Mars, the father of the Roman people.

**Name of the author:** Livy  
**Date:** 27 BCE to 25 BCE  
**Language:** Latin

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

**Title of work:** History of Rome  
**Reference:** Preface 6-9  
**Commentary:**

This text is an excerpt from Livy’s work, *Ab Urbe condita libri* (“Books from the Foundation of the City”), which was originally made up of 142 or perhaps 150 books dealing with the history of Rome from the arrival of Aeneas in Italy. The death of Drusus the Elder in 9 BCE is the last dated event that Livy mentions (on what could have been the original chronological limit of Livy’s work, see Chaplin, Kraus, “Introduction,” p. 7). Livy’s *History of Rome* is not an annalistic work, namely a compilation of numerous historical events listed year by year. There is a real unity inside Livy’s work which has led Bernard Mineo to conclude that this work had been composed according to a “philosophical approach to history that points towards a particular moment in time and space – the end of the civil wars and the establishment of Augustus’ Principate” (Mineo, “Introduction,” p. xxxii). A large part of Livy’s *History of Rome* is now lost. Only books I to X and XXI to XLV remain in full, and some short fragments of other books, together with the *Periochae*, which are very short summaries of all the books. The dating of the publication of the various books remains a debated issue, especially concerning the starting date of the composition of the work. Since Livy alludes in the first book to the second closure of Janus’s temple in 29 BCE (I.19.3), he seems unaware of the third closure in 25 BCE, and Augustus is referred to with the title *Caesar Augustus* (granted by the Senate in January 27 BCE), the first book – in the version that we have today – must have been written between 27 and 25 BCE (Mineo, “Introduction,” p. xxxiv-xxxvii). Finally, the question of Livy’s assessment of Augustus’s political re-foundation is another point which divides scholars. Some insist upon passages (as in the preface) which could be interpreted as being pessimistic or even critical towards Augustus’s regime. Others defend the idea that Livy composed a pro-Augustan work which would have perfectly fitted in with the policy of moral and religious restoration wanted by Augustus. An intermediary position seems to be the most prudent choice. Thus, if Livy was certainly a man who had Republican convictions, he may have been obliged to compromise with Augustus’s regime which was openly placed under the label of the *res publica restituta* (“the Republic restored”), but which evolved quickly towards a regime monopolized by the princeps. According to Bernard Mineo, the first book of the work and the preface may have been conceived at a time when Livy still “hoped [for] a new Romulus,” a time “when Octavian presented himself as the man who will restore concord and unity and open a new era.” It would thus make the *Ab Urbe condita libri* a work which was begun roughly at the same time as Virgil’s *Aeneid*, “a work whose ideological intentions seem very close to Livy’s” (Mineo, “Introduction,” p. xxxvii).

In the narratives of the origins of Rome, Romulus and Remus are often presented as the sons of the god Mars. In a very common version of the legend, they were children of Mars and Rhea Silvia or Ilia, but other versions suggest that Rhea Silvia was raped by an unknown man (Livy, *Roman History* I.3.11-I.4.1-3) or by Amulius himself (Plutarch, *Life of Romulus* IV; concerning these three versions, see Dionysus of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* I.77). The association of either Rome or the Romans with Mars is commonplace in Roman literature. We can quote for instance the use of the expression *Martia Roma* (Ovid, *Tristia* III.7.52; Ovid, *Letters from Pontus* I.8.24; IV.9.65; Martial, *Epigrams* V.19.5), or the fact that Romans were called *Martigenae*, the sons of Mars (Silius Italicus, *Punica* XII.582; XVI.532, also Ovid *Amores* 3.4). The Romans used this mythological filiation so as to justify the fact that Rome had since its origins been predestined to be an extraordinary military power and to rule an empire which would stretch to the limits of the known world.

