

# The Birth of the Republic

Rome's astonishing ascent was not based wholly or even mostly on her military exploits, but on the moral sensibilities of her people and the limitation of government power.

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by *Steve Bonta*

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*This is the first installment in a series of articles on the rise and fall of the Roman Republic.*

As with most ancient nations, the origins of Rome are clouded by legend. The first inhabitants of what became the city-state of Rome may have been refugees from defeated Troy, led by the semi-legendary hero Aeneas. Rome's greatest poet, Virgil, said as much in his immortal epic, the *Aeneid*, and Roman historians, such as Appian and Livy, claimed the same.

By all accounts, Rome in the eighth century B.C. was little more than an armed camp of brigands. Yet within seven hundred years, this squalid, warlike settlement became the greatest man-made power the world had ever seen, mistress of most of Europe, North Africa, Asia Minor and the Middle East. Ancient Rome was the incubator for Christianity, the repository of Western Civilization for over a thousand years, and the setting for much of the greatest historical drama — and many of the most extraordinary characters — ever to occupy the human stage.

Rome rose to unexampled heights, only to fall with a shock that still reverberates across the centuries. Unlike the great civilizations that preceded her — Egypt, Elam, Sumer, Babylon, Carthage and others — Rome's legacy was far more than jumbled ruins. Of Rome we preserve a vast literature, a code of laws, and many of our political, cultural, artistic and religious forms. For instead of collapsing utterly, like its predecessors, Rome was first broken into fragments and then transmuted into the political and religious institutions that served as a foundation for modern Western civilization.

America's Founding Fathers, as well as their European contemporaries, were fascinated with Rome, for in the 18th century the Western world had only recently

attained the wealth, power and vitality of Roman civilization at its peak. In the more than two centuries since the American founding, American and European civilization have far outstripped and eclipsed the achievements of ancient Rome. But the mystique of Rome persists. The lessons of the rise and fall of Rome resonate in our age, when a single power consumed by imperialistic ambition and cankered by moral decay — the United States of America — seems to be slouching down the same path to decline that the Romans followed.

Of the time between the traditional founding of Rome around 753 B.C. with the ascent of Romulus and the birth of the Roman Republic in about 509 B.C. with the expulsion of the Tarquins, we know nothing not colored by legend. Yet there is no reason to believe that Romulus did not exist, or that he was not, as Plutarch and Livy both assert, the first Roman king. Romulus is depicted as a violent, warlike individual, the most ruthless member of a very rough crowd. The stories of his murder of Remus, his brother, and his war with the Sabines over the rape of the Sabine women by his men, whether true or not, are certainly in keeping with the warlike spirit the Romans cultivated, from the very foundation of their city.

## State of War

With only a few brief interludes, Rome was perpetually at war from the time of the Tarquins to the ascent of Caesar Augustus. In Alexander Hamilton's words, she "never sated of carnage and conquest." Like Sparta, Rome, both as a monarchy and as a republic, was organized along military lines. Every able-bodied Roman male saw annual military service throughout his young adult years, until the time of Marius in the late second century B.C. when Rome professionalized her military. So pervasive was the military in Roman political culture that even the senators were known as "conscript fathers." Much

of Rome's success can be attributed to her fanatical attention to military order and to the cultivation of virtues conducive to military strength: unswerving loyalty, obedience, frugality, and disregard for peril to life and limb.

From her remotest beginnings, Rome enjoyed an almost uninterrupted string of military successes, at first over hostile neighbors like the Aequans, the Volscians and the Samnites, and later against overseas rivals like Carthage, Macedonia and Pontus. Rome's military setbacks, during the seven and a half centuries between her founding and the destruction of the legions of Varro by the Germans at the Battle of Teutoburg Forest in 9 A.D., were few and memorable. They included the sacking of Rome by the Gauls in about 390 B.C.; the humiliation under the Samnite yoke at Caudine Forks in 321 B.C. (which was speedily avenged by an overwhelming Roman reprisal); the setbacks against Pyrrhus, king of Epirus, and Hannibal, the Carthaginian general; the challenge of Mithridates, king of Pontus; Spartacus' short-lived slave revolt; and the slaughter of Crassus and his legions by the Parthians in 53 B.C. at Carrhae.

But for the most part, Roman military history is a dreary catalog of one-sided battles with outmatched and poorly organized foes, of the destruction or absorption of entire nations into the expanding Roman state, and of almost superhuman resilience in rebounding from rare defeats that would have broken the back of any other people, such as the disaster at Cannae in 216 B.C., where Hannibal's forces cut down the flower of Rome's entire military.

## Political Strength

But the ascent of Rome was not due wholly or even mostly to her military successes.

