



Undergraduate assignment feedback form

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Critically discuss to what extent textual ancient sources on Rome's pre-republican history can be considered reliable. Make use of complementary evidence to prove/disprove the reliability of ancient sources.

'Memory is not identical with History yet it nonetheless plays a fundamental role in the sorts of things that are thought worthy enough of being recorded or elaborated'¹. Roman history is not identical to memory because until the Romans wrote down their history until around 600 years after the events from Pre-republican history. This means that they had to record all their history through memory and pass it on through the oral tradition rather than writing it down. In this way the historians might not have had all the facts, which means that they could present the early Romans in a way their purpose and fill in the gaps. This is because they had a less detailed version of the events to begin with.

This essay is firstly going investigate the similarities between some of the different written evidence that there is. A number of historians give different dates on events from early Roman history. One example is the way that historians give different dates for the founding of Rome. The reason for this is that the early Romans particularly in the pre-republican period did not think that it was important to document their history. This leads to the fact that later on within the republic when they did start documenting their history, the historians could not be sure of the facts, particularly dates. Some historians, however, do use the same dates as each other. This is because their methods of research were not to discover more information about their past but to present the same information but in a new way². Livy and Dionysius use similar dates to each other. The reason for this is most likely

¹ J. Marincola pg.6

² T.J Cornell pg.4

because they were using similar sources.³ Having similar dates within some of the sources might make them more reliable, however, the fact that there are multiple dates available for such important events as the founding of Rome makes leads to the question whether any of the dates are reliable. This is because the later historians were using the dates given by earlier historians as their sources. Therefore, if the dates of the earlier historians were not reliable and it was not possible for the later historians to do any research except from reading their predecessors then a lot of the dates within the ancient sources might not to be reliable.

One important thing to understand about the Roman historians such as Livy is that they were writing at the height of the Roman empire. Therefore, most of the historians were idealising Roman history trying to make themselves look better⁴. It is obvious that Livy was writing at the height of the Roman empire in his introduction when he talks about the might and power of Rome and how their history shows this⁵. As well as this, because previously Roman history had not been well documented historians could put their own view of history across. This leads to them highlighting similar traits and customs between the early Romans and the Romans of their own period. Whereas modern historians attempt to distance himself from the subject they are writing about and do not assume that they share the same values⁶ As a result, the historians may have been trying to glorify the early Romans. One example is the founding myths which show the early Romans to be all inclusive because of the original Romans being mostly outcasts from being either convicts and fugitives or freed slaves⁷. During the Roman republic when they conquered other places instead of making all their enemies their prisoners they were often invited to become Roman citizens. This shows that the Romans from the pre-republican era were just as inclusive as the Romans from the republic. Another example for this is the way that Aeneas was readily welcomed into the community even

³ T.J. Cornell Pg.2

⁴ Potter pg.8

⁵ Livy, Book 1, chapter 1, section 1

⁶ J.Maricola pg.5

⁷ T.J Cornell Pg.60

though he was a refugee. This means that later on in the Roman republic Rome had a special significance for migrants and refugees.

The Romans historians also tried to explain the development of their customs through history. Livy shows this when he introduces the importance of intermarriage and Roman citizenship into the story of the Sabine Women. Livy acknowledges the importance of intermarriage for the Romans⁸. Brown points out that Livy mentions this because intermarriage helped the Romans to form alliances and helped Rome grow as a community⁹ later, within the empire. In addition, if it had not been for the Sabine women, the 'greatness' of Rome would not have lasted any longer than one generation¹⁰. Dionysius tries to explain through the rape of the Sabine Women that kidnapping of brides was part of an ancient Greek wedding custom¹¹. This suggests that Dionysius thought that it was not the fault of the early Romans because according to his customs the Romans had not done anything wrong. On the other hand, Livy, although he is often referring to the greatness of his ancestors, admits that the Romans were not always right. When Livy writes 'a sense of injury has often given place to affection'¹² it shows that not only does Livy admit that what they did was wrong, but he also points out that because the events eventually lead to affection, he is not blaming them entirely.

