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What Is Historical Thinking?

The Roman historian **Livy** (Titus Livius, 59 BCE–17 CE) offers the following narrative about the life of **Romulus**, the founder of Rome. Rhea Silvia was made a Vestal Virgin in the hopes of preventing her from having children; she became pregnant, by the god Mars according to her account. When she gave birth to the twins Romulus and Remus, the king ordered the babies to be exposed by the Tiber River, but they were miraculously nourished by a she-wolf and then discovered by a farmer (**Figure 1.1**).

After they grew up, they overthrew their evil grandfather and decided to found a new city on the spot where they had been exposed, but the brothers could not agree who should be the ruler of the new city. They decided to hold a contest by looking out for birds; Remus saw six, but a moment later Romulus saw twelve. The conflicting result led to an argument in which Remus was killed. Romulus then offered his new settlement as a place of refuge for fugitives and other dispossessed people. His men then kidnaped women from a neighboring community in order to get wives, and the city prospered. Finally, one day as Romulus was reviewing the Roman army, a sudden thunderstorm arose, with clouds so thick that no one could see him and “from that moment Romulus was no longer seen on earth.” A few men took the initiative and began to say that Romulus had been swept up into the heavens and soon the entire people were calling Romulus a god and the son of a god and praying that he might forever protect his children, the people of Rome. However, even then, says Livy, there were some who quietly claimed that the king had been torn to pieces at the hands of the senators (Bk. 1, Ch. 3–16).

Few historians today would accept the details of these stories, and fewer still would be willing to stake their reputation even on Romulus being a historical person, but these stories are still the place where we must start our work of understanding the Romans. At the very least, they represent the stories that the Romans



Figure 1.1 Bronze statue of a she-wolf suckling Romulus and Remus. Musei Capitolini, Rome. The wolf was originally considered to be Etruscan, but is now thought to date to the tenth century CE. The twins definitely date to the fifteenth century CE.

themselves told about the foundation of their city. As historians, we can only work with the material that we have; we cannot create stories out of thin air, but parts of the narrative – the she-wolf nourishing infant twins, the ascension of Romulus into heaven – seem too fanciful to believe. Sometimes we can use our common sense to decide what to accept, but sometimes our assumptions about what is possible are not reliable. The story of Romulus’ ascension may seem unbelievable, but the story of Jesus’ ascension into heaven has billions of believers around the world, and in principle is no different from Romulus. So how do we, as people living twenty centuries or more after the Romans, handle these stories? That is our task as practitioners of historical thinking.

The most important element to understand about a historical source is not its date, or the identity of its author, or the bias of the author, although those are all important. *It is understanding what the author is trying to do and what their purpose is in writing.* The first question we should ask about Livy’s account is: what is he trying to accomplish with these stories about Romulus?

Fortunately, Livy, like most ancient and many modern historians, reveals his purpose at the very beginning of his text. He indicates that he will concern himself with:

the life and morals of the community; the men and the qualities by which through domestic policy and foreign war dominion was won and extended... so that you see, set in the clear light of historical truth, examples of every possible type. From these you may select for yourself and your country what to imitate, and also what, being disgraceful in its origin and disgraceful in its conclusion, you are to avoid (Livy, *Preface*).

How might the knowledge that Livy wants to use Romulus to suggest something of the “life and morals of the community” help us understand his stories? For one it helps make sense both of the she-wolf story and of Romulus becoming a god. Livy

wants us to know that the Romans viewed Romulus as someone so special that he must have had a direct link to divinity. Ancient texts are full of stories of the miraculous rescue of infants exposed to a premature death: Oedipus from Greek mythology or Moses from the Bible are similar examples. All of these stories are meant to tell the reader that an individual was destined for greatness, and in some way connected to the divine. If we read the story as Livy's attempt to make us understand the greatness of Romulus rather than as a literal description of facts, the text becomes more understandable.

We can go further with our analysis. In the story about the death of Remus, the brother of Romulus, Livy actually offers two versions. He first describes how Romulus and Remus engaged in a battle of words over the founding of the city: the verbal fighting led to physical fighting where Remus was killed. But Livy goes on to tell another version in which Remus leaped over the walls of the new city as a way to mock his brother, leading his brother to strike him dead with the words "So perish all who leap over my walls!" Livy here makes the morals of Rome's founder clear: Romulus placed the honor and protection of the city above the ties of family, a character trait that reappears frequently in episodes from Roman history. It might be seen as a part of Roman morality. However, we have to grapple with the fact that Livy tells us two stories, and seems to tell us this second story only because it was "more frequently told." Did Livy not believe the second story? Does he want us not to believe it? Is the lesson really that Rome's founder placed civic ties above family ties, or was it that he killed his brother out of anger? Perhaps Romulus is not an example to be imitated after all, but an example to be avoided. Note that once we know that Livy wants us to draw moral lessons from Roman history, we can start asking different questions rather than asking whether it really happened that way.

In the story of Romulus' own death Livy again gives us two versions, and again forces us to confront a series of problems. On the one hand is the miraculous disappearance of Romulus, which is clearly intended to indicate divine intervention; in this version Romulus is never said to have died, only that he was no longer seen. On the other hand, Livy notes that some people claimed that Romulus was torn to pieces by senators. To Livy's readers, the second story must have sounded an awful lot like the death of **Julius Caesar**, which occurred when Livy was around 15 years old. Caesar was stabbed 23 times by a group of senators as he conducted a meeting of the Senate. Again Livy presents an example that might well be worthy of imitation immediately alongside an example to be avoided. In this instance, Livy's purpose seems more directly relevant to his own day: is the lesson that Romans should avoid being ruled by a dictator or that they should avoid the habit of assassinating people? Livy again does not give us a clear answer: he asks us to think for ourselves.

