Florus, *Epitome of the Roman History of Titus Livius* I.3.6-8

Roman conquests as contagion.

**Name of the author:** Florus  
**Date:** 117 CE to 161 CE  
**Place:** Rome  
**Language:** Latin

**Category:** Roman  
**Literary genre:** History

**Title of work:** Epitome of the Roman History of Titus Livius  
**Reference:** I.3.6-8  
**Commentary:**

The title and the dating of Florus’s work have been greatly discussed, as has the identity of the author himself. We will summarize these debates by recalling that Florus’s *tabella*, or picture, of the history of the Roman people is not an epitome of Livy’s work. Rather, it was an original composition in which Florus decided to present the history of the Roman people from the foundation of Rome by Romulus to the reign of Augustus (the latest event is Varus’s defeat in 9 CE), by dividing it into four ages of life (*infans*, *adulescentia*, *juventus*, *senectus*), each age being internally organized through narratives of internal or external wars; of times of stability or of crisis. Among these ages only the first three are presented in Florus’s work, the fourth one – only mentioned in the preface of the work –, is presented as an age of decline of the Roman people until Trajan’s martial policy enabled them to recover strength. This mention of Trajan is one of the soundest elements which can be used to assert that Florus may have composed his work under Hadrian or Antoninus Pius’s reigns. Finally, for what concerns the identity of the author, many with the name Florus are known and many scholars have proposed to identify him with a poet of Spanish origin. What remains certain is that the author of the *tabella* identifies himself many times with the Roman people by using the first person, making it obvious that Florus claimed “no identity other than Roman,” and wrote from a Roman perspective (Lavan, “Florus and Dio,” p. 126, 129; for further details about the work, see the introduction in *Florus, Epitome Taken from Titus Livius*, Preface).

This text comes after Florus’s presentation of the first age, or *infantia*, of the Roman people, namely the monarchical period of Rome; thus, it occurs at the very beginning of the Republican period, which corresponds also to the beginning of Rome’s *adulescentia*, a period mainly characterized by the expansion of the dominion of the Roman people outside the city of Rome, Latium, through their conquest of Italy (on the periodization of the ages, see Jal, *Florus, Oeuvres*, p. lxix-lxx). Just before the passage presented here, Florus narrates the settlement of the Republican institutions by their legendary founder, Lucius Junius Brutus, who is said to have preferred to execute his sons than to see them establish anew kings at the head of Rome. After having presented the mythical origins of the settlement of the Republican institutions, Florus proposes a global survey of the various steps of Rome’s increasing expansionism; the Roman people took up arms (*arma corripere*) against foreigners to defend their liberty (*libertas*), boundaries (*fines*), allies (*socii*), glory (*gloria*) and their empire (*imperium*). The first element of this gradation, the defence of the *libertas* of the Roman people, should be understood as a reference to the fact that the Roman people would have had to first fight to prevent the return of the Tarquini, and of the monarchy which were largely supported by Rome’s enemy, the Tuscans.

This gradation thus sums up the evolution of the dominion of the Roman people, limited first to a city and a region, and then to the whole of Italy, and finally reaching a universal dimension. In this passage, it is essentially the notion of defence of frontiers which is developed, especially in § 7 through the image of the enemies of the Romans cornering the Roman people in their city. The fact that Florus insists on the vital necessity for the Roman people to defend their frontiers and to subdue their close neighbours before beginning their expansion in Italy fits in with a topos of Roman narratives dealing with the settlements of empire. For instance, in Trogus Pompeius’s work – that we know through some kind of anthology made by Justinus, probably a teacher of rhetoric who may have lived during the second or third century, possibly close to Florus (Yardley and Heckel, *Justin. Epitome*, p. 8-13) – there are various references to the fact that the conquest of close territories and the submission of neighbouring peoples were essential elements in the process of the settlement of any empire – elements which have to precede submission of further territories (for the references see Lerouge-Cohen, “Les livres,” p. 369). Such an idea is present, for instance, when Trogus-Justin highlights the fact that the Parthians succeeded to become the greatest Eastern Empire after that of the Assyrians, Medians, and Persians, especially by submitting their fierce and
dangerous neighbours, the Scythians (see Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic Histories of Pompeius Trogus* XLI.1.8-9). But the most interesting passage is certainly the one in which Trogus-Justin presents the beginnings of Rome, and writes that after the foundation of Rome: “A senate was next appointed, consisting of a hundred old men who were called Fathers. Soon after, as the neighbouring people disdained to intermarry with shepherds, the Sabine virgins were seized by force; and the surrounding tribes being brought under their sway, the sovereignty of Italy, and afterwards that of the world, was acquired ([finitimisque populis armis subjectis primo Italiae, mox orbis imperium quasestim])" (Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic Histories of Pompeius Trogus* XLI.3.2). This idea that the submission of neighbours and the conquests of closest territories was a vital first step in the process of the settlement of the Roman Empire clearly echoes Florus’s perspective and words in this text, but also in other passages of his work, such as when he recalls that after Rome’s victory over the Senones, the Roman people could continue to subdue their neighbours (see I.7.19), or when he describes that after the submission of the whole of Italy, the Roman people considered that the next neighbouring territory they had to conquer was Sicily, a decision justified by Florus by the fact that it had to be “restored to the continent to which it belonged” (I.18[I].2). The existence of echoes between Florus and Trogus-Justin’s formulations is not surprising. Myles Lavan has shown that many similitudes existed between Florus’s wordings or perspectives, especially when he frequently uses the language and imagery of slavery or mastery when dealing with foreign peoples submitted by the Roman people, and those of authors from the second-half of the second and the beginning of the third century. Examples include Cassius Dio, Herodian, or Justinus via his anthology of Trogus Pompeius (even if we cannot know how much he intervened upon the original text), who all seem to use the same kind of vocabulary and imagery when they deal with the description of the process of the establishment of Rome’s *imperium* (see Lavan, “Florus and Dio,”; Lavan, *Slaves to Rome*, p. 101-111; on the use of the vocabulary of slavery and mastery in Florus’s work, see Florus, *Epitome Taken from Titus Livius* I.33.7-8).