Rome, in her evolution from armed camp to monarchy to republic to empire, discovered a formula for limiting the power of government by dividing it among several different magistrates and

elected bodies. The Roman Republic also developed a written code of laws that defined and protected the rights of Roman citizens. The exquisitely balanced Roman state conferred an extraordinary degree of political stability, while granting to Roman citizens a degree of personal liberty almost unknown in human history before that time. The Roman state was, wrote Polybius, “a union which is strong enough to withstand all emergencies, so that it is impossible to find a better form of constitution than this.”

Many of the institutions of the Roman republican government, as well as the roots of the distinctive Roman culture, developed well before the founding of the republic itself. The Senate, Rome’s oldest government body, was apparently founded by Romulus. It may have been patterned after the Gerousia, a governing body of Sparta, and also resembled the Athenian Areopagus.

Rome’s second king, Numa Pompilius — a Sabine statesman who refused an offer of the kingship until a large body of his fellow-citizens persuaded him to accept — set about civilizing the Romans and refining the crude despotism of his predecessor. “The first thing he did at the entrance into government,” Plutarch relates, “was to dismiss the band of three hundred men which had been Romulus’ life-guard ... saying that he would not distrust those who put confidence in him; nor rule over a people that distrusted him.”

Numa forbade the use of any graven image in the worship of God, a practice that seems to have persisted for more than a century after his death. He instituted many other religious reforms, including the creation of the Vestal Virgins, and lived a life of conspicuous piety that many of his

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subjects were pleased to emulate.

Numa was by disposition a man of peace, and wanted to reduce the Romans’ love of violence and warfare. He instituted the order of the Fetiats, a college of priests whose special task it was, in Plutarch’s words, to “put a stop to disputes by conference and by speech; for it was not allowable to take up arms until they had declared all hopes of accommodation



**The Vestal Virgins** were the guardians of the sacred fire at the temple of the goddess Vesta that came to symbolize the Roman state. Violation of their oath of virginity was punished by being buried alive.

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to be at an end.” The Fetials endured until the late Roman Empire, providing a check of sorts on the power of the Roman state to go to war.

During his reign, at least, Numa appears to have been successful in taming the warlike disposition of his people, even if it was seldom assuaged thereafter. It was the custom in Rome to shut the doors of the

temple of the god Janus during times of peace, a custom that, after Numa, was put into practice only once — during the consulship of Marcus Atilius and Titus Manlius in the third century B.C. — in all of the centuries leading up to the reign of Caesar Augustus. Wrote Plutarch with admiration:

During the reign of Numa, those gates were never seen open a single day, but continued constantly shut for a space of forty-three years together, such an entire and universal cessation of war existed. For not only had the people of Rome itself been softened and charmed into a peaceful temper by the just and mild rule of a pacific prince, but even the neighboring cities, as if some salubrious and gen-

tle air had blown from Rome upon them, began to experience a change of feeling, and partook in the general longing for the sweets of peace and order.... For during the whole reign of Numa, there was neither war, nor sedition, nor innovation in the state, nor any envy or ill-will to his person, nor plot or conspiracy from views of ambition.

## **Kings and Despots**

Unfortunately, this state of affairs did not outlive Numa himself. Tullus Hostilius, his immediate successor, was, according to Livy, “not only unlike the preceding king, but was even of a more warlike disposition than Romulus.... Thinking, therefore, that the state was becoming languid through quiet, he everywhere sought for pretexts for stirring up war.” Before long, he succeeded in provoking a war with the Albans,



**Rome triumphant:** The pageantry of a Roman military triumph was a common sight in the streets of ancient Rome. The Roman Republic, almost incessantly at war, became the most formidable military power the world had ever seen.

a closely related neighboring nation. The war ended with the Roman destruction of Alba, and the permanent enmity, towards Rome, of Alba's allies.

After the Alban conflict, Tullus declared war against the Sabines, which resulted in a speedy Roman victory. In all, the reign of Tullus, which lasted 32 years, was applauded by Livy for its "great military renown." It set the pattern, to be followed by Rome ever after, of incessant warfare with her neighbors, and aggressive territorial expansion.

