A WORLD OF ROMAN MYTHS

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In this eloquently written, artfully crafted and highly original book, Wiseman’s objectives are these: to demonstrate that there is a rich world of Roman myths, to trace its development from the eighth century BC to the late first century AD, and to reconcile with it a few elusive conundrums of Roman myth and religious institutions. But Wiseman also explores the comparatively unfettered knowledge and use of Roman myth in art, literature and political ideologies from late antiquity to the eighteenth century in order to challenge the idea of the ‘mythless Romans’—lacking divine myths on the order and scale of Greek mythology, and using historical myth in manner as idiosyncratic as it was unimaginative—as a modern construct imposed by nineteenth century scholarship. Everyone professionally engaged in the study of ancient Rome, or in myths of the ancient world, should read this book, even if, according to Wiseman, *The Myths of Rome* was written for a non-specialist audience.

This non-specialist pitch is facilitated by considerable didactic supporting material. Frequent intratextual references link discussion of myths and topics across chapters, which are conveniently subdivided by numbered text headings. The subject matter of the numerous plates and illustrations is either well captioned or discussed substantively in the text, but there are also thirty-one topics treated as digressions from the main text on grey-shaded pages. The endnotes (not marked in the text) are referenced with page numbers and key phrases and refer the reader mainly to primary sources. (Those interested in secondary scholarship must often cull it from the extensive but selected bibliography). In sum, everything possible has been done to assist the non-specialist, yet Wiseman assumes a basic knowledge of Roman history or at least the reader’s capacity to absorb a prodigious quantity of information at each sitting.

*The Myths of Rome* grows out of Wiseman’s previous scholarship. The organisation is chronological, meaning that the material is arranged ‘according to its probable age’ (p. 12). This results in some displacement in mythical time, as with the Romulus myth, which is not treated extensively until the late fourth and early third centuries. Wiseman contends that myths have a discernible beginning, a first telling, and thus he retells the myths of Rome as part of a dialogue with cultural, social, political, and historical circumstances. As in his earlier work, Wiseman emphasises the dramatic quality that characterises Roman ‘historical’ myth and its likely
development and dissemination through theatrical performance. What makes this book both stimulating and compelling is Wiseman’s tenacious focus on the cusp, that critical but elusive phase when historical figures became legendary, in order to show why these myths arose.

Despite claims to a wider appeal, this book is academic in terms of its subject and Wiseman’s interpretation of it. This is, however, Roman myth according to the author; the argument is implicit and nowhere does Wiseman actively debate or defend an issue. His treatment of just one exhaustively published topic, the enigmatic Argei, illustrates this point. The description of the sacraria Argeorum (‘Argive shrines’) and of the sacrifice of the Argei (‘straw effigies’) appears within the ‘Argive’ myth cycle (p. 25) and, in an alternate explanation, in the Hercules and Evander cycle (p. 31) in the same chapter. Using Servius’ commentary on the Aeneid and Servius auctus, Wiseman relates that the Argives came to be in Rome through Danae’s sons: Argos (killed and memorialised in the toponym ‘Argiletum’) and Argeios (though how his progeny came to have shrines is not explained). Alternatively, Hercules founded the ceremony of ‘sacrificing’ straw effigies of men in honour of his Argive comrades by casting them into the Tiber River. The notes (pp. 312f.) refer to the relevant ancient sources and to three major secondary sources where extensive bibliography on this subject (prior to 1997) can be found; however, there is but the faintest allusion to considerable scholarly preoccupation with the sacrifice of the Argei (p. 280). Even if it must be read carefully and used cautiously, this book is an eminently scholarly endeavour. Wiseman has an uncanny knack not only for exposing and clarifying Roman myths by grouping them into cycles but also for digesting copious detail to reveal meaning in variation. Using a broad base of literary, iconographical, and archaeological evidence, he focuses unwaveringly on what it tells us. The following review of the content of each chapter therefore sketches only some of the major points of the discussion.

