

ROMAN LEADERSHIP PATTERNS IN ANTIQUITY

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From the founding of Rome to the informal establishment of the Roman Empire, leadership played a crucial role in the way history unfolded. More compelling than the leaders themselves, however, is the way history repeated itself in two of Rome's most vital periods of (re)formation. The purpose of this essay is to examine the parallels between one of Rome's most popular origin myths, the story of Remus and Romulus, with two of the most important figures, Marcus Antonius and Gaius Octavianus, at the turn of the Roman Republic as it transformed into the beginnings of the Roman Empire. More specifically, the leadership capacities of these four Roman figures are analyzed and related to more contemporary examples of leadership.

The culture in Ancient Rome was largely based on tradition. It is arguable, however, that some “traditions” were (unintentionally) followed a little too closely, particularly in terms of leadership. Arguably, the most interesting occasion of an ancient Roman leader mirroring a leadership pattern from generations earlier is that of Gaius Octavianus and Marcus Antonius battling for control over Rome. Throughout this paper, I draw connections between the leaders who ushered in the Roman Empire and the supposed founders of Rome. To accomplish this purpose, I briefly summarize Livy's account of the Remus and Romulus myth, and analyze the characters and political goals of Marcus Antonius and Octavianus. Furthermore, contemporary examples of leadership in the United States are examined in relation to Roman leaders of antiquity.

REMUS AND ROMULUS

As Livy composed his multi-volume work, *History of Rome*, he determined it necessary to start from the beginning (around 753 BCE), even though he questioned the legitimacy of Rome's generations-old foundation legend. Like many other stories in antiquity, the supposed creation of Rome was rooted in familial contention. Remus and Romulus, twins who were royal by birth, wanted to establish their own city in the region they were raised. According to Livy, their decision was reinforced by the overgrown populations of nearby Alban and Latin settlements; Remus and Romulus wanted to have a fresh territory to themselves. With numerous followers to aid in their endeavors, the brothers decided the city would prosper and proceeded with such plans. Livy notes,

These considerations were interrupted by the curse of their grandsires, the greed of kingly power, and by a shameful quarrel which grew out of it, upon an occasion innocent enough. Since the brothers were twins, and respect for their age could not determine between them, it was agreed that the gods who had those places in their protection should choose by augury who should give the new city its name, who should govern it when built.¹

With growing contention and no clear resolution, the brothers consulted the gods to decide who would lead their newly-established city. Each brother chose their lots and awaited an augury (a "sign from the gods"). Augury and divination were primary methods of decision-making for leaders in Ancient Rome when reason offered no clear answer.² Though Remus allegedly received an augury of six vultures first, Romulus received twice as many vultures not much later. Contention ensued. Remus and Romulus were each supported by their own followers: "one party laying claim to the honor from priority, the other from the number of birds."³ As the rest of the myth continues, Romulus slew his brother and sole power fell on him. "...and the city, thus founded, was called by its founder's name."⁴

1 Livy, *History of Rome*. Books I-II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1919), 25.

2 Joseph Miller, "Roman Culture," Lecture at Utah Valley University, February 26, 2018.

3 Livy, *History*, 25.

4 Livy, *History*, 25.

In terms of leadership, much can be learned from the account of Romulus. One of the most infamous world powers in history bore his namesake, meaning he was able to establish a city with a lively culture and spirit. Among these values was a strong devotion to honor and defend the Roman way of life. However, the legend of Romulus also nurtured seeds of heartless competition, a spirit of spiteful conquering, and internal factions within the Roman image as brother slayed brother over a simple namesake. This example is replicated, to an extent, later in Roman history, as will be illustrated in a later section.

MARCUS ANTONIUS

Many generations after Rome was founded, Julius Caesar (100-44 BCE) was assassinated and left no clear heir to his rule. However, Marcus Antonius (83-30 BCE) “was both a leading man in the Caesarian party and consul, head of the government.”⁵ Though the Ides of March, when Caesar was assassinated, left the Roman Republic shaky under the constant threat of civil war, Antonius appeared to be a good candidate for holding the Republic together. He had been in the political system long enough to jump through the hoops; he was an experienced soldier, military leader, and politician. Ronald Syme, a prominent Roman historian, notes that “on the whole, Antonius was distinctly superior to what Rome had learned to expect of the politician in power.”⁶ Overall, Antonius appeared to be more levelheaded and had no apparent lust for dominion. Once the provinces of the Caesarian faction were allotted, Antonius found himself in the consular position over Macedonia and leading Caesar’s Balkan Army—six of the best legions in the army—which reflected Antonius’s capabilities as a military leader. However, as Antonius focused his attention on his newly-acquired province and legions, he left Rome for a month, leaving room for other various factors, like Octavianus, to make a move on the city.⁷

Though Antonius may have looked like a shoo-in at the beginning, his reputation and strategic capabilities were soon bogged down. Syme noted that Cicero and propaganda were the two leading factors which led to Antonius’s downfall. He observed that Cicero, a major force in the

5 Ronald Syme, *The Roman Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), 96.

6 Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 109.

