The background of the book cover is a reproduction of a Roman fresco, likely from the Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum. It depicts a domestic interior with several figures. On the left, a man in a white tunic with a yellow sash stands. In the center, a woman in a yellow dress is seated, looking towards the right. On the right, another figure is partially visible, and a large, stylized face is painted on the wall. The fresco is cracked and aged, with a color palette of earthy tones like ochre, red, and white.

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SOCIAL AND
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of the
ANCIENT
WORLD

ERIC M. ORLIN

A SOCIAL AND
CULTURAL HISTORY OF
**REPUBLICAN
ROME**

WILEY Blackwell

A Social and Cultural History of Republican Rome

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Eric M. Orlin

University of Puget Sound

Tacoma, Washington

WILEY Blackwell

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Acknowledgments

The idea of writing a textbook on Roman history began on a long drive from Calgary, Alberta back to Berkeley, California, after attending the Annual Meeting of the Association of Ancient Historians. Fired up by presentations at the conference, two graduate school friends, Judy Gaughan and Beth Severy, and I brainstormed what we might do if we ever decided to write a textbook.

Thankfully this book is not the crazy text that three sleep-deprived students conjured out of the midnight air as we crisscrossed the Pacific Northwest. However, that night did plant the seed, of what parts of the story are often omitted or of how one might try to tell the story of the Roman Republic differently. As I taught courses over the past twenty years, I tried to include as many of those parts as I could, always looking for different ways to tell the story. My courses always involved a significant focus on religion, the family, social structure, arts and letters, and the economy, and I often found myself frustrated that even the new wave of excellent Roman history textbooks did not devote the space I wanted to these topics. When Wiley informed me that they were developing a series of textbooks for the ancient world focused on social and cultural history, I felt I had to say yes, even as I felt there had to be people more qualified than I to write it.

A book such as this does not stand on its own: it rests on the work of many scholars who have written in greater depth on various subjects covered in this book. Indeed, one of the great challenges of this book has been to take brilliant ideas of others expressed in a book of 80 000 words and try to shrink them down to 500 words. Most of these books can be found in the Further Readings section, but I want to acknowledge my debt also to those authors whom space prevented me from listing. I want to express particular appreciation to colleagues and friends who took the time to read chapters and try to save me from as many mistakes as possible: Bill Barry, Douglas Boin, Lee Brice, Judy Gaughan, Matthew Loar, Carolyn MacDonald, Carlos Noreña, Andrew Riggsby, Brett Rogers, Nate Rosenstein, Beth Severy-Hoven, and Jesse Weiner. Special thanks go to Nandini Pandey, who not only read

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Timeline of Roman History

Parenttheses indicate an approximate date

Period	Date	Military	Political	Social	Cultural	Religious
Monarchy	753 BCE		Traditional date for Foundation of City of Rome	(Romulus creates patricians, plebeians, and patron-client relationships)		(Cult of Hercules arrives in Rome)
Early Republic	509		Traditional date for Foundation of Roman Republic		Etruscan terracotta statues	Temple of Jupiter Capitolinus
	494	Local skirmishes	Traditional date for First Secession of Plebs	Struggle of Orders (Traditional dates 494-287 BCE)		Temple of Castor and Pollux
	451-50				Twelve Tables written	
	431					Temple of Apollo
	396	Conquest of Veii				<i>Evocatio</i> of Juno Regina
	390	Gallic Sack of Rome			Destruction (?) of City	
	367		Creation of praetor	Plebeians eligible for consulship	(Construction of "Servian" wall)	
	341-338	War vs. Latin League	Settlement of 338		(Manipular Organization of Army)	
	326			Abolition of <i>Nexum</i> slavery		

(Continued)

(Continued)

Period	Date	Military	Political	Social	Cultural	Religious
Middle Republic	312				Aqua Appia and Via Appia constructed	
	304				Publication of <i>legis actio</i>	
	290	Conquest of Samnium complete			(Capitoline Brutus)	Temple C of Largo Argentina
	280–275	Wars vs. Pyrrhus in S. Italy			(Introduction of Roman coinage)	
	270			Death of Scipio Barbatus	(Livius Andronicus)	
	264–241	First Punic War				
	218–202	Second Punic War				
	218	Hannibal crosses Alps into Italy				
	216	Hannibal destroys 100 000 Roman soldiers			(Naevius)	
	212				Marcellus brings Greek art from Sicily	Magna Mater brought to Rome
	204				(Fabius Pictor)	
	202	Scipio invades N. Africa; victory over Carthage			(Plautus)	
	200–146	Conquest of Greece and Asia Minor		(Massive Influx of enslaved persons)	(development of formulary procedure)	

