

Daisy Dorrington, *Suckling for Identity: The She-Wolf as a Roman Icon*

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Abstract

The she-wolf has long been an established image in Ancient Roman iconography with a crucial role in the best-known version of Rome's founding. As a renowned Roman icon and a mutual mythological ancestor of the Roman people, her familiar image was capable of inducing a sense of communal identity. The concept of using a mythological ancestor to incite a superior collective identity is a common theme in studies of antiquity. This article intends to add to this body of work using the she-wolf as its focus to highlight how use of her image by contemporaries emphasised Rome's military strength, divinity and divine favour and even their reliance on maternal roles to maintain their innate superiority. The she-wolf defined what it meant to be Roman; her position as a Roman icon provided a shared heritage which incited a sense of patriotism that highlighted the Romans' superior origins which gave them an advantage over other societies. This article will demonstrate how the she-wolf acted as a Roman icon that was used to promote different aspects of Roman superiority, focussing on what united the many people of the vast Roman Empire instead of the many things that divided them.

Then Romulus, proud in the tawny hide of the she-wolf, his nurse, shall take up the line, and found the walls of Mars and call the people Romans after his own name.

Virgil, *Aeneid*. 1.275

The she-wolf was a prominent Roman icon with a crucial role in the best-known version of Rome's founding. After their abandonment by the Tiber at the request of their great-uncle King Amulius, Romulus and Remus are said to have been rescued and nursed by a passing she-wolf.¹ This legend spanned a large portion of Rome's history and was known from at least 'the beginning of the 4th century BCE, possibly already in the first half of the 6th century

¹ Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.79; Liv. 1.4; Ov. *Fast.* 2.381-425; Plut. *Vit. Rom.* 3-4; Enn. *Ann.* F38-40;

BCE.² The she-wolf's significance in Roman discourse is evident when one compares the numerous references (literary and iconographic) in the various accounts of Rome's founding with the minor role of the she-wolf in the narrative. Despite this subtle role, her image became one of the most iconic in representations of Rome and Roman identity to its citizens and enemies alike. One might suggest the reason for this was the she-wolf's ability to incite a sense of shared Roman identity amongst a diverse group of people via means of a common ancestor. The she-wolf emphasised what united the people of Rome, accentuating their superior origins of which regardless of external factors they, as Romans, shared. Her individual significance and personal role in Rome's founding is evident in the extract from Virgil's *Aeneid* above. When founding Rome, Romulus was 'proud in the tawny hide of the she-wolf'³ implying gratitude is owed to the she-wolf for imbuing Romulus with vigour for discovery. Hence, all Romans are indebted to the she-wolf for the walls they live within, constructing a communal identity through a shared experience of patriotic gratitude to a mutual mythological ancestor. The concept of using mutual mythological ancestors to incite identity was prevalent even in Ancient Greek culture with the "embrace of Greek heroes and gods as ancestors (and legitimising agents) by the major dynasties."⁴ Similarly, the image of the she-wolf was exploited by leaders seeking to unify the nation and secure their position.

² Rissanen 2014: 336-7.

³ Verg. *Aen.* 1.275.

⁴ Patterson 2010: 65.

The wolf was a threat in the ancient North Mediterranean and its ecological dominance was equivalent to Roman strength and military might – Rome was the metaphorical wolf of the ancient world. As the sacred animal of Mars, alongside many other divine elements of the story, the she-wolf emphasised the divine favour and heritage of Rome and its inhabitants. Divinity passed from the sacred she-wolf to Romulus and then onto the Romans. The maternal role of the she-wolf outlined the expectations of mothers, underlining their fundamental importance to the function of Roman society and constructing an ideal identity exclusively for its mothers. Good mothers were imperative to rearing men to continue Rome's prosperity. Thus, the she-wolf constructed and maintained a superior Roman identity, translating what it meant to be Roman – strong and militarily valiant, divinely favoured and reliant upon idealised maternal roles. The she-wolf acted as a Roman icon and was used to promote different aspects of Roman superiority and focused on what united the people of the vast Roman Empire instead of the many things that divided them.