7 Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 109.

Roman State during the time, notoriously despised Antonio and used Antonius's character and political blunders as propaganda.⁸ Antonius was caught supporting parties other than the Caesarian (which an important number of Roman citizens favored) and was tainted with scandal for his relationship with Cleopatra (which was viewed as unpatriotic and treasonous).⁹ Syme argued, "In the end it was not debauchery that ruined Antonius, but a fatal chain of miscalculations, both military and political, and a sentiment of loyalty incompatible with the chill claims of statesmanship."¹⁰ While Antonius appeared to be the best candidate for Rome's next great ruler, his self-interest and personal agenda outshone his capacity for leadership. The citizens of Rome were not thoroughly convinced by a man who sought to expand foreign relations instead of reflecting the needs and values of the people he was meant to represent. Considering all of Antonius's slipups, the game of Roman tradition was played much better by Octavianus.

OCTAVIANUS

Though Antonius was the alleged heir to Caesar's political state because of his political background, Gaius Octavianus (63 BCE-14 CE) was the appointed heir of Julius Caesar's name and fortune. However, Octavianus was only distantly related to Caesar and lacked any kind of nobility aside from being adopted into the Julian house. When Octavianus first heard news of Caesar's assassination, he was in Apollonia studying oratory and the practice of military exercises. He did not hesitate to cease his chance at the throne. He got in touch with many "persons of influence and had surveyed the political situation."¹¹ He established connections with Campania, Balbus, Hirtius, Pansa, and, most importantly, Cicero.

Octavianus started out as an unlikely success due to his lack of political and military history. At only eighteen-years-old, he had not gone through the traditional hoops that were required of Roman leaders, however he was resolute: "He had a cause to champion, the avenging of Caesar, and was ready to exploit every advantage."¹² Octavian, teamed

8 Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 109.

9 Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 109.

10 Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 105.

11 Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 114.

12 Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 119.

with Cicero, played to the memory of Caesar and the ideals of his followers to gain power. Syme suggests:

As his enemies bitterly observed, the name of Caesar was the young man's fortune. Italy and the world accepted him as Caesar's son and heir. . . . One thing at least is clear. From the beginning, his sense for realities was unerring, his ambition implacable. In that, the young man was a Roman and a Roman aristocrat. He was only eighteen years of age: but he resolved to acquire the power and the glory along with the name of Caesar.¹³

The inherited name of Caesar and his followers undoubtedly gave Octavianus an edge over Antonius. Though no one would have expected him to become the next Roman tyrant, Octavianus employed a great deal of strategy while encountering a great deal of luck. Most importantly, he became a leader and representative whom many Roman citizens were willing to support, as they realized he was in line with their desires and culture.

MIRRORING MYTH

When analyzing the contention between Antonius and Octavianus, there are many parallels to the Remus and Romulus myth. Each similarity marks important milestones in the development of a new Roman phase, both in the creation of Rome and of the Roman Empire.

The first parallel is the presence of familial ties. Though Antonius and Octavianus were not twins, both had undeniable connections to the highly-esteemed memory of Julius Caesar and were related by marriage. Both Antonius and Octavianus desired control over the Caesarian faction. However, after experiencing much inner-turmoil, those of the Caesarian faction were not keen on fighting more battles. Syme acknowledges this by positing, "The prospect of a split between the Caesarian leader and Caesar's heir was distasteful to the sentiments of soldiers and officers, ruinous to their interests. Remonstrance was addressed to Antonius: the military men urged him to treat Caesar's heir with loyalty and respect."¹⁴ If Antonius had immediately turned against Octavianus, he would have lost all the respect and support from valuable members of

¹³ Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 113.

¹⁴ Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 118.

his army and faction. Faction members who were devoted to upkeeping Caesar's memory would have felt betrayed if Antonius were to destroy Octavianus, whom they honored as Caesar's heir. Thus, Antonius and Octavianus were forced to play nice to gain respect from the Caesarian faction, which had the most political sway in Rome at the time.