This habit of retrojecting current history into the past – of explaining past events according to present circumstances, as if history never changes – is widespread among all historians and even other writers. Often this is simply a product of being shaped by our own experiences: if I think the world works in a certain way, then I am more likely to think that events in the past happened that way.

Key Debates: *How Do We Tell the Story of the Past?*

For many people, one of the frustrations of studying the past is that there often seems to be no clear answer, no story that scholars can agree on. William Cronon, an environmental historian, in an article titled “A Place for Stories” (1992), once noted that two books, published in the very same year, looked at the same materials drawn from the same past and reached almost completely opposite conclusions. How can this be? Are there no answers in history?

Not exactly. History is a humanistic discipline: that is, it deals with human beings. Human beings often have fundamentally different views about the world. What makes a person good or evil? What makes a person happy? Does nature or nurture shape human character? These questions do not admit of a single answer that can be found scientifically.

Cronon, in analyzing the two books mentioned above, suggested that most historians tell one of two types of stories: either that the world today is better than it was yesterday or that the world was better before. Cronon says that “the one group of plots might be called ‘progressive,’ given their historical dependence on eighteenth-century Enlightenment notions of progress; the other might be called ‘tragic’ or ‘declensionist,’ tracing their historical roots to romantic and antimodernist reactions against progress”(Cronon, 1992, p. 1352).

Roman historians also participated in these types of debates. For the most part, they subscribed to the tragic narrative. For

instance, Livy wrote that “as our standard of morality gradually lowers, let my reader follow the decay of the national character, observing how at first it slowly sinks, then slips downward more and more rapidly, and finally begins to plunge into headlong ruin” (Livy, *Preface*). There’s no beating around the bush here: the arrival of wealth corrupted the good morals of the Roman people, making people of his own day unable to bear either the diseases or their remedies. However, others saw Roman society differently: the very wealth that Livy criticized allowed the first emperor Augustus to famously claim that he found Rome a city of brick but left it a city of marble, a place with all the amenities that an imperial capital should have. Clearly Augustus felt that Rome of his day was better than earlier generations.

Discussions like these continue to this day. We have probably all heard stories about how our parents had to walk three miles to school in the snow (mine used to say uphill both ways!): is the point of the story that today’s world is better because I did not have to do that, or that today is worse because I lack the character and strength built over the course of those journeys? These questions depend on what we consider to be the key factor in making a judgment: is having a house filled with the latest gadgets more important than spending time with one’s grandparents? Each person needs to decide for themselves: there is no one answer, just as there is no one answer to our historical questions.

Think of the hit musical *Hamilton*: it suggests that politicians in the eighteenth century were, just like politicians today, making deals in back rooms and engaging in brutal partisan politics. It even presents a character approving of a Presidential candidate because “it seems like you could have a beer with him,” a comment often made about George W. Bush during his campaign. In some ways this habit helps us understand the past better, as *Hamilton* surely does, but it can also make us believe the past was just like the present when it may have been dramatically different. No historian today believes that Romulus might have been assassinated by senators. Once we see that the historian is shaped by their own experiences, we can ask more productive questions rather than simply discarding a text as inaccurate or biased. In the end, that is our task as historians when we confront a source: to find out what the source may be telling us rather than discarding it because it does not meet our expectations.

Using Livy as an example has opened a window onto how historians deal with sources. Livy does not provide an eyewitness account, but eyewitnesses have disadvantages as well as the advantage of being present at a particular event. Eyewitnesses see only a portion of the action, and so may not be able to gain as complete an understanding of an event as others. The ability to gather a wide variety of evidence and to consider what each piece might be telling us is critical to good historical thinking. In the case of the Roman society and culture, we are both blessed and cursed in this regard. The blessing is that we have a wide variety of source material on which to draw, as the Roman Republic, and especially its last 200 years, is one of the best attested periods in the ancient Mediterranean world. We have multiple texts from both Roman and Greek authors on which to draw. We also have what scholars call **material culture**: physical remains of both monumental public buildings and private dwellings uncovered in archaeological excavations, as well as inscriptions left on stone and coins minted by the Roman state and others. All of these sources assist us in reconstructing a picture of Roman life. The curse is that this material is widely scattered like pieces of a puzzle, since most of it was created for purposes other than helping us tell a history of Roman social and cultural life. Our task then is first, to find the information that is relevant to our story and second, to understand the original purpose of the evidence so that we can put it in the proper place in our puzzle. The discussion that follows examines the major sources of information and then discusses how we might use these sources throughout this book to understand Roman society at any given point in time.

Literary Sources

One of the primary issues we must confront in approaching the literary sources from Roman history is to recognize that fundamentally Rome was an **oral** society. Although the alphabet had been invented as early as the eighth century BCE, Rome did not develop a written literary tradition until the middle of the third century BCE. For comparison's sake, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* seem to have been committed to writing in the eighth century, and the great Athenian tragedies were composed over the course of the fifth century. Mass literacy is a relatively recent phenomenon and it remains unclear how many Romans could read and write.

Exploring Culture: *Could the Average Roman Read?*

"Stronius knows nothing!" "Vote for Popidius Ampliatus and Vedius Nummianus!" "Rufus loves Cornelia." The walls of Pompeii are covered with graffiti written by residents and visitors to the town, but how many people could read them?

Some scholars have suggested that the percentage of inhabitants of the Roman empire who were literate was as low as 10%. If we are interested in those who had formal training and could read and especially write Roman history or poetry, that number might not be far off. Our written texts clearly come from this segment of the population.

