

The She-Wolf of Rome

FROM MYTHIC ORIGINS TO POPE SIXTUS IV'S RENAISSANCE REVIVAL

Carl Balowski | February, 2025

Abstract

This study traces the enduring symbolism of the *lupa* (she-wolf) as a defining emblem of Rome's power and identity, from its legendary origins in Livy's and Vergil's accounts of Romulus and Remus through the medieval period and into the Renaissance revival under Pope Sixtus IV. Early Republic sources indicate that a bronze wolf statue stood at the foot of the Palatine Hill by the 3rd century BC, and literary references by Cicero and others confirm its cultural importance as *Mater Romanorum* ("Mother of Rome"). Although the symbol receded in visibility during the later Middle Ages, the image of the wolf nursing the twins remained deeply embedded in Rome's civic consciousness, reflected in medieval guidebooks and chroniclers who described statues, seals, and public rituals evoking this mythic origin.

In the 15th century, renewed interest in classical antiquity—championed by humanists such as Flavio Biondo—set the stage for Pope Sixtus IV to capitalize on the wolf's emblematic power. Soon after his election in 1471, Sixtus strategically transferred the antique bronze she-wolf (and other classical sculptures) from the Lateran Palace to the Capitoline Hill, symbolically uniting papal authority with Rome's legendary founding. By adding newly crafted figures of Romulus and Remus beneath the *lupa*, he restored its iconic motif while signaling a Renaissance *renovatio* of ancient virtue under papal guardianship. This act demonstrated how the papacy could claim both spiritual and temporal dominion, positioning Sixtus IV as an heir to Rome's imperial legacy and sealing the she-wolf's role as a potent political and cultural icon.

Origins in Roman Mythology and Ancient Symbolism

The wolf's association with Rome begins in the city's very foundation myth. According to tradition, the twins Romulus and Remus – destined to found Rome – were abandoned as infants and saved by a she-wolf (Latin: *lupa*). The earliest accounts, like Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*, describe how a "thirsty she-wolf from the surrounding hills, attracted by the crying of the children, came to them, gave them her teats to suck" until a shepherd rescued the boys (Titus Livius (Livy), The History of Rome, Book 1, chapter 4) In Vergil's *Aeneid*, which celebrates Rome's divine origins, the hero Aeneas beholds a depiction of this scene on his shield: the she-wolf lying in a cave, **"the twin brothers, Romulus and Remus, playing, hanging on her teats, and fearlessly sucking at their foster-mother…[as] she caressed them in turn, and licked their limbs with her tongue."** (Virgil (70 BC–19 BC) - Aeneid: VIII) These vivid accounts cemented the *lupa* as a nurturing mother of Rome, a symbol of the city's birth under divine auspices (the wolf being sacred to Mars, father of the twins).

From early on, Romans adopted the image of the she-wolf with the twins as an emblem of their city. Literary and archaeological evidence shows it was a well-known symbol by the early Republic. Roman historians believed a bronze statue of the wolf existed by 295 BC at the foot of the Palatine Hill (Romulus and Remus: Myth and Reality of the Lupercalia Festival – Everything Latin) Indeed, coins from the 3rd century BC onward carried the motif, attesting that "the image of a she-wolf suckling the twins…has been a symbol of the city of Rome and the ancient Romans since at least the 3rd century BC" (Romulus and Remus - Wikipedia) Cicero, writing in 65 BC, even mentions a famous statue of the wolf (possibly gilded) that stood on the Capitol until it was struck by lightning (Romulus and Remus: Myth and Reality of the Lupercalia Festival – Everything Latin) Such references illustrate how deeply the *lupa Capitolina* ("Capitoline Wolf") resonated as a personification of Rome's origins and destiny.

The She-Wolf in the Roman Empire and Late Antiquity

Throughout the Roman Empire, the she-wolf remained a proud civic icon. It appeared in public art, reliefs, and altars – for example, an altar from Ostia depicts the wolf nursing the twins alongside personifications of the Tiber River and Mars (Romulus and Remus - Wikipedia) Emperors keen to link themselves to Rome's foundation myth promoted the symbol; Augustus famously celebrated Romulus, and later artists showed the wolf in contexts evoking Rome's eternity. By late antiquity, the image was so entrenched that it survived even the Christianization of the Empire as a cultural emblem of the Eternal City. However, with the empire's decline, many ancient monuments were lost or repurposed. The fate of the original Capitoline Wolf statue is uncertain – medieval chroniclers suggest it endured, but the line between the ancient artifact and later reproductions grew blurred. What is clear is that the *idea* of the she-wolf as "Mother of Rome" persisted into the medieval era, preserved by memory and texts even when physical artifacts fell away (1995.04.14, Jacks, The Antiquarian and the Myth of Antiquity – Bryn Mawr Classical Review)

