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Barthold Georg Niebuhr

Excerpt

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THE HISTORY OF ROME.



IT was one of the main objects of the first volume to prove that the story of Rome under the kings was altogether without historical foundation. I have sifted the legends which pass for history; such fragments of them as lay scattered about I have collected, for the sake of restoring the manifold forms they once bore: not however as though this could bring us nearer to historical knowledge: for while the grandeur of the monarchy the seat of which was on the seven hills is attested by the monuments it left behind, the recollections of its history have been purposely destroyed; and to fill up the void the events of a narrow sphere, such as the pontiffs after the Gallic irruption were familiar with, have been substituted in the room of the forgotten transactions of an incomparably wider empire. Even Fabius beyond a doubt knew nothing more than the story that has come down to us: and hardly would it have been possible for him to find any authentic records, except in the writings of foreign nations; which he could never have reconciled with his own story or made any use of. On the other hand his age was in possession of a real history, though in many parts tinged with fable, since the insurrection of the commonalty: and though this has only reached us in a very defective state, disfigured with arbitrary transformations, yet from this time forward it becomes my cheering task to undertake the restoration of a genuine, connected, substantially perfect history.

VOL. II.

A

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[More information](#)

This would be absurd, if the story of the city before its destruction by the Gauls had been left almost exclusively to oral tradition, and all the scanty records of an age little given to writing had then perished¹: in such a case we could only replace it, like that of the kings, by an illusion. Livy however assuredly did not go so far as to assume this; nor will anybody with a feeling for truth think it possible with regard to much the greater part of the occurrences related out of the century before the coming of the Gauls, that they should be fabrications: stories are often invented, not so a multitude of insulated facts. What led Livy to speak thus positively was probably that the annals of the pontiffs began from that event²; as Claudius Quadrigarius, perhaps influenced by this very circumstance, commenced his too at the same point³. This writer was one of the annalists whom Livy had before him; and perhaps we hear in Livy's words what he alledged to justify his deviating from the common practice of like chroniclers: it is pretty certain too that he must be the Clodius, from whom Plutarch quotes, what he probably said on the same occasion, that the pedigrees, so far as they went back beyond that date, were fabrications⁴. Where an error has usurped general sway, the first expressions of a mind that feels called to assert its freedom are almost always exaggerated: and such was the case with Claudius in his disgust

¹ Livy vi. 1. *Parvæ et raræ—literæ fuere—et, etiamsi quæ in commentariis pontificum aliisque publicis privatisque erant monumentis, pleræque interiere.*

² See Vol. 1, p. 247. Livy himself may be regarded as a witness of this, if we suppose that in the passage just referred to he names the commentaries of the pontiffs, which were preserved, instead of the annals.

³ A good many fragments of his first book remain, which speak of events between the Gallic and the second Samnite war; but there is no trace of anything earlier.

⁴ Numa. 1. *Κλωδίος τις ἐν ἀναγραφῇ χρόνων.*

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

HISTORY OF ROME.

3

at the mass of imposture: he overlooked that there was no external reason to warrant his rejecting the genealogies of those patricians whose ancestors had their Lares on the Capitoline hill, like the Manlii and Quinctii, as spurious during the earlier ages: and how should he have examined them in detail? Had he or had Livy attended to constitutional law, they must have perceived that its excellent historians had drawn from the books of the pontiffs information the authenticity of which was quite as indisputable as that of the twelve tables, of the compacts between the estates, and of other laws and treaties belonging to that period: and equally well established is that of the returns of the censuses, were it only because their statements must in later times have sounded utterly incredible and inconceivable. It is true, the copies of most of the censorian families must have flowed originally from transcripts of but a few, that had been preserved in the Capitol or in neighbouring towns: but it was enough for their coming down in a genuine form to posterity, if a single one remained and was multiplied.