There is reason to believe that literacy was more widespread from an early period in Roman history. Rome possessed a written law code from the middle of the fifth century BCE and it seems to have been a point of importance to the lower classes to have important public documents made available publicly in writing. It is possible that relatively limited numbers of the lower classes could read these documents for themselves, but clearly some outside of the elite circles possessed this ability and could either share it with others or read when need be. At the same time, the language of the early law codes suggests that many agreements were verbal and that witnesses might be crucial to establishing them. Written contracts for transactions were not the norm.

The graffiti from Pompeii falls further out on the literacy spectrum. For one thing, this evidence dates to 79 CE, two hundred or more years after Rome had established itself as the dominant city in the Mediterranean, and it is likely that literacy rates had improved as more money flowed into Rome from her conquests. However, it also suggests a more widespread picture of literacy: it would make little sense to go to the trouble and expense of expressing oneself on the walls of the city if only a small percentage of the city's population could read them. Some of the graffiti even engage in conversation with other messages, indicating that the author of the second graffiti, or perhaps a friend, had read the first post. The graffiti at Pompeii might be seen as the social media of its day, which certainly implies a higher level of literacy than 10% if one is willing to count composing tweets on subjects ranging from politics to sports to sex.

Further down the literacy spectrum, it seems likely that the majority of Romans could at least recognize the letters of the alphabet. Individual letters have been found on building blocks and roof tiles, suggesting that manual laborers could recognize these for use in construction projects. The letters SPQR (the abbreviation, still used, for "the Senate and People of Rome") appear frequently, apparently familiar enough that recognizing these four letters would be enough to indicate the involvement of the Roman state.

Like other non-literate societies, most communication in Rome, including stories about the past, was handed on orally from one person to another. Adding to the challenge, whatever written texts might have existed prior to 390 BCE were probably destroyed when the Gauls sacked Rome in that year. This situation means that Roman historians face particular challenges: we lack contemporary texts for the first 600 years of Rome's history and we have only scattered contemporary texts for the next hundred. The vast majority of surviving Latin texts date from after 80 BCE, and our copies of them come from many centuries after that (**Figure 1.2**).

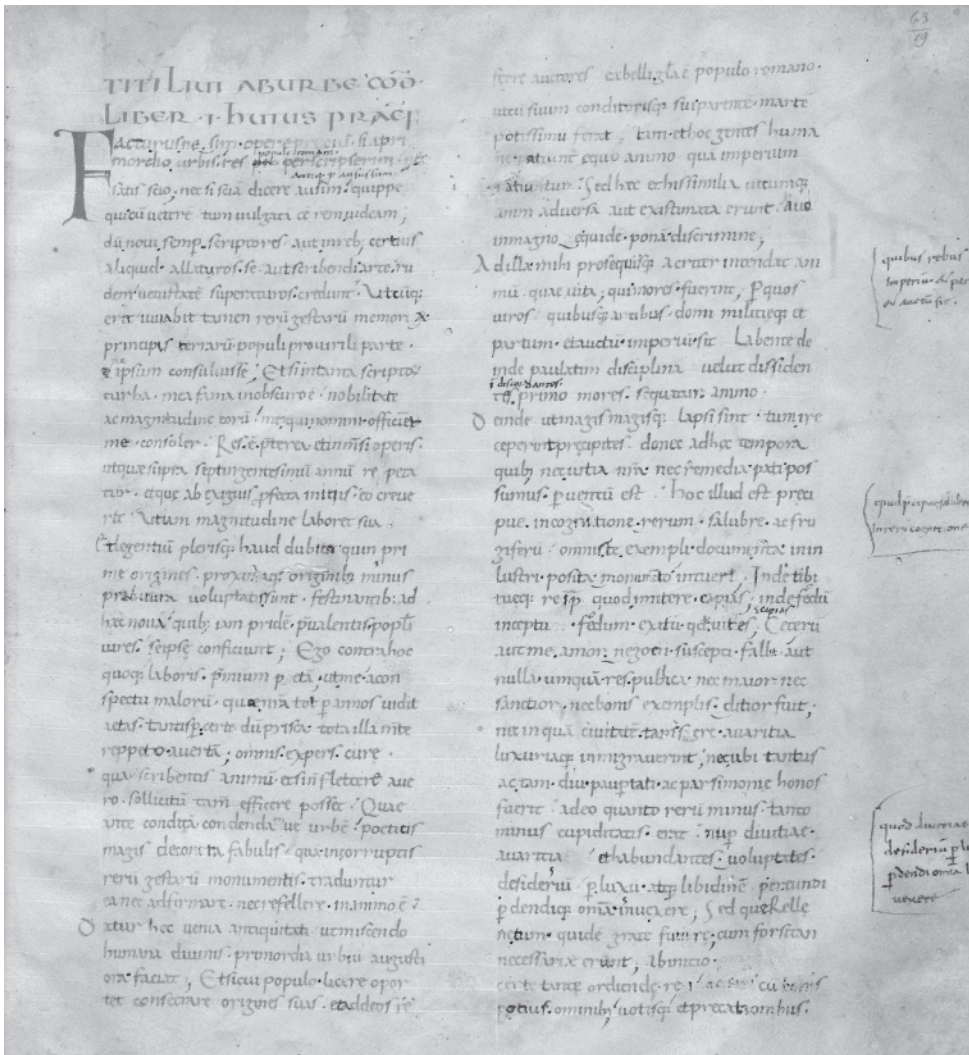


Figure 1.2 Fol. 1r from ms Plutei 63.19, a tenth century CE manuscript of Livy, originally copied in Verona and now in the Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana in Florence.