This passage is particularly interesting because it confronts the mythological tradition of the origins of Rome and the point of view of Livy. For him, the mix of humans and gods’ interventions or actions appear as being more the result of an intention to boost the prestige of one city, than the reflection of a real historical event: “Such traditions as belong to the time before the city was founded, or rather was presently to be founded, and are rather adorned with poetic legends than based upon trustworthy historical proofs, I purpose neither to affirm nor to refute. It is the
privilege of antiquity to mingle divine things with human, and so to add dignity to the beginnings of cities...” (§ 6-7). Then, Livy comes back to the doubtful credibility of the claim that Mars could be the father of Romulus and Remus: “The Vestal was ravished, and having given birth to twin sons, named Mars as the father of her doubtful offspring, whether actually so believing, or because it seemed less wrong if a god were the author of her fault” (Vi compressa Vestalis, cum geminum partum edidisset, seu ita rata, seu quia deus auctor culpae honestior erat, Martem incertae stirpis patrem nuncupati; Livy, Roman History I.4.2, Loeb’s edition and translation). In a way, Livy’s scepticism towards the divine origins of Rome’s founders and the fact that he decides not to go further into the debate (“neither to affirm nor to refute,” nec adfirmare nec refellere; on this attitude of Livy see Forsythe, Livy and Early Rome, p. 41) clearly recalls the attitude of Dionysus of Halicarnassus when he deals with the same subject (Roman Antiquities I.77.3). Finally, Livy’s position has to be put in perspective and contextualised in an ancient historiographical tradition opposing divine interventions or myths with the analysis of direct evidence; in other words, the contrast between Herodotus and Thucydides’s methods. In spite of this original debate, many historians of the Hellenistic period – especially those writing local histories – continued to boost the legendary origins of the cities or communities they defended (see Curty, Les parentés; Rosalind, “The Greek Polis”). These origins were fully invented elements, but they remained useful tools to enhance regional prestige that played a prominent role in diplomacy (see Jones, Kinship Diplomacy). Thus, Livy’s assessment that he is sceptical about the mythical origins of Rome may be some kind of critical response to the Hellenistic historians.

The most interesting point of this text is that even if Livy is sceptical about the credibility of the tradition dealing with the divine ancestry of Rome’s founders, he admits its “symbolical value” (on this expression, Briquel, “Préface,” p. 9). He even goes further by asserting that it was normal that Rome imposed its mythological tradition on the peoples she submitted by military strength: “…and if any people ought to be allowed to consecrate their origins and refer them to a divine source, so great is the military glory (belli gloria) of the Roman People that when they profess that their Father and the Father of their Founder (suum conditorisque sui parentem) was none other than Mars, the human race may well submit to this also with as good a grace as they submit to Rome’s dominion (quam imperium patiuntur)” (§ 7). This reflection of Livy fits in with some kind of “mythology of Roman superiority” (Koch, “Roman State Religion,” p. 297). Even if Livy recognizes that this narrative had more to do with “poetic legends” (fabulae) than with real historical facts (monumenta, § 6), he claims that Rome could legitimately impose its narrative of its origin to all the peoples on Earth she submitted by strength. Livy’s assessment can thus be understood in two different ways. On the one hand, Livy may say that the Romans could impose this narrative because Rome’s military superiority was so obvious that imposing the use of this mythological narrative was just another coherent way to justify the military superiority of the Romans. On the other hand, by saying that the Romans could impose the narrative of Rome’s divine origins, Livy may imply that the Romans were right to claim that there was something divine in the origins and in the history of Rome. Following such a way of reasoning, Livy’s point of view would tally with the global message of Virgil in the Aeneid: Rome could not have become so powerful by chance, but only thanks to divine support.

Keywords in the original language:

- bellum
- conditor
- conditus
- deus
- fabula
- gens humana
- gloria
- imperium
- Mars
- monumentum
- origo
- parens
- populus romanus
- urbs

Thematic keywords in English:
empire
glory
Mars
military strength
Remus
Roman legend
Roman origins
Roman people
Roman power
Roman superiority
Rome (city)
Romulus
vice
virtue

Curty, Olivier, Les parentés légendaires entre cités grecques: catalogue raisonné des inscriptions contenant le terme “suggeneia” et analyse critique (Genève: Droz, 1995)
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Jones, Christopher P., Kinship Diplomacy in the Ancient World (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999)

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