

Romulus and Remus – from the steppes of Central Asia?

'New Scientist' magazine carried an article on 4 July 2015 about new studies of DNA which appear to show a large migration of people of the Yamnaya culture from northern Eurasia into Europe about 2500BC. The Yamnaya, or 'pit-people', were distinct from the hunter-gatherers who reached Europe about 45,000 years ago, and the Neolithic farmers of 9,000 years ago. They were cattle herders who domesticated the horse, invented the chariot, and created the first pastoral economies in the steppe grasslands, moving around over large distances to find fresh pastures. Their language, Proto-Indo-European, is the common ancestor of all modern European languages. They produced the distinctive Corded Ware pottery.

The article states that, according to studies of Indo-European mythology, young Yamnaya men would go off in warlike groups, raping and pillaging for a few years before settling down as respectable adults. These groups were associated with wolves and dogs and the youths are said to have worn dog or wolf skins. Professor David Anthony, Anthropology Curator of the Yager Museum of Art & Culture, Hartwick College, Oneonta, NY, most of whose research and field work has been in the Eurasian steppe grasslands of Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan, has found a site in Russia where the Yamnaya killed wolves and dogs in midwinter. Bodies in Yamnaya graves frequently have pendants of dog canine teeth round their necks. He says this offers archaeological evidence for the youthful 'wolf packs' of Indo-European legend, and sees a link to the foundation of Rome. "You've got two boys, Romulus and Remus, and a wolf who more or less gives birth to them. And the earliest legends of the foundation of Rome are connected with a large group of homeless young men who were given shelter by Romulus. But they then wanted wives, so they invited in a neighbouring tribe and stole all their women. You can see that whole set of early legends as being connected possibly with the foundation of Rome by youthful war bands."

Robert Payne writes in 'The Roman Triumph' that originally there were perhaps no more than 30 or 40 determined men living in an isolated community and regarded by their neighbours as bandits or worse. They brought with them, or instituted, a custom which survived for a thousand years – the Lupercalia, originally the sacrifice of a she-wolf in a cave on the Palatine hill, followed by a procession of youths who whipped one another with thongs made from the wolf's pelt. Afterwards they feasted on the victim. He adds that "the mysterious she-wolf in the cave was the source of their energy and the emblem of the tribe."

It will be interesting to see what may be revealed by further research now under way into the genetics of Corded Ware burials from further west in Europe than Germany and Luxembourg.

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