On the one hand, the absence of texts from the earliest years of Rome's history might appear to be a serious problem: the distance between Livy and the death of Romulus is greater than that from us to Christopher Columbus, but as we have discussed, later texts do not mean that they have no valuable information about early Rome. It means that we have to ask different questions about someone like Livy, who drew on earlier written material that we no longer have, than we would about other authors. Knowing when authors were writing is important because we can use

that knowledge to ask questions more appropriate to that historian and therefore more useful to us in attempting to understand Roman society.

The abundance of sources dating after 80 BCE means that a Roman historian does have plentiful eyewitnesses for the Late Republic (133–31 BCE; see Chapter 2 for an outline history of the Roman Republic). Chief among these are the texts of the Roman orator and statesman **Marcus Tullius Cicero** (106–43 BCE). Cicero provides us with three different types of texts: speeches written and delivered primarily in the law courts, philosophical treatises, and personal letters to family and friends. Because Cicero apparently did **not** intend for his letters to be made public, they are often the most revealing source. His correspondents ranged from leading politicians of his day to his wife and daughter and his best friend Atticus, and the letters range over a wide set of topics, from politics to personal matters such as the death of his daughter in childbirth. Not only do they allow us to see his unpolished opinions about affairs of state or others in the Roman elite, but we get glimpses into his actual day-to-day activities and his family life. No other source can compare to Cicero, which sometimes has the consequence of giving too much weight to the evidence we get from him.

Indeed, Cicero's writings suffer from a flaw common to almost all literary sources from antiquity: they give us a slice of life for the upper class only. The texts we have usually emerged from elite society, the top 1% of the Roman world, and we have no historical texts authored by a woman, restricting us to one-half of that 1%. Compounding the problem, the elite tended not to be interested in the lives and concerns of the non-elite and so rarely wrote about them. Cicero's correspondents are almost entirely other members of the elite; in the surviving collection are only four letters to his wife and four letters to his secretary Tiro. One challenge we will have to take up in this book is how to make the silence speak: how to learn something about the lives of women and the other 99% of Rome's inhabitants despite the nature of our sources.

One way that modern historians try to fill the gaps in our picture is through comparative history. While recognizing that every society is unique in its details, anthropologists and other specialists have often been able to identify features that can be found in multiple societies. For instance Rome, as we will see, was a heavily agrarian society, dependent on farming for the majority of its economic output. As such, it likely shared certain features with other agrarian societies, such as the seasonal nature of the cycle of work: manufacturing societies are less dependent on the sun and rain for survival. Similarly, almost all pre-modern societies, because they lacked modern medical knowledge and equipment, suffered from very high infant mortality rates and shorter life spans than today. By looking to other societies and considering the ways in which they might compare to Rome, a Roman historian can get a better overall picture of Roman society, even if that picture remains fuzzy around the edges.

Another tool that Roman historians use to get around the problem of sources is to consider a much wider collection of texts than are normally considered "historical". To some extent, all literary creations might be considered historical. Even if they were not written for the purpose of recounting historical events, they reveal critical

elements of their society. Think of movies in our own society: the story may be fictional, but the movie shows us how people dressed at the time, what cars they drove, and how they lived. Sometimes a movie can tell us something of the values of the people at the time: how men and women related to each other or to their jobs. Theater played this role for the Romans. Among the earliest written Latin texts are comedies by **Plautus** (c. 250–184 BCE) and **Terence** (c. 190–160 BCE), both of whom came from outside the elite class. The depiction of women and enslaved persons upon the stage provides some useful material, even if the representations may be exaggerated or distorted for comic effect. In a later period, the love poetry of poets such as **Catullus** (87–54 BCE), **Propertius** (c. 50–16 BCE), and **Ovid** (43 BCE–17 CE) can suggest something of how Roman men conceived of relationships and how they expected women to behave. These texts, which drew on Greek predecessors, are also an essential resource for understanding how the Romans responded to Greek culture, which in turn helps us understand how the Romans thought about their own place in the world. For that reason, we will return repeatedly to the Roman response to Greek culture in learning about the Roman Republic.

Not only did the Romans have to respond to Greek culture, but the Greeks eventually had to learn to live in a world dominated by Roman power, and several Greeks left us valuable sources. Chief among these is the historian **Polybius** (c. 200–120 BCE). Polybius was an aristocratic Greek who was sent to Rome to serve as a hostage to ensure the good behavior of the defeated Greeks following a Roman military victory in 167 BCE. As an upper-class Greek, Polybius was accepted into Roman aristocratic circles. Far from being angry at the Romans for their treatment of him, Polybius grew to respect and admire the Romans, to the extent that he chose to stay in Rome even when the Romans allowed him and the other hostages to return home. Polybius took advantage of his time in Rome and of his connections to compose a history of the rise of Roman power, with an eye toward explaining to his countrymen how this upstart city to the west had become the dominant power in the Mediterranean.

Polybius' account strikes most readers as evenhanded, but his dependence on some Roman families forces us to examine in each incident how far Polybius might have been attempting to flatter particular individuals. As we have already discussed, Polybius' purpose in writing is also critical to understanding his text, and he tells us the following in that regard:

to discover, in the first place, the words actually spoken, whatever they were, and next to ascertain the reason why what was done or spoken led to failure or success. For the mere statement of a fact may interest us but is of no benefit to us; but when we add the cause of it, study of history becomes fruitful (*Histories*, 12.25).

Historians trained in North America and Europe have mostly adopted these principles – to understand causes and not just list facts – so Polybius is often held in high regard today.

