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 Excerpt
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CHAPTER I

A too familiar story

THE FABIAN NARRATIVE

The first history of Rome was written by Quintus Fabius Pictor, a senator from a very famous patrician family. He wrote in Greek, either during or just after the great war with Hannibal, in order to familiarise the civilised world, for whom Greek was the *lingua franca*, with the origins and achievements of the city on the Tiber which was now a major power in that world.

Greek readers of the history of a city expected to begin with a foundation story, including the genealogical association of the founder with the familiar world of heroic legend.¹ Fabius did not disappoint them. According to a library-catalogue inscription that happens to survive,² he related

Herakles' arrival in Italy and the return of Lanoios and his ally Aeneas and Ascanius; much later, the birth of Romulus and Remus and the founding of Rome by Romulus, who was the first king.

'Much later' covers the dynasty of the Silvii ('men of the forest'), descendants of Aeneas and rulers of Alba Longa, which Aeneas' son Ascanius had founded.³ Eleven generations after Ascanius, the brothers Numitor and Amulius succeeded to the Alban throne.

At that point began the story of Rome. Fabius' narrative does not survive, but it was followed in detail – with additions and variants – by two later Greek authors whose works do survive, Dionysius of Halicarnassus in the late first century BC (*Roman Antiquities* I 76–83) and Plutarch in the early second century AD (*Life of Romulus* 3–8). Plutarch, indeed, even cites

Fabius' source: 'The first to publish the story to the Greeks was Diocles of Peparethos, whom Fabius Pictor followed on most points.' But since it is impossible to tell which, if any, of Plutarch's items were in Diocles but not in Fabius (or even if he had access to Diocles' text at all), all we can do is combine Plutarch's narrative with that of Dionysius in order to reconstruct, at least provisionally, the Roman foundation-legend as it appeared in the first Roman history. It went something like this.

'DE REMO ET ROMULO'

Amulius offers his brother a choice between the kingship and the family fortune. Numitor takes the kingship, but Amulius then uses his wealth to depose him and seize the power himself. Fearing vengeance, he arranges to have Numitor's son killed, and appoints Numitor's daughter Ilia as a priestess of Vesta, supposedly as a mark of honour, but really to prevent her having children who might avenge their grandfather.⁴

Four years later, Ilia is in the sacred grove of Mars getting water from the spring. The sky is suddenly darkened, and a male figure of supernatural size and beauty appears and ravishes her. Afterwards he consoles her with the prospect of bearing the offspring of Mars himself – twin sons who will excel all men in warlike valour – and soars back to heaven on a cloud.⁵ Ilia, unable to go on performing her duties as a Vestal Virgin, consults her mother and feigns sickness.

Amulius is suspicious, and in due course discovers her pregnancy. He complains to Numitor, who gets the whole story from his wife and reports it to the royal council. Is Ilia telling the truth? Evidently she is, for she gives birth to twins as the god foretold. Amulius refuses to believe it: one of the women must have smuggled in a second baby. As an unchaste Vestal, Ilia must die, and her offspring be thrown in the river. However, the first part of the sentence is commuted to imprisonment in solitary confinement, at the plea of Ilia's cousin, the daughter of Amulius.⁶ (Plutarch gives the cousin's name – Antho, 'Flower' – and puts both sentence and intercession *after* the birth.)

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The infant twins are put in a box and taken by Amulius' men⁷ down from Alba to the Tiber, which is in flood. The men put the box down in the floodwater where it washes against the slope of the Palatine hill.⁸ The water recedes, the box is grounded, the twins are tipped out crying into the mud beside a fig tree.⁹ There now appears a she-wolf with swollen udders (for she has just whelped), who licks the babies clean and suckles them.

This miraculous scene is witnessed by Faustulus, the king's swineherd, who comes down from the hill and rescues the twins.¹⁰ The she-wolf calmly retreats into a nearby cave, sacred to Pan,¹¹ and Faustulus takes the babies home to his wife. Now, Faustulus happens to know who they are: he was in Alba when Ilia's childbirth was made public, and even, by some heaven-sent chance, accompanied the king's servants on their errand to the Palatine. Not only that, but his wife Larentia has just given birth to a still-born child. So he and Larentia bring up the twins as their own, in secret,¹² and call them Romulus and Remus from *ruma* ('teat'), referring to their miraculous suckling.¹³

The boys grow up handsome, spirited and brave, as befits royal children supernaturally begotten.¹⁴ Despising idleness, they pass their time in physical exercise and hunting, in 'driving off robbers, capturing thieves, and rescuing the oppressed from violence'.¹⁵ But like their foster-father they are the king's herdsmen, grazing his beasts on the Palatine and frequently quarrelling with Numitor's herdsmen on the Aventine about the pastures between the two hills. One day, when the twins are about eighteen, Numitor's men take advantage of Romulus' absence at a sacrifice and make a full-scale attack. Remus leads the resistance, but is caught in an ambush and taken as a prisoner to Numitor.