It admits of no doubt that, as these rolls were preserved for memorials in the censorian families, so those who had the image of a consul among their ancestors, kept consular fasti, wherein memorable events, at least of the year they were interested in, were noted down: and many others also must have been in possession of the like. These now were original annals, that arose independently of those of the pontiffs, and were drawn up by divers persons; not always contemporaneously, but in their earliest parts from the recollections of the writer himself or of his neighbours, and sometimes no doubt from erroneous ones, touching past events: hence the dates are often contradictory; the Auruncian war for instance is placed in the years 251, 252, or 258, the battle of Regillus in 255 or 258: discrepancies only to be accounted for from there having been sundry

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[More information](#)

annals of different origin. It is impossible to pronounce whether any contemporary ones were preserved or not, which began any number of years before the insurrection of the commonalty: that none of them can have gone back so far as the origin of the consulate, is clear from the confusion in the fasti for the first years of the free republic, and from all genuine history of this period having vanished without leaving a trace. To preserve the recollection of an event, and to give the memory a hold, it was noted in the fasti under a year of the Capitoline era and of the consuls, in the same way as the calendars recorded under a certain day, that on the same day the dictator Tubertus had gained a victory, as well as what days had become inauspicious by the defeats on the Allia, at Trasimene, and at Cannæ. Neither these accounts nor the former gave any detail of circumstances; but merely alluded to them. Of the notices so recorded some few have come down to us, manifestly handed from very ancient times, with scarcely an alteration even in the language⁵. I will not however by any means deny that some sort of narrative may have been mixed up with them very early; in which case they must have resembled the chronicle of Marcellinus and the like.

But the appropriate place for narrative was in the funeral orations peculiar to Rome, the use of which was derived from time immemorial: for women were admitted to a share in this honour even before the Gallic war, or immediately after. These writings, in which assuredly it was no less vain to look for an accurate representation of facts than for eloquence, Livy, if they crossed his thoughts, would hardly deem a historical source, since in another passage he joins with Cicero

⁵ For instance in Livy ii. 19. His consulibus Fidenæ obsessæ, Crustumeria capta, Preneste ab Latinis ad Romanos descivit. What a contrast between this and the prolix delineation of resultless battles in other passages!

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[More information](#)

in reprehending their want of truth⁶. Nevertheless they cannot have been beset with this vice from the first: only in course of time, when the ancestors of a house were enumerated up to its origin along with their honours and their exploits⁷, could vanity indulge in inventions concerning them. One may easily convince oneself that in the history prior to the taking by the Gauls many stories, for instance about the Valerii, the Claudii, the Fabii, the Quinctii, and the Servilii, have flowed from this source: and among them several, such as those concerning the Servilii, are worthy of full faith: those too more in detail about the Fabii contain matter of undeniable authenticity. With others the case is very different: I am sorry to say that those of the Valerii are less deserving of credit than any others, just as their pedigree betrays striking carelessness⁸. All these documents were deposited in the hall of the house, and they were probably lost and then restored together. Those vivid traditions however, whereby the times of their ancestors became the common property of the Romans, were preserved by such as escaped the sword of the Gauls: and if Livy was speaking of these, he was unquestionably right in saying that the record of events was trusted to memory.

The same has happened among every people whose annals were a mere dry catalogue of events: and not only does the imagination in such cases mould a subject it takes from history with the same freedom and plastic power as one created by poetry, but the characters have

⁶ viii. 40. Cicero Brutus 16 (62).

⁷ The account of the Claudii in Suetonius at the beginning of his Tiberius was drawn from the orations of that house, and exemplifies the nature of such enumerations.

⁸ C. Valerius Potitus is described as L. F. Vol. N: although his first military tribunate was in the year 340, that is 71 years after the consulship of his pretended father, and 96 after the first consulship of Publicola, who would be his uncle.