The second very interesting point in this text are Florus’s uses of the noun *contagium* and of the verb *corripere* in the following sentence: “This lasted until, as if by some disease (quasi contagio), they went through the peoples one by one, always infecting the next ones (et proximis quibusque corripis), they brought all of Italy under their power (totam Italiam sub se redegerunt)” (§ 8). As Myles Lavan has rightly noticed, the use of the noun *contagium* shows the violence and the ineluctable nature of the Roman conquest of Italy, which is compared to a disease that “overcomes its victims one by one” (Lavan, “Florus and Dio,” p. 126; Lavan, *Slaves to Rome*, p. 102). The use of the verb *corripere* strengthens the viral metaphor, as it is used here to mean the contracting and the spread of diseases (see TLL, see corripiro 1043.35-1044.8; Lavan, “Florus and Dio,” p. 127, n. 5). A quick look at the *Thesaurus linguae latinae* shows that Florus is the sole Roman author who uses these terms relative to contagion to speak about Rome’s expansionism. Moreover, we can see that Florus does not reserve the use of the noun *contagium* to Rome’s expansion, as in the rest of his work he uses it when, for instance, he refers to the idea of the spread of conflicts or of aggressive ambitions. In this sense, he speaks about the Sabines that the Roman people fought because they were affected by some kind of “contagion of the war,” and they would have joined the Latins so as to fight against Rome (I.10.1); the “contagion” of the Macedonian war is seen as the main cause of the second Ilyrian war (I.29.1); the presence of Carthaginians in Spain is viewed as the cause of the “contagion” of the wars in Spain (I.33.5); before the burst of the conflict with Numantia its inhabitants are described as having remained out of the “contagion of war” (I.34.4). By using the term *contagium* to refer to Rome’s expansionism, Florus may have wanted to stress its inexorable nature and also the violence of Rome’s expansionism. This idea is confirmed in another passage which occurs after the conquest of Italy by the Roman people, a passage in which Florus asserts that the next step is the conquest of Sicily. To describe the progression of the Romans in Italy, he compares their move to that of a fire (ignis) which was stopped by the straits of Messina after “having laid waste the woods that lie in its course (I.18[I].2). From a slightly different perspective – which remains however interesting for our text because it is connected with Florus’s use of the vocabulary of disease –, when Florus narrates the first Sicilian revolt, he renews the viral metaphor that he uses for the Roman conquest and applies it to the description of the violence of the Roman-repression which followed this servile revolt as he writes about this repression led by Perpenna, during the last siege near the city of Henna: “he reduced them through hunger as if by plague (quasi pestilentia)” (II.7.8; these references are quoted in Lavan, “Florus and Dio,” p. 127). In this specific case, the fact that Roman repression is compared with the cruelty and harshness of an epidemic clearly echoes the viral metaphor used by Florus at the beginning of his narrative of Rome’s conquests. The use of this vocabulary enables him to highlight the inexorable nature and the power of Rome’s expansionism, which will be later illustrated through the enumeration of all the Italians and then of foreign peoples which have been progressively submitted to the Roman yoke. Florus’s use of the vocabulary of disease shows how his point of view on Rome’s expansionism is unique and may have been quite critical. This assessment can be confirmed by other passages of his work, especially when, in I.31-34, he highlights that some wars waged by Rome were unfair, because Rome attacked peoples or cities which did not represent an immediate threat. Such questioning of Rome’s aggressive expansionist policy shows the originality of his point of view, which may have been that of a person who accepted
Roman domination and assumed the senatorial Roman legacy, but may have considered this legacy from the point of view of a Roman originating from a province of the Empire (Inglebert, *Les Romains chrétiens*, p. 46-47; Florus, *Epitome of the Roman History of Titus Livius* I.3.7-8).

Keywords in the original language:

- arma
- contagio
- corripio
- fines
- imperium
- Italia
- liber
- libertas
- pomerium
- populus romanus
- redigo
- socius

Thematic keywords in English:

- contagion
- Italy
- Roman conquests
- Roman land
- Roman people
- Roman power
- Rome (city)
- war


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