

CHAPTER 3

MORALITY, TYRANNY,
HEROES, AND KINGSTHE BEGINNINGS
OF THE REPUBLIC

All Rome knew Lucretia for her beauty and goodness. No one doubted that she loved her husband and was faithful to him. In the eyes of the average Roman, this made her a perfect woman. But to Sextus, the king's ruthless son, Lucretia's goodness was a challenge. As the Roman historian Livy tells the tale, Sextus couldn't see such perfect devotion without wanting to destroy it. Sextus went to Lucretia's house when he knew that her husband was out of town. Because Sextus was a prince and also her husband's cousin, Lucretia and her servants welcomed him and served him dinner. They didn't suspect his cruel plan.

When everyone else was asleep, Sextus crept, sword in hand, into Lucretia's bedroom. He threatened to kill her and spread a rumor that she had been unfaithful to her husband, if she refused to do what he wanted. Lucretia was not afraid of death, but she didn't want to die with her husband thinking that she hadn't been faithful to him. So she obeyed Sextus—she felt that she had no choice.

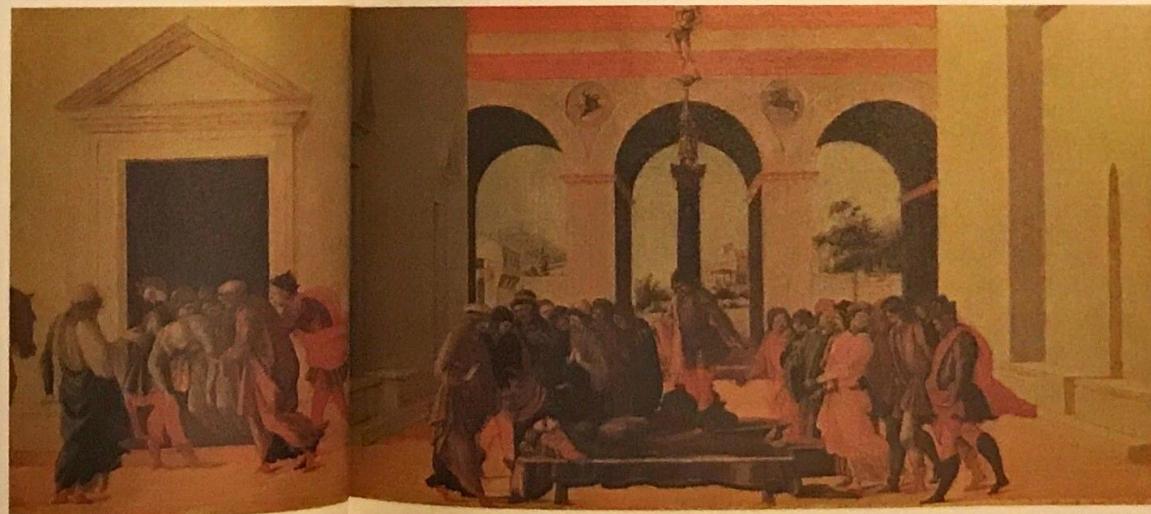
The next morning, overcome with grief and shame, Lucretia sent messengers to her husband and her father. She asked them to come right away—something terrible had happened. The men came as quickly as they could. Lucretia's husband brought along his friend Brutus. When Lucretia saw them, she began to cry and told them what Sextus had done. According to Livy, she said, "Give

me your right hand in faith that you will not allow the guilty to escape."

Lucretia's husband and Brutus believed in Lucretia's innocence and promised to get even with Sextus. Brutus made this solemn promise. "By this blood, which was so pure . . . I swear before you, O gods, to chase out the king . . . with his criminal wife and all their children, . . . and never to tolerate kings in Rome evermore."

Brutus kept his promise. He and Lucretia's husband won the loyalty of the army and drove out Sextus's father, the tyrant Tarquin the Proud—Rome's third Etruscan king. They condemned him and his whole family to life in exile, never again to see Rome. And that was the end of kingship in Rome. From this point on, kingship became so unpopular that *rex* (king) became a term of hatred and dishonor. The arrogant king Tarquin had always been unpopular. But the Romans prized high morals above all, and his son's attack on a woman's honor was the last straw.

The story of Lucretia is one explanation for how kingship ended in Rome. But how had it begun? The Romans believed that Romulus became Rome's first king when he founded the city in 753 BCE. They believed that six more kings ruled Rome until Brutus forced Tarquin the Proud from his throne in 509 BCE. According to tradition, the first



66 Livy, *From the Founding of the City*, 25 BCE

THE MORAL OF
THE STORY

The Romans used stories about their founders and past heroes to display the virtues that they believed were important. People do the same thing today when they tell the story about George Washington chopping down his father's cherry tree, for example. Then and now, some of these stories were literally, exactly true; others were exaggerated—tall tales. Later Romans used the legend of Lucretia to teach right and wrong. For a woman, "right" meant faithfulness and devotion to her husband. For a man, it meant the kind of patriotism, loyalty, selflessness, and courage displayed by Brutus when he came to the aid of his friends. "Wrong" meant the arrogance of Tarquin and the brutality of Sextus.