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[More information](#)

incidents, which elsewhere are told of others, transferred, and often purely arbitrary fictions ascribed to them; which gain credit, like Charlemagne's pretended expedition to the Holy Land. Such legends whether concerning the personages of history or those of poetry were equally termed *fabulæ*. That at Rome as elsewhere they shaped themselves in verse, that the virtue of Coriolanus and the victories of Camillus were sung in the same manner as the first Punic war, does not to my feelings admit of a doubt: if the bards are nameless, so are those of the Nibelungen and the Cid. But the rhythmical form is here a secondary matter: the one main point is, to recognize that those very stories which speak to the soul are treated by tradition freely and creatively; that it does not give back the chain of incidents one by one as it receives them; that, in proportion as a story is listened to with general interest, it is more liable to be transformed without any limit, until it becomes fixt in some book; while on the other hand what excites no emotion comes down just as it was recorded to the historian who likes to employ himself in putting some life into it. This is not disputed by those whose concurrence I should be loth to forgo, and who at the same time think it hazardous to build on the assumption that the Romans had a body of popular poetry which has perisht: so that I will not disturb the consciousness of our being substantially agreed, by striving to impart the whole of my conviction to them. Besides I am far from asserting that the whole body of those traditions was originally circulated in song; nor do I doubt that some which began in verse were turned into prose tales, when writing became more and more an employment: just as the popular storybook of Siegfried arose out of the Nibelungen. Among the legends of the kind I have been describing, those of Coriolanus, of Cincinnatus, of the fall of the Decemvirs, of Camillus, are not to be mistaken: of the same kind, with some excursions into

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

the region of the marvellous, are those of Curtius and Cippus.*

In ages before a literature exists a man will often write down an account of what has befallen him for the use of his family. In the progress of things almost every one aims at surpassing his predecessors, goes more into detail, takes in more objects, and approaches to a complete narrative of contemporary events: and as every chronicle must begin from the beginning, and a new one subjoins itself as a continuation to a repetition of some older annals already extant, attempts are made to render these too less meagre, by incorporating popular traditions; at Rome the funeral orations likewise were drawn upon, though there was a difficulty in making such insertions, owing to the form of the annals, which required that everything should be set down under a particular year. In this way a variety of popular books must have grown up, which, before a different taste and standard became prevalent, were great favorites, and which in the fifth and sixth century of the city must have spread the more widely, in proportion as the old legends lost the freshness of their original colouring: in aftertimes however they were neglected by literary history for this among other reasons, that the authors were unknown. The oldest remaining Florentine annals⁹ are themselves pieced together out of some no less dry and meagre than the oldest Roman ones, along with fables and traditions: in the history ascribed to Malispini they are enlarged and prolonged through a series of continuations. This work, by which they were superseded, and which itself has been thrown into oblivion by Villani, is of the same kind as those fuller Roman chronicles I have been speaking of; the existence of which however was totally forgotten by the classical writers of Rome, as the sayings of Appius the Blind would have been, unless Panætius had spoken

* Valerius Maximus v. 6. 3. ? Which have been published by Lami.

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[More information](#)

of them*. In such books Coruncanus and the Marcii read the story of their fathers; and later writers added little of importance, any more than Villani could do to what Dante had already read in Malispini.

The Fabian house, as they were eminent for their skill in the arts and their familiarity with Greek literature, would probably be especially careful in keeping such a chronicle: the account for instance of the campaign of the great Q. Rullus in the year 451 is evidently taken from contemporary sources. Out of this house came the historian censured by Polybius for his partiality to his countrymen,† a partiality occasioned by the hostile feelings of the Greeks, for whom, and not for his fellowcitizens, he, like Cincius and Acilius, wrote in Greek, in order that they might think more worthily of Roman story. Though this might be sufficient for foreigners, it did not satisfy the Italians, who were already desirous of becoming Roman citizens, and were acquainted with the Latin language: which may have been one of the causes that at length in the seventh century Roman authors wrote the history of their country for readers in their mother tongue¹⁰. That the Romans possess a general knowledge of their ancient history is proved by the fact that Cincius treated of chronology, of constitutional law, and of sundry antiquarian questions, which imply such a knowledge; and yet did not think it necessary to write his history in Latin. For the same reason Cato moreover only handled the Roman history as part of that of Italy. However after the time of Cassius Hemina the historians of Rome were numerous: the perpetual discrepancies in them shew that there was a great variety of old chronicles: and the very circumstance, that they all thought it their business to tell the whole of the ancient history anew, leads us to perceive that every one of them, on finding

* Cicero Tusc. iv. 2.

