

The History Guide

Lectures on Ancient and Medieval European History

Lecture 10

Early Roman Civilization, 753-509BC

now I've finished the work: & not Jove's-wrath,
fire, sword, or time-bite can destroy it;
when it so pleases that day with power over nothing
but my body, my uncertain life-span ends:
but with my better part I'll be borne above stars forever,
& my name will be indelible: wherever Roman
power reaches, conquered lands, I'll be read:
& with fame through all the ages, if poet's predictions
are true at all, I'll live

Introduction

The Roman poet [Ovid](#) (43 B.C.-A.D. 17) composed the above lines as the Epilogue to his poem, *Metamorphosis*, sometime around A.D. 9. Augustus Caesar had been *imperator* of the Roman Empire for more than twenty years. It was the era of the *Pax Romana*. Ovid was on to something, something specifically Roman. The Greeks had "fathered" history in the works of Hellenic historians like Herodotus and Thucydides (see [Lecture 7](#)). However, the Greeks failed to see history in terms of a future. To put it another way, the historical awareness of the Greeks was geared toward the present. They had no past, other than a Greek past.

The Romans, on the other hand, had a very distinct past from which to gain insight into their own present and future -- the Greeks and their history. The Romans embraced history -- its past, present and future and I would like to suggest that Ovid's Epilogue speaks to the historical awareness of the Romans. Ovid knew that his poem would live forever and that "wherever Roman/power reaches, conquered lands, I'll be read." In other words, Ovid exhibits a greater sense of historical awareness than did the Greeks, and this is a specifically Roman trait. Ovid knew that Rome triumphed because of who the Romans thought they were. That is, the Romans maintained a positive image of themselves and this meant confidence, optimism and a capacity to act and create the kind of world they wanted to inhabit.

Although we enter a different world when we leave the cosmopolis of the Hellenistic Age and move to the world of the Roman Republic and the Empire, that world should still be somewhat familiar to us since what we are really looking at is what the Romans managed to do with Greek culture, history, philosophy, art, medicine and a hundred other things. I wouldn't go as far as to suggest that the Romans were nothing but a copy of the Greeks -- that would be tantamount to asserting the genius of the Hellenes and imitative nature of the Romans. However, the fact remains that what the Romans became was in part thanks to their historical awareness heightened by the presence of the Greeks.



[ROMAN HISTORY](#) can be divided into three convenient periods or episodes. The years 753-509 B.C. concern the years of Rome's origins. By 509 B.C., Rome had established itself by pushing the Etruscans out of northern Italy. The era of the Roman Republic falls between 509 B.C. and the [Battle of Actium](#) in 31 B.C. Rome under the Republic consolidated its power both at home and abroad, especially during the Punic and Macedonian Wars. The Republic is also the period when Rome developed its distinctive forms of law and government. Finally, the period from 31 B.C. to A.D. 476 constitutes the era of the Roman Empire. It is this period that most people think of when they are reminded of the grandeur that was Rome. Thanks to the greatest of all the Roman emperors, Augustus Caesar, Rome was able to capture and control all of modern day France, Spain, Greece, Asia Minor, Palestine, North Africa and Great Britain. Of course, the Empire is also the period in which Christianity made its appearance as another mystery cult among the lower orders of people. However, it quickly became apparent that Christianity was something more than just another mystery cult and was indeed a new religious phenomenon that had to be reckoned with.