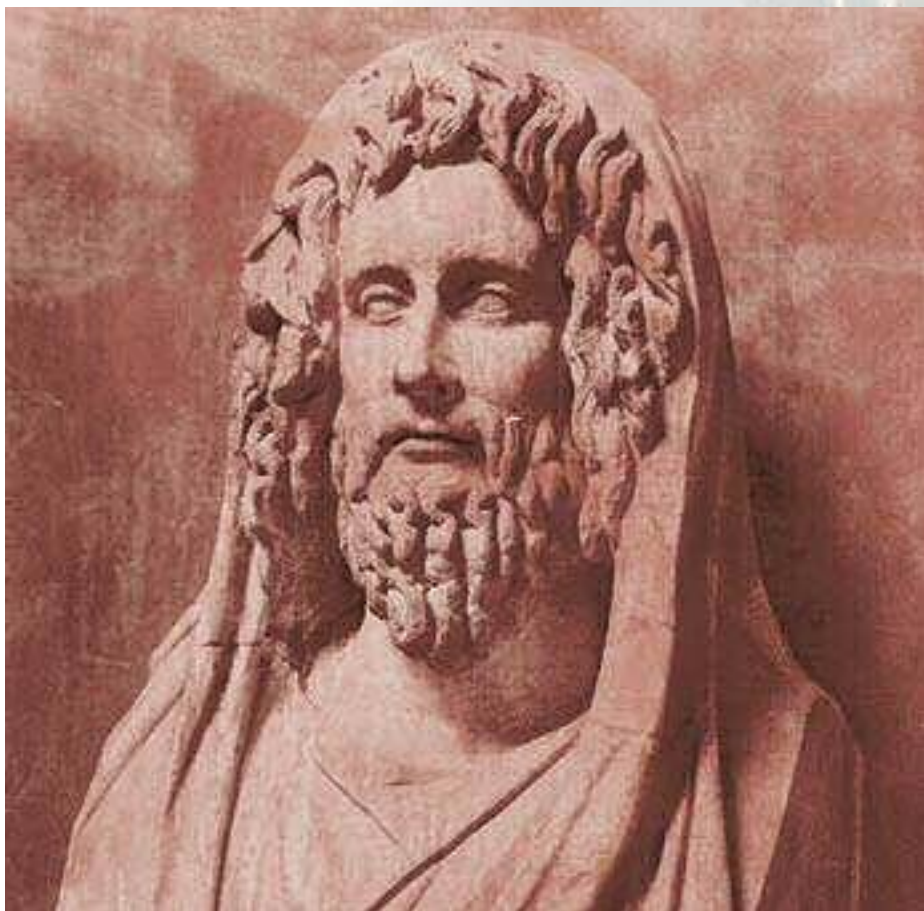
The four kings that followed Tullus continued the Roman tradition of endless war, with campaigns against formidable foes like the Veii, the Aequans and the Volscians. The latter two in particular fought the Romans for generations before finally being vanquished and absorbed into the burgeoning Roman state.

The last king of early Rome, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus ("Tarquin the Proud"), was a vicious despot who came to power by murdering his predecessor, the aged monarch Servius Tullius. Tarquin is said to have been aided in his misdeed by Tullius' daughter Tullia, with whom he had developed an adulterous liaison. Tullia found her father's lifeless body in the street outside the Senate where Tarquin had personally cast it, whereupon she triumphantly drove her chariot over it. She even, according to Livy, carried off a portion of her father's remains to be offered up to her household gods.

Tarquin lost no time clamping down on the Roman state. He purged the government of suspected rivals, including many senior senators, and even had a number of his own relatives murdered. He surrounded himself with an armed entourage, since, in Livy's estimation, "he had no claim to the kingdom except by force, inasmuch as he reigned without either the order of the people or the sanction of the senate." Like most tyrants, Tarquin was preoccupied with war and with building a monument to himself, in this case an immense temple of Jupiter intended to be the most magnificent building in the ancient world.

### Rise of the Republic

Tarquin's downfall was as dramatic as his seizure of power. His youngest son Sextus conceived an illicit passion for Lucretia, the wife of a Roman aristocrat related to Tarquin himself. While Lucretia's husband



**Reluctant king:** Numa Pompilius, Rome's second and greatest king, at first refused the offer of kingship. His reign was the most peaceful period in Rome's history, and was marked by many religious reforms.

## For the Serious Student

The original sources for Rome's semi-legendary early history are many, but two in particular stand out, as much for their literary quality as for their historical interest: Livy and Plutarch. Titus Livius or Livy was, if not the greatest, certainly the most comprehensive source for Roman history, from the founding of Rome up to the late republican period. As with most ancient authors, much of Livy's Roman history has been lost, but the remaining portions are packed with fascinating details and vivid descriptions of pivotal events like the expulsion of the Tarquins. In the American Founders' day, Livy was required reading for advanced Latin students. Nowadays, the complete surviving works of Livy are available in very readable translation, and are one of the best introductions to both the history and culture of early Rome.