When Lucretia died, the Roman people gathered to grieve the loss of this pure and honorable heroine.

66 LIVY

66 Livy, *From the Founding of the City*, 25 BCE

senex = "old man"
Senators were usually
old men who were the
heads of families.

three kings who followed Romulus to the throne were Romans. But Roman kingship was not passed down in a royal family, as it is in Great Britain, for example. Instead, when a Roman king died, the **Senate**—a group of wealthy men who owned land—elected the next ruler. Even a foreigner could rule if he could gather enough support among the senators. And that's exactly what happened when the Senate elected an Etruscan, as the fifth king of Rome. Tarquinius Priscus, later known as Tarquinius the Elder, ruled well and brought Etruscan engineering and artistry to Rome. But his grandson Lucius Tarquinius, also called Tarquin the Proud, was another story. He was the tyrant who ruled as Rome's seventh and last king.

Though no one can say for certain how many kings ruled Rome, archaeologists can prove that kings did rule Rome during this period. A 6th-century cup found in the Roman Forum at the *Regia* (the king's house) offers proof. On it is written the word *rex*, Latin for king. A black stone called the *Lapis Niger* gives more evidence. Also inscribed with the word *rex*, this stone probably marked the grave of an early king buried in the Forum. Ancient ruins show that the *Regia* burned down around 500 BCE. Perhaps Brutus and his followers set fire to it in their anger against Tarquin the Proud and his family.

Once the kings were banished, the senators took control of the government. They agreed to share the leadership with the Assembly so that no one could ever again take over and rule as a tyrant. Rome became a **republic**—a state in which highest power belongs to the citizens. Its Popular Assembly was made up of the citizens who were entitled to vote: landowning men. (Slaves and women could not vote.)

Each year the Assembly elected two senators to the high office of consul. In the early years of the Republic, these men handled nearly everything. They served as judges, priests, military commanders, and city councilors. But as Rome's population grew, the workload grew too. The city needed more officials, whom they called magistrates. The consuls were still the most powerful magistrates, but the Assembly also elected other officials for the less important

Res + publica =
"thing" + "of the people"
A republic belongs to
its people, not to a king
or queen.

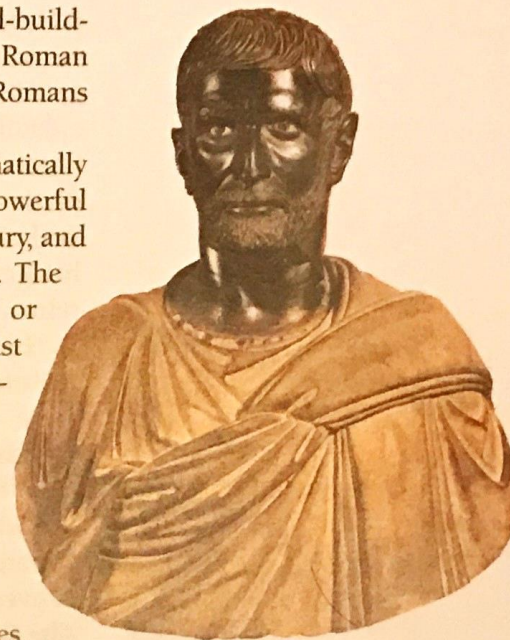
jobs. Praetors judged lawsuits. Aediles directed road-building projects and managed the city's markets. But no Roman official could serve for two years in a row. The Romans did not want anyone to become too popular.

Once a man had served as a magistrate, he automatically became a lifetime member of the Senate, the most powerful "club" in Rome. The Senate controlled Rome's treasury, and no money could be spent without Senate approval. The senators ordered public buildings to be built or repaired. They also investigated major crimes against the state, made foreign policy, and chose Rome's foreign ambassadors. In theory, the citizens' Assembly was the supreme authority. But since the Senate contained nearly all the experienced ex-magistrates, it usually controlled the Assembly. In reality the Senate, not the Assembly, dominated Rome's political life.

The Roman Republic lasted for five centuries. During that time Rome grew from a city of about 35,000 into a huge city, a metropolis with 1 million inhabitants and an empire with 50 million subjects. Such tremendous growth never happens without war and conquest. Rome's armies stayed busy throughout the years of the Republic. But Rome was not always the attacker. Its neighbors often besieged the city as well.

In 475 BCE, about 35 years after the Roman army had banished Tarquin the Proud, the Etruscans again threatened Rome. Livy tells the story of a soldier named Horatius Coclus who was guarding a bridge across the Tiber River when the Etruscans suddenly attacked. Horatius saw a huge band of enemy soldiers charging down the hill on the other side of the river. They were heading straight for his bridge—and Rome.