Polybius' greatest value to the social and cultural historian may actually lie in the fact that he often appears as what we might call a cultural anthropologist. As a Greek living in Rome, Polybius found himself confronted with customs and behaviors that

seemed strange to him. In his concern to explain the Romans to his countrymen, he took the time to describe things that Roman authors took for granted. For instance, our best description of a Roman funeral comes from Polybius, and he also left us a detailed discussion of the Roman government. We still need to ask questions of Polybius; as a Greek, he often used his Greek experience to understand Roman customs, and on occasion seems to have misunderstood Roman behavior because of that perspective. However, he often provides us with crucial data missing from Roman sources, and the fact that he was present in Rome during a crucial period in Rome's expansion makes him an invaluable resource.

Another Greek deserves mention in this regard: the biographer and moralist **Plutarch** (45–127 CE). Although he wrote substantially later than the people he described, Plutarch was able to draw upon many sources contemporary with those individuals that no longer survive for us. Among his numerous writings, Plutarch wrote a series of *Parallel Lives*, matching a figure from Roman history with one from Greece. Perhaps the greatest value for our study lies in the fact that he included many details about the private or personal lives of the people involved, allowing us to learn something of the practices of the Roman upper class. At the same time, we need again to ask about Plutarch's purpose in writing; in most cases he aimed to provide a moral lesson from these lives and he explicitly matched his pairs in order to draw moral comparisons between the Greek and the Roman.

Plutarch's treatment of Romulus provides an example of his method and a good contrast to Livy. Plutarch's version of the fateful clash between Romulus and Remus states that Romulus lied about the number of birds that he saw. It was this deceit that led Remus to make fun of the walls and jump over them, which is when Romulus killed him. Plutarch's story thus presents Romulus in a much less flattering light than Livy does. Indeed, Greek texts are often less sympathetic to the Romans, perhaps because they had no interest in celebrating Roman greatness.

Working with Sources

Vae Victis!

In 390 BCE, a tribe of Gauls (modern France) made their way south across the Alps toward Rome. They put the Romans to flight at the River Allia, 11 miles from Rome, and laid siege to the city. The Romans sent their women, children, and religious items out of the city for safekeeping, while the men of military age took up a position on the Capitoline hill, the highest and most easily defended of Rome's seven hills. Eventually the defenders ran short on food and negotiated surrender terms with the Gauls: in exchange for an agreed sum of gold, the Gauls would depart from the city.

To add insult to injury, the Gauls used unequal weights as the gold was being measured, so that the Romans would end up paying more than the agreed sum. When the Romans objected, the Gallic leader threw his sword on the weights, making the Romans add extra gold to cover its weight as well. As he did so, he uttered the words "*Vae victis* (Woe to the conquered)!" reminding the Romans that those defeated in war have no bargaining power.

Livy describes what happened next:

By good fortune it happened that before the infamous ransom was completed and all the gold weighed out, the Dictator [Camillus] appeared on the scene and ordered the gold to be carried away and the Gauls to move off.... Fortune now turned, divine aid and human skill were on the side of Rome. At the very first encounter the Gauls were routed as easily as they had conquered at the Allia (Livy, 5.49).

Diodorus Siculus, a Greek contemporary of Livy, tells a different story however:

[when] the Romans sent ambassadors to negotiate a peace, they [the Gauls] were persuaded to leave the city and to withdraw from Roman territory in exchange for one thousand pounds of gold (Diodorus, 14.116).

Diodorus knows nothing of the miraculous arrival of the Roman dictator, and neither does the very brief mention of Polybius, another Greek who is our earliest surviving source on this episode. And even Roman sources, including Livy, acknowledge the devastation to the city caused by the Gauls. The image that emerges from all of our sources is more consistent with the notion of the Gauls plundering the city and then moving off.

Even if the Greek accounts provide a useful corrective, Livy's account is still valuable. It reveals an attempt to save face, to avoid having to admit that Rome had once paid bribes to secure its survival. More than that, Livy's account helps us understand Roman imperialism. The story of *Vae victis* became an important part of the Roman mentality: if losers have no bargaining rights, the Romans resolved never to suffer this fate again and so developed a stronger military that they used to engage anyone who even remotely threatened their security.

That does not automatically make Greek sources more reliable. Plutarch had his own purposes in writing. In his commentary on the character of Romulus, Plutarch made clear that he saw Romulus as a tyrant, guilty "of unreasoning anger or hasty and senseless wrath," but he also includes the unlikely account of Romulus' assassination. His version seems less concerned with Caesar, perhaps because he was writing 200 years later. Instead his text serves to reinforce his moralizing critique: Romulus was deservedly killed because he was a tyrant. Moralizing aims can affect a historian's account as much as contemporary politics or a desire to paint a founder in a positive light.

Material Culture

Now that we have begun to develop a list of questions that we might ask of our literary sources, it is time to turn to the other major source of information for the Roman Republic: the material evidence. For a number of topics (visual arts and architecture, the city of Rome, the economy) the main source of evidence is not literary but

physical. First and foremost, there is information that has been gathered through the practice of **archaeology**, the systematic uncovering of ancient remains in the earth, including private houses, cemeteries, roads, and large public structures such as temples and grain warehouses. The Roman state and individual Romans also left writings on stone or bronze, from public decrees to private tombstones; **epigraphy**, which is the analysis of these inscriptions, provides another key source of information. **Numismatics**, or the study of ancient coins, provides a third key primary source, not just for the economic information that can be derived but from the messages that Romans sent through the design on their coins. Each will be discussed more fully in the section below, to understand the questions we should ask of each source.

Archaeology

When archaeology is mentioned, we might think first of the remains of major cities and monuments: the city of Pompeii, the Colosseum, and the Forum in Rome. These monuments offer the most visible clues to understanding the growth of cities such as Rome. The development of new architectural forms, often by adapting them from other societies, can also tell us about the relationship between Rome and foreign cultures. For instance, several early Roman temples clearly follow the design of earlier temples in Etruria, suggesting a high degree of Etruscan influence in early Rome. For monuments such as these, we can ask questions about broad cultural trends and the development of city life over a long span of time. However, for questions such as what people ate, what they wore, or what their daily lives were like, major monuments have no answers.

