

*Livy in Historiography:
Roman History as Justification
and Approval for the Augustan Settlement*

by *Vernon A. McGuffee*

Livy lived from about 57 b.c. to 17 a.d.—a period of vast recuperation and transformation in Roman history. Rome had to revive itself from the internal strife of 146 to 31 b.c. During this period, civil and class warfare ravaged the country leaving a fear of both autocratic tyranny and the vulnerability of decentralization. The Augustan solution ended this dilemma. But eventually the question of the cure being more harmful than the disease arose. Livy, however, thought not. To assuage doubts of the solution's appropriate nature, he wrote about the creation of the early republic in a way that showed the necessity for such action. Indeed, Livy's *Roman History*, with its Stoic foundations, can best be understood as a justification of Octavian's methods through historical example.

Livy was a known Stoic whose personal beliefs strongly penetrated his work. One can see the relationship between Stoicism and history when looking at P.G. Walsh's description of this particular doctrine.

The central doctrine of Stoic physics—that there is an essential harmony in matter, directed by a material god immanent in it—thus surveyed from the viewpoint of ethics; and the man who follows reason and virtue, being in harmony with the universe, inevitably succeeds, where as he who espouses rashness inevitably fails.¹

Logically, Livy used this belief to derive from history what he could not necessarily know. Before the Second Punic War, Romans reiterated their history through the oral tradition—surely distorted by time and revision to say the least. From what they understood, Stoics generally saw the first century of the republic as the greatest period of Roman history. Lack of corruption

gave the city strength.² Livy expounded upon this and professed that his contemporaries, living in a debauched society, could never reach the level of greatness achieved by their ancestors.³ However, the past could be used not only as an anodyne to the present, but also as a way to improve society. Again, Walsh speaks insightfully:

...moral and patriotic considerations are unified for didactic purposes to demonstrate to posterity that national greatness cannot be achieved without the possession, especially by the leading men of the state, the attributes which promote a healthy morality and wisdom in external and domestic politics.⁴

By focusing upon leaders, Livy reached what he considered the heart of history to show where Rome succeeded and failed. Octavian, as a moral figure, seemed to represent a new beginning for Roman greatness.

After crushing all serious opposition, Octavian began his reign in 31 b.c. and established a period of peace. Like the Stoics, he too saw the early Roman republic as the greatest era of Roman history. The Romans believed that after the first century of the republic's existence, simplicity and virtue evolved into corruption and vice. In fact, to rid Rome of such debauchery was one of the purposes for Octavian's reforms.⁵ One focus of such measures became the Senate. This body had originally been conceived to advise the magistrates. Over time, however, it became the dominant partner in the relationship—a concept totally contrary to republican ideals. Octavian used his authority to restore the patricians to their original position. To this end he ejected unworthy senators and increased the number of patricians by raising the status of many plebs. After restoring the social hierarchy to republican standards, he issued an edict that nullified the illegal *acta* of the triumvirate. These acts coupled with his mercy toward those who opposed him popularized Octavian as the harbinger of relief and peace. With the ground thus paved, on 1 January, 27 b.c., Octavian stepped down from his position of authority and handed the rule of Rome over to the senate. The

¹Alan Davies Winpear and Lenore Krump Geueke, *Augustus and the Reconstruction of Roman Government and Society* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1935; reprint, 1970), 14.

²*Ibid.*, 65.

³Walsh, 66.

⁴Winpear and Geueke, 16.

⁵P.G. Walsh, *Livy: His Historical Aest and Methods* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957).

Republic was reborn. The senate reacted by returning the authority to rule back to Octavian, who modified it to fit the needs of Rome. Now the senate presided over all of the older and wealthier provinces, relinquishing those that might present a problem to the security of the realm. On these, Augustus retained a strong grip.⁶ The problem, of course, was that Octavian (despite his obviously superior morality) had reestablished the Roman republic with the addition of kingly power within its borders. Five-hundred years past, the Romans had rejected such authority in one person. How could they accept it now? Livy indirectly dealt with this issue. To see the effects of strong and moral rulers, one needed to look back at Lucius Junius Brutus and Publicus Valerius: the founders of the commonwealth. Livy believed that the most disastrous and most common type of immorality present in a ruler was the desire to achieve kingly power. Before the expulsion of the Tarquin kings, such a government proved effective, but only because the development of Rome had not yet allowed for the superior republican form. In fact, Brutus "would have acted to the greatest injury to the public weal, if through the desire of liberty before the people were fit for it, he had wrested the kingdom from any of the preceding kings."⁷ But the ascension of the commonwealth ended rule by the one, and Brutus became one of the most lauded heroes in Roman history. Part of Brutus's greatness came from his reading of the peoples' oath that abolished all kingly power from Rome forever. No longer would the people "suffer any one to be king, nor allow any one to live at Rome from whom danger to liberty might arise." As the founder of the Roman commonwealth and a war hero, Brutus enjoyed a funeral "with all the magnificence possible at the time."⁸

Brutus's co-consul, Publicus Valerius, proved to be nearly as esteemed a republican as Brutus himself. Early on, however, Valerius's acts led the people to question his motives. After Brutus's death, Valerius exhibited reluctance to offer an election of a second consul. Furthermore, he lived upon Velian Mount which seemed an impregnable fortress. He had the

⁶Ibid., 46-9.