† i. 14. 15. iii. 9.

¹⁰ The poem of Ennius indeed was earlier; but its object was not to teach history.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

HISTORY OF ROME.

9

any chronicles that had previously been neglected, incorporated fresh matter from them. For assuredly the notion of distinguishing himself by any peculiar merits in his views or style was never entertained either by Fabius Servilianus or by Vennonius; nor by writers who lived considerably later, indeed after the time of Sylla, Cn. Gellius¹¹ and Q. Quadrigarius. To the same class belongs Q. Valerius Antias, who however obtained a scandalous notoriety by his falsehoods, and by fabricating circumstantial narratives and definite numbers.

L. Piso had a peculiar object in view: he fancied that the ancient legends however contradictory and incredible were only history run wild, and that he was the person destined to restore them to their genuine form. Men's minds however in his days had still so much of poetry in them that his ungenial efforts produced no sort of effect: and notwithstanding the old censor's great personal respectability, his annals were not more successful than any others in attaining to the reputation enjoyed among the Greeks by the work of Ephorus; which was recognized to be the basis of their national history, and as such was continued by one writer after another. Even after the time of Piso the early history was the subject of fresh investigations; for men had learnt to make use of ancient documents; and as Philochorus corrected the history of Athens by their means, the same service was rendered to that of Rome by C. Licinius Macer, a contemporary of Cicero, with whom the list of the annalists properly so called closes. Macer's influence on the history that has come down to us is very

¹¹ It has been assumed that there were more than one Gellius, owing to the expression of Dionysius, i. 7: "Αἰλιοὶ καὶ Γέλλιοι καὶ Καλοπούρμιοι" which however means nothing more than when the English talk of their *Clarendons* and *Humes*. Nor has anybody taken it into his head that there were several Calpurnii. In Cicero de Leg. i. 2. (6), *Gellii* has only been introduced by a conjecture, probably suggested by the spurious *Origo Gentis Romanæ*, where a Sextus Gellius has been fabricated; apparently after that passage of Dionysius.

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Barthold Georg Niebuhr

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10

HISTORY OF ROME.

important. We cannot suppose that Dionysius and Livy did anything for the speeches they insert, except work them up as pieces of oratory: those speeches however are frequently something more, and contain allusions to circumstances of which their narratives shew no knowledge, but which cannot possibly have been brought in at random¹². Where such is the case, they must have found something of the kind in some annalist whose imperfect work they were remoulding¹³. Now it is not likely that those who wrote in the simple old times would have employed so much art; whereas of Macer we are told by Cicero that he was immoderately fond of speeches¹⁴. He may not have succeeded in them: but we can conceive that the only one among all the annalists after Piso who had taken part in public life, wherein he had displayed a very honorable character, would like to dwell on those points where he was in his own element. Of him too we may believe that he would trace the changes in the constitution with intelligence and interest. The oldest Roman books of which the names have been handed down were collections of statutes; and I have already mentioned the writings of Cincius on constitutional law: eighty years after his time C. Junius, who from his friendship with the younger Gracchus was surnamed Gracchanus, wrote a history of the constitution and the great offices of state, which went back to the time of the kings, and from the establishment of the consulate enumerated under the years of the Capitoline era what new magistracies had been instituted, and what changes made in the duties of the old ones. Copious remains of this invaluable work, which must have been entirely compiled from the writings of the pontiffs and the

¹² As in the passage quoted in Vol. 1, note 1341.

¹³ Indeed one may assume that Livy took every circumstance in his narrative from some one of his predecessors, and never added anything of his own except the colouring of his style.

¹⁴ De legib. 1. 2. (6).