For those questions, it is the small and often fragmentary remains that offer the most information. Archaeology is, in fact, one of our primary sources of information for non-elites in the ancient world. If Cicero has very little to say about the non-elite, we must recover that information by other means, and archaeology is tops on that list. The humble garbage dump turns out to be a tremendous source of information, as specialists can recognize plant and animal remains, household goods, and other items that tell us what people ate or used on a daily basis. We can ask about how the diet of the lower classes compares to that of the wealthy, but we can also ask questions such as the origins of either natural or manufactured products, which can tell us about contact with other regions and trade practices. As historians have begun to pay proper attention to the non-elite, excavations have increasingly focused not on the grand houses of the elite, but on the homes of the less fortunate. For example, at Ostia, the port city of Rome, multi-story apartment buildings have been uncovered, offering a glimpse into the one or two room dwelling places in which an entire family might live (**Figure 1.3**). Excavation of cemeteries sheds light on family structure, demographic trends, and even the kinds of affectionate language used by family members to commemorate their deceased, offering insight into how Roman family members felt about each other. The deliberate disposal of items in garbage dumps and cemeteries not only does a better job preserving items than items left out in the open, but forces us to ask questions about why a particular item might have



Figure 1.3 Insula of Diana, Ostia Antica, second century CE.

been discarded. The lives of individual Roman men, women, and children are illuminated more by archaeology than by any other source.

Archaeological evidence cannot answer every question we might have. One challenge is simply the availability of archaeological data for our time period, which is generally less abundant than for the Empire. **Pompeii** provides a good example (**Figure 1.4**). The city has a long history and was refounded as a colony by the Romans in 80 BCE, but the city owes its fame and its preservation to the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius in 79 CE, a full hundred years after the end of the Republic, and of course the years closest to the eruption are the best preserved. Sometimes we do have evidence for an earlier period; for example, many houses in Pompeii have rooms that can be dated to the Republican period. The vast majority of the material from Pompeii, however, dates to the period of the Empire. Historians must then decide how much the evidence from the later period can be used to understand practices of a century or more earlier. While Pompeii offers unparalleled evidence on issues such as what Roman houses looked like, religious practices of the household, and town planning, it also vividly demonstrates some of the challenges of using archaeological evidence.

Pompeii also reminds us of the seemingly random nature of archaeology: archaeologists find what they happen to find. A volcano happened to erupt five miles from Pompeii that almost perfectly preserved the city, which happened to be discovered when the King of Naples wanted a new summer palace, but other cities elsewhere in



Figure 1.4 Aerial view of Pompeii. Mt. Vesuvius is in the background.

Italy remain completely undiscovered by archaeologists. This phenomenon presents challenges for the historian; our questions have to be tailored to the information that has been randomly provided, and we always wonder what evidence we are missing that might either confirm or refute the answers we develop. Certain time periods may be over-represented (or under-represented), not because there actually was more (or less) material produced in a given period, but because archaeologists happened to find more or less of it. Historians constantly question how far the practices of any one city represent Roman culture as a whole: what happens in Seattle may be very different from what happens in Dallas or in smaller cities like Pueblo, Colorado. Nor should we automatically assume that the larger cities were more “civilized”: we know that by 60 BCE Pompeii was home to several theaters as well as Italy’s first surviving stone amphitheater, but at that time Rome itself had none of these buildings. The smaller the sample size, the harder it is to know what might be typical; with a larger data set – a collection of cities or many acres of countryside – archaeologists are able to compare data across sites and look for general patterns that are true across the spectrum.

Inscriptions

Inscriptions left on permanent materials (generally stone or bronze), many of which turned up in the course of archaeological excavations, provide a second crucial source from material culture. Some inscriptions offer information about the practice

of politics in Rome and Italy: electoral graffiti on the walls of Pompeii gives glimpses into the ways in which political campaigns were waged. Similarly, two town charters apparently drawn up by Julius Caesar and published shortly after his death offer insight into government structures, from magistrates to the grain dole. One of the most famous Republican inscriptions, the so-called Senatorial decree *de Bacchanalibus* (“on the Bacchanalians”) (**Figure 1.5**) is of interest not only for information about certain religious behaviors but also because it was found in southern Italy and so can tell us something about the relationship of the Roman **Senate** to the cities of Italy. In addition, the *fasti*, Roman calendars inscribed on stone, not only help us order the Roman year with its festivals and other holidays but also provide chronological information about magistrates and triumphs. As with any source, we need to ask questions about why a given document was published: why did the Roman state feel the need to tell everyone in Italy about their treatment of a particular religious practice? Why was it felt necessary to start posting calendars in different towns across Italy? However, these documents are invaluable because they provide direct evidence for contemporary Roman behavior.

