

Criticism of livy's the early history of rome



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Livy's *The Early History of Rome* chronicles the rise of the Roman Empire, from its founding (traditionally dated to 753 BC) through the reign of Augustus Caesar in his own time. His catalogue details the accomplishments and failures of major Roman figures and puts forth a model of greatness for all of Rome to follow. For Livy, "History is...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." (30) His aim was to dictate history without bias. Livy, however, fails to achieve this goal. By presenting biased representations of Romulus and Tarquinius Superbus, two of the seven legendary kings of Rome, he denies the general populace the opportunity to draw the same sort of conclusions that he made in constructing his histories. Instead, Livy presents a pre-constructed model of the ideal Roman citizen and leader, basing his judgments primarily on military prowess and strength. Livy initiates his history with the foundation of Rome and the clash between Romulus, arguably the most notable Roman in history, and his brother Remus. Livy wastes no time in laying praise upon the two, commenting on their Robin Hood-like traits as they both "took to attacking robbers and sharing their stolen goods with their friends." (35) In describing the settling of what was to become Rome, Livy brushes on the fight between Romulus and Remus, which culminated in the death of Remus. Although Livy initially describes the quarrel without much detail, he follows by retelling it in another, "commoner" way, saying that "Romulus killed [Remus] in a fit of rage, adding the threat, 'So perish whoever else shall overleap my battlements.'" (37) By adding this extraneous recount of the story, Livy establishes the brutal tradition of war and aggression that came

to define the Roman Empire as time progressed. Rome itself came to existence through an extreme display of force and power, and Romulus furthered his rule by the same means. In detailing the conquer of Veii, an Etruscan town neighboring Rome, Livy notes, " In the fight which ensued, Romulus used no strategy; the sheer power of his veteran troops sufficed for victory," (48) and mentions how Romulus's soldiers wasted Veii's surrounding cultivated land merely for revenge. Overwhelming strength and vicious strategies became the bedrock of the modern Roman military, and the Roman people had grown to expect it. Livy describes Romulus as a great citizen because he was a man of exemplary strength and military prowess, completely disregarding his moral character. By allowing such a narrow scope of Romulus's abilities measure his worth as a citizen, Livy pushes a strict definition onto his audience outlining what makes a Roman citizen great, thereby prohibiting his readers to think freely. Livy's depiction of Romulus obviously goes a step further than that of an objective historian, as he showers praise on the founder of Rome. Although Livy inserts minute instances of Romulus's weak moments, such as when he fled the Sabines, he does so only to humanize the great hero. Following a short retreat, Livy brilliantly recreates a speech given by Romulus, clearly adding a slight artistic touch to emphasize the leader's greatness. Livy writes, As [Romulus] rode, he waved his sword above his head and shouted, '...Father of Gods and men, suffer them not to set foot on the spot where now we stand. Banish fear from Roman hearts and stop their shameful retreat.'... It was almost as if he felt that his prayer was granted: a moment later, ' Turn on them, Romans,' he cried, ' and fight once more. Jupiter himself commands it.' The Romans obeyed what they believed to be the voice from heaven. They

rallied, and Romulus thrust his way forward to the van. (45) Livy misses no opportunity to praise the actions of Romulus and is quick to liken his actions and characteristics to those of the gods. Livy goes on to even claim that Romulus's birth and entire existence was divine, and his death (or disappearance) was majestic: " One day...a storm burst, with violent thunder. A cloud enveloped [Romulus] so thick that it hid him from the eyes of everyone present; and from that moment he was never seen again upon earth." (48-49) Livy echoes this sense of divinity and praise for Romulus throughout his entire work. He bestows a regal title on Romulus and upholds him as a paradigm for greatness to be followed by all future Roman leaders. The attributes relating to Tarquin's effectiveness as a leader hardly stray off the path set forth by Romulus. Although Livy discusses Tarquin's failures as a political ruler, at no point does he question his leadership in battle. Livy claims, " However lawless and tyrannical Tarquin may have been as a monarch in his own country, as a war leader he did fine work. Indeed, his fame as a soldier might have equaled that of his predecessors." (94) Once again, Livy stresses the significance of military skill and the importance of expanding the empire through conquest. Furthermore, Tarquin's overwhelming ambition manifested itself in brutal military advance and aggression, once again conveying Livy's idea of how the Roman Empire is to be defined. Tarquin came to power in a way similar to Romulus: through brute force. Just as Romulus seized power from his brother Remus, Tarquin too took the throne from Servius through battle. His characteristics as described by Livy emulate those of Romulus and other kings of Rome, and his persona, although corrupt, fits Livy's model of the ideal Roman ruler. Again, Livy does not hesitate to include his own opinions. Livy's portrayal of

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Tarquin's rule outside of his military talent strays a great deal from that of Romulus and other Roman kings. His harsh and negatively biased narrative effectively strips the reader of the ability to make an uninfluenced judgment of Tarquin's merits as a leader. Livy even goes so far to say that after Servius's death, " never again was a Roman king to rule in accordance with humanity and justice." (90) Given Tarquin's position as the successor of Servius, one is immediately led to believe that he is unjust, according to Livy's blanket statement. Readers who knew nothing of Tarquin begin to understand him only in the manner in which Livy presents him. Subtleties such as this make it difficult to overlook certain biases in the writing in order to truly comprehend the merit of Tarquin. Livy's Early History of Rome slips away from being an accurate historical account into a biased depiction of Rome's former leaders. Livy's contradiction with himself does not lie in his analysis, but in the simple fact that he even presents one. He could very well be correct in characterizing Tarquin as an unjust ruler and in presenting Romulus as a king who was divine in every manner. It could be true that Tarquin acquired the throne through an unjust display of power and immoral actions. Although Livy's accuracy is debatable, the conclusions he draws regarding morality and justice pushes The Early History of Rome past the point of an objective account of Rome's history. By including his own opinions, Livy doesn't allow people to analyze this information for themselves. By tainting his history with his own bias, Livy is able to present history in a manner through which his conception of good will be unquestionably inherited by the whole of his audience. Livy follows the definition of his opinion of history in that he comes to his own conclusions on the basis of the monument delivered to him. But he departs from his own

simple characterization of history even in the preface of his catalogue, saying “ I do honestly believe that no country has ever been greater or purer than [Rome] or richer in good citizens and noble deeds.” (30) The insertion of an opinion such as this into the preface establishes a slant to Livy's writing, which he continues to insert into the whole of his histories. Livy's conclusions overshadow the premises, and in doing so, he robs the reader of the opportunity to decipher, for himself, the quality of Rome. He may be completely right in his opinions, but in order to agree with his own conception of what history should be, his opinions should have remained separate from The Early History of Rome, without clouding over the basic, factual aspects of its grand history. Although Livy interprets history as a means to which conclusions regarding good and success are to be determined, The Early History of Rome robs people of their ability to interpret facts for themselves. The morality and greatness of both Romulus and Tarquinius Superbus are decided in Livy's writing before the reader even has a chance to make judgments for his/herself. Without doubt, Livy's efforts chronicle major moments in Roman history, and the work in itself is an amazing achievement. Cataloguing the years of Roman history consolidated rumor and legend into fact, creating a model for Rome to follow. Livy's only error in this vast undertaking was in imprinting his own conception of morality and justice onto his work, an error that pulls the reader away from active thought and engaging debate. In doing so, Livy may have helped solidify a better Rome, but it would have been a Rome with less of a conception of why certain things are just, and more of a flat, basely concluded concept of justice. Works Cited: Livy. Early history of Rome books

I-V of The history of Rome from its foundations. London: Penguin Books, 2002.