

THE FABRICATION OF THE HISTORICAL TRADITION ON EARLY ROME

Research Question: How trustworthy are the sources and narratives about early Rome?

The History of Early Rome

While there is archaeological evidence for settlements in the general vicinity of the future city from the 10th century BCE onwards, and quite a lot about the early history of Rome can be reconstructed using this evidence,¹ the earliest historical writings still extant do not appear before c. 200 BCE. While we have only fragments of the early historians and poets (Q. Ennius, Q. Fabius Pictor, M. Porcius Cato, etc.),² the first comprehensive treatments of Rome's history appear another two centuries later. Additionally, these early writers all wrote their accounts before the backdrop of Greek (historical) writing and origin stories, rendering them difficult to dubious.³ Most of early Roman history only survives today in the works of T. Livius ("Livy", 59 BCE–17 CE), Dionysius of Halicarnassus (c. 60 BCE–after 7 BCE), and later authors such as Plutarch (c. 46–after 120).

According to tradition, Romulus, a distant descendant of the Trojan hero Aeneas, founded the city on the 21st of April 753 BCE, and ruled it as the first king until 717. Six more followed him until L. Tarquinius Superbus, the last king, was ousted in 509 and the republic was established. While the existence of these kings is doubtful, their actions and the institution they created are more easily authenticated.⁴ It seems that Rome was influenced heavily by its Etruscan neighbours and the Greek colonies, and from spectacular tombs found in the vicinity, there is reason to believe that the significant economic surplus was concentrated in the hands of a small elite.⁵

Livy

Titus Livius was probably born as a citizen into the wealthy elite in 59 BCE in Padua and died at some point after 17 CE. He does not seem to have pursued either a political or military career, but focussed on his writing, much of which is lost. Ever since the early 20s BCE, he wrote on his main (but probably unfinished) work, *Ab Urbe Condita Libri* ("books from the founding of the city [of Rome]"). Many of the 142 books are lost; still extant are books 1-10 (until 293 BCE), 21-45 (218-167), as well as fragments. From many of the other books exist the *periochae*, summaries written in antiquity.⁶

¹ Cf. Holloway, R. Ross, *The Archaeology of Early Rome and Latium*, London / New York NY 1996; Smith, Christopher, *Early and Archaic Rome*, in: Coulston, Jon / Dodge, Hazel (eds.), *Ancient Rome. The Archaeology of the Eternal City*, Oxford 2000, pp. 16–41.

² On these and other authors, cf. their articles in *The New Pauly* or the *Oxford Classical Dictionary*; On the sources for early Roman history cf. Ogilvie, Robert M. / Drummond, Andrew, *The Sources for Early Roman History*, in: Walbank, Frank W. (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History 7.2. The Rise of Rome to 220 B.C.*, Cambridge 1990, pp. 1–29.

³ Ward, Allen M. / Heichelheim, Fritz M. / Yeo, Cedric A., *A History of the Roman People*, Boston *et al.* 2010, p. 27–29.

⁴ Cornell, Tim J., *The Beginnings of Rome. Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars (c. 1000–264 BCE)*, London / New York NY 1995, pp. 119–218.

⁵ Morel, Jean-Paul, *Early Rome and Italy*, in: Scheidel, Walter / Morris, Ian / Saller, Richard P. (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*, Cambridge 2007, pp. 487–510, here: p. 495.

⁶ Cf. Schmidt, Peter L. / Manfred Fuhrmann, Livius, in: *The New Pauly Online*, URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e7 (04/04/2019); Briscoe, John, Livy, in: Hornblower, Simon / Spawforth, Antony, *Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Third Edition. Electronic Edition, URL: <http://pm.nlx.com/xtf/view?docId=ocd/ocd.12.xml;chunk.id=div.ocd.4120;toc.depth=1;toc.id=div.ocd.4105;brand=default> (04/04/2019); Conte, Gian B., *Latin Literature. A History*, Baltimore MD / London 1994.

Sources

Liv. 1.1.3f.

Ut cumque erit, iuvabit tamen rerum gestarum memoriae principis terrarum populi pro virili parte et ipsum consuluisse; et si in tanta scriptorum turba mea fama in obscuro sit, nobilitate ac magnitudine eorum me qui nomini officient meo consoletur. Res est praeterea et inmensi operis, ut quae supra septingentesimum annum repetatur [...].

But however that may be, I shall find satisfaction in contributing—not, I hope, ignobly—to the labour of putting on record the story of the greatest nation in the world. Countless others have written on this theme and it may be that I shall pass unnoticed amongst them; if so, I must comfort myself with the greatness and splendour of my rivals, whose work will rob my own of recognition. My task, moreover, is an immensely laborious one. I shall have to go back more than seven hundred years [...].

Liv. 1.1.6f.

Quae ante conditam condendamve urbem poeticis magis decora fabulis quam incorruptis rerum gestarum monumentis traduntur, ea nec adfirmare nec refellere in animo est. Datur haec venia antiquitati, ut miscendo humana divinis primordia urbium augustiora faciat;

Events before Rome was born or thought of have come to us in old tales with more of the charm of poetry than of a sound historical record, and such traditions I propose neither to affirm nor refute. There is no reason, I feel, to object when antiquity draws no hard line between the human and the supernatural: it adds dignity to the past [...].

Liv. 1.1.9

ad illa mihi pro se quisque acriter intendat animum, quae vita, qui mores fuerint, per quos viros quibusque artibus domi militiaeque et partum et auctum imperium sit; labente deinde paulatim disciplina velut desidentis primo mores sequatur animo, deinde ut magis magisque lapsi sint, tum ire coeperint praecipites, donec ad haec tempora quibus nec vitia nostra nec remedia pati possumus perventum est.

I invite the reader's attention to the much more serious considerations of the kind of lives our ancestors lived, of who were the men, and what the means both in politics and war by which Rome's power was first acquired and subsequently expanded; I would then have him trace the process of our moral decline, to watch, first, the sinking of the foundations of morality as the old teaching was allowed to lapse, then rapidly increasing disintegration, then the final collapse of the whole edifice, and the dark dawning of our modern day when we can neither endure our vices nor face the remedies needed to cure them.

Liv. 1.1.10

Hoc illud est praecipue in cognitione rerum salubre ac frugiferum, omnis te exempli documenta in inlustri posita monumento intueri; inde tibi tuaeque rei publicae quod imitere capias, inde foedum inceptu, foedum exitu, quod vitas.

The study of history is the best medicine for a sick mind; for in history you have a record of the infinite variety of human experience plainly set out for all to see; and in that record you can find for yourself and your country both examples and warnings; fine things to take as models, base things, rotten through and through, to avoid.

Discussion Thesis

Due to the fact that the earliest coherent accounts of the early Roman history are centuries removed from the alleged events and are filtered through the tradition of Greek history and origin stories, there is nothing we can really know about early Roman history.

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