Lupine Strength

The wolf's place as an object of fear and symbol of strength in antiquity is clear; they were as P.M.W. Tennant asserts: 'the only type of animal which constituted a real threat to the community in the northern Mediterranean.'⁵ Thus, the choice to select such a fierce predator to nurse their founder and act as a Roman emblem is significant, particularly considering the importance placed on breastfeeding in Roman culture. The contemporary belief that the

⁵ Tennant 1988: 82.

feeder passed their own attributes via their milk suggests the she-wolf imbued the twins with her natural strength.⁶ The perception of the transmission of wolf-strength is evident in Oppian's *Cynegetica*, 'on the breast of... she-wolf that roams by night; for so shalt thou make them strong and swift exceedingly, like unto their milky foster-mothers.'⁷ Hence, the twins acquired the wolf's strength through suckling, implying the Romans, as descendants of Romulus, inherited this genetically. The heritable nature of lupine traits is evident in Propertius: 'a she-wolf nurtured the blood from which [the Romans]... sprang... what walls have sprung up from your milk!'⁸ Propertius suggests the nursing of the she-wolf had a tangible impact on Roman biology, an impact which enabled the construction of Roman walls. By suckling the twins she had a role in erecting the walls of Rome by providing its citizens with superior genetics ensuring the success and prosperity of the state. The strength of individual citizens translated to Rome's military authority as a nation, as is suggested through the use of the she-wolf in militaristic contexts as in Fig.1. The militarism of the coin is evident, the obverse depicts the head of Janus and the reverse, the prow of a ship with the she-wolf suckling twins above. Janus was the god of beginnings and gates; the gates of his temple were closed in a ritual fashion during peacetimes, thus he was 'linked with... the beginning and end of military campaigns.'⁹ In consideration of the date of striking, the ship may be a reference to Roman naval supremacy in the Third Macedonian War, where

⁶ For breastfeeding in Roman culture see, Plut. *Mor. De amor prolis*. 2-3; Gell. *NA*. 12.1; Salzmänn-Mitchell, 2012: 151-153.

⁷ Opp. *Cyn.* 1.435-444.

⁸ Prop. 2.19-30; 4.55-61.

⁹ Purcell 2015: 1

Macedonian fleets were ‘almost invisible.’¹⁰ The depiction of the she-wolf alongside such imagery shows she could be associated with Roman authority. One may even suggest the she-wolf here is used as an agent to legitimise acts of violence in the name of continuing Rome’s *aeternitas* – she provided them with the means and they were to maintain Rome in her honour. Her presence in the militaristic sphere is further established by her use as an individual emblem of several Roman legions (Legio II Italica, Legio XI Claudia), the use of her image on the reverse of coins minted by the Legio I Italica and her presentation on some military insignia of the Legio VI Ferrata.¹¹ Mika Rissanen says in this capacity ‘the she-wolf motif can be seen as a reference to their Italian origin.’¹² However, the wolf was a ferocious beast, a suitable and valorous self-identification for a Roman legion communicating that they battled like wolves. Not only this, the image of the wolf referenced the superior strength innate to the Romans, suggesting in this militaristic context, the she-wolf conveyed their Italic origin but emphasised the valour inherited through their nationality and the she-wolf.

¹⁰ Hoyos 2010: 514

¹¹ Rissanen 2014: 338.

¹² Rissanen 2014



Figure 1: Laureate head of bearded Janus on the obverse and the prow of a galley with the suckling she-wolf above on the reverse. Minted at Rome, 169-158 BC.¹³

Significantly, prior to Rome's supremacy the wolf was used as an icon by militaristic societies as reference to their combatant ability. The Spartans for example used the wolf as a representation of the homeland and 'all its soldiers fought for it, the alpha wolf leading the pack.'¹⁴ Whilst the wolf represented Sparta itself for the Spartans, the Dacians defined themselves as 'those who are like wolves... [and] each Dacian who was able to fight answered the call of the sacred wolf.'¹⁵ The Dacian's lupine identity is recognised on Trajan's column with the Dacian Draco (see Fig.2). The wolf dragon hybrid is used to emphasise Dacian strength in order to highlight Rome's superiority in defeating them. The message is clear, as Cristina Mazzoni points out: 'only another people descended of wolves – a people, that is, engendered by Mars and fed by a she-wolf – was able to conquer them.'¹⁶ By displaying the Dacian's lupine identity the she-wolf and the

¹³ BMCRR 514 in Freeman & Sear 1997: 192.

