

From Village to Empire:
An Introduction to the History of Rome
Seminar 1: Sources for early Roman history

One of our principal sources for early Roman history is the historian Livy, who wrote a history of Rome in 142 books. Livy began his history at the very beginning (the fall of Troy and the flight of Aeneas), and continued up to his own times (the reign of Augustus: 31 BC – AD 14). This meant that he was often narrating events which took place (if they did so at all), centuries before his own day. But how could Livy know anything at all about early Roman history?

Read the following passages, and think about where Livy is getting his information, what problems he has encountered, and how he has tried to overcome them. It's also worth thinking about the wider problems which we may be able to detect here. What light does this evidence shed on Roman historiography, and on the value of the literary tradition of early Rome?

Livy 1.3.1-2: Ascanius, Aeneas' son, was not yet ripe for authority; yet the authority was kept for him, unimpaired, until he arrived at manhood. Meanwhile, under a woman's regency, the Latin state and the kingdom of his father and his grandfather stood unshaken – so strong was Lavinia's character – until the boy could claim it. I shall not discuss the question – for who could affirm for certain so ancient a matter? – whether this boy was Ascanius, or an elder brother, born by Creusa while Ilium yet stood, who accompanied his father when he fled from the city, being the same whom the Julian family call Iulus and claim as the author of their name.

Livy 1.8.2-3: [Romulus decided to adopt emblems of authority.] He therefore put on a more august state in every way, and especially by the assumption of twelve *lictors* [i.e. attendants who carried the *fasces*, bundles of rods, each with a single axe, symbols of a magistrate's power to coerce and punish]. Some think the twelve birds which had given him an augury of kingship led him to choose this number. For my part, I am content to share the opinion of those who derive from the neighbouring Etruscans (whence were borrowed the curule chair and the purple-bordered toga) not only the type of attendants but their number as well – a number which the Etruscans themselves are thought to have chosen because each of the twelve cities which united to elect the king contributed one *lictor*.

Livy 1.49.9: To Octavius Mamilius of Tusculum, a man by long odds the most important of the Latin name, and descended, if we may believe report, from Ulysses and the goddess Circe, he [i.e. Tarquinius Superbus, Rome's seventh king] gave his daughter in marriage, and in this way attached to himself the numerous kinsmen and friends of the man.

Livy 2.8.4-5: [After L. Junius Brutus died, a new consul was elected in his place]. The choice fell upon Spurius Lucretius, who by reason of his great age was no longer strong enough for the duties of the consulship, and died within a few days. They elected in Lucretius' place Marcus Horatius Pulvillus. In some ancient authorities I do not find Lucretius given as consul, but Brutus is followed immediately by Horatius; I suppose that because no exploit lent distinction to Lucretius' consulship men forgot it.

Livy 2.18.5-7: In the oldest writers, however, I find it said that Titus Larcius was the first to be made dictator, and that Spurius Cassius was master of the horse. They chose men of consular rank, for so the law prescribed which had been passed to regulate the selection of a dictator. I am therefore the more disposed to believe that Larcius, a consular, rather than Manius Valerius, the son of Marcus and grandson of Volesus, a man who had not held the consulship, was assigned to be the director and superior of consuls; and indeed if men had been specially desirous of choosing the dictator from that family, they would much sooner have selected Marcus Valerius the father, a man of proven worth and an ex-consul.

Livy 2.40.10: Having then led his army out of Rome's dominions he [i.e. Coriolanus] is said to have perished beneath the weight of resentment which this act caused, by a death which is variously described. I find in Fabius, by far the oldest authority, that Coriolanus lived on to old age. At least he reports that this saying was often on his lips, that exile was a far more wretched thing when one was old.

Livy 2.41.10-12: [Spurius] Cassius had no sooner laid down his office than he was condemned and executed, as all authorities agree. There are those who say that his father was responsible for his punishment, that he tried the case in his house, and that, after causing his son to be scourged and put to death, he consecrated to Ceres his personal property, from the proceeds of which a statue was made and inscribed: 'the gift of the Cassian family.' I find in certain authors, and this is the more credible account, that the quaestors Caeso Fabius and Lucius Valerius brought him to trial for treason, and that he was found guilty by judgement of the people and his house was pulled down by popular decree. Its site is now the open space in front of the temple of Tellus. But whether it was a domestic or a state trial, he was condemned in the consulship of Servius Cornelius and Quintus Fabius.

