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Origin Myths as Identifier for Ideal Cultural Values:
Roman and American Origin Mythos

The Roman historian Titus Livius Patavinus, more commonly known as Livy, took great pains to record for posterity the myths and traditional origin tales of early Rome. Writing during the reign of the first Roman Emperor, Augustus, these stories do much to emphasize the goodness of honorable men in times of great strife. Living in a period of time that was certainly still reeling from the misfortune of civil war and faced with the prospect of dissolution of the Republic, Livy was looking to the past for inspiration and examples of virtuous men would have provided an example to follow and also solace in dark times. Tales such as *The Rape of Lucretia* show Roman honor and virtue in the face of brutal oppressors and *Cincinnatus Leaves His Plow* express the humble virtue of a citizen-soldier-farmer who is able to defend the Republic with his acquisition of dictatorship and then returns this power to the senate once his duty was complete. Livy's stories of the founding of Rome should be familiar to Americans as many of the virtues expressed in his stories are the same as those in our own origin mythos. George Washington being offered the crown over the newly free American states and refusing harkens back to the tale of Cincinnatus. Traditionally, recounting the events of the Boston Massacre, during which British so mercilessly murdered innocent civilians, is reminiscent of the brutality of the Etruscans, who so dishonorably robbed Lucretia of her womanly virtue. Horatius' brave action at the bridge held off the enemy advance just as the colonial militia held off the British at the Battle of Bunker Hill. What people look to in times of sociopolitical change, such as during the reign of Augustus or during the early formation of the American Republic, tells a great deal about the

characteristics that those people aspire to exhibit and allow a glimpse into that culture's ideal social mores and especially those that should be exhibited by its leadership.

When Octavian finally defeated the last of his opposition, he was astutely aware that he needed to rule his people under the pretense of restoring the Republic. The dictatorship of his predecessor, Julius Caesar, had quickly ended with his assassination by members of the senate. In order to avoid this same fate, Octavian ingeniously orchestrated a masterful piece of political theatre intended to create a general sentiment that he was actually restoring power into the hands of the senate. The Principate which followed was a direct result of his political maneuvering. The title of *princeps* which he bestowed upon himself was an almost humble title considering its meaning: "First Citizen." In this title, Octavian was considering himself merely the first among his new community of equals. The name he adopted, Augustus, was also a carefully picked one. "Octavian had initially thought of taking the name of the founder of Rome, Romulus,"¹ until the realization that this figure carried with it the unwanted baggage of having been a king of Rome. Clearly, propaganda was a key component of Augustus' stable acquisition of sole emperorship. The origin myths of Rome, as written by Livy, can easily be construed as a component of this propaganda. If Augustus could associate himself with the mythic founders of the city of Rome who embraced *virtus* and despised tyranny, it would do much to thicken the smokescreen obscuring his acquisition of absolute power.

Many revolts against established authority are made to appear virtuous by portraying the establishment as inherently evil and corrupt; Rome and America are no exception to this statement. In the origin mythos of America, it is British tyranny and brutality that led to the revolution which overthrew colonial rule. This perspective is made exceedingly apparent in the story of the Boston Massacre. During a demonstration in the streets of Boston, a British

¹ Mellor, *Augustus as Princeps*, 18.

detachment fired into a crowd of innocent civilians. In the now famous engraving of the massacre by Paul Revere,² the noble looking American colonists are pictured as helpless against the vastly overpowering force of British arms. The commander of the British troops appears to be deliberately ordering his soldiers to fire on the crowd. The surviving Americans are collecting the wounded and scampering off with what remains of their pride after such monstrous defeat. This story would be a rallying cry during future encounters with British forces and would epitomize the righteousness of the American cause by typecasting the opposition as inherently brutal and dishonorable.

Livy paints an equally appalling picture of Etruscan brutality with *The Rape of Lucretia*. Lucretia is a noble Roman woman who is raped by the Etruscan King. Overcome with grief, Lucretia committed suicide, but not before making her father and husband swear to her that they would seek vengeance. After pulling the knife from Lucretia's body, the oath was sworn: "By this girl's blood ... and by the gods, I swear that ... never again will I let them or any other man be King in Rome."³ From this act a revolution was born which would lead the Romans to overthrow Etruscan rule.

