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REVIEW

RICHARDSON'S ESSAYS ON EARLY ROME

James H. Richardson, *Kings and Consuls: Eight Essays on Roman History, Historiography, and Political Thought*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2020. Pp. x + 238. Paperback, £40.00. ISBN 978-1-78997-386-0.

The history of early Rome is a tricky topic. On the one hand, we have the clear and detailed accounts of Livy and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, who tell how Rome was founded as a monarchy, how a sequence of seven kings built the city and established its most important social, religious, and political institutions, and how the tyrannical behaviour of the last king drove the aristocracy to expel him from the city and abolish the monarchy. The leaders of this aristocratic coup made Rome a Republic, keeping the institutions created by the kings, but replacing the monarch with two annually elected magistrates called consuls, who would exercise executive authority in the state. Thus most of the fundamental institutions of the Republic were in place by 509 BC, and—with very few exceptions—they defined the Republic for the next five hundred years, until Augustus established his principate. This is the received tradition of Rome's origins: the state and its institutions were created by legendary kings, but the government eventually passed into the control of the aristocracy, who replaced the king with consuls but otherwise kept the state mostly unchanged.

On the other hand, scholars have long questioned the reliability of this received tradition, and wondered whether tales of the monarchy and early Republic were anything more than fables and folklore. They point to many problems that undermine confidence in the tradition, most particularly the yawning chasm of time between the foundation of Rome and the appearance of reliable documents and records. The Romans did not start writing about their own history until the late third century BC, which means that Rome was already five hundred years old before its first historians began documenting the city's past. Some records must have existed in early Rome, but their nature, quantity, reliability, and contents are conjectural. The works of Rome's earliest historians are now lost and survive only in fragments, so we have only a general idea what information they contained, and even less information about what sources they used and what the reliability of those sources might be. So we know that Livy and Dionysius based their work on the research of earlier historians going back to the late third century, but we cannot evaluate

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the accuracy and reliability of those earlier historians. This doubt is compounded by the many obvious contradictions, discrepancies, and problems within the surviving narratives, which demonstrate that—at the very least—the sources behind those narratives contained different versions of earlier events, and that later authors did not know how to reconcile the variations they discovered in older records. Even if one assumes that ancient writers intended to produce accurate source-based histories (which is not always a safe assumption), we have no way to evaluate the overall reliability of their sources. It is possible, therefore, that our received tradition is little more than a series of myths and stories cobbled together by Rome's first historians.

There is a temptation to look to archaeology to confirm or disprove the traditional narratives, but the many remarkable discoveries of the past century tend to answer different questions about early Rome. For example, the discovery of archaic inscriptions bearing the word *rex* prove that someone bore this title in early Rome, but do these inscriptions refer to true kings such as the monarchs of legend, or do they simply refer to the priest known as the *rex sacrorum*, a position that existed throughout the Republic? Likewise, the remains of early defensive fortifications have been found around the Palatine and elsewhere in the city, but are these pieces of the massive circuit wall ascribed to Romulus by the literary tradition, or are they smaller defensive works encircling different individual hilltop communities, such as that on the Palatine? Archaeology shows that Rome was a large and powerful city by the late sixth century BC, but this does not prove or disprove the particular explanation for Rome's growth given by the narratives, nor does it tell us what kind of political organisation made that growth possible. There is insufficient information at this time to establish the historical context of much of the archaeological data available to us, allowing scholars to interpret discoveries in very different ways. Andrea Carandini, for example, sees the archaeological discoveries as confirming the literary record very closely, while Peter Wiseman has argued for the unreliability of the literary accounts and emphasised the inherent danger of using an uncertain literary account to provide historical context for archaeological discoveries.[1] Most scholars now find themselves somewhere between these two positions. Tim Cornell, for example, has suggested that the historical framework given by the literary record is basically reliable (at least from the sixth century BC), but recognises that it has significant

