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THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

A Very Short Introduction

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Chapter 1
The mists of the past

According to legend, the story of Rome begins with the fall of Troy. When the Greeks poured forth from the Wooden Horse and brought the ten years of the Trojan War to an end, the Trojan prince Aeneas gathered around him the last survivors of the burning city. Under his leadership, the refugees from Troy sailed first to Carthage in North Africa and then to Italy, where they settled on the plains of Latium. Aeneas, the son of Venus, the goddess of love, did not actually found Rome. But his son Iulus Ascanius became the king of the Latin city of Alba Longa and the ancestor of the Julian clan, from whose ranks would later arise Julius Caesar and the emperor Augustus.

The descendants of Iulus Ascanius ruled Alba Longa for many generations. Then a discontented prince, Amulius, deposed his older brother Numitor and seized power. Numitor's sons were executed and his daughter, Rhea Silvia, was made a Vestal, a virgin dedicated to Vesta, the goddess of the hearth. Fate, however, intervened. The virgin Rhea was raped and gave birth to twin sons, whose father she believed was Mars, the god of war. Abandoned beside the River Tiber by their great-uncle, the twins Romulus and Remus were suckled by a she-wolf and raised by the king's herdsman. Upon reaching manhood, the brothers overthrew Amulius and restored their grandfather to power. They then returned to the site of their abandonment by the Tiber to

1. Bronze wolf (possibly of Etruscan origin), with the children below added by a 15th-century pope

found a new settlement on the Palatine Hill. Sibling rivalry swiftly came to a head. Unable to agree upon who would lead the emerging community, the twins turned to violence and Remus was killed. From that bloodshed the state that would rule the Mediterranean world was born. In 753 BC, on the traditional reckoning, Romulus gave his name to the city he had founded and became the first king of Rome.

The new settlement faced immediate social crisis. In order for his community to grow Romulus welcomed all who came to him, among them slaves, fugitives, and brigands. But Rome lacked sufficient women to provide the next generation. A solution had to be found. The Romans held a great festival to which they invited the nearby tribes, of whom the most prominent were the Sabines. At a chosen moment, the Roman men sprang out and seized every young woman they could catch. By the time the Sabines had

prepared their counter-strike, those women were wives and mothers. Separating the armies, they demanded that their fathers and husbands make peace. The 'Rape of the Sabine Women' secured the future of the Roman community and began Rome's influence over its neighbours.

In Roman tradition, Romulus was the first of seven kings who successively ruled Rome for almost two and a half centuries. Romulus himself disappeared under mysterious circumstances during a storm, and was said to have ascended to the heavens as the god Quirinus. His successor, Numa Pompilius, was a Sabine. He was credited with the organization of the Roman calendar and of the most ancient rites of Roman religion. By contrast, the third king, Tullus Hostilius, was a warrior. During his reign the Romans destroyed their ancestral city of Alba Longa, of which only the temples were spared. Ancus Marcius, the fourth king, was the grandson of Numa, and like his grandfather placed great importance on the correct conduct of public religion. But he was also a warrior, who established the rituals by which Rome might justly go to war and defeated the surrounding Latin peoples. On Ancus' death power passed to Lucius Tarquinius Priscus, who had come to Rome from the Etruscan people to the north. His reign saw the expansion of the Roman city, particularly around the central Forum, and he laid the foundations for the great Temple of Jupiter on the Capitol above the Forum. These civic works were continued by the sixth king, Servius Tullius, Tarquin's son-in-law, who devised the census by which the Roman population was mustered and defined the city by the erection of the Servian Wall.

The seventh and last king of Rome was Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, 'Tarquin the Proud'. The son of Tarquinius Priscus and married to Servius' daughter, Tarquin overthrew Servius and seized power. He ruled by fear as a tyrant and ignored the Senate, whose role was to advise the king. Tarquin's sons shared their father's character, and from their crimes came the downfall of the

monarchy and the creation of the Republic. At a drinking party outside Rome, the princes and their guests began to boast of the qualities of their wives. When they rode home to determine the truth, the princes discovered their own wives enjoying themselves in luxury. Lucretia, the wife of their friend Collatinus, was on the contrary the model of female virtue and was found spinning and directing the domestic servants. Her beauty aroused the lust of Sextus Tarquinius, the youngest prince, who returned in secret and raped her at sword point. Innocent of guilt, Lucretia nevertheless sought atonement and before her father and husband she drove a knife into her heart. The man who drew forth the knife was Lucius Junius Brutus, the ancestor of the conspirator against Julius Caesar. Rallying the Roman people, Brutus expelled Tarquin and his sons. In 510 BC, the Roman monarchy was dissolved. The kings were replaced by two elected consuls, of whom the first were Collatinus and Brutus, and the Roman Republic was formed.

From myth to history

What truths lie hidden within these legends of the ancient Roman past? No written sources survive from the centuries before the Republic's foundation. The story of the Trojan prince Aeneas was immortalized in the *Aeneid* of Virgil (70–19 BC), an epic poem composed over a thousand years after the estimated date of the sack of Troy. For Romulus and his successors, our most valuable account was composed by one of Virgil's contemporaries, far removed once again from the age of the kings. The historian Livy (59 BC–AD 17) concluded Book 1 of the 142 books of his *History of Rome* with the Rape of Lucretia and the expulsion of the Tarquins. Virgil and Livy lived through the Republic's final collapse and the rise of Augustus (31 BC–AD 14), the first Roman emperor. Their writings can hardly provide an accurate record of the distant centuries before the monarchy's fall.