Plutarch, a Greek who compiled his famous book of parallel biographies of ancient Greeks and Romans in the early 2nd century A.D., is one of the best-loved writers of all time. His brief but engaging sketches portray his subjects with honesty and affection; their failings and strengths are both held up for the reader to evaluate. Still the best translation of Plutarch's *Lives* — one of the most widely read books in early America — is the so-called Dryden translation. Compiled by poet John Dryden in the late 1600s and later edited by scholar Arthur Clough in the mid-19th century, this masterly translation is still in print in a two-volume Modern Library Classics edition. ■

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was away, Sextus crept into her chamber and violated her at the point of a sword. Lucretia immediately sent for her father and husband, enjoining each to bring a trustworthy friend. Accordingly her father brought Publius Valerius and her husband summoned Lucius Junius Brutus, who happened to be a disaffected nephew of Tarquin. The distraught Lucretia informed the four men what had happened and, as an affirmation of her testimony, committed suicide on the spot, after securing their promise that the guilty party would suffer

sword, and all other means in my power; nor shall I ever suffer them or any other to reign at Rome.” He then led the other three in the same oath, and they then bore Lucretia’s body to the Forum, where they raised a revolt against the Tarquins. After a 25-year reign of terror, Tarquin the Proud was expelled from Rome, and Brutus and Collatinus, Lucretia’s husband, elected Rome’s first consuls.

Lucius Junius Brutus is thus remembered as the father of the Roman Republic. After the expulsion of the Tarquins, he and all

for his crime.

It was Brutus who drew Lucretia’s dagger from the self-inflicted wound, and, holding it aloft, reputedly said: “By this blood, most pure before the pollution of royal villainy, I swear, and I call upon you, O gods, to witness my oath that I shall pursue Lucius Tarquin the Proud, his wicked wife, and all their race with fire,

Rome took an oath never to allow another king to reign over Rome. The new state, called a “res publica” (“people’s thing”) in Latin, was something new: a form of government that protected the rights of its citizens while being itself limited by laws and by the diffusion of its powers into many different magistrates and governing bodies. Brutus’ commitment to the new republic was so unshakeable that he even presided over the execution of several of his own sons and nephews after finding them guilty of conspiring with agents of the exiled Tarquin to reinstall the monarchy. He eventually perished on the battlefield in hand-to-hand combat with the son of Tarquinius Superbus, during one of several unsuccessful attempts by the Tarquins to reconquer Rome.

His consular colleague Collatinus, because of bearing the surname Tarquinius, soon left office and voluntarily went into exile, to remove any apprehensions that another Tarquin might usurp power. His place was taken by Publius Valerius, the other witness to Lucretia’s suicide,



Roman soldier of the First Class



Roman soldier of the Second Class

and usually reckoned along with L. Brutus as Rome's most important founding father.

Plutarch compared Publius Valerius, afterwards nicknamed Poplicola ("lover of the people"), to Solon, the great law-giver of Athens. Indeed, Publius proved to be more of a statesman than his erstwhile colleague Brutus, while being as strong a partisan of popular liberty. When Publius heard that some had criticized him for his stately house on a hill overlooking the Forum, he ordered the house pulled down, and moved in with friends until furnished with a more modest house of his own.

Publius also made substantial reforms in Roman law to shore up the new republican government and to fortify the rights of the people against depredations by the state. He appointed 164 new senators to fill the vacancies of those purged by Tarquin. He enacted a law permitting offenders convicted by the consuls to appeal their sentences directly to the people, a device that, by depending on the doubtful ability of the populace to deliberate en masse, was probably much less effective as a check on state power than it was intended to be. He also instituted the death penalty for usurping any public office without the people's consent and provided for tax relief for the very poor.

Such measures may smack more of democratic excess than of true republican government. Indeed, while Rome eventually achieved the best-balanced form of government in the ancient world and deserved the appellation of republic, she shared with most other ancient popular states the fatal deficiency of allowing the masses to assemble and deliberate directly. In the long run, this handicap, together with certain other flaws, was to doom the Roman Republic. But it must be borne in mind that, when Western Civilization was in its infancy, any degree of popular govern-

ment was probably a distinct improvement over the suffocating despotism that held the rest of the human race in thrall.

With the career and reforms of Publius Valerius — whose name in a latter age was used by the authors of *The Federalist Papers* as an enlightened pseudonym — the Roman Republic was off to a brilliant beginning. Poplicola, after successfully

leading Rome in a series of wars instigated mostly by the vindictive Tarquins, stepped down from the consulship and died, having lived a life that "so far as human life may be, had been full of all that is good and honorable," in Plutarch's admiring terminology. But the Roman Republic was to outlive its founders by many centuries, and its legacy by millennia. ■



**Rome on the ropes:** The sacking of Rome by the Gauls in circa 390 B.C. was a rare instance of Roman military defeat, and the only time the Eternal City was breached by a foreign military invader until the last years of the Empire in the Fifth Century A.D.