

Reviews

I. HISTORY AND CULTURE

T. P. WISEMAN, *THE MYTHS OF ROME*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004. Pp. xxii + 390, 16 col. pls, 109 figs. ISBN 0-85989-703-6. £50.00.

In *The Myths of Rome* Wiseman gives us his most comprehensive account to date of the development of Roman myth or, as he calls it, the Roman 'story-world'. He aims to show the general reader that, 'The Romans were not a people without myths. They too had stories to tell about their gods, their forefathers and the achievements of their city' (11). W. admits Greek influence, but not the late artificial and antiquarian influence supposed by Wissowa, rather a vibrant and creative engagement with so-called Greek myth from the time of their very first contacts c. 800 B.C.

W. defines a myth as 'a story that matters to a community, one that is told and retold because it has significance for one generation after another. Such a story may be (in our terms) historical, pseudo-historical or totally fictitious, but if it matters enough to be retold, it can count as myth' (10–11). For W. therefore the story-world of Rome as a free city-state stretches from the Golden Age of Saturn to the reign of Nerva, under whom the transition to an imperial monarchy was finally completed. Noting that 'every story was once told for the first time' (12), W. seeks by means of a roughly chronological exposition to isolate which stories were in circulation at each stage of Rome's development.

The earliest Greek explorers of Italy located their own preliterary stories in the new world of the West, and the native peoples adopted them as their own. Odysseus, Aeneas, Jason, Castor and Polydeuces, Hercules, Perseus, Diomedes, Evander, and presumably their more detailed mythological contexts had all been absorbed by the people of Latium and beyond by at least the end of the sixth century B.C., and in some cases much earlier. These and others became the heroes and founders of Italian cities too, and fitted seamlessly into a story-world which included genuine historical figures such as Demaratus, the Tarquins, the Vibennas, and Macstrna. This story-world was dynamic and politically-charged, an ideological battleground some of whose authentic contemporary elements W. is able to rescue from the distortions of later reworkings. Thus the downfall of Tarchetios of Alba (in Promathion of Samos), shorn of an obvious late addition (the twins are an inconsistency added to fit Romulus and Remus), is a story in which the founder's myth mirrors that of Servius Tullius (in both the 'usurper' has divine parentage), and was created by Tullius himself in order to bolster his claim to rule. The myth of Numa was another deliberate creation, this time by opponents of the current regime: 'an ideal of monarchy at a time of furious dissatisfaction with a wealthy and tyrannical ruler [Superbus]' (53).

In W.'s view many features of the Roman tradition can be traced to alternative plebeian and patrician versions of the same events. So the capture of Veii and the sack of Rome were already being presented in the 370s B.C. as episodes of patrician failure and plebeian achievement, while in the 340s B.C. a patrician backlash made the military tribune M. Furius into 'Camillus' the heroic dictator, and added a number of exemplary patricians to their account of the sack. Stories about the past were being invented as fast and as radically as the political circumstances required. For example, the myth of the twin Lares, representing authority shared between two consuls, had by 296 B.C. been attached to the sons of Mars, Rome's new protectors at a time of massive military success; and these sons of Mars became Rome's joint founders, Remus and Romulus, representing contrasting but complementary plebeian and patrician virtues, before the introduction of Remus' death made Romulus sole founder. This development was analogous to the human sacrifice demanded by prophets in 296 B.C., and to Publius Decius' *deuotio* at Sentinum: 'the death of Remus was necessary, a foundation sacrifice for Rome's protective walls' (142). Likewise the Rape of the Latin Women, which reflected incorporation of the Latins in 338 B.C., became the Rape of the Sabine Women in order to accommodate incorporation of the Sabines of Cures in 290 B.C., an event which was also responsible for Titus Tatius as joint king with Romulus. But he was removed (murdered at Lavinium) as soon as integration of the new citizens meant he was ideologically unnecessary: 'myths had to reflect political facts' (138).

