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Exempla Augusto: Allusions and Warnings in Ab Urbe Condita, I

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Any author who wrote during the time of Augustus has been scrutinized under the scholarly microscope to better understand the author’s motives and political leanings and how these may have influenced his writing. Titus Livius, more commonly known as Livy, is no exception. On the contrary, because so little is known about him, the speculation has only increased. The scholarly discussion has questioned how Livy fit into the greater scheme of the Augustan program and if he was merely an Augustan apologist and propagandist. While not under the patronage of Maecenas like the epic poet Vergil, Livy was nevertheless acquainted with Augustus, and questions arise about his objectivity and intentions. Livy likely had much to gain from the recently won peace and prosperity. He had a positive, supportive view and understanding of what Augustus was trying to accomplish but was wary of this newfound power, especially since it was in the hands of one man. By including stories from the period of Rome’s early kings that can be understood as alluding to Augustus, and subtle warnings about the misdeeds of the last king and his son, Livy implicitly demonstrated his guarded support for the Augustan regime.

Titus Livius, a Hidden Historian

Not much is known about Livy (59 B.C.E.–17 C.E.). There is no evidence that he lived any kind of public life—in the Roman sense of participating in politics and the military—and this is one reason why there is so little

information available about him. None of his contemporaries seem to have written about him, and he gives very little autobiographical information. He was raised in the northern Italian city of Patavium (the modern university town Padova), and only later came to Rome. He seems to have made a conscious decision to avoid the political upheavals of the time and instead focus on study and books, gathering sources and materials for his future endeavor. Patavium was known for its Republican leanings during the civil wars that raged during the first century B.C.E. Since Livy grew to maturity during the great conflicts between Julius Caesar’s assassins, Octavian and Antony, the consequences of unbridled ambition and the ravages of war left a deep impression on the blossoming historian. Consequently he appreciated the peace and tranquility finally established by Caesar’s heir. But at the same time he was wary of the newfound and increasing power of the young Octavian, soon to be Augustus.

*Ab Urbe Condita*

Livy’s masterpiece, *Ab Urbe Condita*, survives in thirty-five books, which makes it the most substantial single piece of literature to survive from Classical Rome. However, when one realizes the tremendous size of Livy’s history—142 books—it is easy to understand the poet Martial’s dismay that his library was not large enough to hold the work. It has been proposed that to compose a work of similar magnitude today would require composing roughly a 300-page book every year for forty years!

For the purpose of this paper, it will not be necessary to discuss the date of composition for any books other than the first. From internal evidence it is clear that Livy composed book 1 sometime between 27 and 25 B.C.E. In 1.19.3 Livy mentions, “Bis deinde post Numae regnum clausus fuit . . . iterum, quod nostrae aetati di dederunt ut videremus, post bellum Actiacum ab imperatore Caesare Augusto pace terra marique parta.” Because Livy calls Octavian (which was still his name at the Battle of Actium) by the name “Augustus,” which he adopted January 16 27 B.C.E., the *terminus ante quem* for book 1 would be this important date. This same passage, making reference to the closing of the temple of Janus, allows us to posit a *terminus post quem* for book 1. Livy mentions that the temple

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9. Although Syme mentions that this specific use of “Augustus” could have been added at a later time (“Livy and Augustus,” 43), he uses this argument as an illustration of how Livy is merely an Augustan propagandist. He does not reconcile this with the fact that Augustus closed the temple of Janus on three separate occasions. If such was the case, a careful historian like Livy would undoubtedly have mentioned the other closures.
has been closed on only two occasions, once under Titus Manlius, and again under “Caesar Augustus.” Since Augustus closed the doors to the temple on three separate occasions, first in 25 b.c.e. and twice again after the completion of the Spanish campaigns, book 1 could not have been composed later than 25 b.c.e. since only the first closure is recorded. Since Livy would have composed the first of his 142 book history at this time, when Augustus was looking for ways to connect himself with the great Romans—specifically the founding figure of Romulus—many of the allusions Livy used can be understood not only as promoting Augustus and his new government, but also indicating to Augustus to proceed with caution so as not to have a similar fate as the early kings.

