



The Beginnings of Rome: Italy from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars

Tim J. Cornell

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Using the results of archaeological techniques, and examining methodological debates, Tim Cornell provides a lucid and authoritative account of the rise of Rome. The beginnings of Rome, once thought to be lost in the mists of legend, are now being revealed by an ever-increasing body of archaeological evidence, much of it unearthed during the past twenty-five years. This new material has made it possible to trace the development of Rome from an iron-age village to a major state which eventually outstripped its competitors and became a Mediterranean power. The Beginnings of Rome offers new and often controversial answers to major questions such as Rome's relations with the Etruscans, the conflict between patricians and plebeians, the causes of Roman imperialism and the growth of a slave-based economy.

The Beginnings of Rome: Italy from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars Details

Date : Published October 7th 1995 by Routledge (first published 1995)

ISBN : 9780415015967

Author : Tim J. Cornell

Format : Paperback 507 pages

Genre : History, Ancient History, Nonfiction



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Hayo Bethlehem says

It's now clear to me why there was so little written about the early history of Rome. There isn't that much information available to write about. Still, this book very neatly gave an overview of that what is available, and describes the problems of gathering enough evidence to write about.

Michael says

I enjoyed this, but I think I wasn't really in its target audience. Much of the book seems to assume the reader already knows the historical sketch of the topic at hand.

Joey says

Excellent book full of great scholarship. Challenges a lot of the assumptions made by many classical scholars, and rebuts a lot of unscientific theories.

Andrew Ashling says

What I liked most about this book is that the author didn't try to make the facts fit a preconceived theory. Another plus is that the author uses several disciplines, among which archeology and its latest discoveries.

Cornell works in a strict chronological order, working his way through what is known, what can be conjectured and what's probable. He neatly presents all options, and then indicates his preferred scenario with the reasons of his choice. However, he leaves some leeway for the reader to disagree with him.

As this book is rather detailed, it may not appeal to those who like sweeping historical stories. No disrespect meant: I'm a great fan of John Julius Norwich. This book, though, is another species. It will appeal to people who'd like to find out what really happened to make a few hamlets on some hills near a bight of a river into a community, a city and a central Italian power.

Well organized, extremely readable (which is no mean feat seeing there was a wealth of scholarship involved in writing this book) and ultimately satisfying.

After reading this book, I got the impression to have a fair idea what can truly be known about the origins of Rome, where we must use conjecture and where there are still lacunae in our knowledge.

Jody says

6 stars. The best Roman history book I have ever read. T. J. Cornell is scholarly without being pedantic. He is honest about the limitations of the source material, both literary and archeological, yet his narrative is extremely plausible. And, in my opinion, he successfully challenges the established 'fact' that an Etruscan Rome ever existed. Highly recommended for Roman history buffs.

Mary says

(Note to publishers: 400+ pages of detailed arguments printed on glossy paper bound together into a heavy book are physically difficult to read. Honestly, I shouldn't need an anti-glare filter for a book!)

This is Cornell's synthesis of early Roman history. The challenge is that there are very few primary sources for this early period and most of those are archaeological artifacts that must be interpreted. The earliest histories we have were written generations later, and while those authors had access to sources that have not survived, contemporary historians still have to decide how reliable the information is.

The basic approach here is to summarize the traditional account of a topic, raise some questions and/or summarize other historians' interpretations, then present Cornell's analysis of the source material to answer the questions (usually while dismissing most other interpretations as faulty readings of the sources or simply based on no evidence whatsoever...). Cornell does a pretty good job of making sure his conclusions don't get buried in the mass of details. I've no academic background in history, but I was able to follow most of his arguments.

Steven-sup says

Good stuff

Evan Leach says

Writing a history of Rome's early years is a tricky business. The earliest surviving works of Latin literature weren't written until about 200 BC, and the earliest surviving Latin histories came 150 years after that. To put that in perspective, the nearby Greeks had been cranking out poems, plays, and philosophers for at least 350 years by that point, and probably longer (depending on when you date Homer). Rome's written record is scant indeed before the Punic Wars, which makes life tough for historians.