Chapter 1, ‘The Triumph of Flora’ (pp.1-12), elucidates Tiepolo’s 1743 painting ‘The Empire of Flora’ and several other Renaissance masterpieces using their probable and then more widely read inspiration of Ovid’s Fasti. The point is clear: if we cast aside preconceptions born of nineteenth and twentieth century scholarship and cinematic representation, the world of Roman myth can be recovered. With Flora as an entrée into this world, Wiseman suggests that Roman myth is about liberty in both its political and personal senses for, as he frequently shows, Roman myths expose an undercurrent of fun and lack of inhibition that also permeated correlative religious activities (e.g., games and theatre). But, Wiseman reiterates, Roman history and myth are not mutually exclusive since a myth is ‘a story that matters to a community, one that is told and retold because it has a significance for one generation after another [whether it is in our terms] historical, pseudo-historical or totally fictitious’ (pp. 10f.). Thus Wiseman contends that Roman myth told Rome’s story, which was largely about liberty and the people.

The array of Greek myths attached to cities and places in Italy is the subject of chapter 2, ‘Latins and Greeks’ (pp. 13-36). As the now considerable body of
archaeological evidence shows, Rome (and by extension Roman myth) and Greek myth were roughly contemporary in their formative period in the ninth and early eighth centuries BC. Greek expansion into Italy and Sicily in the eighth and seventh centuries also had an overland route, as is substantiated by artifacts, toponyms, language, hero cults and religious practices, variant versions of myths and mythical ancestors. Using Servius’ commentary, Wiseman demonstrates this point through the myths themselves, which are related and interrelated as four cycles: (a) Trojan stories, (b) the Argonauts, (c) the Argives, Hercules and Evander ([a]-[c] are all analogues of exploration), and finally (d) Saturnus and Liber. In short, the seventh century BC tradition of Odysseus (and Circe) in Italy shows that Greeks brought their stories with them and that these continued to develop in their new homeland. We know the myths from later versions, but Wiseman is careful to indicate stories (e.g., the Palladion) whose multiple versions also betray their age. Finally, Wiseman links the myth of Saturn (Greek Kronos) to the Capitolium, to several deities of the Forum Boarium, to the grove of Semele and through her—and this is important for much of Wiseman’s argument for myths ‘by, of and for the People’—Liber.

With chapter 3, ‘Kings (and After)’ (pp. 37-62), Wiseman shifts to the stories that typify ‘Roman’ myth: the curious blend of legend and history pervasive in the surviving historical sources, not just in the pre- and early historical periods but, as Wiseman shows, throughout Roman history. Here the myths of the late regal period and the early republic, many of them concerned with securing the libertas (‘freedom, liberty, independence’) of the Roman People, are again grouped, or more accurately, disentangled, into cycles: the Corinthian origins of the House of Tarquin, the tale of Aulus and Caile Vipinas, the evidence and myths of Servius Tullius, and the myths and miracles surrounding Numa and the two Tarquins. The chapter closes with the sixteen tribes of Rome, and Wiseman draws attention to the most ‘mythical’ of them, the Aemilii, Claudii, Corneli, Fabii, and Horatii, to set the stage—and the relative age—for the myths of the republic.