Romulus, on his return, is all for mounting an immediate rescue attempt, but Faustulus dissuades him from his 'too frenzied haste'¹⁶ and tells him the whole story of his birth and upbringing. Together they plan a greater strategy, to free all of Numitor's family from the tyranny of Amulius. Stage one is gradually to assemble as many supporters as possible in the *agora* at Alba without arousing suspicion.

Meanwhile, Remus is brought before the king, found guilty of the charges brought against him by Numitor's men, and sent to Numitor's house for punishment. Impressed by his physique and dignified bearing, Numitor questions him about his origin and from his reply is inspired to guess the truth.¹⁷ He tells Remus the story, enlists his aid against Amulius, and sends a reliable messenger to summon Romulus. Romulus, in fact, is already close to the city, with his forces now in place. He joins Remus and Numitor and they plan the attack.¹⁸

Now the plot thickens. Faustulus comes to Alba bringing the conclusive evidence – the box in which the twins were cast away. He is stopped at the city gate by the king's guards and forced to show what he is trying to conceal. One of the guards recognises the box from his errand eighteen years ago, and Faustulus is hauled before the king and brutally interrogated. Forced to admit that the twins are alive, Faustulus nevertheless claims that they are minding their herds far from the city. (Amulius of course does not know the identity of the herdsman he has just turned over to Numitor.) He offers to go and find them and bring them to the king. As for the box, he is taking it to show Ilia, who he hears is in the king's custody.

Amulius sends Faustulus away with an escort of guards to find the twins, and despatches a messenger to summon Numitor, whom he wants to keep under surveillance while he deals with Ilia's long-lost sons. But the messenger changes his allegiance; he warns Numitor of Amulius' plot and urges immediate action. Under the leadership of the twins,¹⁹ the combined forces of Numitor's retainers and the countrymen in the *agora* storm the citadel, put Amulius to death, and restore Numitor to his rightful throne.

CONCORD OR DISCORD?

This tightly constructed plot, well described by Plutarch as 'theatrical',²⁰ is a unity complete in itself, and clearly treated as such by both Plutarch and Dionysius. But Rome has still not been founded. It is not at all easy to see from the extant accounts how Fabius Pictor handled the rest of the foundation

story. And that may not be an accident, for the subsequent episodes are not all as edifying as the tale of heroism and divine favour on which Fabius evidently lavished most of his art.

At first the story continues straightforwardly.²¹ Numitor gives the twins and their followers permission to found a new city 'at the place where they were brought up' – that is, by Faustulus' hut on the Palatine hill.²² But after that the surviving traditions differ.

Some authors say firmly that Rome was founded by both the twins together.²³ After that, *either* Romulus became tyrannical and killed his brother (with civil war resulting)²⁴ *or* Remus actually outlived Romulus.²⁵ Others betray a knowledge of that tradition without committing themselves to it. Valerius Maximus, for instance, gives an explanation of the Lupercalia which implies a joint foundation; John Tzetzes says evasively that the twins 'began' the foundation together, though he names only Romulus as the founder; the anonymous author of *De viris illustribus* attributes to both twins the foundation of the *civitas* before the building of the fatal walls.²⁶

That last expedient can be traced back as far as Cassius Hemina in the second century BC, only a generation or two after Fabius Pictor. A fragment happens to survive from the second book of his *Histories*:²⁷

Pastorum vulgus sine contentione consentiendo praefecerunt aequaliter imperio Remum et Romulum, ita ut de regno pararent inter se. Monstrum fit: sus parit porcos triginta, cuius rei fanum fecerunt Laribus Grundilibus.

The shepherd population, by consensus and without dispute, gave Remus and Romulus equal authority, on the understanding that they should arrange between themselves about the kingship. A portent followed: a sow gave birth to thirty piglets. To mark the event they founded a shrine to the *Lares Grundiles*.

The portent – more familiar in other legendary contexts²⁸ – is an aetiology independent of the foundation story; but the first sentence clearly implies that the herdsmen were meeting in assembly, essentially as a citizen body, to decide who should have authority over them. According to Diodorus, it was the

twins who had brought that about.²⁹ Very properly, therefore, power is devolved on both, and they are invited to sort it out between themselves. The author of the *Origo gentis Romanae* describes the next stage.³⁰

Cum igitur inter se Romulus ac Remus de condenda urbe tractarent in qua ipsi pariter regnarent, . . .

