

Livy's View of the Roman National Character

As early as 1663, Francis Pope named his plantation, in what would later become Washington, DC, "Rome" and renamed Goose Creek "Tiber", a local hill "Capitolium", an example of the way in which the colonists would draw upon ancient Rome for names, architecture and ideas. The founding fathers often called America "the New Rome", a place where, as Charles Lee said to Patrick Henry, Roman republican ideals were being realized.

The Roman historian Livy (Titus Livius, 59 BC-AD 17) lived at the juncture of the breakdown of the Roman Republic and the rise of the Roman Empire. His 142 book History of Rome from 753 to 9 BC (35 books now extant, the rest epitomes) was one of the most read Latin authors by early American colonists, partly because he wrote about the Roman national character and his unique view of how that character was formed.

"National character" is no longer considered a valid term, nations may not really have specific national characters, but many think they do. The ancients believed states or peoples had a national character and that it arose one of 3 ways:

- 1) innate/racial: Aristotle believed that all non-Greeks were barbarous and suited to be slaves; Romans believed that Carthaginians were perfidious.
- 2) influence of geography/climate: e.g., that Northern tribes were vigorous but dumb
- 3) influence of institutions and national norms based on political and family life.

The Greek historian Polybios believed that Roman institutions (e.g., division of government into senate, assemblies and magistrates, each with its own powers) made the Romans great, and the architects of the American constitution read this with especial care and interest. Livy has a speaker visiting Rome in 167 BC talk about the nature of Athenians vs Spartans, Africans vs Gauls, but these have become literary topoi, not necessarily deeply believed by those who cite them. And Livy does speak about the salubrious situation of Rome and its strategic position, in a passage taken over from Cicero. But that is not where Livy's emphasis lies.

There was a tendency among Roman writers to feel that early Rome had sprung fully formed from the beginning, that Romulus and the rest of the kings were gentlemen. Cicero has the fourth king (c. 650 BC) bring in Greek learning, so Rome bursts into flower almost immediately through Greek culture. Dionysios of Halicarnassos, a contemporary of Livy who covers the same period as he, shows Rome as a Greek foundation, with Evander ("good man" in Greek) welcoming Heracles, who destroys, on the spot of Rome, Cacus ("bad man") and says Latin is an Aeolic dialect of Greek. Plutarch makes a similar point when he derives "Talassio", the shout that accompanies a Roman wedding procession, from the Greek verb "to spin".

This notion of Romans as really Greeks probably did not spring from Roman attempts to link their history with Greek history but from Greek attempts to explain the foundation of another Greek city. Greeks saw cities as founded by a single, wise man, who created it almost instantaneously, with a full set of laws and institutions. "Roma" they explained as a Greek word (7 different Greek words were suggested by Plutarch as possibles - all connected with figures of Greek legend.) The Romulus and Remus story itself comes from a little known Greek writer of the 3rd century BC, Diocles of Peparethos.

Greeks found nothing strange about the Romans and admitted them freely to, e.g., the Isthmian games, since they saw them as Greek. Early Roman history is a blatant borrowing of Greek history and legend, by Greek writers of the 3rd and 2nd century. Livy has to incorporate these stories, but he rejects the notion of Romans being Greeks. Livy doesn't like Greeks and says they use their tongues more than anything else. We see this attitude in his digression on Alexander the Great in Book 9. Livy's contemporaries had said that Alexander, had he turned westward rather than eastward, would have taken over Italy. Livy says Alexander would have been wiped out.

As to where King Numa got his wisdom, most claimed it came from Pythagoras, but Livy points out that Pythagoras came to Italy about 500 BC and Numa lived about 700 BC, so a meeting is impossible on chronological grounds. Even if that were not so, however, asks Livy, how would Numa have known about Pythagoras, or reached him, or talked to him in a common language. More important, according to Livy, Numa didn't need Pythagoras because Numa was a good solid Sabine; that's where he got his wisdom.

Native virtues, not Greeks, explain, says Livy, Roman success. From the humble origins established by Romulus when he set up Rome as a place of asylum for runaway slaves, Rome evolved little by little by hard work. When Brutus drove out the last of the kings and established the Republic, Romans were ready for liberty (as they would not have been 2 centuries before). Lowly, crummy people had evolved into the greatest nation on earth - a model, thus, for the American founding fathers, who called themselves "the New Romans."

Livy didn't see Rome developed as the result of a few geniuses. Cato the Elder's history of early Rome often does not even give the names of early Romans who accomplished great feats; it was simply "the consul". Livy believes it was the people as a whole, despite the fact that in his own day the gap was growing ever greater between the rich, politically powerful the poor, who were no longer important in the political process. Augustus, in the forum he built, surrounded the perimeter with the statues of Roman greats from the past - put his own statue in the middle.

The Roman writer Sallust, unlike Livy, saw Roman history as a result of great individuals. Livy was popular in colonial America precisely because he presented simple, ordinary low-born people as the creators of Rome's great destiny. The soldier-farmer ethos, as exemplified in Cincinnatus, provided a model of life lived on the land. When, in 1663, the American colonist Sir William Berkeley visited England and heard comments about the lowliness of Americans, he said that he hoped that was so because that was why and how Rome came to be so great. When, in 1787, Thomas Jefferson's daughter wrote her father from Paris that Livy was giving her fits and she could not read him without the help of a tutor, Jefferson responded by return mail that he was distressed that she needed help to read her Livy. Part of her developing as a true American was to learn to rely on herself to read the author who had been so important in shaping the minds & ideals of the founding fathers.