⁷Titus Livius, *Roman History*, translated by John Genre Freese, et. al. (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1899), 72.

⁸Ibid., 74, 79.

perfect opportunity to become king. But when the people complained, he promptly moved his residence to the foot of the mount, "where the temple of Vica Poto [the goddess of victory] now stands." Before new elections were held, he passed (as single consul) "laws regarding an appeal to the people against the magistrates, and declaring accused the life and property of anyone who should have formed the design of seizing regal authority, were welcome to the people."⁹ Public payment for his grand funeral reflected the extent of his popularity.¹⁰ Although all citizens were considered equal, a life of outstanding unselfishness meant entry into the realm of the dead with superior esteem. Rule for the good of Rome meant good fortune for all.

After Brutus and Publicus Valerius, Rome suffered a series of immoral consuls who, for Livy, exemplified the extent of disruption society must suffer at the hands of wicked power-mongers. In fact, the period of Claudius's consulship thoroughly exposed this problem. For, according to Livy, his was an era of the ascending aristocracy. The liberty of Romans declined as the number of debtors increased. The commons learned to fear a corrupt system that put their property and freedom in jeopardy. For those who could not escape, debtors' prison (and its torture chambers) ensued. Amidst this came the Volscian war and the commons' refusal to enlist in the military ranks. They would not fight for an aspiring despot. In fact, when the Volscians arrived, "the people exulted with joy, and said that the gods were coming to take vengeance on the tyranny of the patricians." Claudius thought that "if one or two [of the people] were to be seized, the rest would keep quiet." For advice, Livy informs us, the senate wisely turned its ear away from Claudius and toward Publicus Servilius who better understood the mood of the people. Servilius promptly tried to delay the discontent until after the war. He then tried to attain the military support from the commons by issuing an edict to protect soldiers' property from abduction and relieve all soldiers from debt. Thereupon, a multitude signed up to constitute an

⁹Ibid., 80.

¹⁰Ibid., 91.

army that would carry Rome to victory.¹¹

After the war, Claudius promptly reversed Servilius's decree, making both consuls appear corrupt. Popular disgust by the commons could be seen in the issue over which consul should dedicate the temple of Mercury. When the senate referred the vote to the people they chose "Marcus Laetorius, a centurion of the first rank, which... was done not so much out of respect to a person on whom an office above his rank had been conferred, as to affront the consuls." When the consuls and senate protested the commons' choice, riots broke out across the city.¹² Now that the people had risen to defend their liberty, the rule of law had been cast aside and the mob became supreme. From this, Livy clearly drew the lesson that Claudius's selfish bid for an autocratic state had destroyed the flow of the Roman republic.

Healing came slowly to the city. The resignation of the two consuls largely restored order, but not the entire confidence of the people. As Livy described it, fearful for their liberty and distrusting the patricians, the commons continued to hold nightly meetings: "As it was, the republic was divided and split into a thousand senate-houses and assemblies..." But again the fear of war necessitated the order of centralization. To this end, the council voted on the harshest solution offered: Marcus Valerius as dictator. For the purpose of war, the dictator was acceptable. Indeed, it had been common practice to elect dictators for war efforts. The dictator's victory became lauded as "there was no other battle in those times more memorable than this since the action at the Lake Regillus [where they had won the republic]." But at the war's end, the people made it very clear that they no longer wanted the dictator. Possessing higher moral standards, Marcus Valerius resigned, claiming: "For my part, I will neither further disappoint my fellow citizens, nor will I be dictator to no purpose."¹³ Livy hammered his point home in showing that, throughout Roman history, the true heroes have been those who have put the liberty of the people above their own desires for power. This embodied the true spirit of the republic.

¹¹Ibid., 99-100.

¹²Ibid., 102.

¹³Ibid., 107-108.

Roman military strength embodied this spirit. Livy demonstrated this point through the example of Horatius Cocles. Single-handedly he faced the entire Etruscan army while his men destroyed the bridge behind him to prevent invasion. He stepped forward to meet the enemy.

Then casting his stern eyes threateningly upon all the nobles of the Etruscans, he challenged them singly, now reproached them all as the slaves of haughty tyrants, who, unmindful of their won freedom, came to attack that of others. For a considerable time they hesitated, looking round one upon another, waiting to begin the fight. A feeling of shame then stirred the army,...