195		Repeal of <i>lex Oppia</i>	(Ennius)	
186			(Terence)	Bacchanalia incident
184		Censorship of Cato the Elder	Basilica Porcia	
177		Italian recruitment difficulties		
171		Spurius Ligustinus		
169		<i>lex Voconia</i>		
167	Victory in Greece	Triumph of Aemilius Paullus		Polybius arrives in Rome
161		<i>lex Fannia</i> sumptuary legislation		
160		(Cornelia raises the Gracchi brothers)	(Cato's <i>On Agriculture</i>)	
154			Stone theater in Rome destroyed	
149			Creation of first permanent court	
149-146	Third Punic War			
147				First marble temple in Rome
146	Destruction of Carthage and Corinth			

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Period	Date	Military	Political	Social	Cultural	Religious
Late Republic	139		Introduction of Secret Ballot		(Lucilius)	
	133		Tiberius Gracchus			
	122		Gaius Gracchus	(Tombstone of Claudia)		
	107	(Army reforms)	First consulship of Marius			
	104				First election for <i>Pontifex maximus</i>	
	91–89	Social War		Italians gain full citizenship	(Jurist Mucius Scaevola)	
	88	War vs. Mithridates	Sulla marches on Rome	Massacre of Italians in Asia		
	82–79		Sulla's dictatorship	Cicero and Terentia marry	(Appearance of Dressel amphorae)	
	80				First surviving amphitheater at Pompeii	
	70		Cicero's prosecution of Verres		(Veristic portraits, e.g. statue of general from Tivoli)	
	67–63	Pompey the Great conquers East				
	60		"First Triumvirate" formed		(Catullus)	

59	Caesar's Campaigns in Gaul	Consulship of Julius Caesar	Pompey marries Julia	
55				Theater of Pompey built
53			Tiro gains free status	(Cicero)
49	Civil War between Pompey and Caesar	Caesar crosses Rubicon		
48–44		Dictatorship of Caesar		
46			Cicero and Terentia divorce	Dedication of Forum of Caesar
45			Death of Tullia	
44		Caesar assassinated		Caesar deified after his death
31	Battle of Actium			
27		Octavian becomes Augustus, first Roman Emperor		
25				Livy publishes first five books of history (Horace, Ovid, Sulpicia active)
20				

(Continued)

(Continued)

Period	Date	Military	Political	Social	Cultural	Religious
	19 BCE				Vergil dies; <i>Aeneid</i> published after death	
	79 CE				Eruption of Vesuvius buries Pompeii	
	450				(Oldest surviving manuscript of Terence)	
	529				Justinian's <i>Digest</i> published	
	1748				Rediscovery of Pompeii	
	1764				Winckelmann argues that white statuary is ideal	
	1789		Authors of Federalist Papers use Roman pseudonyms			
	2020				White supremacists deploy SPQR as symbol	



Introduction: We Are All Historians

Most of us do things that historians do every day.

Almost one hundred years ago, Carl Becker delivered a speech to the national gathering of professional historians titled “Everyman His Own Historian.” In it he told the story of a figure whom he called Mr. Everyman who had stumbled across a handwritten note at home reminding him to “Pay Smith for a coal delivery.” Even though Mr. Everyman did not recall actually seeing Smith deliver the coal, the helpful note, combined with the 20 tons of coal in his house, led him to believe that the coal actually had been delivered, and off he went to pay the bill. When he got to Smith’s office, however, Smith reminded him that his operation had been unexpectedly out of coal that day and so he had passed the delivery job to Brown. Mr. Everyman dutifully went to Brown’s office and paid his invoice for \$1,017.20. After returning home from his country club that night, Mr. Everyman went through his records. Sure enough he found the invoice from Brown, and so went to bed secure in the knowledge of what happened.

Becker’s point was that Mr. Everyman models historical behavior: he uses his memory and consults written records to determine what happened, and when the records do not match up, he continues investigating until he has a clearer and more certain picture of the past.

This book is about the Roman Republic, but it is also about this process of historical thinking: each reader is invited to consider themselves a historian and ask: how do we know what we know (or think we know) about ancient Rome?

The process can be a challenge: the Romans often seem so familiar to us, especially since so many aspects of their society have been incorporated into modern societies, and especially American society. The United States Senate is explicitly modelled on the Roman Senate, and our system of checks and balances derives from ideas about the Roman government. Roman law is the basis for our legal

system. Roman architecture is all around us in our public buildings, and Latin literature has been a touchstone for many authors. Yet we need to remember that the Romans are far distant from us in time and space.