Liber’s importance to the nascent republic is the subject of chapter 4, ‘The God of Liberty and Licence’ (pp. 63-86). Here Wiseman examines Liber’s ideological suitability for both interested parties (patricians and plebeians), noting from the outset the significant placement of the Liberalia (March 17) in the calendar. Underscored are Liber’s multiple spheres as a god both of physical, spiritual and sexual liberty and of social and political freedom—both patrician ‘freedom to’ and plebeian ‘freedom from’ (p. 67), as well as his close connection to ‘law’. In this chapter Wiseman draws important parallels with Athens and suggests that Romans’ own consciousness of these parallels shaped development in multiple spheres during the early republic: civic and political institutions, the prominence of the law, religion, and the myths themselves. To close the chapter, two sections tie in Liber’s other side; the world of ecstasy and sexual licence reflected in several springtime religious festivals and drama in which cavorting (by actors and ordinary Romans) in the manner of nymphs and satyrs was de rigueur.
Chapter 5, ‘What Novius Knew’ (pp. 87-118), opens with a pithy summary of the late fifth and early fourth centuries, juxtaposing triumph (the conquest of Veii) and humiliating tragedy (the Gallic sack of Rome) to set the socio-political scene. This was a world in which the turn of events gave the people better political leverage. The centrepiece of the chapter focuses on Novius Plautus’ creation known as the Ficoroni Cista and the story world of fourth-century Rome as revealed by bronze cistae and mirrors. Here Wiseman treats us to myths not otherwise attested and recreates a world of Dionysian drama in which Liber, satyr/nymph pairs, an easy mix of mortals and gods, ‘sexual frankness’ and epic farce predominate. Though this world is at odds with the view of fourth-century Rome in our (later) historical sources, Wiseman maintains that the seeds of the great hero tales of Rome were sown at this point (p. 118) and that the Roman people’s gods, amongst them Liber, Quirinus, Mars, the Lares, and Victory came into their own.

At the book’s midpoint in chapter 6, ‘History and Myth’ (pp. 119-48), Rome (Greek Rhome, ‘strength’) has by 275 BC superseded the power of her mythological mentor. So also the plebeians had made significant gains against the patrician oligarchy. Competition for power is replicated in the mythopoetic sphere: historical figures from past epoch-making events—the capture of Veii, the Gallic sack, the overthrow of the Tarquins—crystallised into heroes and new cycles of quasi-historical legend, suggests Wiseman (p. 126). Thus plebeian gains were symbolised and reinforced with temple dedications and promulgated more widely with bronze statuary representing Lucius Brutus and Marcus Camillus, heroes of the ‘liberation’ from the Tarquins. But Wiseman tells the stories of these heroes in two ways: first as tales in which quick-thinking plebeians save Rome in the face of patrician failure (the early fourth century version) and then as legends in which patricians (M. Furius [Camillus] and M. Manlius) save the day (the mid fourth century version). At this point the proliferation of detail surrounding the palace and familial politics of the Tarquins was used to promote the (mythical) roles of plebeian and patrician families alike. An aspect of late fourth-century Rome such as consular power-sharing is projected back onto the past in myths. Thus Wiseman lodges the cycle of foundation myths firmly in the wars of the late fourth and early third centuries; Remus (like Publius Decius Mus) had to sacrifice himself so that Romulus could found Rome, whose people were said to be a blend of Latins, Sabines and others.

In the third century BC came the myths about Roman values and identity that helped Rome rise from the ashes of Cannae (chapter 7, ‘Facing Both Ways’, pp. 149-78). Here are the stories of paradigmatic Romans revered for their fides (G. Fabricius and Marcus Atilius Regulus), for their modest, turnip-eating ways (Manius Curius), and for their willing self-sacrifice for the greater good (Cincinnatus). Romans’ religious devotio is reflected by numerous temple dedications; here Wiseman pays particular attention to those of Janus, Juturna, Fons and Flora, returning again to the world of gods debauching nymphs, which provided material for four and soon-to-be six sets of games. Conflict with Carthage inspired more temple-building, this time to imported deities (Venus Erycina and Magna Mater) and marked the beginning of fully
historical Romans with divine parentage (Publius Scipio). The triumph of Rome over Hannibal had modest but potent mythical implications famously summarised in Polybius’ description of Roman funerals. The influence of this ‘national’ thinking is simultaneously explored with reference to the American founding fathers. Even here Wiseman emphasises the theatrical element at funerals and Polybius’ identification of the use of theatre in Roman religion as a means of social control.