[1] A. Carandini, *La leggenda di Roma, I: Dalla nascita dei gemelli alla fondazione della città* (Milan, 2006) and *Rome: Day One*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (Princeton, 2011); T. P. Wiseman, *Remus: A Roman Myth* (Cambridge, 1995); *The Myths of Rome* (Exeter, 2004); and *Unwritten Rome* (Exeter, 2008).

flaws and is cautious about drawing connections too closely between the archaeological evidence and the literary account.[2]

This is the debate that James Richardson takes up in his book *Kings and Consuls: Eight Essays on Roman History, Historiography and Political Thought*. The book is a collection of eight essays, seven of which have been published previously as articles or book chapters, but they have been updated to include recent scholarship. Richardson dedicates the book to Peter Wiseman and generally follows his sceptical view about the reliability of the literary record on early Rome. He presents clear and concise discussions of the modern theories and debates on Roman historiography, but his approach is to prioritise the primary evidence itself, carefully identifying both what it says and—equally important—what it does not say. Each of his chapters examines one specific question about early Rome and draws a line between what points can be confidently asserted based on that evidence, and what interpretations are less certain or speculative. While each of the chapters was originally written to make a stand-alone argument, the cumulative effect is to emphasise the unreliable nature of the traditional narrative and to point out how little we know with certainty about early Rome.

After a lengthy introduction that lays out the debate over the reliability of the literary record, the first chapter, 'The People and the State in Early Rome', examines the traditional belief that Rome and many of its most important institutions were created all at once at the founding of the city by the legendary Romulus. This tradition presented the Roman state as the spontaneous—and very ancient—creation of its founder-king, giving great antiquity and legitimacy to its institutions and system of governance. As noted above, the literary texts recording this tradition contain numerous variations, contradictions, and discrepancies, and Richardson argues that these constitute an alternative narrative in which Rome developed only gradually, and did not begin as a unified state: 'the most obvious conclusions to draw from this are that the Roman state was at first under-developed and comparatively weak, and also that not everyone subscribed to the idea of it' (36). The notion that Rome appeared suddenly as a strong, stable, and unified state under the firm rule of a king's central authority is shown to be contradicted by the narrative itself, which emphasises Rome's slow development.

The second chapter, 'The King and the Constitution', has not been published previously, and examines the tradition that the Roman kingship had

[2] T. J. Cornell, *The Beginnings of Rome: Italy and Rome from the Bronze Age to the Punic Wars (c. 1000–264 BC)* (London, 1995); 'The Value of the Literary Tradition Concerning Archaic Rome', in K. A. Raaflaub, ed., *Social Struggles in Archaic Rome: New Perspectives on the Conflict of the Orders*, expanded and updated edition (Oxford and Malden, Mass., 2005) 47–74; and 'Livy's Narrative of the Regal Period and Historical and Archaeological Facts', in B. Mineo, ed., *A Companion to Livy* (Malden, Mass., 2014) 245–58.

been elective. After noting the poverty of the reliable evidence on the monarchy that could have been available to Rome's first historians, Richardson discusses a fundamental contradiction: the narrative tradition says that the Roman kingship was elective, but it also presents hereditary succession to the monarchy as the normal expectation. In stories told by Livy and Dionysius, a deceased king is widely expected to be succeeded by his son(s), but a rival overcomes this expectation to win election to the throne. If the monarch was elected, why do these stories repeatedly present hereditary succession as the normal expectation? Richardson interprets this as ancient writers injecting invented stories into their accounts that were clearly incompatible with accepted ideas (63). He suggests that institutions such as the *interrex* and the *curiae* developed long after the founding of the city, and so do not support the story of an elective monarchy. He suggests (76) that the idea of an elective monarchy was introduced into Roman folklore much later as a way to fabricate a role for the Senate and people in Rome's earliest government, and concludes (85) that the stories of the regal period are not historical but a mix of anachronisms resulting from the introduction of specific views and arguments to express later ideas about the character of the Roman people.