To reconstruct Rome's origins, historians have to rely heavily on archaeological evidence. This involves a lot of educated guessing. In *The Beginnings of Rome*, T.J. Cornell does about a good a job of this as one could ask. The problem is that this kind of history can be dull reading for non-specialists. This is no fault of Cornell's, who's merely playing the hand he was dealt. But reading about what *might* have happened based on either (1) ancient legend or (2) information gleaned from pottery shards gets old fast. This kind of archaeological approach to history is no surprise when reading about the Xia Dynasty or something, but it's truly incredible that this is what we're reduced to for Rome in 300 BC. 300 BC!!! By that time, their Greek neighbors *directly to the east* had (1) defeated Persia; (2) fought another really famous war; (3) gone ahead and conquered the eastern world almost to the Ganges; and most importantly **took the time to sit down and write about it**. Meanwhile in Rome they were ~~perfecting tortellini~~ squabbling with the Etruscans (maybe?) and basically just mucking around. Or they could have been perfecting string theory for all we know, since there's barely any written record to inform us about it. Who knows!

So ultimately this is a difficult book to rate. If you are truly interested in the early history of Rome, and are aware of the difficulties involved in reconstructing it, I would recommend this book without reservation. Short of diving into the Cambridge Ancient History series (The Cambridge Ancient History, Vol 7, Part 2: The Rise of Rome to 220 BC), this is as thorough a history as you will find. It is extremely well organized, well written, and contains some nice illustrations. Again, I thought T.J. Cornell did a great job considering the difficulties surrounding early Roman history.

But those difficulties are real. If you are more interested in ancient history generally, I'm not sure I would recommend this. What we really know about Rome's early years is just too vague and tenuous to make for a very arresting read. Cornell spends a great deal of time carefully considering different interpretations of the archaeological/mythological record and discussing how he ultimately came to his conclusions. This is good scholarship, but not exactly thrilling for a non-specialist. I liked this book, but it definitely gets a little dry at times. **3.5 stars**.

Traveller says

I thought Romulus and Remus did it.. ;)

This book looks extremely interesting ; count me in when we're looking at archeological evidence.

Michel says

Al wat we op school geleerd hebben over het ontstaan van Rome is verkeerd!

Ja, natuurlijk dat ze ons gezegd hebben dat Romulus uitgevonden is, maar daarna: dat Rome eigenlijk maar boeren waren, dat ze al hun cultuur van de Etrusken haalden, dat de Etrusken trouwens lang de baas waren in Rome. En hoe zat dat met de grote P en de kleine p, de patriciërs en de plebejers, die waren er altijd al, juist? Oh, en de senaat tijdens de republiek, die waren altijd de baas, toch?

Nope, er zijn ons allemaal dingen wijsgemaakt!

Zoals in wel meer velden waar een mens het niet zou verwachten, is er de laatste twintig jaar ook in de

geschiedenis van het oude Rome vanalles veranderd: van de positie van Rome ten opzicht van de rest van Italië (geen niet-innovatieve boeren) over de geschiedenis en de positie van senaat en consuls en de staat-in-de-staat van de plebejers en hoe het eigenlijk aristocraten/oligarchie versus populisme/democratie was, tot wat de koningen misschien wel waren (een soort condottieres?).

Boeiend, en Cornell is een grappige mens ook, vooral in zijn voetnoten. Bijvoorbeeld!

The only text to support this interpretation is Isidorus, Orig. 9.4.11, a secondary source with no independent authority. Cicero's reference to a pater conscriptus (Phil. 13.28) is ironical. This text 'ist natürlich ein Scherz', said Mommsen (Staatsr. III. 863 n.), who knew a joke when he saw one.

C. Çevik says

A very detailed source for the earliest period of Rome.

Davide says

The founding of Rome is shrouded in mystery. There are many stories from the likes of Livy and Vergil which have many falacies as can be expected from a source such as them writing fully believing in the stories of Rome's founding.

If you like the genre you must read it. However, it is very easy to read.