Livy 3.23.7: I find in a good many writers that the Antiates revolted that same year, and that Lucius Cornelius the consul conducted the war and took the town. I should not venture to affirm it for a certainty, since there is no mention of the matter in the older historians.

Livy 3.47.5: The discourse with which he [i.e. Ap. Claudius the decemvir] led up to his decree may perhaps be truthfully represented in some of the old accounts, but since I can nowhere discover one that is plausible, in view of the enormity of the decision, it seems my duty to set forth the naked fact, upon which all agree, that he adjudged Verginia to him who claimed her as his slave.

Livy 3.70.13-15: The consuls led their army back to the city laden with a vast quantity of booty, as well as with the goods which they had lost by the pillage of their fields but had now recovered. I do not find either that the consuls themselves asked for a triumph or that one was offered to them by the senate, nor is there any record of the reason why they despised the honour or did not hope for it. The best conjecture I myself can offer, after so long an interval of time, is this: since the consuls Valerius and Horatius, who besides beating the Volsci and Aequi had also attained renown by bringing the Sabine war to a successful conclusion, had been refused a triumph by the senate, they were ashamed to ask for that distinction in recompense of an achievement only half as great, lest even if it should be granted, it might seem that account had been taken rather of persons than of deserts.

Livy 4.29.5-6: The memory of the noble dictatorship [of Aulus Postumius] assumes a sombre hue in a tradition that Aulus Postumius' son, who, tempted by an opportunity of fighting to advantage, had left his post unbidden, was in the hour of his victory beheaded by his father's orders. One is loath to believe this story, and the diversity of opinion allows one to reject it. It is an indication of its falsity that we speak of Manlian, not Postumian discipline, whereas he who had first established so rigorous a precedent would himself have received the notorious stigma of cruelty.* Besides, Manlius was given the *cognomen* Imperiosus (the Despotic), while Postumius received no such grim distinction.

* Aulus Postumius was dictator in 431 BC. Titus Manlius was also said to have executed his son for attacking the enemy without orders to do so. This allegedly happened when Titus Manlius was consul in 340 BC.

Livy 4.34.6-7: Certain annalists have recorded that there was a naval battle also with the Veientes, near Fidenae [so on the Tiber river, rather than at sea], a thing equally difficult and incredible; for even today the river is not wide enough for that, and in those times it was somewhat narrower, as we learn from the old writers; unless possibly there were a few ships assembled to dispute the passage of the river and this was exaggerated, as so often happens, by those who added to the inscription [sc. under the family's wax portrait bust of the commander] the false claim of a naval victory.

Livy 4.61.11: There are those who think that Artena had belonged to the Veientes, not to the Volsci. Their mistake is due to the fact that there was a city of the same name between Caere and Veii; but this place was destroyed by the Roman kings, and it had been a dependency of Caere, not of Veii; the other town of the same name, whose overthrow I have just related, was in Volscian territory.

Livy 9.23.1-6: The seat of war was now shifted, and the legions were transferred, from Samnium and Apulia to Sora, which had gone over to the Samnites, after putting to death the Roman colonists. The Roman army, by a series of forced marches, undertaken to avenge their slaughtered fellow-citizens and regain the colony, came first upon the ground. But the scouts who had scattered out along the roads reported one after the other that the Samnite legions were following and were already close at hand. Whereupon the Romans marched to meet the enemy, and an indecisive battle was fought near Lautulae. It was not the losses nor the rout of either army that put a stop to the engagement, but darkness, which left them uncertain if they had lost or won. I find in some authorities that the Romans were defeated in this battle, and that it was here that the master of the horse, Quintus Aulius, lost his life. To fill out the term of Aulius they appointed Gaius Fabius, who marched from Rome with a fresh army.

Livy 10.37.13-15: Of this year, too, the tradition is uncertain. Postumius [L. Postumius Megellus, consul in 294], if we follow Claudius [Quadrigrarius, an annalist of the first century BC], after capturing several cities in Samnium, was defeated in Apulia and put to flight, and, being wounded himself, was forced to take refuge with a few followers in Luceria; while Atilius [M. Atilius Regulus, the other consul in 294] campaigned in Etruria and obtained a triumph. Fabius [Pictor] writes that both consuls fought in Samnium and at Luceria; that the army was led over into Etruria (by which consul he does not state) and that at Luceria both sides suffered heavy losses; in the course of the battle a temple was vowed to Jupiter Stator, as Romulus had vowed one before.