Dionysius was trying to try to make the Romans look good to the Greeks. This was important because the Greeks had very different ideals compared to the Romans such as the Greeks were not as inclusive as the Romans. The way Dionysius does this is by highlighting the ancestry of the Romans to the Trojans. This is significant because according to Dionysius 'the Trojans were a nation as truly Greek as any'¹³. If the Trojans were like the Greeks then so are the Romans because they are descendants of Aeneas who was a Trojan. As well as this, Aeneas provides a link between the Roman and Greek epics because the Aeneid was very similar to the Greek epics by Homer which Aeneas also

⁸ Livy Book 1, Chapter 1, Section 9

⁹ Brown. R 291

¹⁰ Brown. R pg. 293

¹¹ Dionysius 20.32.2

¹² Livy Book 1, Chapter 1, Section 9

¹³ Dionsius, Book 1 Roman antiquities, Chapter 1, Section 61

features in. Dionysius goes into a lot more detail about the history of Aeneas than Livy because it is the major link between the Romans and the Greeks. The reason that Dionysius was emphasised the link between the Romans and the Greeks was to prove that the Romans were not barbarians or savages but had just as distinguished a history as the Greeks themselves¹⁴. Dionysius' version of the historical events in this case can be just as unreliable as Livy's because both historians are altering the history or presenting it in such a way that suits their aims. Dionysius tries to show that the Romans were more like the Greeks than they might have been.

The final component that needs to be considered is that of fact versus thought. The reason that this area has to be looked into is because the earliest historian Q. Fabius Pictor did not live until around 200BC¹⁵. This means that most of early Roman history will be unreliable because the Romans did not start documenting their history properly until around 500 years after Rome was founded. This can be shown through the way in which Livy manages to write about the foundation of Rome through to early republic in only one book¹⁶ which shows that even Livy did not have much information to go on. However, Livy still manages to write in great detail about events and writes long speeches. It might be because he is making it up and writing what he thinks should have been said instead of what actually said had been said. The difference between thought and fact is unclear with the reporting of some of the events within Roman history. Some examples of this are that according to Livy Romulus made the laws of the city all on his own¹⁷. This is not very likely because it would take more than one person to write all of the laws for a city. Also, when the neighbouring towns visited 'they marvelled that Rome has grown so rapidly so great'¹⁸. It was not possible for Rome to have grown so fast which is why they would have had reason to marvel. It is not very likely that Rome had not been built so fast however Livy had no evidence on the contrary because the events had taken

¹⁴ Dionysius Book 1, Chapter 1, Section 5

¹⁵ T.J Cornell Pg.5

¹⁶ Potter Pg.10

¹⁷ Livy Book 1, Chapter 1, Section 8

¹⁸ Livy Book 1, Chapter 1, Section 9

place 500 years before the first Roman historians. There was no evidence to the contrary at the time because there were no eye witness accounts. Also, the ancient historians were trying to immortalize the great deeds and people from the past, so they would exaggerate so that great events would seem even greater and more impressive than they already were.¹⁹

To conclude, it can be said that the Romans may have considered the accounts of their history to be reliable because they had done some research. However, the only research they did was to read the earlier historians' works. This might mean that some of the facts may not have been reliable to begin with. Therefore, the writers were able to write about history in a way which suits their own opinions of Rome. The way that Dionysius makes the Romans look more Greek and Livy tries to show that Rome has been great from the very start, demonstrates this point. Even though historians' such as Livy and Dionysus thought that their sources were reliable, they were not. This is because they did not have the research methods that are available today such as archaeological evidence and most early Roman history before it was written down was only passed on in the oral tradition. The accounts of the history were more likely to change and become more exaggerated during the 500 years between Romulus and Q. Fabius Pictor, the first Roman historian.

¹⁹ J. Marincola pg.9

Ancient Sources

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