¹⁴ Strehie 2017: 371.

¹⁵ Strehie 2017

¹⁶ Mazzoni 2010: 70.

heritable unrivalled strength she bestowed on Romans is indirectly referenced. For a nation constantly expanding, creating a homogenous identity encapsulating a diverse array of people for purposes of maintaining peace by inciting patriotism was crucial. Therefore, the ferocity of the wolf and its preceding use by pugnacious societies and the she-wolf's role in Rome's founding, merge to construct a superior Roman identity emphasising their inimitable genetic strength. The Romans were the wolves of the ancient world, imbued with the physical strength of an animal they were destined to dominate.



Figure 2: The Dacian Draco on Trajan's Column.¹⁷

¹⁷ National Geographic 2021

Divinity and Divine Favour

The wolf's inhuman strength was perceived as synonymous with the divine. The divinity that surrounded and lived within the wolf was crucial to creating a nonpareil identity of a people divinely favoured and imbued. As the sacred animal of Mars, the god of war, the she-wolf's ability to reference strength and military might is obvious, but also significant is her divinity.¹⁸ The wolf had a religiously charged history that preceded the she-wolf. For example, the Faliscans, who became the *Hirpi Sorani* (the wolves of Soranus), deemed the wolf sacred after a few of their tribe were fatally punished for chasing wolves after they disturbed a sacrifice.¹⁹ The divine retribution enacted on those hunting wolves suggests they were perceived as being divinely protected animals outside of Roman culture. This undoubtedly assisted the wolf's transition to Roman divinity. Livy highlights the she-wolf's role as divine defender of Rome in his discussion of Gaius Flaminius' alarming consular authority. Divine disapproval revealed itself in the form of several prodigies, including the sweating of the wolves on Mars' statue on the Appian Way.²⁰ The wolf was shrouded in divinity hence her negative reaction communicated the will of the gods, allowing Livy to discredit Flaminius and exclude him from Roman destiny. Thus, the she-wolf was clearly perceived by contemporaries as being in communication with the divine, as a messenger of Mars she revealed their thoughts and judgements. She could also reaffirm and express Rome's divine favour as is evident in Dio's account of the Battle of Sentinum (295 BC).

¹⁸ For wolf as envoy of Mars see Verg. *Aen.* 8.630-635; Liv. 22.1.12; Ov. *Fast.* 3.10-43; Plu. *Rom.* 3-4; Kamm 1995: 2.

¹⁹ Rissanen 2012: 119.

²⁰ Liv. 22.1.4-12.

He says, ‘a wolf... entered the space between the two armies and... passed through... [the Roman] ranks. This encouraged them, for they looked upon...[the wolf] as belonging to themselves.’²¹ This account is a vivid representation of the wolf inspiring a superior identity amongst the Romans, giving soldiers in battle the gumption for victory. The wolf does not alarm the soldiers because it is recognised as a fellow member of their elite group. In fact, as an intermediary of Mars, the wolf ‘encourages’²² them by reminding them of their divine support. Hence, not only were the Romans divinely favoured but imbued with a hereditary connection to the divine. Mars is the father of the twins and through the channel of the she-wolf is also the nursing mother – divinity surrounded Rome and its founder.

The she-wolf’s exploitation by rulers looking for legitimisation through supposed divine approval further validates her ability to incite a sense of divine identity, as with Augustus’ Ara Pacis (see Fig.3). Mazzoni writes ‘the Julian line is seen on the Ara Pacis as descending directly from Aeneas and Romulus... Augustus was the new Aeneas.’²³ Through the she-wolf, Augustus explicates his divine heritage and places himself within the prophesised destiny of Rome. He was the new Aeneas, the re-founder of Rome, destined to bring tranquillity and peace through means of military success in honour of the she-wolf and the resources she provided. Severus also used the she-wolf to solidify his position. As with Augustus, Severus’ emperors followed a period of severe civil unrest and stability was required to prevent further conflict. Stability was acquired by legitimising Severus’ claim to emperors with a

²¹ Cass. Dio. 8.8,1

²² Cass. Dio.

