



[Horace, Epodes VII.1-20](#)

The threat of civil war

Name of the author: Horace

Date: 38 BCE

Place: Rome

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Literary genre: Poetry

Title of work: Epodes

Reference:

VII.1-20

Commentary:

Horace's *Epodes* take the form of iambic poetry, mimicking the style of the Greek lyric poet Archilochus. Horace addresses his fellow citizens, whom he refers to as *scelesti* (villainous, criminal). This passage sees Horace lecture his fellow Romans about threat posed by civil wars. It may have been written in the aftermath of the breakdown of the Treaty of Misenum in 38 BCE, which resulted in the Sicilian war between Octavian and Sextus Pompeius. Having fought during the civil wars on the opposite side to Augustus in the past, Horace is now in a position where he must praise the emperor, and was doubtless feeling the strain of this discontinuity. Having recognised, and vowed to move past this issue, however (see, for example, *Ode III.IV*), Horace embraces his challenge (see David Porter, *Horace's Poetic Journey*, p. 226-227). The poet laments that the Roman people have seen enough bloodshed on the battlefields and at sea, and should not continue to engage in civil warfare. What is worse, the battles that Rome has been recently occupied with are not great campaigns against Carthage (a reference to the Punic Wars, which ended with the sack of Rome in 146 BCE), or Britain (which the Romans had not yet attacked), for example, which would at least be in aid of her defence or expansion, but rather see Rome's citizens fighting amongst each other. For Daniel Garrison, the opening words of this poem perfectly convey the dire state that the poet bemoans, with the verb *ruo* combining both the Romans' hastiness to embark upon a suicidal mission and their destructive attitude (Daniel Garrison, *Horace: Epodes and Odes*, p. 181). The term *furor* (verse 13) often refers to the passion which animated the Romans during the civil wars (see Paul Jal, *La guerre civile à Rome*).

As David Porter explains, this poem provides the culmination of themes and motifs which have been present in previous *Epodes*. *Epode V*, for instance, mentions a tortured child, which is now mirrored in the murder of Remus, and the motif of cursing, which is extremely prominent in the earlier *Epodes*, finds its dramatic climax here in the long felt effects of Romulus's fratricide (David Porter, *Horace's Poetic Journey*, p. 256; on the theme of fratricide as the "original sin" of Rome, manifesting through civil wars, see Cicero, *On Duties III.10.41*, and then Lucan, *Civil War I.93-95*). In Horace's words, by engaging in civil war, and destroying herself from within, Rome is effectively answering all the Parthians prayers (the Parthians being an example of a formidable foe who would love nothing more than to see their great enemy caught up in a self-destructive mission). Horace argues that such in-fighting is not natural – wolves and lions, for instance, do not set about killing their own kind, they focus instead on banding together against enemies of other species. That humans are the only species who frequently attack their own kind is something also raised by Pliny (*Natural Histories VII.1.5*) and will become one of the main themes of Lucan's *De Bello Civili* (Lucan, *The Civil War I.1-32*). Rather than depleting her own population even further, therefore, Rome should turn her attention to foreign threats. For Robin Seager, the future conquests of the Parthians and Britains fit into a fictional pattern created by Rome to "justify her expansion". By emphasising the provocation of foreign powers (here the imagined taunting prayers of the Parthians, which mimic the arrogance of Carthage), Rome's subjugation of these peoples is vindicated (Robin Seager, "Horace and Augustus," p. 24-25). The poet laments that Rome is essentially fated to see hardship, however, because she is under a curse brought about by the fratricidal actions of Romulus against his twin brother Remus in the early days of the city's foundation. By spilling his brother's blood, Romulus destined the city that he founded to struggle for her future.



Keywords in the original language:

- [Brittanus](#)
- [cruor](#)
- [fatum](#)
- [furor](#)
- [Karthago](#)
- [Latinus](#)
- [nepos](#)
- [Parthi](#)
- [Remus](#)
- [Romanus](#)
- [sacer](#)
- [sanguis](#)
- [scelestus](#)
- [urbs](#)
- [Via Sacra](#)

Thematic keywords in English:

- [blood](#)
- [Britain](#)
- [Carthage](#)
- [civil war](#)
- [curse](#)
- [destiny](#)
- [fate](#)
- [fratricide](#)
- [Parthians](#)
- [posterity](#)
- [Remus](#)
- [Roman army](#)
- [Rome \(city\)](#)
- [Romulus](#)
- [Via Sacra](#)

Bibliographical references: Garrison, Daniel H., [*Horace: Epodes and Odes: A New Annotated Latin Edition*](#) (London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991)

Porter, Daniel H., [*Horace's Poetic Journey: A Reading of Odes 1-3*](#) (Guildford, Surrey: Princeton University Press, 1987)

Jal, Paul, [*La guerre civile à Rome: Étude littéraire et morale*](#) (Paris: P.U.F., 1963)

Seager, Robin, "[Horace and Augustus: Poetry and Policy](#)", in *Horace 2000: A Celebration: Essays for the Bimillennium* (ed. Niall Rudd ; London: Duckworth, 1993), 23-40

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