Chapter 3, 'The Oath *per Iovem lapidem* and the Community in Archaic Rome', examines the oath that Polybius describes as having been sworn by the Romans to affirm their first treaty with Carthage in the first year of the Republic. While a treaty between Carthage and Rome presupposes that the Romans identified themselves as a state, and so supports the idea that the Republican government appeared in highly developed and centralised form upon its creation in 509 BC, Richardson notes (90) that the oath *per Iovem lapidem* was only binding on the person who swore it, which requires 'little more than the existence of a single leader or chief of some description' (94). This seems to undermine the idea of the dual consulship, and suggests instead that powerful individuals held sway in the early Republic, such as the leaders of private war bands or an individual called a *praetor maximus*, both of which are found in the narrative accounts.

The fourth chapter is titled 'Rome's Treaties with Carthage: Jigsaw or Variant Traditions?'. Richardson reviews the numerous references to these treaties in the surviving sources as well as the attempts by modern scholars to assemble them into a coherent story. Since many of these scholars believe the historical framework conveyed by the narratives is essentially correct—a single tradition that was preserved and handed down (albeit imperfectly) from Rome's earliest days—they assume that different authors are giving different pieces of a single story, which means it should be possible to reconcile the different references and piece them together into a single series of treaties. Richardson argues the opposite: there was no single narrative handed down from Rome's earliest days, so the different sources were actually reporting pieces of different traditions regarding Rome's dealings with Carthage, and so

they cannot be combined into a single version: 'What all these discrepancies and problems suggest is that Philinus, Polybius, Diodorus and Livy do *not* in fact merely preserve different parts of the same reliable accounts of events, as is generally supposed, but instead pass on material drawn from a range of different sources, material that is in some instances simply unreliable and in others incompatible too' (116).

Chapter 5 is entitled 'Ancient Historical Thought and the Development of the Consulship' and it surveys the substantial problems with the tradition that the consulship was created at the foundation of the Republic in 509 BC. Looking at primary evidence and modern scholarly discussions, Richardson points out that the consulship may have been created as late as 367 BC, and that the Romans may have experimented with different types of government before that time. In that case, he raises an intriguing question: if the consulship was not created to replace the exiled king, how did it obtain the strong anti-monarchical ideology that was later attached to it? He suggests (132) that this resulted from Rome's encounters with Hellenic monarchies starting in the early third century BC, two generations before the Romans first started writing about their own history. In that case, Rome's anti-monarchical traditions may not date to the late sixth century, but to the early third.

'The Roman Nobility, the Early Consular *Fasti* and the Consular Tribunate' is the title of Chapter 6, in which Richardson asks why Rome's nobility seems entirely absent from tales of the regal period, but suddenly appears in full force with the birth of the Republic. He suggests (140) that 'the nobility appears with the consulship', which leads him to examine the reliability of the early *fasti*. He explains the debate among scholars over the reliability of this list of consuls and other high magistrates (especially over the parts describing the early Republic), and he concludes (147) that 'Livy just did not have access to a single list of magistrates that he could actually trust'. He suggests that the absence of a single official list of magistrates had enabled the Republican aristocracy to claim consulships for their family dating back as far as possible, since claiming early consulships established the antiquity of a family's nobility. This, he suggests, explains why the names of so many noble families first appear in the early years of the Republic, since there was no value in fabricating ancestors in the regal period when there were no consulships to hold. This also explains why Rome's first historians found a large and confusing number of variant traditions about who held consulships in the early years of the Republic, variants that they imperfectly assembled to shape the current narrative tradition.