This should not deny the importance of Roman tradition. The early years of Rome were held up by later generations as a golden age in which the structures of Roman society were laid down and the virtues which made Rome great were revealed. Important customs and practices were associated with the early kings, and heroes of the past established models for true Roman behaviour. Lucretia set the pattern for Roman women in the domestic sphere and defended her honour with her life. Brutus' liberation of Rome from Tarquin's tyranny drove his distant descendant to conspire against the dictatorship of Caesar. These models were more than rhetorical ideals. They influenced how later Roman men and women acted, and they reveal how the Romans themselves envisioned where they came from. The stories from the mists of the Roman past are crucial to our understanding of the Republic, even if they do not always shed light on Rome's historical origins.

In the absence of reliable literary sources, the modern historian of early Rome must turn to other forms of evidence and place the first Romans within their physical and cultural setting. Rome is located in the fertile plain of Latium which lies halfway down Italy's western coast. Italian geography is dominated by the Alpine mountains and the Po River valley to the north and by the Apennine range, which runs like a backbone down Italy. The Apennines are steeper and closer to the coast in the east than the west, and the majority of the fertile soil in central Italy is on the western side. The plain of Latium could support a dense farming population, although the land had to be defended from the raids of the hill people of the Apennines, of whom the most notable in early Roman history were the Samnites.

The Indo-European Italic people who would become known as the Latins occupied the plain of Latium in c. 1500–1000 BC. For these early arrivals, Rome was a natural site for settlement. A ring of seven hills offered defensive protection, and nearby lay the Insula Tiberina, the island that marked the easiest point at which the River Tiber could be crossed. To the north was the region of

Map 1. Early Rome and Italy

Etruria, which by approximately 900 BC had been settled by the people known as the Etruscans. To the south from 750 BC onwards were a number of cities founded by colonists from the Greek world, including Syracuse in Sicily and Neapolis ('New City', Naples), from whom southern Italy would take the name Magna Graecia ('Greater Greece'). Latium in central-western Italy was at the natural junction for land communication between Etruria and Magna Graecia. This interaction of cultures was to exert a major influence on early Rome.

Archaeology has revealed a human presence in the area of Rome in the Bronze Age (before 1000 BC). The first significant settlement on the Palatine Hill is then attested by Iron-Age huts from the 8th century, suggesting that the traditional Roman foundation date of 753 may be more accurate than we might have assumed. During the 7th century this initial Palatine settlement united with settlements on the other hills, and the urban landscape of Rome began to emerge. The causes of this crucial development are only hinted at in our literary record. One striking feature of the legendary seven kings of Rome is that the names of two of the later kings, Lucius Tarquinius Priscus and Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, are not Latin but Etruscan. The transformation of the scattered hill settlements into the city of Rome would appear to have taken place under Etruscan rule.

Who were the Etruscans? This is a question that scholars have debated for centuries. Their origins are unknown, but the Etruscans had settled northwest of Rome in what is now Tuscany by at least 900 and perhaps as early as 1200 BC. Thousands of Etruscan inscriptions have been found, but frustratingly they cannot be read, for the Etruscans were not an Indo-European people and their language has no surviving parallel. Our knowledge of Etruscan culture derives from archaeology, particularly the elaborate *necropoleis* (cities of the dead) around their towns. Magnificent tomb paintings depict feasting, dancing, and athletic contests, including gladiatorial combats, which formed part of Etruscan funerary rites. Their surviving art and craftwork drew extensively on Greek influences, and it was through the Etruscans that Greek culture first entered Rome.

The Etruscan influence upon early Rome was profound. The very name Roma (Ruma) may be Etruscan, and the city that emerged in the 6th century followed an Etruscan pattern. At the city's heart on the Capitoline Hill stood the greatest temple of Rome, dedicated to the triad of Jupiter, Juno, and Minerva. In Roman tradition the temple was begun by the Etruscan Lucius Tarquinius

Priscus, and the Capitoline triad recalls the Etruscan divine trinity of Tini, Uni, and Menvra. The urban layout of Rome imitated the grid pattern typical of Etruscan towns, and Roman houses again followed an Etruscan model with an *atrium* (open court) leading into the *triclinium* (banqueting hall) from which doors opened into sleeping quarters. Etruscan architectural designs also left their mark. Aqueducts and bridges, drainage systems, and the extensive use of arches and vaults were all Etruscan features which were to become characteristic of Roman architecture.

Nor was Etruscan influence limited to Rome's physical appearance. As Roman tradition acknowledged, a number of Roman religious practices were derived from the Etruscans, including divination through haruspicy, seeking the gods' will by inspecting the organs of sacrificial animals. It is possible that the gladiatorial contests so popular in Rome were inspired by Etruscan funeral games. The Roman Republic also drew on the Etruscans for symbols of authority. Livy attributed to the Etruscans both the *toga praetexta* (a white toga with a broad purple border) that senior Roman magistrates wore and the curule chair (*sella curulis*) in which the magistrates sat when performing their duties. The *fasces*, bundles of rods within which was bound an axe, were originally carried by the 12 lictors who accompanied Etruscan kings as attendants and bodyguards, and under the Republic the same honour was paid to each of the consuls.

By the late 6th century the Etruscans had become the dominant force in northern and central Italy. Despite the scale of Etruscan influence, however, Rome never became an Etruscan city. As the Romans would repeatedly demonstrate, it was a cardinal gift of the Roman genius to absorb and adapt the strengths of those they encountered without sacrificing their own identity. The Etruscans, like the Greeks in later centuries, contributed greatly to Roman culture yet ultimately fell under Roman dominion. The expulsion of the kings did not end Etruscan influence but reaffirmed Rome's political independence and began its slow rise to power. The Republic that now took shape was a uniquely Roman creation.