

CHAPTER 2
ROMAN HEROES



CW Chapter 2: Introduction

Heroes

In **Greek myths**, the gods were often interested in the things that people did. **People who were special enough to capture the gods' attention were thought of as heroes.** You may already know some of the stories told about Greek heroes who went on incredible quests and faced strange monsters. We know that the Romans also enjoyed stories about the heroes from Greek mythology. Many of these stories were re-told by Roman writers such as Ovid and Livy, and archaeologists digging in Roman ruins have found statues and paintings relating to Greek heroes like Perseus, who cut off the head of the snake-haired Medusa, and Theseus, who killed the Minotaur in the labyrinth.

The Romans also had their own heroes. **To the Romans, a hero was someone who did something extraordinary, usually for the sake of Rome.** While stories of Greek heroes tell of fantastic journeys and fearsome creatures, stories of Roman heroes tend to focus on the history of Rome. Greek heroes were often seen as semi-divine, but most of the heroes of Rome were men and women who showed qualities that were particularly important to the Romans, such as **excellence in fighting, bravery, endurance** and, most importantly, **commitment to Rome.**



FIGURE 2.1 The Farnese Hercules

This statue is a 3rd-century AD Roman copy of a 4th-century BC Greek bronze original and is yet another example of the Greek influence on Roman religion and culture. Sculptors of the 4th century BC liked to humanise gods and heroes: notice how tired Hercules looks after his labours.

The Latin verb *laboravi* means *I worked*. What are *labours*?

Hercules and Cacus

Hercules was a Greek hero who was famous for the twelve remarkable displays of strength and bravery which he had to complete as a punishment for killing his own wife and children. He played an important part too, however, in stories of Rome's history. In Rome's most famous epic poem, the *Aeneid*, the 1st-century BC Roman poet Virgil includes a section of the Hercules story which highlights the connection between Hercules and Rome.

For the tenth of Hercules' labours, he had to travel to the ends of the earth to steal cattle that belonged to a three-headed giant, Geryon. When Hercules was on his way back through Italy with the cattle, he stopped to let them graze and, while they were grazing, he fell asleep. Although the place he chose was at that time a field of fresh grass, **it would one day be part of the city of Rome.**

Hercules did not know that a **fire-breathing giant named Cacus** lived in a cave nearby. Cacus lived on human flesh and nailed the heads of his victims to the door of his cave. While Hercules was asleep, Cacus stole some of the cattle. When Hercules woke up, the remaining cows were mooing, calling to those who had been stolen. Hercules heard an answering 'moo' coming from the stolen cattle in Cacus' cave.

Hercules charged towards the cave: he found that Cacus had blocked the entrance with a huge rock. Enraged, Hercules began to tear away at the top of the mountain to reach Cacus. Cacus responded by breathing fire and smoke. Eventually, **Hercules strangled Cacus** with so much strength that Cacus' eyes popped right out of his head.

The local people were so grateful that they set up an altar to Hercules as if he were a god. The area where Hercules had grazed his cattle became the **Forum Boarium**, the large open public space which included, among other things, the cattle market of Rome. In the 2nd century BC a round temple dedicated to Hercules was built there.

Hercules was a hero because of his incredible strength. He used that strength to perform tasks no one else could do.

forum is the Latin word for *market place*

Aeneas

Though his name may be less familiar to us than heroes like Hercules, one of the greatest Roman heroes was Aeneas. The Romans believed that **Aeneas was the founding father of the Roman race**; his story is told by the poet Virgil and the historian Livy.

Aeneas was the son of a mortal man and the goddess Venus. He was brought up in the city of Troy and fought in the **Trojan War**. Aeneas fought bravely as Troy was falling around him, but the gods commanded him to flee the city. The gods told Aeneas of a prophecy that one day his descendants would become the citizens of new and powerful city. The name of this city would be Rome.

As we shall see in Exercise 2.5, **Aeneas endured a long and difficult journey from Troy to Italy**. The goddess Juno made things very difficult for him. Juno was angry with Aeneas because she had heard another prophecy that the future Romans would one day destroy her favourite city of Carthage in north Africa. The story of his travels, as told by Virgil, describes how terribly Aeneas suffered. Aeneas lost his homeland, his wife and his father and he had to make many personal sacrifices. When he fell in love with Dido, Queen of Carthage, Aeneas had to leave her and continue his journey because it was his destiny to settle in Italy.

When Aeneas finally arrived in Italy, he was at first welcomed by the local king, **Latinus**. There had been a prophecy that Latinus' only child, his daughter **Lavinia**, would marry someone from another land. Latinus decided that Aeneas must be the one destined to marry his daughter. Unfortunately, **Turnus**, son of a neighbouring king, was also determined to marry Lavinia. This meant **war**. Aeneas, who had already suffered so much and escaped from war in Troy, had to lead his men into battle again. After much blood had been spilled, Aeneas and Turnus fought against each other in single combat. Aeneas killed Turnus and married Lavinia. Many years later, **Aeneas' descendants went on to found the city of Rome** and to build a great empire.



FIGURE 2.2 Wounded Aeneas

This Roman fresco from the town of Pompeii dates from the 1st century AD. It is probably based on Virgil's account of the battles Aeneas had to fight in Italy. Here Aeneas stands with his wounded leg slightly bent, leaning against a spear. He gazes towards his mother Venus, who brings him medicinal plants. At the right hand side of the fresco, Aeneas' son Ascanius is crying. On the left hand side a doctor, with a long beard and a tunic, tries to remove an arrow from Aeneas' leg. The soldiers behind them indicate that the battle is not yet over and Aeneas will be called on to fight again.

