Cities of Myth: Crash Course World Mythology #35

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology and today we're going to put on our mythical coats, grab our mythical hats, hop on a mythical mode of public transportation, and get ourselves into the hustle and bustle of mythical cities.

Some of these cities are real, some ar fictional, and some are even metaphorical. But all of them are metropolitan.

Come on, Thoth, the Bifröst bus only runs once an hour.

===== Intro (0:20-0:30) =====

City myths can be tricky. They're not like other mythical places we've looked at like gardens, caves, or mountains because they don't belong to the natural world. They're man-made or sometimes god-made and this means that the stories we tell about them can be a little different.

A lot of the stories we have about cities are closer to tall tales, which are fun but they don't really meet our criteria for myth. Mostly because they're, well, a little un-serious.

A good example of a tall tale city is El Dorado, the City of Gold said to exist somewhere in South America that really tended to be more of a metaphor for some ultimate prize that one might search for endlessly but never actually attain.

And some urban tales are almost too serious. There are places that really existed with archaeological evidence and complicated histories that transcend the stories we tell about them. Probably the best known of these is Troy whose siege is described in the Iliad.

The archaeological history of Troy is fascinating but I'm going to leave that for Crash Course Archeology. Just kidding! There's no Crash Course Archeology. Or maybe we just haven't discovered it yet!

Another significant archaeological city that has a mythical story attached to it is Jericho. Jericho is one of the oldest cities in human history but is probably best known for the story of its destruction at the hands of Joshua in the Old Testament.

According to the story, the Lord tells Joshua to march around the city walls for six days with seven priests blowing rams horns as they carry the Ark of the Covenant, a chest that contains the Ten Commandments.

On the seventh day, following the Lord's instructions, Joshua has the army march around the city seven times. And on the seventh circuit, he has the trumpets sound and the army shout its war-cry.

According to the book of Joshua, Chapter 6, Verse 20: "When the trumpets sounded, the army shouted, and the sound of the trumpet, when the men gave a loud shout, the wall collapsed; so everyone charged straight in, and they took the city."

It's a great story but archaeologists are still arguing over whether or not a walled city even existed at the time of Joshua. And even if it did exist, trumpets probably didn't bring it down.

Looking at things etiologically, as we sometimes do, is fun, but it isn't always possible to reconcile myths and historical remains. This is especially true of living cities which have to go about their business while also existing as a repository of stories about them.

Let's start with a holy site mentioned in the Bible, but still standing today. A holy site common to all three Abrahamic religions: Jerusalem. It might be an understatement to say that Jerusalem has been the subject of many stories.

And the imagery used to describe Jerusalem changes dramatically depending on who's doing the describing and when. Sometimes the city is beautiful, sometimes ugly, sometimes Jerusalem is personified as a not especially reputable mythic woman.

This is particularly true during the Babylonian captivity, a time in th 6th Century BCE, when the Babylonian emperor Nebuchadnezzar kept sacking Jerusalem and sending Jews into exile. This all led to some complicated feelings about Jerusalem.

The lamentations of Jeremiah begin, "How doth the city sit solitary, that was full of people! She is become as a widow, that was great among the nations! She that was a princess among the provinces is become tributary!"

Okay, a tributary. Not so bad... But then it starts to get unpleasant.

Jeremiah continues, "Jerusalem hath grievously sinned; therefore she is become as an unclean thing; all that honored her despise her, because they have seen her nakedness: yea, she sigheth, and turneth backward. Her filthiness was in her skirts; she remembered not her latter end; therefore is she come down wonderfully; she hath no comforter:"

Yeah, I mean... Jeremiah's ambivalences may be understandable? It's hard to see your sacred city conquered and destroyed. Though, as for Jeremiah comparing the city to a lewd and unclean woman... It's not the only time the Bible deploys the female image unfairly.

But maybe we can read it as a lamentation for a city that was supposed to nurture him but is now taunting him and other Jews by harboring their conquerors. The Jews eventually go back and rebuild Jerusalem, so hopefully some of these feelings abate.

In the New Testament, Jerusalem is described as a woman again, but this woman is more.... well, clean. In the Book of Revalation, John invents an idealized Jerusalem. A new Jerusalem intended as a new spiritual home.

In chapter twelve, he says, "And I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of Heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband."

So which is it? Bride or harlot covered in filth? Both? Some cities in the Bible are often classed as places of sin. Sodom and Gomorrah being the most obvious examples.

But let's not forget cities also provide opportunities for humankind to unite. For the early Christians, the ideal city wasn't Jerusalem but Rome. We haven't talked a great deal about Roman mythology in this series, largely because it draws heavily on Greek sources, but Romans did create their own mythological history. Particularly for their city.