Much like Remus and Romulus, Antonius and Octavianus could not contain their lust for power and avoid contention amongst themselves. As Antonius started to make imprudent decisions, such as focusing his attention on Eastern provinces rather than Rome itself, Octavianus started acquiring more backing in Rome and surrounding provinces. By playing to the Caesarian faction, which dominantly appealed to the lower and middle classes, Octavianus gained more valuable allies within Rome and the government. M. Cary and H. H. Scullard, scholars of the ancient Roman period, discuss Octavianus's rise in reputation within the military and discuss the intentionality behind his turn from an allegiance with Antonius. According to Cary and Scullard,

[Octavianus] could offer no guarantee of peace in the future, except by retaining the armed forces of the empire under his undivided control. His prestige among the troops was now so high that he could answer for their good behavior; but if he were to abdicate his military power or to share it with others, there was every reason to fear the ambitious military officers might again turn their soldiery upon the civil authorities or upon each other. Fifty years of civil war and revolution had created a tradition within the Roman army which none but Octavian could break; therefore it was his duty no less than his right to keep the entire military *imperium* in his own hands.¹⁵

In other words, after generations of civil unrest, civilians and soldiers were ready for stability in their government and leaders. By remaining true to the memory of Caesar, Octavianus placed himself in a position that inspired trust. Continuing an alliance with Antonius, however, would run against the name of Caesar and Roman patriotism. While retrospect allows us to see the benefits of Octavianus's moves over Antonius, at the

15 M. Cary and H. H. Scullard, *A History of Rome: Down to the Reign of Constantine* (New York: Palgrave, 1975), 315.

time it was uncertain which political moves would prove efficacious or damning. Placing bets on different political allegiances is comparable to Remus and Romulus choosing the gods to whom they would expect auguries from.

As in the Remus and Romulus story, “signs” and games played just as important of a role in the contention between Antonius and Octavianus. Remus’s augury of six vultures, which arrived before Romulus’s, is comparable to the immediate advantage Antonius was allotted after Caesar’s death. However, this “first sign” was easily contested by Octavianus. Throughout his political career, Julius Caesar devoted himself to propaganda in the form of games and festivals, “which were customary devices for the organization of popular sentiment.”¹⁶ Playing to the image of his successor, Octavianus hosted a festival that was abundantly funded by many of Caesar’s former friends. Octavianus began gaining more momentum and support against Antonius. Finally, Octavian secured the upper hand when a comet appeared in the northern quadrant of the sky. The superstitious mob believed this was a sign from Caesar himself, who was essentially esteemed as a god. “Octavianus accepted the sign with secret confidence in his destiny—and with public exploitation.”¹⁷ This “twelve-vulture sign” was enough to convince Caesar’s followers that Octavianus was the rightful heir to the Caesarian faction. This sign is comparable with the one Romulus received, and with his newly-obtained credibility, Octavianus gained enough support from citizens and soldiers to gain leverage over Antonius.

Another major comparison is Antonius’s death and defeat, which is similar to Remus’s death. As Syme notes, Antonius was in a position where he had to balance support of the Senate and the opposing support of the Caesarian faction. Syme asserts, “A move to one side would alienate the other. Hitherto Antonius had neglected the avenging of Caesar and prevented his cult; he had professed conciliated towards the assassins, with impunity. The disloyal Caesarian would soon be brought to book.”¹⁸ After allying with Cleopatra and the East and dishonoring the motives of the Caesarian faction and its followers, Antonius placed himself in a

16 Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 116.

17 Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 117.

18 Syme, *The Roman Revolution*, 115.

position he could not recover from.¹⁹ In the Battle of Actium, Antonius was defeated by Octavianus, who was then able to acquire total power of Rome. Though Octavianus did not slay Antonius like Romulus slew Remus, the end for Antonius was arguably more bitter. Antonius, having lost everything he hoped to gain, namely power and high honor, fled to Egypt in exile and committed suicide the year following his defeat in Actium.²⁰ Comparable to Romulus after Remus's death, Octavianus was then in prime position to (re)invent Rome without being contested. Octavianus's new system of government and leadership was the strong foundation on which the Roman Empire was built.

DEIFICATION OF LEADERS

The Roman tradition is one that honors and reveres its strongest leaders. As seen before, the foundation of Rome reflects the strength and divine acknowledgement of its namesake, Romulus. With Octavianus taking the name of Caesar Augustus, using the name of his predecessor as a title and signal of strength, the city of Rome underwent severe changes in its governmental structure, particularly in the way it regarded its new "imperator." Love and respect for Caesar Augustus extended past regular fanfare; he became a god in the people's eyes. Arguably, obedience to Augustus turned into blind faith. The "Oath of Allegiance to Augustus," which was commonly recited by Roman delegates, officials, and citizens, illustrates the godlike status Augustus achieved:

I swear by Jupiter, Earth, Sun, by all the gods and goddesses, and by Augustus himself, that I will be loyal to Caesar Augustus and to his children and descendants all my life in word, in deed, and in thought, regarding as friends whomever they so regard, and considering as enemies whomever they so adjudge; that in the defense of their interests I will spare neither body, soul, life, nor children, but will in every way undergo every danger in defense of their interests . . .²¹

19 Joshua J. Mark, "Mark Antony," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, 2013. https://www.ancient.eu/Mark_Antony/

20 Joshua J. Mark, "Mark Antony."

21 "Oath of Allegiance to Augustus," in *Roman Civilization: Selected Readings*, ed. Naphtali Lewis and Meyer Reinhold (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 589.