In 2009, eighty years after Carl Becker delivered his lessons about Everyman to a gathering of historians, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich stood up before the same professional setting and reflected on the distance between Becker's distant time and her own. People no longer heated their houses with coal, nor did most people physically show up in an office to pay a bill. More significantly, a twenty-first century audience may not immediately recognize just how much 20 tons of coal really is: it is 10 times larger than the equivalent amount of heating oil that until last week I used to heat my house. Nor do we recognize that the fictional Mr. Everyman paid almost *four times* the going rate for coal in 1931, or that the \$1,000 he paid represented the median salary for an entire year in 1931, equivalent to about \$40,000 today. That is, Mr. Everyman paid a year's salary to purchase an overpriced delivery of coal that would have heated his house for four years.

Ulrich's point was that context matters in understanding a text. Becker's audience surely knew these things immediately, which means they knew Mr. Everyman was no everyman; perhaps the detail of Mr. Everyman returning from his country club was meant as a clue. As she concluded her speech, "it is easy enough to figure out the price of coal, hard to capture the contexts that give events their meaning." Historians do not just recount facts, they have to work to generate meaning from events.

This book is built around these two intertwined ideas: that we are all historians and that we need context to understand the past. Historians need to ask questions of a text, as Ulrich did: who says what, and when, and why, matters. And often the most important part of a document is not what it says on the page, but what it *does*: what argument or image is the author trying to advance through the text on the page? Often this means following a maze of sometimes unintended clues to uncover just what the author is up to. If the story of Mr. Everyman's coal reminds us vividly of how different the United States was in 1931 and 2009, how different must Rome be, separated by thousands of miles and thousands of years? One of the aims of this book is to help readers recognize that distance and the difference it makes. Each chapter in this book offers examples of questions that could be asked, inviting readers to join in the journey of trying to understand the Romans by inquiring about both facts and meaning.

One of the themes of Roman history is the Romans' encounter with other peoples, first their neighbors in central Italy, then the rest of the peninsula, and eventually the entire Mediterranean basin as they built a multi-ethnic society. One might ask how they managed the conquest of the Mediterranean, but an even more interesting question is how these encounters changed the Romans and how those encounters helped the Romans understand what was distinctive about their own society. We might view our own encounter with the Romans in the same way, as an opportunity not only to learn about the Romans but to reflect upon our own society and the choices we have made and are making as we build our own multi-ethnic societies.

I completed work on this book in the summer and fall of 2020, after the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and many other Black Americans laid bare how much work needs to be done for America to build an equitable multi-ethnic society. It would be foolish to claim those events had no impact on the text that has emerged. Just as many citizens have become more aware of the breadth and depth of the problem of white supremacy, scholars have become more aware of the particular role played by the field of Classics in the flourishing of white supremacy. Most scholars in the discipline continue to be Euro-American, and the study of Greek and Latin has often served as a gatekeeper, meant to advance some (elite white) people into the upper reaches of society while excluding (Black and brown) others. Research into the ancient world has often placed the Romans and Greeks as the ancestors of European nations as a means to project the superiority of European culture, and the symbolism of the ancient world has often been explicitly adopted by white supremacist groups in the twenty-first century. As a white male who has benefitted from the structures of both Classics and broader society, it felt important to emphasize the ways in which ancient Rome was not a pure white European world: it was not “pure,” it was not “white” (a word that had no racial meaning in ancient Rome), and it was not only “European.”

While the context of this era may have led me to emphasize these points, the facts have not changed. It simply took some of us, myself included, until this summer to ask these types of questions. My hope is that readers of this book will develop the ability to ask their own questions of Roman history, of me, and of others.

A Note on the Text

The story of the Roman Republic is a remarkable one. Most histories choose to focus on how Rome grew from a small village located at a marshy crossing of a river that flooded seasonally to become the dominant military power in the Mediterranean basin, and then how the Roman Republic “fell” into one-man rule. These military and political questions are important to be sure, but they only tell a portion of the story, and perhaps not the most important one. They pay insufficient attention to the way people lived their lives in the Roman Republic, to the structures that organized their lives: family, religion, economy, and law, to name only a few. This book reverses that emphasis, telling the story of Rome’s political and military growth in only a few chapters and devoting most of its energy to understanding the institutions of Roman life and how they were changed by the growth into an imperial power.