After Actium there was a sense of anxiety and apprehension, as has been understood by Livy’s preface, “donec ad haec tempora, quibus nec vitia nostra nec remedia pati possimus.” Syme believes this melancholy statement is a result of the apprehension that existed throughout the empire, but in Rome especially, because although Octavian had triumphed over his enemies at Actium, the empire was not yet entirely secure and even if the war was concluded, there were certainly questions yet to be answered. 10 Would the returning Octavian begin a new round of proscriptions? Would he simply seize total control of the government? Would he really restore the Republic? Would he bring back those times that remained only in memory, when Romans were truly Romans, and Virtus and Romanitas still meant something? The empire that Augustus was to build would be built upon tradition, and Augustus did not miss any opportunity to exploit any connections with antiquity.

Romulus

During the first years of the Principate, there seems to have been a tangible undercurrent, of which Livy and others were aware, that sought to connect Augustus and his regime with the original fathers of Rome and those who had laid the foundations for her future greatness. Augustus even wished to be viewed as a second Romulus and took many steps to ensure that the connection was made. 11 Livy records the story that when Romulus and Remus took up their respective places for conducting their auguries—Romulus on the Palatine, Remus the Aventine—Remus was the first to view a heavenly sign of six vultures, but Romulus immediately saw double the number and was thus declared the founder of the new city (1.6.6–1.7.2). Likewise when Octavian performed his first augury as consul in 43 b.c.e. he is reported to have seen twelve vultures, a fact he proudly displayed on the pediment of the temple of Quirinius. 12 That Suetonius records the appearance of these twelve

10. Syme, Roman Revolution, 42. Syme and others have mentioned the supposed marriage law that was attempted in 28 b.c.e. in order to identify the remedia, but the only mention of anything remotely related is found in Propertius alone and is inconclusive.
most auspicious birds, “as they had appeared to Romulus”13 illustrates it was understood even at a later date that there was some sort of connection between Augustus and Rome’s great founder.

Livy also mentions that Romulus obtained sole power through force and violence (1.7.3), that Rome had been strengthened by the dual attributes of war and peace, and that the power of Rome and ensuing peace was due solely to Romulus’ powerful personality and charisma (1.15.6–7). The ruthlessness of Octavian was well known, as evidenced in accounts from ancient historians. After the fall of Perusia when prisoners petitioned for their lives and attempted to explain their presence in the city, he coldly told each one: “You must die!” Although he kept 300 prisoners as a human sacrifice to his deified father on the Ides of March.14 Whether this story is exaggerated by Suetonius, as was probably the case, is immaterial it suggests the brutality of which Octavian was capable. His willingness to use force and his powerful personal charisma are likewise recorded in accounts preserved respectively by Dio (46.43) and Velleius Paterculus (2.80.3). Dio recounts how some of Octavian’s soldiers, after the siege of Perusia, went to the Senate to request that Octavian be granted the consulship. When rebuffed, one of the soldiers produced his sword and insisted, “If you do not grant the consulship to Caesar, this shall grant it.” According to Paterculus, after the defeat of Sextus Pompey in Sicily, Octavian marched into Lepidus’ military camp with “nothing but his name” and persuaded the soldiers to abandon their commander and join his cause. Nothing would stand in the way of Octavian’s vengeance on his adopted father’s killers and supreme power in the Roman state.