Medieval Memory: The She-Wolf as *Mater Romanorum*

During the Middle Ages, Rome's populace and visitors continued to revere the she-wolf as a symbol of the city's former glory. A bronze wolf statue stood for centuries in front of the Lateran Palace (the papal residence), becoming a focal point of civic lore. The *Chronicon* of Benedict of Soracte (10th century) notes a location in the Lateran "called *ad lupam*, that is, the mother of the Romans," where important trials and executions took place (Capitoline Wolf - Wikipedia) This suggests the wolf statue had become a metaphorical *Mater Romanorum*, a guardian figure under whose eyes justice was dispensed. Medieval guidebooks like the *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* (Marvels of Rome) also mention Rome's ancient marvels, including the bronze wolf. An English cleric, Magister Gregorius, writing in the 12th century, described seeing a *lupa* in the Lateran portico – at the very entrance of the pope's palace. He observed it poised as if to attack a nearby bronze ram fountain, noting "she was set up as if stalking a bronze ram…The wolf had

also served as a fountain… but it had been broken off at the feet and moved to where he saw it," with no twin infants present (Capitoline Wolf - Wikipedia) This account indicates the statue was venerated more as a curiosity of ancient Rome's grandeur; the nurturing image had faded (no infants were depicted), yet the wolf still signified Rome's heritage.

Throughout the medieval period, Rome's communal government and rebels alike invoked the old symbols to legitimize their authority. In the mid-14th century, the tribune Cola di Rienzo – who briefly revived the Roman Republic – made "especial use of these relics" of Rome's past, including the *lupa*, to rally the populace (1995.04.14, Jacks, The Antiquarian and the Myth of Antiquity – Bryn Mawr Classical Review) The Roman civic seal and banners under the medieval commune often bore the acronym SPQR, but the ethos behind them drew on iconic legends like the she-wolf nourishing Rome. The very endurance of the Lateran wolf statue into the 15th century, regarded with awe by locals and pilgrims, shows that the mythic symbol never fully vanished. It remained a potent reminder that Rome had once been Caput Mundi – the head of the world – suckled in infancy by a ferocious, providential beast.

Renaissance Humanists and the Revival of Roman Antiquity

The Renaissance brought a renewed passion for classical antiquity, and Rome's humanist scholars eagerly revisited the old myths and symbols. Antiquarians in the 1400s, such as Flavio Biondo, Poggio Bracciolini, and others, combed the city for ruins and texts to reconstruct Rome's ancient topography. Biondo's *Roma Instaurata* (1444–46) systematically identified ancient sites and monuments, from temples to the Lupercal cave where the wolf supposedly nursed the twins ([PDF] Ancient Rome in the light of recent discoveries - Wikimedia Commons) The *lupa* as *nutrix* (nurse) of Rome fascinated these scholars – it was a bridge between legendary past and present reality. They debated historical details, compared literary sources (Livy, Dionysius, Virgil, etc.), and even engaged in spirited controversies. For example, the origin myth of Siena – a rival city that claimed it was founded by Remus's sons and whose emblem was also a wolf – became a

point of contention. The humanist Biondo, defending Rome's primacy, argued against Pope Pius II (himself Sienese) and his circle over whose *urbs* had the true ancestral claim (1995.04.14, Jacks, The Antiquarian and the Myth of Antiquity – Bryn Mawr Classical Review) These debates show how symbols like the she-wolf had real political and cultural currency in the Renaissance: they were not mere fables, but assertions of legacy and legitimacy.

By the mid-15th century, even as the popes re-established Rome as the center of Christendom, the city's classical heritage was embraced as a source of pride and authority. Popes and scholars often worked hand in hand: Pope Nicholas V (1447–1455) sponsored translations of ancient works and began major building projects to revive Rome's grandeur. His successors continued this trend. The *Mirabilia Urbis* was updated and printed by 1499 with woodcut illustrations – one showing the She-Wolf with Romulus and Remus – reflecting the fusion of medieval marvels with Renaissance knowledge (The Capitoline Wolf, 1995 - by LaurieAnnie - Ipernity) The climate was ripe for Rome's ancient symbols to be not only preserved, but deliberately showcased as emblems of a revived *Roma aeterna*. No symbol was more evocative than the Lupa Capitolina, which by now had come to embody the very spirit of Rome's endurance.

