

Study Guide on Livy's *Ab urbe condita* or *The Rise of Rome*

As Livy recounts, the Tarquins believed that “Monarchy . . . is the finest form of government among gods and men” (80¹). What is Livy’s position on the Roman monarchy?

- Recall that he attributes to Romulus and Remus “the family curse—the desire for kingly supremacy” (10).
- Livy declares that the death of Servius Tullius “marked the end of just and legitimate rule by kings at Rome” (57).

Livy begins Book II by stating, “The history of a free nation in peace and war will be my theme from this point on . . .” (71). What does he mean by “free nation”?

- After the death of Romulus, “Nevertheless, despite conflicting choices, they did agree in wanting a king, having as yet no experience of the blessings of liberty” (22).
- Horatius is proclaimed the “liberator of our city” by his father (33), and Livy refers to Brutus as “the great-hearted liberator of the Roman people” (65).
- “And, mild and restrained though [Servius’ rule] was, certain authorities affirm that he intended to abdicate precisely because it was rule by one man, but that . . . villainy within his own family prevented him from carrying out his plan to give freedom to his country” (57).

What are the conditions required for liberty, according to Livy’s account? How does the history of the early Roman nation show freedom’s dependence on certain conditions?

- In what ways did the monarchs help to establish the conditions required for liberty? Among other passages, consider:
 - “After receiving supreme power in this way Numa determined that Rome, which had originally been established through force of arms, should be re-established through justice, law, and proper observances” (24).
 - “[W]hen [the nation] matured and grew strong it was able to enjoy the excellent fruits of liberty” (71).
- What are the differences between the monarchy and the consuls that make the latter an institution fitting for freedom?

What is Rome’s “national character”? Among the Romans described in this work, who best embodies that character, and why?

¹ Livy. *The Rise of Rome: Books 1-5*. Translated by T.J. Luce. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. (All page numbers refer to this edition.)



- Is there a consistent teaching in this history regarding the relative weight of obligations to the city and to the family? Consider, for example, Publius' defense of his son (32–33), and Brutus' execution of his sons (76).
- What do the Romans love? Is it glory, liberty, religion, law, or something else? Is this common love the reason for their success?

What is Livy's view of religion and the gods? Does he see the triumphs of Rome as divinely ordained? Does he view religion as necessary for the common good of the nation?

What does Livy mean when he writes of "successive founders" (71)? Why were successive founders necessary?

- Is Romulus a fitting founder? Was Romulus' "force of arms" necessary in the process of founding Rome (24)?
- Describe what the early rulers of Rome contributed to the city and the nation.

What is Livy's view of human nature?

Consider both the continuity and the change of institutions from the time of the founding through the beginning of the republic. What seems to be the relation between these two processes? Does Livy think one is more important than the other?

What does Livy mean when he says that now Rome "struggles under the incubus of its own great size" (3), calling it "a mighty people . . . long bent on its own undoing" (3)?

How does Livy view his own project of writing a history of Rome?

- Note the exhortation to the reader: "pay the closest attention to . . . how men lived, what their moral principles were, under what leaders and by what measures at home and abroad our empire was won and extended" (4).
- "The special and salutary benefit of the study of history is to behold evidence of every sort of behavior set forth as on a splendid memorial; from it you may select for yourself and for your country what to emulate, from it what to avoid, whether basely begun or basely concluded" (4).

Suggested use: This study guide includes a few questions and observations about Livy's *Ab urbe condita*. Among possible uses, one could consider these comments while reading the work; or one could use them as starting points for a classroom discussion.