In the seventh chapter, '"Firsts" and the Historians of Rome', Richardson examines the question of whether some ancient writers deliberately promoted their own families in their works, manipulating their presentation of the past to enhance their families' reputations. He notes that scholars have generally rejected this idea on the grounds that the surviving fragments of these authors

are insufficient to show bias (or its absence), so he instead looks for patterns in the names of those men said to have been the first to hold some high office or achieve some other important honour. Having an ancestor who was the first to accomplish such a feat—such as the first to hold the consulship, or the first plebeian consul or dictator, or the first to receive a particular honour or perform a particular deed—conveyed special distinction, and so early historians may have been tempted to insert their own ancestors into these desirable positions. Surveying the traditional record, Richardson notes (186–7) that a very large number of such 'firsts' are ascribed to men belonging to the Licinian, Papirian, Postumian, and Valerian families, suggesting that the ancient historians Licinius Macer, Postumius Albinus, and Valerius Antias invented or edited stories in order to insert their ancestors into the tradition, while the Papirii—who did not produce a known historian—may have claimed these 'firsts' to glorify their family name.

The final chapter is entitled 'L. Iunius Brutus the Patrician and the Political Allegiance of Q. Aelius Tubero' and it examines the story given by Dionysius of Halicarnassus (*AR* 5.18 and 48) that L. Iunius Brutus—the founder of the Republic—had been a patrician, but all the subsequent members of his *gens* had always been plebeian. Noting that several scholars have already dismissed the existence of L. Iunius Brutus as a myth, Richardson asks why the story of his patrician status should have arisen at all, since his *gens* had always been plebeian. He suggests that the author Q. Aelius Tubero may have fabricated, or at least popularised, this story of L. Iunius' patrician status to reinforce contemporary propaganda that Caesar's assassin, M. Iunius Brutus, was not a true descendant of the legendary founder of the Republic. This fabrication may have been created to diminish the status of M. Iunius and separate him from the tradition of tyrannicide represented by L. Iunius. In other words, Tubero manipulated a piece of Rome's history to serve contemporary politics.

The book concludes with a bibliography and index.

Although these eight chapters were originally written as stand-alone pieces, they collectively produce a very strong argument against the reliability of the traditional narrative on early Rome. Richardson's focus on the primary evidence goes to the heart of the epistemological question of how our sources—and their sources—knew what they knew about the earliest periods of Roman history. Modern scholars who accept the basic historical framework of the narrative tradition believe that reliable documents and other records had existed from (at least) the start of the Republic, and that these preserved a single, authoritative tradition about the history of early Rome down to the late third century, when the Romans began writing narrative histories. If one holds this position, then the errors, variations, contradictions, and other problems in the narrative tradition can be interpreted as mere mistakes and dismissed as such. In contrast to this, Richardson's chapters argue that, if the details

supporting the customary historical framework are accepted, then the problems that undermine that framework must also be accepted, since they are all part of the same narrative tradition. His analysis suggests that there was no single authoritative tradition, but that several variant traditions—which did not tell the same stories or contain the same information—came down to Rome's first historians. In this light, the anomalies and problems in the traditional narrative are not mistakes, but parts of variant traditions that once existed before they were all condensed into a single version. His argument is persuasive, and it suggests that the familiar historical framework of early Rome did not exist until the first historians started piecing it together in the late-third and early-second centuries BC, and because they were working with several variant traditions, each seems to have assembled a slightly different version of this framework, emphasising the events, themes, topics, and families that most interested them.

Richardson is very careful in constructing his arguments. He does not propose an alternate reconstruction of early Rome, but instead challenges historians to rethink how they approach the study of the regal period and early Republic—of its kings and early consuls. Rather than trying to reconcile the problems in the received tradition—i.e., rather than trying to fit all the pieces into a single clear account—Richardson suggests that we should focus on the problems themselves as windows into the range of ideas that ancient writers encountered about Rome's past. As he says at the end of his last chapter: 'to continue to insist that Roman accounts of Rome's early history are based on a "foundation", "core" or "backbone" of evidence and are therefore broadly reliable is not only, at best, to operate on faith, but it is also to risk leaving untested—and also unexplained—the various reconstructions and hypotheses of the Romans themselves' (203). This is a persuasive argument, and it suggests that the traditional narrative can only be sustained by dismissing the considerable body of evidence that contradicts the accepted historical framework. While accepting the anomalous evidence seriously muddies our understanding of early Rome, it also offers rich opportunities for exploring what the Romans believed about their past.

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