Pope Sixtus IV and the Capitoline She-Wolf: Renovatio Romae

This humanist revival set the stage for Pope Sixtus IV (Francesco della Rovere, r. 1471–1484) to make a historic move that linked papal authority to the legacy of ancient Rome. Upon his ascent in 1471, Sixtus IV found Rome still filled with ruins and remnants of the old empire – as well as a populace increasingly conscious of their city's illustrious past. Sixtus, though a Franciscan theologian by training, proved shrewd in harnessing classical symbolism for political ends. One of his first acts as pope was to **"establish the Capitoline Museum, the first public collection of antiquities in Europe"** by donating several of the Church's ancient bronze statues to the people of Rome. In December 1471, only four months after his election, he issued orders to transfer the venerable bronze wolf (the *Lupa*), along with other famous bronzes – the *Spinario* (Boy with Thorn), the

Camillus (altar-boy statue), and a colossal head of Emperor Constantine – from the Lateran Palace to the Capitoline Hill (Capitolini Museums - Italia.it) (Capitoline Wolf - Wikipedia) There, on the symbolic heart of Rome's civic government (the *Campidoglio*), these artifacts were installed as proud testimonies of Rome's ancient *virtus*. The she-wolf was placed prominently at the Palazzo dei Conservatori, and around this time new twin figures of Romulus and Remus were created and added to complete the iconic group (Capitoline Wolf - Wikipedia) Sixtus's donation literally **"relocated remnants of past greatness to the most symbolic spot in the city" – a gesture of strong symbolic value** (Capitolini Museums - Italia.it) It was a calculated display that the Pope, as Rome's ruler, was in some sense the imperial restorer and curator of the city's ancient glory.

Contemporaries recognized the political message in Sixtus IV's actions. The transfer of the *Lupa Capitolina* and other bronzes from the papal palace to the civic hill was not merely a gift; it was a statement that the papacy now *embodied* the legacy of Rome. One Renaissance inscription, composed during Sixtus's pontificate, proudly proclaimed of these statues: **"the outstanding bronze statues are proof of the historic excellence and capability of the Roman people who created them."** By having these words carved (likely on a plaque at the Capitoline), Sixtus linked his regime to the "historic excellence" of ancient Romans, subtly casting himself as a new *patron* of Rome on par with the emperors of old. The *Lupa* in particular, now standing over the Capitoline as in centuries past, became a visual declaration that Rome's foundational myth and its continuity were under papal guardianship. As historian Ludwig Pastor observes, Sixtus had no deep antiquarian passion himself, but "he used Roman history and ancient objects for political advantage," showing a *"shrewd acceptance of the humanists"* and their ideals Indeed, Pope Sixtus simultaneously allowed the revival of the Roman Academy (a circle of classical scholars suppressed by his predecessor), signaling that under his rule, venerable Roman traditions and learning would flourish rather than be feared

Sixtus IV's urban policies reinforced this synthesis of papal and classical imagery. He undertook extensive renovations in Rome, many consciously evoking Imperial precedent. In 1475, for the Holy Year jubilee, Sixtus rebuilt the ancient aqueduct of Aqua Virgo to

improve the city's water supply, and he constructed a new bridge across the Tiber – Ponte Sisto – notably using spolia from ancient monuments Critics like the humanist poet Fausto Andrelini accused Sixtus of razing parts of the Coliseum ("Caesar's Amphitheater") to supply materials for the bridge Yet even these criticisms underscore Sixtus's aim: to refashion Rome's infrastructure in the image of its past greatness. The Capitoline she-wolf became the capstone of this program. According to one account, on **December 14, 1471** the Capitoline collection was formally inaugurated – essentially the birth of the Capitoline Museums Sixtus's contemporaries understood that **"Sixtus' donation and placement of the ancient statues had considerable political implications"**, intended not only to beautify the city but to assert the papal claim as the heir of Rome's legacy By publicly "restoring" the she-wolf to the Roman people, Sixtus styled himself as a new Augustus or Constantine – a leader who renewed Rome. The humanist Giuliano Maffei even likened Sixtus to Aeneas, saying that just as the Trojan hero brought his gods to Italy, Sixtus *"deemed it right to restore the illustrious bronzes to the Roman people."* Pastor's *History of the Popes* notes that this act greatly endeared Sixtus to Romans and "gave new life to the legend of Rome" under papal monarchy