To be sure, we all have a fairly well-established image of the Romans in our mind. One automatically thinks of Julius Caesar, the Ides of March, the Coliseum, Christians and Jews thrown to the lions, and a people who were pretty much hedonists. This is the Hollywood version, and there is some truth to this portrait, limited as it is. The image of a wealthy Roman riding on the back of an elephant to a friend's house dinner is one thing. But consuming large amounts of food and drink while lying on one's side, waiting to use the vomitorium, is quite another. The Romans enjoyed the good life. The Greeks had first argued that one must cultivate virtue in the city-state. With the onset of changes brought about by Hellenization, the Greeks were caught in an identity crisis, and their philosophies of "therapies" illustrate their attempt to deal with the failure of the *polis* (see [Lecture 9](#)). The Romans would have none of this "therapy." Instead, they grasped the cosmopolis head on, and the result was the Roman world. To aid in this development, the Romans established a "religion of culture," a religion that appealed to all Romans -- it literally surrounded them. It was only later, around the 2nd century A.D., that this "religion of culture" was attacked by an outside force the Romans seemed to have misunderstood, and the result was by the end of the fourth century, a new "culture of religion."

As we all know, Rome eventually went into decline and then fell. The date usually assigned to the fall is A.D. 476. While some historians have pointed to the growing incidence of barbarian invasions, others have hinted that the mixing of different peoples during waves of conquest may have forced the Romans to commit "racial suicide." The Romans were known for their knack of killing off internal political rivals, thus leaving a gap in the number of individuals who could rule effectively. Furthermore, as time passed Roman society became a society of gross disparity -- a two class system of the very rich and the very poor. With this

in mind, some historians have suggested that Rome's ultimate failure was due to the non-existence of a strong middle class. Still others have suggested that the Roman aristocracy were poisoned by the lead in their drinking vessels, or that there was a shortage of manpower, or that the Romans just got too lazy. And, of course, the appearance and growth of Christianity also contributed to Rome's decline and eventual fall.

Throughout history, scholars have looked to ancient Rome – the Rome of both the Republic and the Empire – in order to draw upon the experience of Rome's political and social organization. True, classical Greece was glorified for its artistic, philosophic and cultural achievements but it has been Rome that has really earned all the glory. And we don't have to look very far in order to determine why. The Romans managed to maintain their world for more than one thousand years. The Greeks, even under the brilliance of a Cleisthenes or a Pericles or an Alexander, could not maintain the brilliance of their world view for more than a handful of centuries at best.

We can look back at the Romans with hope that we will not make the same errors. Rome, then, appears as a lesson, a paradigm and a model of what we moderns ought to do. It was the Roman historian Titus Livius, or Livy (59 B.C.-A.D. 17) who admitted that: "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 yourself and your country both examples and warnings; fine things to take as models, base things rotten through and through, to avoid." Given what I have said previously, perhaps such a statement could only have been uttered by a Roman.

Today, some historians and "advanced" thinkers have looked to the decline of Roman civilization in order to voice their opinions that the civilization of the West is destined for a similar fate. They look to Greece, Rome, the Holy Roman Empire, the British Empire, the former Soviet Union and the United States and argue that history indeed is cyclical, that our destiny is somehow preordained from birth to live, flourish and then decline and die. Like any other civilization, America will collapse. Watergate, the Iran-Contra Affair, Bart Simpsonitis, Murphy Brownism, the Marv Albert episode, Monica-gate, the tragedy at Columbine, the decline in family values and morality, our loss of faith in the government, loss of faith in anything pure and in general, a collective anxiety about what the future may hold is all held as evidence that we are indeed a sick civilization and close to death. Oddly enough, such an opinion is not new and has been argued in this country at one time or another since the founding of the American Republic more than two centuries ago.

Early Rome, 753-509 B.C.

By about 750 B.C. the Greeks had established about fifty city-states on the southern peninsula of Italy. To the north lived the tribes of the [Etruscans](#). It is not known how the Etruscans came to occupy the northern territory of Italy (Tuscany). They are not of Indo-European origin and they most likely came from the Near East if not the Orient (this was the argument of [Herodotus](#)). In many respects, the culture of the Etruscans was very similar to that of Mycenae in Greece (on Mycenae, see [Lecture 5](#)). Their cities, twelve in number, were autonomous like the city-states of Sumer and Archaic Greece and were combined in a loose organization which historians have referred to as the Etruscan Confederacy. Material objects found from archeological digs of Etruscan city-states illuminate the luxury and opulence of the Etruscan aristocracy.