Romulus and Remus were deliberating between themselves about the foundation of a city in which they would rule equally.

The adverb *pariter*, like *aequaliter* in Cassius Hemina, is exactly what one expects in a twin story, especially one in which fraternal devotion has been so conspicuous up to now. Everything seems in place for a harmonious agreement, and the joint foundation some authors report is exactly what we might expect.

But that is the minority tradition. According to Plutarch and Dionysius (are they still following Fabius Pictor?), the snake now enters the garden in the form of rivalry and discord.³¹ Two great stories follow – the augury contest and the death of Remus – both of which appear in a striking variety of forms.

THE QUARREL

One of the few substantial surviving fragments of the great epic poem of republican Rome, Quintus Ennius' *Annales* (written not long after Fabius Pictor's history), concerns the twins' competition for signs of divine approval.³² The first few lines are textually corrupt at a crucial point. I offer a deliberately conservative text and translation:

curantis magna cum cura tum cupientes
 regni dant operam simul auspicio augurioque.
 †In monte Remus auspicio se devovet atque secundam†³³
 solus avem servat. at Romulus pulcer in alto
 quaerit Aventino, servant genus altivolantum.
 certabant urbem Romam Remoramne vocarent.
 omnibus cura viris uter esset induperator.

Then, scrupulously taking great care in their eagerness for kingly power, they apply themselves simultaneously to auspicy and augury. On . . . Remus . . .³⁴ and watches

alone for a bird. But Romulus the fair on the high Aventine seeks and watches for the race of high-flying ones. They³⁵ were competing about whether to call the city Roma or Remora. The concern of all the men was about which of the two would be the commander.

Remora is important. It confirms, at an early stage in the tradition, the derivation of Remus' name from *remorari*, to delay.³⁶ Dionysius, Plutarch and the *Origo gentis Romanae* say that the dispute concerned not only the city's name but also its site: Romulus wanted it on the Palatine, Remus at a place called Remoria (Dionysius), Remonion (Plutarch) or Remuria (*Origo gentis Romanae* = *OGR*), which their sources identified as either the Aventine or a hill by the river 'about thirty *stadia* from Rome' (Dionysius), 'five miles from the Palatine' (*OGR*). According to this version, the twins will have watched for their omens each at his chosen site.³⁷ Ennius, however, had Romulus on the Aventine, and Remus evidently on the nearby *mons Murcus*.³⁸

Who won the contest? Ennius seems to say, though the passage is desperately difficult,³⁹ that after the moon had set and the rays of the as yet invisible sun had shot across the sky, a single bird appeared on the left (the favourable side) at the very moment of sunrise;⁴⁰ that twelve birds then appeared, flying into the spaces defined as augurally propitious; and that 'from this Romulus perceived that it was to him that [the first signs?] had been given, the chair and throne of kingship, established by auspicy'.⁴¹

It is infuriating that the textual corruption prevents us from knowing whether Ennius made explicit the question of priority. The careful precision with which he identified the exact moments when the one bird and the twelve respectively appeared suggests to me that he expected his readers to understand that the auspicy was not unambiguous. However, we cannot be sure, and so this fragment of an early tradition, different in various ways from what the later authors say, remains tantalisingly uncertain.

The story most of our authors tell, with Remus on the Aventine and Romulus on the Palatine, is that Remus saw his

birds first, but saw only six against Romulus' twelve. They then either announce Romulus the winner without argument,⁴² or explain that the ambiguity between priority and majority led to a quarrel, and a fight between the rival twins' supporters.⁴³

Dionysius, who tells the latter version at length, includes in it the startling information (known also to Plutarch) that Romulus *cheated*.⁴⁴ After they had taken up their positions, 'through haste and jealousy of his brother,⁴⁵ and perhaps also by divine direction', Romulus sent messengers to Remus falsely announcing that he had seen the birds. Remus, who in the meantime really *had* seen six vultures, went back with the messengers and demanded details from Romulus, who couldn't answer. At that point twelve 'auspicious vultures' were seen in flight, and Romulus brazened it out: 'Why ask what happened before, when you can see them with your own eyes?'

The *Origo gentis Romanae* tells the same story with a different slant and a little extra dialogue.⁴⁶ When Remus asks what Romulus has seen, and reports his own sighting of six vultures, Romulus replies 'I shall now show you twelve'; and they duly appear, with thunder and lightning from Jupiter. Remus can't argue with that, so in this version there is no quarrel and no fight. Instead, Remus yields with a speech of renunciation:

Multa, inquit, in hac urbe temere sperata atque praesumpta felicissime proventura sunt.

'In this city', he said, 'many things rashly hoped for and taken for granted will turn out very successfully.'