Chapter 8, ‘Power and the People’ (pp. 179-226), takes us from the battle of Zama to Augustus. Here the framework is completely historical and avowedly populist, but the chapter is also about (not necessarily exemplary) Romans whose deeds, demeanour, convictions—and, yes, historical circumstances—made some legendary, others mythical, and still others divine. Wiseman succinctly captures the degree of moral turpitude and brutality by recounting the careers of the great grandchildren of Gnaeus and Publius Scipio. It was during this period, he suggests, that much myth was forged; both political factions projected the image of socio-political struggle back onto the early republic and, with the assistance of contemporary (often eyewitness) authors, created the stereotypical Roman ancestors whose sound character and moral excellence contrasted sharply with that of their late republican descendants. In an age of unprecedented violence, Romulus’ fratricide resonated all too clearly such that Augustus drew on the more distant Aeneas as his mythical ancestor and Apollo as his tutelary god.

Few family histories show that truth is stranger than fiction (or myth) quite as well as that of Augustus (chapter 9, ‘Caesars’ [pp. 227-78]). Wiseman relates this well-documented and familiar tale (‘one of the most enduring myths of Rome’, p. 238) with a new twist simply by bringing the roles of women (as mothers and wives) and children to the foreground. The people still had a part to play in making and unmaking heroes and villains (‘For the People’s interests were vested in the princeps….’, p. 238), and as the audience for plays in which myths, both ‘ancient’ and contemporary, were a perennial hit. As Wiseman cautions, we cannot know how much popular drama influenced even reasonably reliable authors like Tacitus (‘…. with such people [the stories] might just be true’, p. 258); and he offers a detailed synopsis of Seneca’s Octavia, as proof that plays must have been as powerful and compelling as modern film and television.

The final chapter, ‘The Dream that was Rome’ (pp. 279-308), brings the story forward in time by recounting not the afterlife of Roman myths but their reinvention in later ages. Wiseman credits initial transmission to Servius and especially to his contemporary Augustine, who in the City of God ensured the posterity of Roman myths by representing Romans of superior character and moral excellence as timeless exempla. Much later Romans’ civic virtue and libertas (still for some ‘freedom to’ and for others ‘freedom from’) became ‘stories that mattered’ in new eras and in strikingly diverse political contexts. Playwrights even ‘restored’ some of the tales to the stage, preserving new versions of old myths for modern Britain, Europe and colonial outposts in the newly rediscovered Americas. Roman ‘liberators’ were in due course (a logical inevitability) invoked for various revolutions until their submergence during
the nineteenth- and twentieth-century fixation with empires. Roman myth re-emerges once again with ‘toga plays’ (and novels) and their film and television adaptations. Though Wiseman makes no direct comparisons to the twenty-first century, readers will find that the myths of Rome resonate as clearly as ever, just as they did for Macaulay, Shakespeare, Machiavelli and back through time to their first telling.

**SCOPIC ORGIASTS AND CATOPTRIC VISUALITIES**

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In 1960 T. F. Carney produced a commentary for undergraduates on book 3 of Achilles Tatius’ novel, *Leucippe and Clitophon*.\(^1\) Carney’s intention may have been to produce an introductory reading text that featured blacks for students in what was then Rhodesia and Nyasaland, since it is in this book that the reader for the first time encounters the *boukoloi*, who are described (3.9.2) as ‘black-skinned’ (μέλανες . . . τὴν χροιάν). More recent research has argued that Achilles Tatius based this lurid episode on more or less contemporary events, coloured perhaps with elements drawn from an earlier Egyptian narrative, and featuring a sensational human sacrifice.\(^2\) Morales makes very little of this cultural, historical and literary context.\(^3\) Instead, in

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\(^1\) T. F. Carney (ed.), *Achilles Tatius: Leucippe and Clitophon, Book 3* (Salisbury 1960). Although hardly adequate by today’s standards, this is still the only introductory text on Achilles Tatius in English to my knowledge.


\(^3\) Alston [2] and Rutherford [2] are omitted from the otherwise extensive bibliography. Morales briefly recapitulates the debate on the religious nature of the sacrifice of Leucippe, however (p. 168 n. 27), and quotes K. Hopwood, ‘All that May Become a Man: The Bandit in the Ancient Novel’, in L. Foxhall and J. Salmon (edd.), *Thinking Men: Masculinity and its Self- Representation in the Classical Tradition* (London 1998) 195-204, for the similarity with the oath of the Catilinarian conspirators (p. 201).