In this passage, Augustus is repeatedly named as or counted among the divine, and those reciting the oath declare their allegiance to him and his family at all costs. However, such loyalty to Augustus and his descendants had negative consequences later down the line as monarchs turned into tyrants who led the Roman people through turmoil and struggle. Though a common theme throughout modernity has been to grieve or chide the Romans for allowing corruption to sneak into their government, many people fail to see the way their own leaders reflect the Roman tradition of leadership that shines through Romulus and Augustus. Contemporary civilizations are no strangers to civil wars, international conflicts, political corruption, and leaders who wreak of tyrannical tendencies. Though such leaders may succeed for a season, their reigns always come with a heavy price, which is, as many Romans stated in the Augustan oath: life.

Herein lies the dangers of strong, yet unpredictable leaders: such leaders often inspire blind obedience and unyielding devotion of their citizens. Though some leaders who can navigate the strange terrain of political and/or military power, like Octavianus, do so in ways that positively impact their followers, they can also create unfortunate traditions and corruptible structures that are prone to collapse. Such is the case with American history, especially, which often draws comparison to the Roman Empire. Kristofer Allerfeldt, a U.S. historian at the University of Exeter, posits in reference to America, “It seems that the Fall of Rome was at the turn of the twentieth century, and is now, a lesson from the past for everything from the results of hubristic overreaching to the consequences of decadent immorality.”²² When leaders, particularly, exemplify characters of this “hubristic overreaching” and “decadent immorality,” meaning they are driven by self-interest and pleasure, followers need to think carefully before pledging their full, unwavering loyalty.

A MODERN PARALLEL

Within the realm of politics particularly, it is important to truly analyze the character and trajectory of the leaders who represent a country’s interests. As the polarization of political parties increases,

²² Kristofer Allerfeldt, “Rome, Race, and the Republic: Progressive America and the Fall of the Roman Empire, 1890-1920,” *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 7, no. 3 (2007): 297.

cultural standards for leadership have been lost. Many scholars and citizens have spoken to this message. Tony Michels, a historian at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, comments on the current leadership standards by asserting, “For the first time in modern American history, we have a president obviously unfit for the office according to previously accepted standards. Trump’s political inexperience, authoritarian leanings, and incessant dishonesty would have disqualified him not long ago.”²³ These words paint a portrait that looks a lot like Octavianus: lack of political experience, a reputation for tyrannical leanings, and the employment of propaganda to further self-image. Though the leadership similarities between Octavianus and President Donald Trump may begin or end at this point, there is certainly an eerie resemblance about the situation which ought to make citizens stop and critically think about the path their leaders are taking them down. Though the path may appear to be “great,” small flashes of tyranny, deceit, and division ought to make us pause for reflection before further degeneration and corruption take root.

CONCLUSION

Though separated by generations, Antonius and Octavianus paralleled the tradition of lust for power and civil war that Remus and Romulus patterned at the very foundation of Rome. The similarities between both stories and the morals that can be learned from each are valuable in modern society. After studying different histories and civilizations, a similar pattern of desire for dominion at any cost becomes apparent when those in positions of leadership are critically analyzed. The events that transpire before the brinks of new governmental/political status are not exclusive to Remus, Romulus, Antonius, and Octavianus. The cycle was present before and after the Roman Empire and has found itself into many other civilizations’ histories and current situations. As Livy posits at the beginning of his history:

What chiefly makes the study of history wholesome and profitable is this, that you behold the lessons of every kind of experience set forth as on a conspicuous moment; from these you may choose for yourself and for your own state what to imitate, from these mark for avoidance what is shameful in the conception and in the result.²⁴

²³ Tony Michels, “Donald Trump and the Triumph of Antiliberalism,” *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 22, no. 3 (2017): 186–192.

²⁴ Livy, *History*, 7.

In other words, history has been set, and it is up to current citizens to identify trends in leadership that have and may threaten freedom and security. Though superpowers like the Roman Empire may dominate for an impressive number of generations, a foundation of bloodshed, civil war, and contention ultimately crumbles, affecting everything that is built on top of it. The presence of leaders, deified or otherwise, may seem fleeting but can have drastic impacts for generations thereafter, whether positive or negative. If there is anything to learn from the Roman tradition of seeking imperium, it is that tyranny and war lead to transient governments and civilizations as well as the perpetuation of corrupt traditions.

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