This book is therefore organized thematically after the first two chapters that offer a chronological introduction. These thematic chapters generally employ a two-part structure. The first part of the chapter attempts to identify the key elements of Roman practices in each area, and the second half tries to understand the impact of Roman conquest on that particular area of life. Some readers or instructors may prefer to operate thematically and make connections across the chapters, and the book tries to offer frequent call-backs to assist with these connections. Others may prefer to read the first half of related chapters (for instance on the family and sex/

gender) together and then read the second halves of these chapters, to better see how the changes in family life connect to changes in sex/gender behavior. Readers are invited to use the book in whatever way is most useful to them.

A final note. Since the book lacks a formal conclusion, the last two paragraphs of the final chapter might be seen as a conclusion, not just to that chapter, but to the entire work. They pose the question whether the Roman adoption of practices from other cultures should be viewed in a positive light, as an openness to cultural exchange with others, or in a negative light, as appropriation of another culture. Readers might ask themselves the same question about our own adoption of Roman practices. The answers may vary from practice to practice, and from person to person. Good historians raise their own questions and come to their own conclusions.



1

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**).

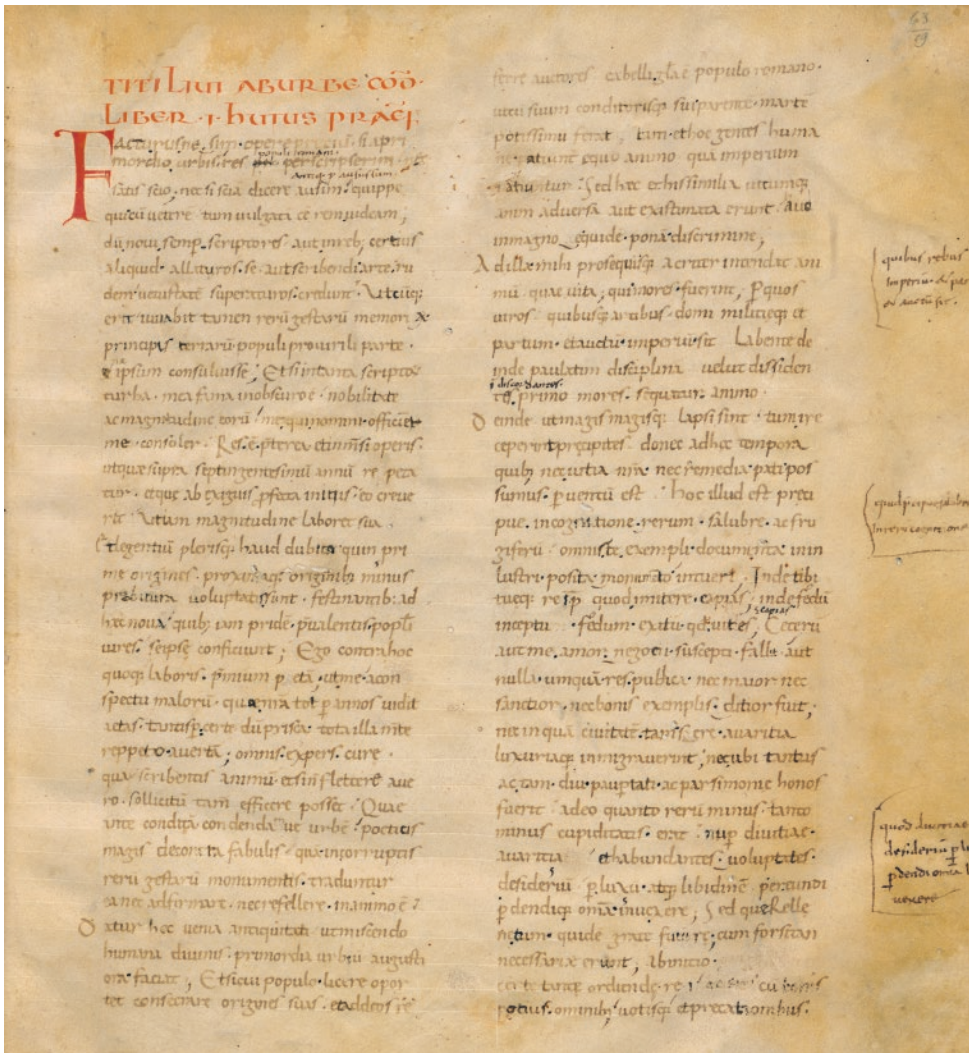


Figure 1.2 Fol. 1r from ms Plutei 63.19, a tenth century CE manuscript of Livy, originally copied in Verona and now in the Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana in Florence.

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