

Parnassus House
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Great Founders – Livy on the Dual Founding of Rome

Livy (59 BC – AD 17) opens his *History of Rome* by asking his readers to attend to particular elements of his writing, including “the life and morals of the community” and “the decay of the national character” as “the standard of morality gradually lowers.” He laments that the Rome of his day is in terminal decline, which he attributes in large part to wealth and avarice. His intent is for us to study the examples of history, that we may select fitting figures to imitate.

According to Livy’s history, Rome has *two* founders: Romulus and Numa. Romulus gives Rome its first form. He begins with little more than his twin brother, Remus, and a band of barbarians. He deposes the king, kills his brother, kidnaps neighboring women, and wages war. Ultimately, he consolidates peoples and power under his rule, and builds new religious and political institutions. His rule ends when he is divinely lifted to the heavens – or, perhaps, torn limb from limb by the senators. After an “interregnum” in which the senate rules without a king, and Rome’s functional longevity is threatened by rivalry and brutality, Numa is selected to rule. He stabilizes Rome, using divine law and religious customs to create a total way of life that re-shapes the *ferocious* Roman regime into a *pious* moral order.

1. Livy’s focus on *morality* helps us to discern the complicated dynamics at the core of Rome’s dual founding. Rome *does not begin* on anything like a moral high-ground. Romulus commits many criminal acts in the initial founding. Although his methods are effective enough to consolidate and shape an altogether new regime, Romulus’s founding orders cannot sustain beyond his direct rule. They depend on personal religious devotion and the disciplining effects of war. It is not until Numa’s reforms that Rome begins to operate under a *prescriptive moral order*. Without Romulus, Rome could not have become *one*. Without Numa, Rome could not have become *great*.
2. Romulus and Numa each concern themselves with unification through *divine sanction*, but in different modes, owing to their differing circumstances. Romulus commands the voice of the heavens for directing state violence to coercive ends, both foreign and domestic. Numa adapts Rome’s religious substrate into a lawful order that orchestrates a total way of life, allowing the state to modulate between peace-time and war-time.
3. Numa’s reforms help us to see more clearly why wealth is a problem for regime stability. As wealth grows, people gain the ability to gratify pleasures beyond strict necessities. Pleasure-seeking is not self-limiting, so people tend towards license – transgressing the prescriptive orders that orchestrate the regime’s way of life. Without these moral orders stabilizing the regime, it is difficult or impossible to maintain functional institutions. Rome had to transition from the discipline of war to the discipline of the Numan laws in order to have effective republican self-government. When the discipline of the law declined, so went the national character and the possibility of self-government.