Just as with archaeology, the less impressive inscriptions often have a greater impact on our understanding of Roman society. Two types in particular stand out: dedications (usually to one or more divinities) and burial epitaphs, both of which give us insight into the behavior of the non-elites that would otherwise be missing. Dedications can help us understand actual rather than idealized religious behavior, showing us to which gods people expressed their gratitude and for what purposes. On occasion they present a picture that never would have been evident from the literary sources. For instance, the literary sources pay little attention to the god Faunus, but his popularity is attested by numerous dedications far beyond anything we would have imagined from the literary evidence. That discovery forces us to ask both what made Faunus so popular, and with whom, and why he did not

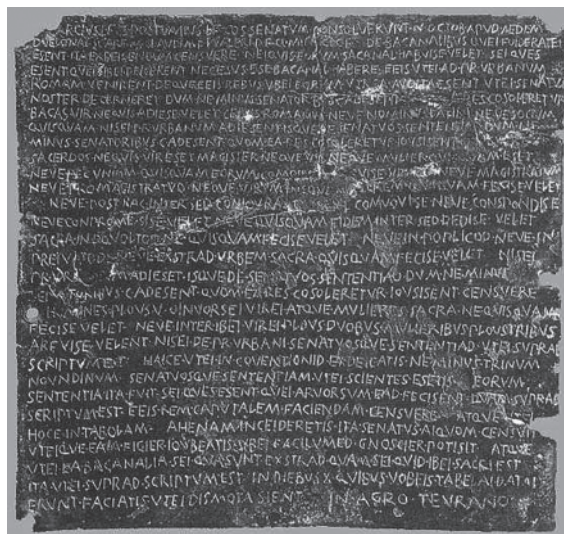


Figure 1.5 Bronze tablet recording the Senatorial decree on the worship of Bacchus, 186 BCE. Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna.

attract the attention of the elites. It thus raises new questions for the historian: a history of religious behavior at Rome simply cannot be written without inscriptional evidence.

In a similar fashion burial epitaphs can tell us a great deal about Roman life among both the elite and non-elite. We are fortunate to possess some epitaphs of famous Romans known from the literary sources, such as members of the Scipiones who conquered Carthage. These materials not only deepen the understanding gained from the literary sources but also allow us to see how the family members wished to be perceived. Ordinary Romans also wanted to be commemorated after death and we can look at their tombstones to compare their practices to the elite and ask in what ways they shared in a common understanding of death, the afterlife, or even family relationships. In addition to these monuments, we have large numbers of simpler tombstones bearing minimal text but which attest to the desire of the lower classes to leave a memorial behind even with their limited resources. The large number of tombstones allows us to ask questions about which members felt a duty to erect a monument and which family members they felt they needed to remember. We can also explore the language and images used on these tombstones to understand the nature of relationships within the family or the values that ordinary Romans held dear. These inscriptions often offer an intimate look into the lives of Romans that cannot be matched by other sources.

Coins

Coins provide a third type of primary source, an object that was actually used by the people of the Roman world. In terms of sheer volume of evidence, coins are the most numerous of any surviving source. The Romans began minting coins in the third century BCE; already one might ask why the Romans did not start minting coins before this point: coins were in use in other parts of the Mediterranean long before. What did they use in the marketplace before this time and why did they start now? Once the Romans start minting, coinage contributes greatly to our understanding of Roman economic history, but coins in the ancient world served other functions beyond just a medium of exchange. While the Roman state guaranteed the value of the coinage minted under its authority, it provided no standard imagery. Rather, it delegated the physical task of minting coins to individuals, sometimes to relatively minor functionaries, and so coinage design thus might change according to a variety of factors: historical events or family ties could play a large role. We might think of how designs on postage stamps today reflect the values and interests of the countries that produce them: a stamp with Elvis on it can tell us about the importance of rock-and-roll in the United States. In Rome, some minters placed designs intended to further their own political ambitions or those of a political ally, while other coins revealed the shared values of the Romans (**Figure 1.6**). Because of their large number and the fact that they can usually be dated with great precision, coins provide a chronological means to understand both the Roman economy and a range of political and social issues.



Figure 1.6 Silver denarius, minted 43 or 42 BCE.

Political Issues: *Using Coins to Tell Your Story*

In 2011, a Roman coin, similar to the one shown in Figure 1.6, sold for over \$500,000 at auction in Long Beach, California. What could make an old chunk of silver so valuable?

This coin provides a unique view into the debate among Roman politicians in the years following the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. When Brutus and Cassius led a group of senators to kill Caesar in the Senate house, was it an act of unwarranted murder or the legitimate removal of a would-be tyrant? Did it undermine the foundations of a civil society or was it necessary to protect the Roman state? The coin reveals the argument for the latter.

On the obverse, or front of the coin, we find the head of Brutus, identified by the abbreviation *BRUT IMP*, or Brutus Imperator. Around the lower left side of the coin we find the name L. (for Lucius) Plaetorius Cestianus. This coin was thus minted by Plaetorius, a middling Roman politician who clearly supported Brutus, whom he identifies as a successful military general; at this point in Roman history *imperator* had not yet come to mean “emperor.” The family of Plaetorius is known to have minted coins during this period, and here Plaetorius uses his position to advocate for a political cause.

The reverse, or back of the coin, depicts two daggers along with the inscription *EID MAR*; specifying the Ides of March makes clear that the daggers are meant to symbolize the weapons used to kill Caesar. Between the daggers is an image of a cap, known to the Romans as a *pileus*. In Roman society, when an enslaved person was given their freedom, a part of the ceremony involved placing this cap on the head of the newly freed citizen. The coin thus suggests that by killing Caesar with the daggers, the entire Roman state had been freed from slavery. Brutus was killed in battle in 42 BCE, so we can date this coin with precision between 44 and 42 BCE. Because Brutus’ side lost the war, we do not have many sources offering their viewpoint in Caesar’s death; in fact we have very few of these coins

because the victors melted down all the ones they could find, which explains why a single coin could be worth a half million dollars. The coin is valuable both to historians and to collectors.

We also have coins showing the views of Brutus' opponents, Mark Antony and the young Octavian. In the summer of 44 BCE a comet appeared in the skies over Rome, and Caesar's supporters argued that this comet represented the ascension of Caesar to the heavens, and that Caesar should thus be worshipped as a god, much as Romulus was worshipped as a god. After the conclusion of the Roman civil wars, Octavian, now known as Augustus, issued a series of coins referencing this star with the legend *DIVUS IULIUS*, or "the deified Julius." These coins thus made the claim for Caesar's divinity and, by association, Augustus' own descent from a god. In a world of limited communication, these coins served as perhaps the best way to share a message.

