mediterranean Sea. The historian Livy, in his work, *The Early History of Rome*, wrote about the city's site:



Not without reason did gods and men choose this spot for the cite of our city—the healthy hills, the river to bring us produce from the inland regions and sea-borne commerce from abroad, the sea itself, near enough for convenience yet not so near as to bring danger from foreign fleets, our situation in the very heart of Italy—all these advantages make it of all places in the world the best for a city destined to grow great.

We know almost nothing about the earliest peoples in Italy, who were Cro-Magnons, but by the Neolithic stage, they seemed to have been displaced by waves of migrations from Africa, Spain, and France. These peoples were themselves displaced by a new set of migrations in the Bronze Age, which began in Italy around 1500 BC, which violently displaced many of the populations already there. These new peoples came from across the Alps and across the Adriatic Sea to the east of the Italian peninsula. They were a nomadic people who were primarily herdsmen; they were also technologically superior. They worked bronze, used horses, and had wheeled carts. They were a war-like people and began to settle the mountainous areas of the Italian peninsula. We call these people *Italic*, and they include several ethnic groups: the Sabines, the Umbrians, and the Latins, with an assortment of others.



The Latins were farmers and shepherds who wandered into Italy across the Alps around 1000 BCE. They settled on either side of the Tiber River in a region they called Latium. They built the original settlement at Rome, a cluster of wooden huts atop one of its seven hills, the Palatine Hill. These settlers were the first Romans.

Between 750 and 600 BCE, Greek settlers established about 50 colonies on the coasts of southern Italy and Sicily. The cities became prosperous and commercially active. They brought all of Italy, including Rome, into closer contact with Greek civilization. The Greeks also taught the Romans how to grow grapes and olives.

The Etruscans were native to northern Italy. They were skilled metalworkers and engineers. The Etruscans strongly influenced the development of Roman civilization. They had a system of writing, and the Romans adopted their alphabet. They also influenced Rome's architecture, especially the use of the arch.

Romans borrowed religious ideas from both the Greeks and the Etruscans. The Romans adopted Etruscan rituals that they believed helped them to win the favor of the gods. Roman gods even took on the personalities and legends of the Greek gods. Romans, however, gave their gods different names. Thus Zeus, the king of the Greek gods, became Jupiter in Rome, and Hera, the queen of the gods, became Juno.

THE EARLY REPUBLIC:

Around 600 BCE, an Etruscan became king. However, Rome was not controlled by the Etruscan cities. Under its Etruscan kings, Rome grew from a collection of hilltop villages to a city that covered nearly 500 square miles. Much of Rome was rich agricultural land. Various kings ordered the construction of Rome's first temples and public buildings. By royal order, the swampy valley below the Palatine Hill was drained, making a public meeting place. Later it became the Forum, the heart of Roman political life.

The last king of Rome was Tarquin the Proud. A harsh tyrant, he was driven from power in 509 BCE. Roman aristocrats, wealthy landowners who resented the Etruscan kings, overthrew him. The Romans declared they would never again be ruled by a king. They swore to put to death anyone who plotted to make himself king.

Having deposed the monarch, the Romans established a new government. They called it a republic, from the Latin phrase *res publica*, which means "public affairs." A **republic** is a form of government in which power rests with citizens who have the right to vote to select their leaders. In Rome, citizenship with voting rights was granted only to free-born male citizens.