The medium for this ever-changing story-world was drama. W. finds evidence for dramatic myth-making in scenes on mid to late fourth-century cistas and mirrors from Latium whose Bacchic processions of musicians, satyrs, and actors reveal that their subjects are theatrical performances. Some even seem to mix contemporary figures with gods and heroes. W. argues that something similar was happening at Rome, and that the respective games of the patrician and plebeian aediles, and those at the celebration of temple dedications, at triumphs, and at funerals were opportunities for the dramatic presentation of myths created and adapted in order to advance a political purpose or reflect a new reality.

Decisive developments were less common in the more stable conditions of the later third and second centuries B.C. But Rome in the second century was 'xenophobic in external affairs, authoritarian at home' (189), and when conflict arose again, with the Gracchi, the Senate held the whip-hand. Now the story of Rome is 'a new mythic history of power and tyranny' (12). It was not until the 70s B.C. that the plebs got their own historian, Licinius Macer. His views that the Senate had always supported policies that resulted in plebeian debt and poverty, and had even murdered Romulus provide the historiographical context for Catiline's uprising. According to Macer, Remus was killed by an unknown hand in a political riot, but the murder of Caesar and ensuing civil war meant Remus' death 'made sense only as a fratricide' (208). No wonder then that Octavius became Augustus and not Romulus.

The People's longing for a true Caesar had to endure the rule of Tiberius, the demise of Germanicus, and the deaths of Nero and Drusus Caesar. Even in this world of literary historians, dramatic performance remained the principal medium for the creation and dissemination of the myths of Rome: Germanicus' death-bed warning to his wife, the banquet where Sejanus tricked Drusus into drinking poison, and the reading to the Senate of Tiberius' letter condemning Sejanus are all episodes which literary historians may have derived from dramatic sources. And one of these sources, a dramatization of the crimes of Nero, survives by chance from A.D. 68.

This brief selection hardly does justice to the elegance and breadth of this beautifully produced volume, which contains a further forty-one single or two-page divertimenti taking up themes in the main text, which is wonderfully illustrated, and has only four misprints. W.'s prose is engaging and committed, particularly his chapters on the crimes of the senatorial oligarchy in the first and second centuries B.C. He aims for a broad readership, which means he is not always as precise with regard to political context as scholarly readers might expect, but the endnotes display mastery of the full range of source material and provide an extremely useful scholarly resource (the only omission detected is the wonderful fragment of A. Postumius Albinus (fr.2P) in which Brutus eats unripe figs dipped in honey).

W.'s 'political' interpretation of many Roman myths is the characteristic feature of his analysis, and reflects a genuine comparative feature of Roman mythology. The presentation of his argument is characteristically idiosyncratic in that he offers little theoretical justification, but relies instead on his interpretation gaining credence as a cumulative whole. This is refreshingly unpretentious and fits W.'s conception of scholarship as experimental and his ideas as provisional. In many cases his interpretations are brilliant, and sometimes they may be correct. However, the implicit exclusion of other, less immediately 'political' explanations (e.g. 'myth and ritual') for many of these stories means his views will not go unchallenged. As it is, the argument is replete with ifs, maybes, possibilities, suggestions, and rhetorical questions. This reflects W.'s integrity as a scholar, but leaves one wondering how radically different the outcome might be if only a few critical criteria were altered. In particular, one looks for W. to consider more explicitly the preservation of this myriad of stories in a preliterate context. If myth was indeed so regularly and dramatically (in both senses) created and recreated, and in some cases equally rapidly discarded, does dramatic performance really provide the mechanism for its preservation as well as its creation? It is a genuine hope that W. and those who take up his ideas will return to this problem.

The fact that one looks for W.'s approach to be extended and refined, in spite of disagreement concerning the political interpretation of some of these stories, is an index of the importance of *The Myths of Rome*. Its readers will return to it repeatedly as both an inspiring and thought-provoking piece of innovative scholarship, and an engaging and vibrant piece of historical writing.

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