Once Octavian, now Augustus, had obtained this power, he was quick to change his tactics and show the people the benefits that would undoubtedly come under his rule. Augustus reportedly exclaimed, “I found Rome built of bricks; I leave her clothed in marble.”15 This proclivity for building was something Augustus shared with Romulus. Both leaders built many temples, but one in particular provided a special connection between the two. Romulus built the temple of Jupiter Feretrius after he slew the prince of Caenina (1.10) and it was later rebuilt by Octavian.16 Both Romulus and Augustus built temples that they had vowed during times of personal or national crises. Romulus built the temple of Jupiter Stator in gratitude for his help in turning the tide of battle against the Sabines (1.12), and likewise Augustus built the temple of Mars the Avenger in fulfillment of his vow during the campaign against Caesar’s assassins at Philippi.17

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The first founder of Rome had done great things: he had conquered many enemies and beautified Rome with marvelous buildings. The second founder of Rome, as Augustus may have viewed himself, followed in those popular footsteps. Livy appears to be more than willing to illustrate the connection between Rome’s two great founders, but he also provides a somber warning to the would-be Romulus. When he recounts the famous story of Romulus’ being taken to heaven in a cloud, he also relates a more sinister variation: Romulus had been ripped apart by the Senators, who felt that Romulus was gaining too much power (1.16). Livy may have been subtly warning Augustus of the dangers inherent in monarchical rule.

Numa Pompilius

Though Romulus was viewed as the founder of Rome, he had a reputation for violence and warfare, and after Actium, the soon-to-be Augustus was eager to place the bloodier aspects of his past behind him. Establishing a conscious connection with Numa Pompilius, the great father of Roman religion, would allow for that. Speaking of the religious founding of Rome by Numa, Livy says, “qui regno ita potitus urbem novam conditam vi et armis, iure eam legibusque ac moribus de integro condere parat” (1.19.1). This concept of a religious founding was something that Augustus was willing and desirous to fully embrace. The Roman people were tired of war. There had been wars between competing Romans since the days of Marius and Sulla, and many religious institutions, like the calendar, had been neglected during the seemingly endless conflicts. Although his famous (or infamous) moral legislation would not be officially introduced for some years, the similarities between the Sabine king Numa and the young-man-turned-Princeps are clear even before the moral reforms.

Foremost is the explicit mention of Augustus by Livy during the reign of Numa. While discussing the temple of Janus, which had just been completed by the new king, Livy mentions that the doors to the temple, which were only shut when there was peace throughout the Roman world, had only been closed twice: once under Titus Manlius and again under Caesar Augustus (1.19.3). Indeed, this is one of only three explicit references to Augustus in the extant works of Livy, and by mentioning Augustus by name Livy leaves no doubt about the religious connection he wished to make between the two rulers. Not only does this reference tie Augustus to the religious significance of the temple of Janus, but also connects him to Numa and the peace enjoyed under his reign, a peace which also existed during the time of Augustus, which Augustus was quick to mention and memorialize.

All the connections that Livy makes between Numa and Augustus are on religious grounds. Livy recounts that Numa established various priesthoods, most particularly the Vestals and Salii (1.20). Augustus was interested
in the Vestals, evidenced by his commitment that if any of his daughters or granddaughters had been of the appropriate age, he would have nominated them for service. Augustus likewise seems to be particularly proud that his name was inserted into the Salian Hymn. Both Numa and Augustus supervised the state priesthoods. Augustus later became pontifex maximus after the death of Lepidus, and although this title is not attested at the time of Numa, it is probable that in the archaic days of Rome many of the responsibilities of the pontifex maximus had their founding. Likewise the establishment of the calendar, which was a religious undertaking under Numa (1.19.6–7), is mirrored by the adjustments made by Augustus, in which he renamed the month Sextilis, as August.

Servius

The reign of Servius Tullius was filled with many developments, but Livy places special emphasis on the census that was conducted during his reign (1.43–44), even mentioning that it was his most important task. Livy is very thorough in his description of the various centuries and their respective requirements. This may have been because Augustus conducted three censuses, the first in 28 b.c.e., immediately before Livy composed his first book and thus having an immediate effect on the historian personally. The detail with which Livy records Servius’ census illustrates that he was very interested in this concept of grouping citizens and assigning them responsibilities based on their wealth. For Augustus’s first census, he changed the requirements for inclusion in the Senate, and later used language similar to Livy’s in describing the religious aspect of his own census, possibly following the precedent set by Servius: “quo lustro civium Romanorum.” As a consequence of the realization that the population was becoming cramped within the walls, Servius extended the pomerium of the city (1.44), bringing two more hills, the Quirinal and Veminal, within the boundaries of Rome. The territorial expansion of the Roman Empire under Augustus may also be considered an extending of the empire’s pomerium, for during his reign Augustus not only annexed Egypt as a kind of personal province, he also pushed the frontiers further out, conquering the Dacians and extending Roman authority to the Danube. The Roman presence was felt in ever-distant places, with Augustus sending expeditions into Ethiopia and Arabia Felix.
Tarquinius Superbus and Sextus Tarquinius