We're going to look at two important myths surrounding the founding of Rome, involving, you might be shocked to learn, families and violence.

One story of the foundation of Rome comes from Virgil's epic poem the Aeneid. This is the story of the Trojan hero Aeneas, who escapes the sack of Troy with his aged father, his young son, and statues of his household gods.

Eventually, he makes his way to Italy where he and his group of Trojans settle. There, Aeneas marries Lavinia, the daughter of the

king of Latium.

Anchises, Aeneus's dad, dies during the journey, but in book 6 of the Aeneid, Aeneus goes to the Underworld and his father explains to him the future history of Rome. Anchises mentions a future descendent named Romulus.

"Of him, my son, great Rome shall rise, and, favored of his star, have power world-wide, and men of godlike mind. She clasps her seven hills in a single wall, proud mother of the brave".

That's right, it's not Aeneus who founds Rome, it's his son who settles at Alba Longa and a later descendent, Romulus, who builds the city of seven hills.

But hold the mythical phone for just a moment, who is this Romulus? The story of Romulus and his twin brother Remus begins in Alba Longa, where a woman named Rhea Silvia lives.

Unfortunately for Rhea, Mars, the god of war, is obsessed with her. And after cornering her in a sacred grove, he seduces her. Which, I mean, let's be real, probably he rapes her.

Now pregnant, Rhea goes to her uncle, King Amulius, for help. But Amulius is furious. Instead of helping his niece, he imprisons her. When she finally gives birth, he orders her twin sons to be left to die on the bank of the Tiber River.

Abandoned, the twins are suckled by a gentle she wolf until they're found by a shepherd named Faustulus, who raises them. Probably because of their early troubled life, but also because they were sorta raised by a wolf, the boys turned to crime, eventually stealing some of Amulius's sheep.

Remus is captured and taken before Amulius for trial. At this point, Faustulus reveals to Romulus the brothers' true identities. Romulus, in good criminal hero fashion, sets off for Alba Longa to get revenge on his great-uncle the King.

Romulus kills Amulius and rescues Remus. He gives the vacant throne to Amulius's grandfather, Numitor and then the twins go off to found their own city.

Which brings us to the Thought Bubble.

===== Thought Bubble (8:43) =====

Romulus and Remus decide where they were abandoned on teh banks of the Tiber would be a great place for a new city. But they can't agree on the exact location.

Romulus receives a sign from the gods, telling him to choose the Palatine hill as the site. So he sets out to mark the boundaries by digging a ditch. Remus sets up camp opposite him, on the Aventine Hill.

Remus, the more headstrong of the two brothers, jumps over the ditch to show Romulus that it's not exactly invasion proof. Romulus, seeing this as sacrilege, kills his brother and becomes the sole ruler of the new city.

That's why it's called "Rome" and not "Reem". And I think we're all thankful for that. Imagine being a Reeman instead of a Roman! Buh!

So Romulus has a spot for his city and no rival twin. But he still has one big problem. Not enough people. So he puts out the word that the hill will be a refuge for the criminals and runaways of Italy.

And that's exactly who shows up. Roman historian Livy calls them "a miscellaneous rabble, without distinction of bond or free".

But that rabble is almost entirely male. And in order to populate the city, Romulus and the city leaders invite visitors from neighboring cities to celebrate a harvest festival with them.

After the visitors arrive, at a prearranged signal, the Romans seize all the young women to grow the Roman population through mass rape. Buh...

Thanks Thought Bubble!

===== End Thought Bubble (10:19) =====

These stories, like the ones in the Bible, remind us how easily myths can gloss over, sometimes even glamorize, terribly violent actions.

The founding and conquering and defending of cities can get really ugly. Some myths reflect this, others choose to pretty up their origin stories with magic and stuff.

The story of Rome's founding highlights some of the complexity to be found in mythical cities. Many cities have origin stories. Some more historically grounded than others.

When we're dealing with actual cities that have archaeological and written histories, we often find that the myths surrounding the story jibe with that history.

Jericho was besieged and conquered at one point, though it's unlikely trumpet blasts were responsible. Rome was built on the Palantine and became the seat of one of the most expansive empires in the world. One empire that relied on cunning and violence, characteristics that we might easily ascribe to its pro-wolf, pro-rape, pro-conquest, brother murderer of a founder.

Cities are ambivalent, morally ambiguous places. Kind of like everywhere else people live. And with that, we've reached the border of our final mythical place.

Next episode we move on to the first examination of mythical beasts. Thanks for watching and I'll see you next time.

===== Credits (11:36) =====

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description for a link to a free trial.

Thanks for watching and do you think mythical cities are built on mythical rock and roll or still just regular rock and roll?