Aeneas was a hero to the Romans because he put **duty to Rome and obedience to the gods** first, in spite of his personal feelings. He did his duty even when he lost things that were important to him. The Romans thought this was so important a virtue that they had a special label for it: *pietas*.

Romulus and Remus

Although Aeneas was considered to be the original father of the Roman people, the foundation of the city of Rome itself was traced back to another hero, **Romulus**. Many Roman authors, including Livy and Ovid, told the story of Romulus and Remus, who were the twin sons of the princess Rhea Silvia and the god Mars. In one version of this story, an Italian king feared that one day his great-nephews Romulus and Remus would take his throne. He ordered the boys to be left in a basket by the river Tiber to die. Remarkably, a she-wolf found the baby boys and saved them.

The she-wolf cared for Romulus and Remus until a shepherd found the twins and raised them as his own. When they were grown up, the brothers wanted to create their own city. The twins chose the place where Rome is located today, but each brother wanted to place the city on a different hill. Remus thought the city should be on the Aventine Hill. Romulus preferred the Palatine Hill and began building a wall around it. However, Remus made fun of Romulus' unfinished wall, jumping over it and laughing to show Romulus how easy it was to cross. **This made Romulus angry and he killed Remus.** Romulus continued to build his city and later Romans believed that he officially founded it in 753 BC. **Romulus made himself king and named the city Rome after himself.**

The Latin noun *locus* means *place*. Explain the meaning of *located*.



FIGURE 2.3 Capitoline Wolf

This famous bronze statue shows the she-wolf nursing Romulus and Remus. It is often shown as a symbol of Classical Rome, but it is not the work of Roman artists. Some experts believe that the wolf was created in the 5th century BC by the Etruscans, a neighbouring Italian tribe who were conquered by the Romans, and that the twins were added in the 15th century. Other experts suggest that the wolf itself was created in the 13th century.

Romulus was a hero because he was truly exceptional: he was the son of a god and the founder of a remarkably successful city. He killed his own brother, but this did not diminish his status as a hero. Unlike today, **a hero for the Romans did not need to be someone morally good** or without great flaws. A hero simply had to be an extraordinary Roman.

The Latin adjective *minor* means *smaller*. Explain the meaning of *diminish*.

Heroes of the early Roman Republic

Hercules, Aeneas and Romulus were all heroes to the Romans in a way that the ancient Greeks would have understood. Hercules, Aeneas and Romulus each had one parent who was a god. Each of these heroes accomplished great deeds or conquered monsters. However the Romans also told stories of Roman heroes who were **everyday people who did exceptional things**. Three of these heroes were **Horatius Cocles, Mucius Scaevola and Cloelia**, all of whom did remarkable things in the wars that took place against Rome's Etruscan neighbours in the early history of the Roman Republic.

As explained on p2, in 509 BC Rome went through a major political revolution. **The Romans expelled the last of their kings, Tarquinius Superbus**, in order to set up a new system of government in which power was shared between two elected leaders who changed every year. Tarquinius Superbus went to the nearby Etruscan city of Clusium and asked their leader, **Lars Porsena**, to help him get his throne back.

Lars Porsena agreed. His Etruscan army attacked Rome by surprise. The people who lived near Rome ran to find safety in the city across a wooden bridge over the river Tiber. Lars Porsena and his army were right behind them. The bridge had to be destroyed because if the enemy crossed the bridge, they would attack the city itself. As you will read in Exercise 2.8, the Romans started to work on destroying the bridge, but because the army of Lars Porsena was so close, most of the soldiers of the Roman army ran off in fear. One soldier, **Horatius Cocles**, remained to face the oncoming army. Two of his comrades, inspired by his courage, stayed by his side. The three of them fought bravely and managed to hold off the entire Etruscan army until the bridge fell. Horatius Cocles was left on the wrong side of the river, so he jumped into the Tiber in full armour and swam back to his men.

At this point, the Romans decided they needed to deal with Lars Porsena once and for all. They agreed that a young Roman named **Mucius Scaevola** should sneak into Porsena's camp and try to murder him. Unfortunately, he did not recognise the Etruscan king and killed the wrong man by mistake. When Mucius Scaevola was captured, he told Porsena that he was only one of many Roman youths willing to endure pain or death in order to kill him. To prove how serious he was, Mucius Scaevola put his right hand into a fire.



FIGURE 2.4 Mucius Scaevola

This statue of Mucius Scaevola placing his hand in a fire looks like a piece of classical art, but it was sculpted in Paris in 1791 by Louis-Pierre Deseine. Notice how the artist has positioned Mucius Scaevola: he plunges his hand in the flames but stares straight ahead with a defiant expression. It is currently held in the Louvre.

The Latin verb *pressi* means *I pressed*. Explain the meaning of *impressed*.

He continued to hold his hand there without flinching. Porsena was so impressed with Mucius Scaevola's bravery that he sent him back to Rome. Porsena also sent ambassadors to offer peace with Rome.

As part of the peace treaty which ended the war between the Romans and Etruscans in 508 BC, ten daughters and ten sons were sent by Rome's noble families as hostages to Lars Porsena. One was a young woman named **Cloelia**, whom you will read about in Exercise 2.9. Cloelia managed to escape to Rome by crossing the Tiber, persuading her female companions to swim after her. The Romans wanted to keep the peace treaty and so they sent the young women back but Porsena admired Cloelia's courage and set her free. He also offered to release any other hostages she chose. The Romans, like Porsena, admired her courage and set up a statue of Cloelia on horseback. This was an honour no other Roman woman had ever been awarded.



FIGURE 2.5 Cloelia crossing the Tiber

This Renaissance painting was created by the 16th-century Italian painter Cristofano Gherardi. Here we see Cloelia escaping from the Etruscan camp by crossing the river Tiber to Rome. It is currently held in the Capitoline Museum in Rome.