²³ Mazzoni 2019:190.

propaganda campaign ‘hinged upon publicizing... [his] divine favour.’²⁴ This included Cassius Dio’s, imperially approved publication on Severus’ ‘dreams and portents which gave...[him] reason to hope for imperial power.’²⁵ Severus claimed to have dreamed ‘he tugged at the udders of a wolf, like Remus and Romulus.’²⁶ The she-wolf is used as a blatant expression of Severus’ divinity. By utilising the she-wolf’s image Severus can monopolise the communal identity inspired by the she-wolf and weave himself into the fabric of Rome’s divine destiny, framing himself as the new Romulus who would bring prosperity back to the previously chaotic Rome. Therefore, the she-wolf could represent Roman divinity, highlighting the divine favour of Rome or the divine heritage of its citizens. Mazzoni asserts that the she-wolf created an image of a people ‘tinged with divine approval through Mars’ she-wolf... so clearly supported by the gods.’²⁷ The she-wolf was a gateway to the divine, she protected Rome on behalf of the gods, communicated their judgements and articulated Rome’s divine approval. More than this, she represented Rome itself but also the Romans as individuals, she was seen as a superior Roman but still as a member of the group – she was the Romans and the Romans were her. Thus, the she-wolf constructed a superior identity of a nation divinely favoured, protected, and imbued.

²⁴ Lusnia 2004: 538.

²⁵ Cass. Dio. 73.23.1

²⁶ Hist. Aug. Sev. 1.8; also see Cass. Dio. 75.3-4

²⁷ Mazzoni 2010: 31.



Figure 3: The fragmentary front left panel on the western wall of the Ara Pacis exhibiting Rome’s founding. As shown in this reconstruction, it is believed Romulus and Remus were shown suckling the twins as Mars stands by nearby.²⁸

Maternal Role

The she-wolf’s maternal role communicated important messages about women and motherhood in Roman society, constructing an idealised identity for Roman mothers. The she-wolf’s nexus with child-rearing is evident in her association with the Lupercalia, a fertility festival.²⁹ Women were essential for the procreation, nourishment and care of Rome’s future generations. The she-wolf is one of three mother figures to the twins: 1) Rhea Silvia, their biological mother, 2) the she-wolf who nursed and cared for them on their abandonment and 3) Larentia, the foster-mother who raised them. To add a layer of further complexity to this maternal maze, the she-wolf whelped immediately prior to discovering the twins. The maternal maze explicates the fundamental nature of

²⁸ “The Western Wall of the Ara Pacis,” accessed 4 February 2021, <http://web.mit.edu/course/21/21h.402/www/arapacis/front.html>.

²⁹ Glinster 2012: 1

motherhood, without these characters the twins would have perished, and Rome would not have been founded. Mothers were responsible for creating good Roman men to continue Rome's prosperity. One might suggest the she-wolf is used as a component to outline expectations of Roman mothers; each mother figure outlined an essential stage of motherhood – the birth, nursing and nurturing, and supervising their transition into adulthood. A mother's role in forming the *personae* of infants is elucidated through the wolf's care of the twins. A fragment of Ennius claims the wolf 'smooth[ed] their bodies with her tongue.'³⁰ Ovid uses similar language stating the wolf 'licked into shape their two bodies with her tongue.'³¹ Both suggest the she-wolf's nurturing moulded and enriched the twins' characters, showing the importance of a mother's role in shaping offspring. This persisted even in negative perceptions of Romulus, Propertius writes: 'You, Romulus, nursed on the harsh milk of a she-wolf, were the instigator of the crime.'³² Propertius relates the 'harsh'³³ milk Romulus was nursed on with the murder of his brother, thus the she-wolf – a faux-mother – is responsible for Romulus' faults.