The oppressive misuse of power displayed in both of these stories tries to portray the oppressors as inherently evil and the oppressed, by contrast, as inherently virtuous. In the ensuing revolutions which followed these accounts, the actions of the oppressed against their oppressors could be viewed as not only justified, but righteous. More importantly, however, is the fact that future audiences can look upon these stories in order to justify their own actions in times of strife. This is certainly the case for *The Rape of Lucretia* at its time of writing by Livy. Octavian would have wanted to be able to portray his actions against his enemies as justified and

² Figure 1.

³ Livy, *Penguin Custom Editions: The Western World, The Rape of Lucretia*, trans. by Aubrey de Selincourt, (Boston: Pearson, 2012) 5.

righteous. Associating himself with this narrative from the past and the moral lessons it embodies would have certainly bolstered his ability to do so. By such means, Octavian, the brutal military commander who had attacked Marc Antony and Cleopatra in Egypt and employed proscriptions in order to raise money for his military conquests, could obscure sentiments by portraying his actions as merely justifiable means to honorable ends.

In American lore, the Battle of Bunker Hill is remembered as a seemingly hopeless situation in which massively outnumbered, poorly trained and poorly equipped militiamen overcame the odds by holding off an entire British regiment. So poorly equipped were these men that they were instructed not to fire on the British until they could see the whites of their eyes. Despite dismal odds, this ragtag unit was able to hold off the British advance long enough for the rest of the colonial army to regroup behind the lines. Though the British troops won the field after the militia had run out of ammunition, it was a Pyrrhic victory considering their staggeringly disproportionate casualties.

The bravery of the men fighting at Bunker Hill is once again evocative of the legend of *Horatius at the Bridge*. The Etruscans were advancing on Rome and the Roman soldiers were routed and retreating back to the city. Knowing that the enemy would make its way over the bridge leading into the city, Horatius rallied the fleeing soldiers to destroy it and “he offered to hold up the Etruscan advance, so far as was possible, alone.”⁴ Horatius succeeded in doing so, showing excessive examples of *virtus* and lacking any fear of his own death. Once the bridge had been destroyed he was able to jump into the Tiber River and swim to safety on the other side.

The bravery displayed in these two stories, that of a poorly equipped militia and of a solitary soldier facing an army, successfully secured enough time to allow others to get to safety and live to fight another day. These two stories feature brave individuals who are willing to risk

⁴ Livy, *Horatius at the Bridge*, 28.

their lives against seemingly impossible odds for the greater good of the community. In the great civil strife that surrounded Octavian's acquisition of sole emperorship of the Roman Empire, he would have been in need of many brave men like Horatius to stand alone against the onslaught of the enemy and would also have wanted himself to be viewed as doing the same for the good of Rome. By harkening back to Horatius, he hoped to elicit bravery out of those men who followed him and inspire the faith of those he meant to rule. During his transformation from Octavian into the role of Augustus, he wanted very much to be viewed as a father to his subjects, even going so far as being proclaimed *pater patriae*, or "Father of the Country," by the Senate in 2 BCE.⁵ Stories such as this would have provided an example for the Roman people of fatherly protectiveness over the community which Augustus would have needed to exploit.

Referred to by many as the "American Cincinnatus," George Washington is remembered in the popular imagination for taking command of the fledgling American Militia and leading it to victory against the British. Once victorious, he was offered the crown over the new American nation which he promptly refused in order to return to his home at Mount Vernon. It is for good reason that he is often referred to by this moniker, as the virtues on display in this popular story are mirroring those in the legend of Cincinnatus. A Roman army was under siege and the situation was looking dire. Cincinnatus was called on to leave his farm and take up the dictatorship to repel the enemy forces. He accomplished exactly what was asked of him and saved the beleaguered Roman army. Then, once his duty to Rome was complete, he "resigned after holding the office for fifteen days, having originally accepted it for a period of six months."⁶ Cincinnatus and Washington both led their respective nations out of potential military disaster and refused dictatorial authority in favor of returning to their lives at home. Both of

⁵ Mellor, 22.