With the accession of Tarquinius Superbus to the Roman throne, the positive allusions to Augustus cease and are replaced with subtle warnings. Livy demonstrates through Tarquinius and his son Sextus how tyrants rule and the effect and ultimate end of that kind of rule. The portrayal of Tarquinius and his son Sextus in the narrative invites the question of whether Livy was hinting at some sort of vague allusion to Julius Caesar and his adopted son Augustus. Both Tarquinius and Sextus did horrible, inexcusable things in Livy’s account, but it was the younger, more rash Sextus who ultimately destroyed the monarchy. It may be possible to view Sextus as a foil for Augustus, who has snuffed out the final flickering flame of the Republic.

One of the first acts of Tarquinius was to reduce the number of senators and begin to judge cases by himself and even secretly (1.49.4–7). The later emperors were to be the ones who perfected this style of governance, but Augustus reduced the number of senators in the early part of his reign. Although this move was taken ostensibly to remove the more unsavory senators from an office of which they were unworthy, it may have appeared to be a political action that shifted the power base in favor of Augustus.

Much of Livy’s narrative during Tarquinius’ reign focuses on his son Sextus, which is interesting if one considers succession and family dynamics in regard to both the original and new rulers. When Sextus was sent to Gabii, he confiscated land and money (1.54) to enrich himself and enhance the power and prestige of his friends and supporters. One cannot help but think of the proscriptions that took place under the Second Triumvirate, which served to finance the continuing wars and personal feuds between members of Rome’s social elite, in which then-Octavian played a significant role. “For Antonius there was some palliation, at least—when consul he had been harried by faction and treason, when proconsul outlawed. For Octavian there was none, and no merit beyond his name: ‘puer qui omnia nomini debes,’ as Antonius had said, and many another. That splendid name was now dishonoured. Caesar’s heir was no longer a rash youth but a chill and mature terrorist.” Sextus likewise won many supporters by giving large donations, no doubt financed by his recent “acquisitions” (1.54.10). While still attempting to solidify his power base, Octavian paid extravagant sums to his supporters (especially his legionnaires), and many supporters found themselves with newfound wealth and prestige. Augustus himself records all the various donatives he gave to soldier and citizen alike, in the form of cash, doles, or games. Augustus’ generosity did not stop once he came to power, and he continued to give gifts of largesse in many forms throughout his reign.

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Plausible Connections and Conclusions

It seems obvious that Livy was drawing positive allusions by utilizing appropriate stories from the lives of the early Roman kings. There are too many parallels to Livy’s own time and circumstances for these connections to be merely coincidental. But after making numerous allusions to kings that the Romans would have viewed in a positive light, Livy spends a good portion of his narrative at the close of the first book discussing a powerful father and son who were universally hated by Romans anciently and in Livy’s own time and were understood to be examples of tyranny and corruption.

Livy undoubtedly agreed with the underlying and guiding principles espoused during his time and was excited to usher in the new era of peace and prosperity. He was also keenly aware of the underlying theme of rebirth and refounding that Augustus and his supporters wanted to portray. But as a careful student of history, he was also cautious of the dangers inherent in having one man hold so much power, and the exemples of Tarquinius and Sextus only intensified that sense of worry. Monarchical Rome had Tarquinius and Sextus, and now Republican Rome had witnessed Julius Caesar and his heir. Would Augustus be another Sextus? Livy may have included these negative allusions as a warning to Augustus of the limits of his power. The Roman people had rid themselves of a tyrant once, and they would do it again if their hand was forced.