The Romans were completely outnumbered, and the men with Horatius panicked. They threw their weapons on the ground and started running. Horatius begged them to stay and fight. He said it would be foolish to run away, leaving the enemy free to cross the bridge and march into Rome. Shouting over the noise of battle, he asked them at



Scholars believe that this bronze bust depicts Brutus—the man who avenged Lucretia's death. After Brutus overthrew the Etruscan king, he became the first consul of Rome.

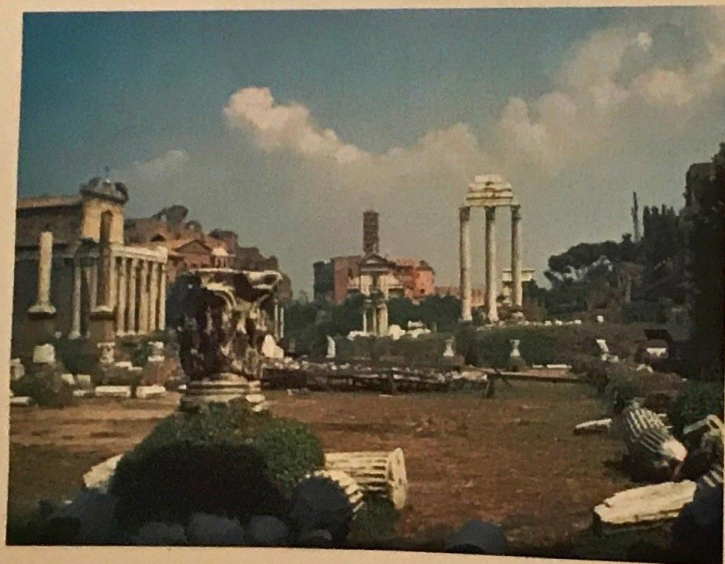
least to destroy the bridge, if they were too afraid to fight. He would meet the enemy alone on the other side.

Horatius's courage astonished Romans and Etruscans alike, but only two Roman soldiers were brave enough to cross the bridge and fight beside him. The three men fought on the riverbank while the rest of the Romans hacked away at the bridge with their swords. When only a small strip of bridge was left, Horatius insisted that his two companions return across it to safety.

Livy tells the story of how Horatius stood alone, facing the enemy: "Looking round with eyes dark with menace upon the Etruscan chiefs, he challenged them to single combat, calling them the slaves of a tyrant king. . . ." At first the Etruscans held back, but then, shamed by Horatius's courage, they began to hurl their javelins at him. Horatius caught their weapons on his shield. "As stubborn as ever, he stood on the bridge, his feet planted wide apart. The Etruscans were about to charge him when two sounds split the air: the crash of the broken bridge and the cheer of the Romans when they saw the bridge fall."

This stopped the Etruscans in their tracks. Then Horatius prayed to the god of the river. "Holy Father Tiber . . . receive these arms and your soldier into your kindly waters.' With that, he jumped into the river with all his armor on and safely swam across to his friends: an act of daring more famous than believable in later times." The Roman people placed a statue in the public square to honor

The Roman Forum encloses the remains of the sixth-century BCE public market as well as temples and other ancient buildings, both public and commercial. The Senate and Assembly met there, and the high priest and Vestal Virgins lived there.



64 Livy, *From the Founding of the City*, 25 BCE

Horatius. As a reward for his amazing courage, they gave him as much land as he could plow in a day.

Patriotic writers like Livy took great pride in telling about brave Horatius and how he stopped the foreign attackers. Livy knew that the story was exaggerated and that his first-century readers wouldn't completely believe it. But he wasn't telling it to get the facts straight. He told it because it painted a picture of Roman courage at its best. Horatius represented the "true Roman."

Even though Rome had abolished kingship, the Senate had the power to appoint a dictator in times of great danger. This happened in 458 BCE when the Aequi, an Italic tribe living west of Rome, attacked. The Senate sent for Cincinnatus, a farmer who had served as a consul two years earlier. The Senate's messengers found him working in his field and greeted him. They asked him to put on his toga so they might give him an important message from the Senate. Cincinnatus "asked them, in surprise, if all was well, and bade his wife, Racilia, to bring him his toga. . . . Wiping off the dust and perspiration, he put it on and came forward." Then the messengers congratulated Cincinnatus and told him that he had been appointed dictator of Rome.

Cincinnatus immediately went to the city and set to work. Although he could have ruled as dictator for six months, Cincinnatus assembled an army, defeated the Aequi, and then laid down his power to return to his plow—all in just 15 days.

For two more centuries the Romans fought against the other peoples of Italy. Scholars follow the Romans in calling these non-Romans Italians. The Romans saw them as enemies to be conquered, even though some of them also spoke Latin.

By 266 BCE, Rome controlled the entire Italian peninsula. Roman writers used the stories of Cincinnatus and Horatius to show how courage and determination helped Rome conquer all of Italy and eventually the rest of the Mediterranean world.

"Dictate" comes from the word *dictare*, which means to recite or command. Although a Roman dictator had absolute power, his term was limited to a maximum of six months.

64 Livy, *From the Founding of the City*, 25 BCE