

A Modern-Day Justification of the Fratricide in Rome's Foundation Myth: Matteo Rovere's *The First King – Birth of an Empire* (2019)

The fraternal relationship and fratricide of the Romulus and Remus myth has long drawn interest as an expression of the political and cultural identity of ancient Romans (see Hillen for a recent bibliography). Why have twins as potential coequal founders only to have one kill the other at the city's founding? Scholarly interpretations of the significance of the fratricide have varied (see Wiseman, 1995, for a review), but with no one explanation receiving widespread acceptance. The 2019 film, *The First King: Birth of an Empire* (original title, *Il primo re*), directed by Matteo Rovere, offers an insightful reconstruction of the bloody struggle Romulus and Remus had in founding ancient Rome. Rovere's rendering of the fratricide, besides offering insight into the cultural and political identity of ancient Rome, additionally presents a contemporary perspective on the acquisition of extensive and longstanding power, as well as its cost.

The fratricide encoded in Rome's foundation myth vexed the Romans themselves, who variously judged or ignored it according to political conditions, a process especially visible during the civil wars that brought about the transition from Republic to Principate (Bannon, 1997). Cicero, for example, vilifies Romulus in his *De Officiis* (44 BCE) by arguing that Romulus acted out of self-interest and expediency rather than for the good of the state (3.41-42). He likely was alluding to Julius Caesar, who identified himself with Romulus (Bannon, 1997; Stem, 2007). Even more damning, Horace, writing in the aftermath of the intense civil strife that followed soon after Julius Caesar's assassination, attributes the bloodletting of his day to "the crime of a brother's murder" when the "blood of blameless Remus was spilt on the ground, a curse for his descendants" (*Epodes* 7.18-20). Livy, on the hand, who begins writing his history in

the transitional period shortly after Octavian had begun to restore peace and stability after his victory at Actium, while acknowledging the moral ambiguity of the fratricide, ultimately presents Romulus' actions as justified for the good of the state (Stem, 2007). After Augustus established firm control of the state, the fratricide is downplayed and even ignored in the literature of the day (Bannon, 1997; Stem, 2007).

Rovere's own reception of Rome's founding and the fratricide offers a modern-day explanation of the type of motivation and moral character necessary for Rome, or by implication any state, to establish itself and then achieve extensive and longstanding success. In the film, both brothers embody powerful forces, some in common, such as courage and a deep sense of love and loyalty to one another, and other forces or traits unique to each of them. Rovere himself describes the story as an allegorical tale of a clash between brothers, where "strength and courage are nothing without *pietas* and submission to the gods' will" (Savanni, 2019).

The clash between the otherwise unified brothers is driven by Remus' inner struggle, a struggle precipitated by a priestess' divination that one brother must kill the other brother to become the king of the powerful city-state to be. Out of his deep love for his brother, Remus refuses to kill him, even though Romulus accepts the divination and even encourages Remus to kill him. Instead, Remus discounts and disavows both the priestess and the gods; he claims that the power attributed to the gods is actually within himself. Thereafter in the film he is driven by his own quest for power and position, which eventually causes his own death.

In contrast, Romulus' deep sense of fraternity extends much farther than just to his brother. From the opening scene and then consistently throughout the film, Romulus shows a sense of *pietas* – devotion and duty to family, the state, and the gods – that supersedes that of Remus (on fraternal *pietas* see Bannon, 1997). Romulus deeply loves his brother but also, unlike

Remus, recognizes his obligations to the community and especially the gods. He is only brought to kill Remus in defense of others under his protection, his community, which the priestess has divined will be Rome's first inhabitants. Romulus makes clear afterwards what being the founder of Rome cost him and that he would have preferred to die instead, which underline his unselfish motives and justify the fratricide.

Works Cited

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