That is a remarkable prophecy, very uncharacteristic of the Rome we think we know. What about all those exemplary stories of rash commanders coming unstuck,⁴⁷ and the contrasting admiration of Fabius Maximus, 'who alone, by delaying, saved the situation for Rome'?⁴⁸ In this story, Remus the slow is beaten by Romulus the hasty.⁴⁹

Remus evidently gave a very similar speech of renunciation in Diodorus Siculus' history in the middle of the first century BC, but the Greek author picked out a particular aspect of it. (In Roman augury, the left was the auspicious side; in Greek,

as in everyday Latin, ‘right’ and ‘left’ connoted respectively ‘lucky’ and ‘unlucky’.) In the Byzantine excerpt which is all that survives of Diodorus’ narrative, we are told that Romulus’ sign appeared on the right-hand side. Whereupon,⁵⁰

Remus was astonished, and said to his brother: ‘In this city it will often happen that *right* fortune follows *sinister* designs.’ For Romulus had sent his messenger too hastily; he had been totally wrong for his own part, but his ignorance had been corrected by mere chance.

The Greek for ‘too hasty’ is *propetes*; the Latin technical term for ‘auspicious birds’ is *praepetes aves*.⁵¹ It looks as if Diodorus’ source was particularly interested in etymological explanations of augural terminology. One wonders whether he exploited the technical term for ‘birds that prevent action’; they were called *remores aves*.⁵²

THE DEATH OF REMUS

The same Byzantine excerptor allows us to follow Diodorus’ narrative to its fatal conclusion. While Romulus is surrounding the Palatine with a trench (hastily, of course),⁵³ Remus nurses his resentment in jealousy of his brother’s fortune. He tells the workmen that the trench is too narrow to keep enemies out. Romulus is furious, and orders all his ‘citizens’ to take vengeance on anyone who crosses it. Remus persists with his criticism. ‘Enemies will have no trouble getting over it’, he says; ‘I can do it myself, easily.’ And he does so. At which one of the workmen, called Celer, ‘the swift’ (*Keleros* in Diodorus’ Greek), invokes Romulus’ order, lifts his spade, and kills Remus with a blow to the head.⁵⁴

Celer is an important character. Some authors say he was Etruscan, and fled to Etruria immediately after the murder.⁵⁵ That implies a guilty conscience and a disapproving Romulus.⁵⁶ Another version, however, makes Romulus reward him with the post of ‘tribune of the knights’ – that is, *tribunus celerum*, commander of the three hundred Celeres (‘swift ones’) who were the king’s bodyguard.⁵⁷ Ovid tells us that Romulus had himself given Celer his significant name, and other sources say the Celeres were named after him.⁵⁸

That perhaps gives an extra resonance to the speech Dionysius puts into Celer's mouth. In this version the inadequate defence is a wall, not a trench. Remus says, 'This wall any of your enemies could easily cross, as I do.' And Celer insolently replies, 'This enemy any of us could easily punish', and hits him with the spade.⁵⁹ Any of us Celeres, the king's strong-arm men, does he mean?

If it is unexpected to find a member of this elite corps wielding a spade, that is probably the result of disparate elements being welded together in the story-telling process. It evidently mattered that the murder weapon was a digging implement. (Diodorus and Dionysius call it a *skapheion*, the generic Greek word for a spade, mattock or hoe; in the *De viris illustribus* it is a drag-hoe, in Ovid a shovel – respectively *rastrum* and *rutrum*.⁶⁰) St Jerome, who had access to an otherwise unknown version of the story of the twins,⁶¹ tells us that 'Remus was killed with a shepherd's shovel by Fabius, Romulus' commander'; the Fabii derived their name from the act of digging, being called after an ancestor who invented the digging of pits to trap wolves and bears.⁶²

Even leaving aside this remarkable variant, it is clear that the versions of the Celer story differed according to their authors' view of the responsibility for the murder. Did Romulus give the order 'Kill anyone crossing the trench'?⁶³ If he did, did Remus knowingly defy it?⁶⁴ Was Celer a thug, or a loyal servant of his king?⁶⁵ Who was it who was too hasty this time?⁶⁶ You could tell the story many different ways, and slant it in Romulus' favour if that was your aim.⁶⁷

If on the other hand you wanted to blame Romulus, there was a better way of doing it than by using Celer. Livy does not mention Celer at all. Of the two versions he tells, the better-known one at the time was that Romulus killed the mocking Remus with his own hand, uttering the splendid line 'So perish all henceforth who cross my walls!'⁶⁸ Deservedly, perhaps, in our own time this dramatic fratricide has overshadowed all the other versions. But for Roman readers it was only one of many, and not (for obvious reasons) necessarily the most acceptable.