As a people, the Etruscans played hard and worked hard. They were not a contemplative sort but were always busy. They were practical and realistic, habits of mind which we will see became specifically Roman traits as well. Trite as it may sound, we could argue that whereas the Greeks were thinkers, the Romans were doers.

The Romans adopted many Etruscan customs over the years. They used the Etruscan alphabet, which the Etruscans had borrowed from the Greeks. The symbol of the Etruscan king's right to execute his subjects was a bundle of rods and an axe: the *fascēs* (from which Mussolini created the Fascisti in the 20th century). The Romans even adopted the Etruscan toga. The vault and the arch were Etruscan in origin as were gladiatorial contests.

Etruscan power and influence over the city of Rome was indeed strong and thanks to their trading interests, the city began to grow. By the mid-6th century, temples and public buildings could be found throughout the city. The Capitoline Hill became the religious center of the city and the Forum, formerly a cemetery, became a public meeting place, thus serving a similar role as the *agora* had at Athens.

It is unclear how and why the Romans ended the era of Etruscan superiority but somehow Rome managed to free itself from the kings to the north and establish their own unique culture. What is noticeable is the manner in which the Romans overcame the Etruscans. Rather than simply conquer these people, the Romans assimilated them into the Roman world. I mention this because this idea of "assimilation" will become a key to both Roman success and failure. The Greeks had the habit of conquering territories and then importing their culture, a process which, during the age of Alexander and after, we can identify as Hellenization. The Romans conquered territories as well but they were much more willing to bring the conquered peoples into the Roman world as partners. I suppose we could say they Romanized these people by giving them an "offer they couldn't refuse."

Early Roman history – a history that dates from 509 B.C., when the Etruscan kings succumbed to Rome – is an uneven mixture of fact and myth. Livy was aware of the problems of writing a history of Rome, when he admitted that: "Events before Rome was born have come down to us in old tales with more of the charm of poetry than of sound historical record, and such traditions I propose neither to affirm nor refute." One of those tales was that of [Romulus and Remus](#). Livy was also careful to add that Roman legends depicted men and women not as they were, but as they ought to be. In other words, Livy's history is a moral tale, told to countless generations of Roman citizens.

According to Roman legend, the Romans expelled the Etruscan king [Tarquin the Proud](#) from Rome around 509 B.C. and founded the Roman Republic. In the following years, the Romans fought numerous wars with their neighbors on the Italian peninsula. They became tenacious soldiers, Stoic soldiers, a Roman trait. War also meant diplomacy and the Romans quickly showed their excellence in that art. They knew the viability of alliances and provided leadership for their allies, something the Greeks could never quite do for themselves.

With the Etruscan monarchy at an end, the dignity of the Senate and the Curiate Assembly (both created during the Etruscan Confederacy) was restored. However, there was no executive office. Among the most powerful families it was decided that extraordinary powers be given to two men, who would eventually be called consuls. The reason the Romans opted for two

executives was an obvious attempt to prevent tyranny. Both consuls possessed the highest military and civil authority in the state. They could only serve for one year at a time. Only much later was it agreed that there be at least a ten year interval between terms so as to prevent "unbridled ambition."

Rome's founding also coincided with war. One of the earliest wars was with two tribes, the Aequi and the Volsci. From this war arose the Roman legend of Cincinnatus. When the Aequi launched an invasion, the Romans called on Cincinnatus to become dictator, that is, he was given ultimate powers for a specified period of time. The Roman officials found Cincinnatus working his farm. He listened to the appeal of the officials, dropped his plow, and accepted the office offered to him. As legend has it, fifteen days later, and after he had defeated the Aequi, Cincinnatus returned to his farm, picked up his plow, and continued to plow his fields. This was the ideal Roman citizen -- a man of simplicity who places his duty to Rome before personal interest or wealth.

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