For Livy, this convincingly showed that the spirit of free peoples proved to be immeasurably greater than that of tyrannized slaves. The commonwealth brought "the enjoyment of freedom, and [the Romans] were accordingly resolved to open their gates to enemies sooner than to kings."¹⁴ Rome had vowed by its actions never to relinquish its now superior nature. Romans would always fight to be free.

Self-sacrifice for the commonwealth meant everything, as Livy again tried to instruct through the story of Gaius Mucius. After Cocles had halted a swift invasion of Rome, the Etruscan forces opted to besiege the city. Mucius volunteered to infiltrate the Etruscan camp and assassinate their king, Porsina. "Father," he said, "I desire to cross the Tiber, and enter the enemy's camp, if I may be able, not as a plunderer, nor as avenger to exact retribution for their devastations: a greater deed is in my mind, if the gods assist." Unfortunately, in his single-handed attempt to save the republic, his knife fell upon the wrong target and his captivity ensued. Facing a degree of torture intended to reveal the entirety of Roman plans, Mucius displayed courage typical in republican heroes: "Mucius said, 'see here, that you may understand of how little accounts of the body is to those who have great glory in view'; and immediately thrust his right hand into the fire that was lighted for sacrifice." Such a feat terrified Porsina. How could his forces defeat a people who loved their liberty so much as to destroy themselves in defending it?¹⁵ Thus, the spirit of freedom conquered that of tyranny and

¹⁴Ibid., 90.

¹⁵Ibid., 86-8.

carried in a period of peace.

Octavian similarly brought peace. Indeed, his acts strongly resembled those of the most successful early republicans. Like Brutus, he had established a commonwealth. Where Brutus relieved Rome of the Tarquin kings, Octavian freed the city from dominating patricians. Like Publicus Valerius, he appeared to be striving for kingly power. Again, however, he followed in the footsteps of his great predecessors. According to Dio, just before he transferred his authority over to the senators he told them, "I shall lead you no longer, and no one will be able to say that it was to win absolute power that I did whatever has hitherto been done."¹⁶ And as Marcus Valerius defended Rome as the esteemed dictator, Octavian's monopoly over the military ensured that liberty would be defended from all threats, within and without. That Octavian ruled for the people was evident in their support for him and his popularity. Perhaps his fellow citizens would someday be as loyal to Rome as Cocles or Mucius.

It can be seen, then, how strongly Livy's Stoic beliefs infiltrated his perception of history. He focused almost entirely on an evaluation of the characters of various Roman leaders to explain the cause of the city's fortunes. Those who ruled for the benefit for all in Rome inevitably brought greatness; corrupt rule brought ruin. This was the way of fortune. In turn, he apparently tried to peer down the path his contemporaries were facing. As long as Rome achieved excellent leadership, it would prosper. Such was the case with Octavian. The man who would later become *Imperator* and mutate the commonwealth into an empire, possessed exceptional morality and *Fortuna* could only smile upon him. To Livy, Octavian was not only a man of higher morality, but also a true Roman hero.

¹⁶Winterspear and Gewecke, 48-9.

Neo-Nazis in Present Day Germany: A Lecture by Dr. Wolfgang Schlauch

On March 11, Dr. Wolfgang Schlauch presented a lecture in Coleman Hall on recent right-wing violence in Germany. Schlauch stated that "a mental wall" currently exists between the former East and West Germanies. This wall, according to Schlauch, "has to be dismantled gradually" in order for a united Germany to develop a more stable and congenial political culture. Such a conscious effort, Schlauch hopes, will reduce the incidence of xenophobic outbursts in Germany which have received critical attention around the world as of late.

Recent events in Germany are of particular concern to Dr. Schlauch. A native of Germany, he has seen his country through the worst of times, from Hitler and the Second World War through occupation and division. In his talk Schlauch applied the perspective of history to the situation in Germany after reunification.

Germany today is a nation in transition. Although the violence directed at foreigners within Germany seems a dire portent to many, Schlauch is more optimistic. The Germans, according to Schlauch, are acutely aware of their Nazi past, and so they are not likely to tolerate a revival of this legacy. This was most evident throughout last December and January when spontaneous demonstrations were held throughout Germany to denounce the right-wing resurgence. In these rallies, over three million ordinary German citizens came out to demonstrate before the world that they recognized their history, and would never allow it to recur.

After he explained the current problems in some detail, Dr. Schlauch described solutions which, in his estimation, can and must be implemented. According to Schlauch, the highly publicized incidents of right-wing violence, such as the murder of an Angolan immediately following unification in late 1990 or the fire-bombing of hostels and anti-foreign riots, were carried out exclusively by young males. Much of the problem stems from high unemployment in the former East Germany and acute disappointment with the realities of unification with the prosperous West.

These disaffected youths seek an identity, and so they invoke the imagery