⁶ Livy, *Cincinnatus Leaves his Plow*, 33.

these men exhibited profound military skill but also modesty; a virtuous combination of attributes such as this are greatly admired in a leader by both Americans and Romans.

Of all of the origin myths discussed thus far, it is presumable that Octavian would have been most interested in the legend of Cincinnatus particularly. His transformation of the Roman Republic into the Principate in which all authority was held by a single ruler with a simple façade of senatorial control and the vast sociopolitical fluctuations which this entailed were made easier by trying to portray himself as merely restoring the Roman Republic. Having his image tied to a mythical figure such as Cincinnatus would have certainly elicited the desired feelings from his subjects. George Washington, who was connected vividly with the legend of Cincinnatus after his refusal of leadership, was subsequently elected as America's first president. The American people would have continued to elect him into successive terms if he had not displayed his modesty once again and refused to hold the office for a third term. With this modern example in mind, it seems logical that if Augustus could be associated with Cincinnatus, who so humbly refused dictatorial power for any longer than was necessary to defeat the enemy, then it would be possible to accumulate progressively more power over Rome as long as this power was being used to restore the Republic. "On January 13, 27 BCE, in his own words, Octavian 'transferred the Republic from my own power to the authority of the Senate and the Roman people.'"⁷ This façade of humbleness in the face of power was exactly the required portrayal in order to create a more stable transition of power from the Senate into the hands of the Emperor.

The Roman and American origin myths share very similar traits though they take place about two thousand years apart. The reason for this is that these stories are all looking to the past for inspiration and guidance during times of great sociopolitical strife. The Roman concept of

⁷ Mellor, 18.

mos maiorum (the idea that one's honor and virtue were directly correlated to the deeds of one's ancestors), not entirely dissimilar from the American conception of the greatness of its past deeds as a nation playing a role in its current and future prominence, makes it entirely feasible that these past deeds are evoked in order to exemplify the greatness of these nations at the time of recounting the story. Augustus would certainly have been trying to conjure the *mos maiorum* of the Julii family to which he had been adopted and who mythically witnessed the foundation of the city of Rome. The Roman myths as recorded by Livy were written during the reign of Augustus following the civil war which led to the formation of the Principate. The stories that arise out of the American Revolution are influenced by knowledge of the past and almost certainly of the past deeds of the Roman Republic. The social mores expressed by Livy as well as in the stories of American independence are those of virtue in the face of brutal oppression, bravery against innumerable odds and impressive military skill coupled with the modesty required to refuse absolute power. These virtues are impressive to almost any society, even ones which are separated by multiple millennia, and would certainly be looked for in times of desperation and strife. Romans and Americans would regard these traits as central to successful resolution of hostilities and, perhaps more importantly, the creation of a stable and just government afterward.

The values that these two disparate societies hold dear and therefore express so richly in the retelling of their respective origin myths tells a great deal about those societies' ideal human characteristics for both its leadership and its citizenry. Cincinnatus and George Washington exhibit great honor and military skill and also the modesty to refuse absolute power. The recounting of the Battle of Bunker Hill and the legend of Horatius defending the bridge express the virtue of bravery in the face of staggering odds for the betterment of the community. The

Boston Massacre and the story of Lucretia's rape are examples of the antithesis of gallantry and honor which cast the opposition as inherently evil. Through the analysis of these stories, the underlying moral ideology of both of these societies may be gleaned. The tales of the American Revolution are often invoked in order to show the honorability of American leadership and the bravery of its citizenry as well as to show the despicableness of its enemies. Livy, writing at the time of Augustus' ascension, similarly writes of honorable modesty in the leadership of Augustus, great bravery of the citizenry towards any opposition and the typecasting of the opposition as the antithesis of honor. All of these myths greatly glorify past deeds and are evoked in times of strife when an exemplar is required to rally the community to a cause. In the case of the American origin mythos, these stories would be remembered to varying degrees many times during its short history. For Rome, these legends were pivotal during Augustus' formation of the Principate.



Figure 1: Engraving of Boston Massacre by Paul Revere

Image obtained from: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e1/Boston_Massacre_high-res.jpg