The she-wolf's treatment of the twins constructs a caring maternal identity, outlining what behaviours were expected of Roman mothers. For example, the she-wolf's reaction to the crying twins; Livy says she 'turned her steps towards the cry of the infants,'³⁴ in Ennius she is 'aroused by the boys' crying.'³⁵ Her maternal instincts vanquished her feral impulses and she

³⁰ Enn. *Ann.* 1. t8

³¹ Ov. *Fast.* 2.381-425

³² Prop. 2.19-30.

³³ Prop.

³⁴ Liv. 1.4.

³⁵ Enn. *Ann.* 1. t7.

automatically began mothering the children during this vulnerable stage, illustrating the ideal Roman mother will have an innate maternal calling that unconsciously inspires them to nurture Rome's future generations. Following her reaction to their cries, the relaxed she-wolf casually cleans and feeds the twins. Livy describes her as 'gently'³⁶ feeding and Ovid as 'fawn[ing]... on the tender babes.'³⁷ Dionysius of Halicarnassus describes her as 'fondling the babes... caring for [them] as if they had been her young and the babes clinging to her as their mother.'³⁸ Ennius notes she was 'reclining...[whilst] the twin boys at play around her teats.'³⁹ This shows mothers were responsible for the basic care of their children, the comfortable and affectionate nature of the scene suggests this care should come intuitively. As Plutarch says, the she-wolf 'nourished and preserved Romulus,'⁴⁰ Roman mothers were expected to safeguard Rome's future generations. The she-wolf's ability to impose a maternal identity with a tangible influence on Roman women is explicit in Plutarch, who claims 'for a long-time people who dwelt near [the wild fig-tree where the wolf suckled]... preserved the custom of never exposing any of the new-born infants, but they acknowledged and reared them all.'⁴¹ The maternalism of the wolf was so profound it encouraged others to follow suit and embody the motherly identity of the wolf. Therefore, the motherly characteristics demonstrated by the she-wolf suggest she contributed to the construction of a maternal identity for Roman mothers. Additionally, the she-

³⁶ Liv. 1.4.

³⁷ Ov. *Fast.* 2.381-425

³⁸ Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 1.79.

³⁹ Enn. *Ann.* 1. t8.

⁴⁰ Plut. *Vit. Rom.* 21.

⁴¹ Plut. *Mor. De fort. Rom.* 320 C-F.

wolf's place within a complex web of motherhood in the founding of Rome may reveal the fundamental importance of motherhood in Roman society. The central role mothers had in constructing their offspring's identity was vital for creating virtuous Roman men and moulding Rome's future.

The she-wolf is one of the most iconic images of Rome's founding; so iconic is her image she came to represent the Romans and Rome itself. Not only did she represent a higher authority as a connection to or symbol of the divine, but she was also a member of the same elite group. Through a mutual mythological ancestor, the she-wolf defined what it meant to be Roman; her position as a Roman icon provided a shared heritage which incited a sense of patriotism that highlighted the Romans' superior origins which gave them an innate advantage over other societies. The she-wolf's elevated position enabled her to create and maintain a superior Roman identity that was strong, dominant, divinely favoured and imbued and had ideal mothers to create Rome's future and continue its prosperity. As Rome acquired more territory the need for an all-encompassing communal image to which all could relate was crucial to unifying its vast and diverse group of citizens. Her image was so powerful it was utilised by leaders to legitimise their own claims to Roman authority allowing them to weave themselves into the tapestry of Rome's divine destiny. The she-wolf was the perfect symbol as she emphasised different aspects of Roman supremacy. The wolf's ecological dominance translated to Rome's strength as a nation and dominance in the ancient world. The divine Italian history of the wolf as envoys of Mars and ancient wolf cults shows the wolf was shrouded in divinity, thus her image as an icon explicated the divine favour, destiny and through suckling, heritage of the Romans. Her role as a mother-figure may have even contributed to the creation of an idealised

maternal identity and clarified the fundamental importance of motherhood in the Roman world. Through the humble image of a she-wolf suckling twin boys, Rome was able to saturate its citizens with national pride and emphasise the ascendancy of claiming Roman identity. Therefore, the she-wolf nursed Romulus and Remus, rescued them from exposure to the elements and enriched the future of Rome by providing them with an unrivalled heritage. Romulus and Remus suckled for nourishment but also for Roman identity.

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ISSN: 2754-2408