

Introduction

Greeks and Romans



1. Romulus and Remus

According to distant, heroic tradition, the Trojan prince Aeneas, fleeing from the destruction of Troy by the Greeks, settled in Italy and was the founding father of the Roman people. Rome itself was founded – tradition again – by Romulus on 21 April 753. He was the first of seven kings. In 509, the son of the last king Tarquinius Superbus – ‘Tarquin the Proud’ – raped the noble Roman woman Lucretia, and Rome rose up against and expelled the Tarquins for ever. It was then that

Rome became a Republic. This was seen as the beginning of the age of freedom (*libertās*). During this period of aristocratic government, Rome extended her power first through Italy and then, after two lengthy conflicts against North African Carthage (the Punic Wars), into the Western Mediterranean itself. As a result, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Spain and North Africa (modern Tunisia) became Rome’s first provinces. After Carthage was finally destroyed in 149, Rome moved into the Eastern Mediterranean (provincialising Greece, Asia (modern Turkey), Syria, Palestine and Egypt).

From the beginning Rome had been in contact with Greek culture, for Greek colonies had been established as early as the eighth century in Italy and Sicily. North of Rome lay another developed culture, that of the Etruscans (whose early kings ruled Rome till they were expelled in 509). Roman culture developed under these joint influences. When the Romans finally conquered Greece in 146, they found themselves in possession of the home of the most prestigious culture in the Mediterranean. Their reaction was very complex, but three main strands may be seen. They were proud of their military and administrative achievement and thus contemptuous of contemporary Greeks whom they had defeated. At the same time, they shared the reverence of contemporary Greeks for the great cultural achievements of earlier Greeks – Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, the tragedians, comic poets and orators. The result of this ambivalent attitude was a more or less conscious decision to create for themselves a culture worthy of their position as the new dominant power. This culture was modelled on and emulated that of Greece in its heyday. Yet the Romans’ pride in themselves ensured that the culture was Latin and its literature was written in Latin, not Greek. Horace’s famous words illustrate Rome’s debt to Greek culture:

*Graecia capta ferum uictōrem cēpit, et artīs
 intulit agrestī Latiō*

Greece captured took as captive its wild foe
 And brought the arts to rustic Italy

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On the other hand, the poet Propertius, a contemporary of Virgil, describes Virgil's *Aeneid* in the following terms:

nescioquid māius nāscitur Īliade

A greater thing than Homer's *Iliad*
Is being born

Romans now felt their culture could stand comparison with the very best of the Greeks'. This veneration of the Greeks contrasts strongly with, for example, the Roman satirist Juvenal's constant attacks on the contemporary *Graeculus ēsuriēns* ('starving little Greek'), which reflected aristocratic contempt for 'modern' Greeks as the decadent descendants of a once great people. Yet at all periods individual Greeks (e.g. Polybius, Posidonius, Parthenius, Philodemus) were held in high esteem at Rome. And by the end of the first century Rome had become the cultural centre of the world, in the eyes not only of Romans but also of Greeks whose poets, scholars and philosophers now flocked there. It is part of the greatness of Rome that, when confronted with Greek culture, she neither yielded



2. Rome in the first century AD

completely nor trampled it under foot, but accepted the challenge, took it over, and transformed and transmitted it to Europe. Without the mediation of Rome, Western culture would be very different, and, arguably, much the poorer.

Here Cicero, one of Rome's most influential writers, reminds his brother Quintus (who was governor of Asia Minor, a Roman province heavily peopled by Greeks) just who he is in charge of and the debt Rome owes to them:

We are governing a civilised race, in fact the race from which civilisation is believed to have passed to others, and assuredly we ought to give civilisation's benefits above all to those from whom we have received it. Yes, I say it without shame, especially as my life and record leave no opening for any suspicion of indolence or frivolity: everything that I have attained I owe to those pursuits and disciplines which have been handed down to us in the literature and teachings of Greece. Therefore, we may well be thought to owe a special duty to this people, over and above our common obligation to mankind; schooled by their precepts, we must wish to exhibit what we have learned before the eyes of our instructors.

(Cicero, *Ad Quīntum* 1.1)