The image of the wolf and twins thus took on a fresh resonance in the Renaissance: it became simultaneously an antiquarian treasure and a propaganda tool. Engravings and festivities began to incorporate the emblem anew. After 1471, public ceremonies on the Capitoline – from senators' processions to carnival pageants – often featured references to Romulus, Remus and the she-wolf, reflecting the atmosphere **"in which it became desirable to model public ceremonies…on antique examples."** The *lupa* icon was now firmly under papal patronage; even as it remained the symbol of the *urbs* (city), it also signified the fusion of sacred and secular authority in Rome. Pope Sixtus IV's deliberate invocation of the She-Wolf of Rome was a masterstroke of Renaissance statecraft: by resurrecting this potent symbol, he reminded the world that the Eternal City's destiny – from its mythical birth by a wolf's milk to its Christian present – was overseen by the successors of Peter. In short, Sixtus IV linked **his** authority to the very origins of Rome, using the ancient She-Wolf as a visual and ideological testament that **Roma renascens** (Rome reborn) thrived under papal supremacy.

Conclusion: Legacy of the Lupa Capitolina

The Capitoline Wolf stands today in Rome's Capitoline Museums, emblem of a city that endlessly reinvents its past. From the legends recorded by Livy and Virgil, through centuries of medieval veneration, to its Renaissance reinstallation by Pope Sixtus IV, the she-wolf has embodied Rome's identity and continuity. Sixtus's restoration of the *Lupa Capitolina* in 1471 was more than an antiquarian gesture; it was a conscious revival of Rome's most ancient symbol to serve a modern purpose. By aligning himself with the she-wolf, Sixtus IV asserted that the papacy held not just spiritual dominion, but was the rightful heir to the grandeur of Rome – the *Caput mundi*. As one historian put it, relocating the bronze wolf to the Capitoline "had a strong symbolic value" (Capitolini Museums - Italia.it) it declared that the eternal spirit of Rome, born of a wolf's nurture, now nourished the power of the Renaissance papacy. The *lupa*, once a feral guardian of abandoned infants, had become by the late 15th century a tamed icon of papal Rome – yet losing none of its evocative power. Through primary sources and humanist accounts we see a clear arc: a wild creature of myth transformed into a political symbol. In the hands of Sixtus IV, the She-Wolf of Rome was reborn as a guardian of papal authority, eternally watching over the Eternal City from her pedestal on the Capitoline, a reminder that Rome's past and present were inseparably intertwined.

Sources:

- Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, on Romulus and Remus and the she-wolf (Titus Livius (Livy), The History of Rome, Book 1, chapter 4
)
- Vergil, *Aeneid* 8.630–638 (Latin), describing the she-wolf and twins on Aeneas's shield (Virgil (70 BC–19 BC) - Aeneid: VIII)
- Cicero, *In Catilinam* 3.19 and *De Divinatione* 1.20, on the Capitoline wolf statue struck by lightning (65 BC) (Romulus and Remus: Myth and Reality of the Lupercalia Festival – Everything Latin)
- *Mirabilia Urbis Romae* (12th cent.) / Magister Gregorius, *De Mirabilibus Urbis Romae*, describing the Lateran wolf statue (Capitoline Wolf - Wikipedia)
- Chronicon of Benedict of Soracte (10th cent.), referencing trials held "at the Wolf, mother of the Romans" (Capitoline Wolf - Wikipedia)
- Flavio Biondo, *Roma Instaurata* (1440s), and humanist debates on Rome's founding myths (1995.04.14, Jacks, The Antiquarian and the Myth of Antiquity – Bryn Mawr Classical Review)
- Ludwig Pastor, *History of the Popes*, Vol. IV, on Sixtus IV's antiquarian donations and use of classical imagery
- Jill E. Blondin, "Renewing Rome in the Renaissance" (*Catholic Historical Review*, 2005) on Sixtus IV's Capitoline Museum and its political symbolism (Capitolini Museums - Italia.it)
- **Additional:** Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 34.139 (mentions a bronze wolf in the Forum); *Lex de Imperio Vespasiani* (Roman law tablets once displayed with the wolf at the Lateran (Lateran Palace - Wikipedia) ; and Pastor, op. cit., pp. 439–442 on Sixtus IV's restoration of Rome (noted in Blondin's bibliography).