Conclusion

The sources for Roman social and cultural history are thus numerous and impressively varied, but not without challenges. One issue that will crop up repeatedly throughout this book is the balance between **synchronic** history and **diachronic** history.

Synchronic history means taking pieces from different times (*chronos*) and putting them together (*syn*) to form a single picture. Roman historians are often forced to write synchronic accounts because of the nature of our evidence. For example, we may learn about Roman fathers from a document in one period and about Roman mothers from a slightly different period, and historians combine the two to provide a picture of "the Roman family." The problem, which sharp-eyed readers might have noticed, is that there may never have been a single time when the Roman family looked exactly like our picture. Synchronic history offers a composite image that can help us understand a subject broadly but sometimes the image remains fuzzy as the details do not match up fully.

Diachronic history goes through (*dia*) time (*chronos*) and so focuses more attention on documenting change. Tracing the rise and fall of an empire is a good example of diachronic history. Our evidence for military affairs often allows us to know the specific battles and the dates that allowed an empire such as Rome to grow, and so we can describe the steps by which Rome grew into an imperial power.

As we embark on our exploration of Roman social and cultural history, we thus face two challenges. One is to combine the literary and material culture sources into a single picture, and the second is to employ both synchronic and diachronic history to understand Roman society. Each historian will find a different balance for these two challenges, which explains why each historian's picture of Roman society looks slightly different.

Let us close this chapter by taking the Roman family as an example of how we might proceed. We could start with the stories about Romulus and note that some literary sources suggest that the Roman family may have been dysfunctional by our

standards. At the same time, we have to note that this story concerns the elite – the founder of Rome! – and we might wonder whether all families felt this way. Plautus and Terence left us comedies from the second century that feature fictional families with stereotyped relationships: a doddering father, a shrewish wife, and a young man mooning over the girl next door, and we might wonder how much truth lies in these stereotypes. Funerary inscriptions written by a husband for his wife or vice versa offer a different kind of evidence and suggest a type of devotion that looks different from the comedic picture. Cicero's letters offer another type of evidence from the first century BCE and show us his personal devastation when his daughter died as a result of childbirth. The houses from Pompeii and elsewhere show that Roman houses, both rich and poor, had few spaces that family members might consider their own private space, and so raise questions about what family life looked like on a day-to-day basis. Each isolated piece of evidence by itself can give us only a partial or even misleading picture. Taken together, however, as we will do in the pages that follow, these sources will allow us to develop a rich picture of Roman life, a life that was both like and quite unlike modern Western experiences.

Discussion Questions

1. If the most important element of historical thinking is understanding the author's purpose in writing, what do you think is the purpose of the author of this textbook? of your professor?
2. Given the absence of female voices from antiquity, how can a historian learn anything about that half of the population of the ancient world?
3. What challenges can you foresee in trying to mingle both archaeological and textual evidence?
4. What subjects do you think will be the most difficult to handle for a cultural historian of Rome? What subjects might be the easiest? Why?
5. What value might there be in developing comparisons between the Romans and modern Western peoples, or peoples living in other times or places?

Further Reading

Ancient Authors (Cicero, Livy, Plutarch, et al.)

Often the best place to find the texts of ancient authors is within the Loeb Classical Library series, with each author listed by name; translations in the Penguin Classics or OxfordWorld Classics are also usually reliable. While translations do exist on the Internet, many of these are very old-fashioned, occasionally misleading (as early twentieth-century translators often shied away from taboo topics), and sometimes even incorrect.

Chaplin, Jane (2000). *Livy's Exemplary History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Chaplin's book is one of a number of recent books that offer new ways of thinking about Livy, whose text provides the foundation for the history of Rome down to the early second century CE. She focuses on how Livy's use of examples was intended to make history relevant for his Roman audience, even as the meaning of those examples might shift over time.

Feldherr, Andrew (Ed.) (2009). *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Historians*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Contains essays on a variety of topics, with attention paid both to texts that survive only in fragments as well as sources for history that remained unwritten. Good focus on themes (religion, space, the setting of examples) rather than merely a historian-by-historian description.

Keppie, Lawrence (2001). *Understanding Roman Inscriptions*. London: Routledge.

A book designed for the non-specialist, Keppie's book covers a range of issues, from how the stone-cutter did his work to how to read and date inscriptions. No knowledge of Latin is necessary; Keppie provides all terms needed. Later chapters in the book cover thematic topics such as government, the army, and religion.

Laurence, Ray (2012). *Roman Archaeology for Historians*. London: Routledge.

A recent introduction specifically aimed at integrating the study of archaeology and Roman history. The complexity of archaeological data sometimes makes the book's language difficult, and examples tend to be drawn from Roman Britain (the author's home country), but the range of topics covered is especially valuable.

Lintott, Andrew (2008). *Cicero as Evidence: A Historian's Companion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

A recent concise work focused precisely on using Cicero as a source for Roman history, rather than on the politician or his views. Superbly organized into four sections, on Reading Cicero, Reading Oratory, History in Speeches and Letters, and History and Ideas. A must-read for this topic.

Yarrow, Liv M. (2021). *The Roman Republic to 49 BCE: Using Coins as Sources*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Yarrow's book introduces students of ancient history to the ways in which coins provide information about the history of the Roman republic. She uses coins to offer insights on early Roman-Italian relations, Roman imperialism, urban politics, and constitutional history, among other topics. This book helps take the mystery out of numismatics, with over 200 illustrations and a guide to research for non-specialists.