Myth V

509–458 B.C.

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Legendary Heroes of Early Rome

Once Tarquinius Superbus had been expelled for tyranny in 509 B.C., the monarchy was replaced by a republican form of government, in which two consuls, elected annually, held equal power and ruled with the advice of the Senate. For the next 250 years, Rome's history was one of constant struggle and conflict, as she vied with other city-states for supremacy in Italy. The story of Rome's conquests is studded with patriots, whose actions reflect the character of early Rome and emphasize the virtue of **pietās**, firm loyalty and devotion to one's country, gods, and family. The stories of these patriots were told by the Roman historian Livy (1st century B.C.–1st century A.D.), on whom the following accounts are based.

Horatius at the Bridge

The king of Clusium in Etruria, Lars Porsenna, was goaded by Tarquinius Superbus into leading an army to attack Rome and restore the monarchy. As the Etruscans advanced to cross the Pons Sublicius, the access route into the city across the Tiber, they were thwarted by one man, Horatius Cocles. He instructed his fellow citizens to demolish the bridge behind him, promising to hold back the attack of the enemy as well as one man could. The sight of a single armed man standing at the entrance to the bridge astounded the Etruscan army. Two comrades helped Horatius stave off the first attack and then retired into the city over what still remained of the bridge. Horatius taunted the Etruscans and

The goddess Victory crowns Horatius Cocles as he defends the bridge. Father Tiber, with water jar, watches (*below*). Horatius Cocles Defending the Bridge, *oil on canvas, 1643, Charles LeBrun*

with his shield blocked the many spears they threw at him as they advanced. As the last of the bridge fell, the loud crash behind him and the cheers of the Romans inside the city stopped the advancing enemy in their tracks. "Father Tiber," prayed Horatius, "receive these weapons and this soldier in your kind waters!" and he jumped into the river and swam through a shower of spears to safety with his fellow citizens in the city.

Mucius Scaevola

Porsenna then decided to besiege the Romans into submission. Gaius Mucius, a young Roman noble, got permission from the senators to infiltrate the Etruscan camp and kill the king. Mucius happened to arrive at the camp on the soldiers' payday. As he mingled with the crowd, he noticed that two similarly dressed important people were talking with the troops from a raised platform. Since Mucius realized he could not ask someone in the crowd, "Which one is King Porsenna?" he made a guess, pulled his sword, and slew the king's scribe. Seized by the royal bodyguards and dragged before the king, he said, "I am a Roman citizen. They call me Mucius. As an enemy I wanted to kill my enemy, nor do I have less courage for death than for killing." When the furious king threatened to have Mucius burned alive, "Watch this," he said, "so you may know how cheap the body is to men who have their eye on great glory." With that, Mucius plunged his right hand into the fire on an altar and held it there. The king, astounded because Mucius showed no feeling of pain, jumped up and ordered his guards to pull him from the fire. "Go back," said Porsenna, "since you do more harm to yourself than to me." After informing the king that he was but one of a number of young Romans who had sworn to assassinate the king, Mucius returned to Rome, where he received rewards of honor and the cognomen Scaevola, "Lefty."

Cloelia

Frightened by the news that others like Mucius Scaevola would attempt to kill him, Porsenna offered to withdraw his troops in exchange for Roman hostages. Cloelia was one of the girls included among the hostages. Inspired by Mucius's act of heroism, when she realized that the Etruscan camp was near the Tiber, Cloelia led a group of girls to elude their guards, swim across the river through a shower of spears, and reach safety on the Roman side. Incensed, Porsenna demanded Cloelia's return, only to honor her by sending her home with other hostages of her choosing and calling her deed greater than those of Cocles and Mucius. After friendship had thus been restored and the treaty renewed, the Romans honored Cloelia by setting up in the Forum a statue of a girl seated on a horse.

Cincinnatus

Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus was a model Roman citizen-farmer, a statesman idolized in legend for virtues other than being a fine patriot and military leader. In 458 B.C., the Aequi, a neighboring people with whom the Romans had been fighting for half a century,

History and myths of antiquity are full of legendary women, some of whom are pictured here.
Great Women of Antiquity, *pencil and watercolor, 1902, Frederick D. Wallenn*

had surrounded a Roman army and its commander, a consul, near Mt. Algidus in the Alban Hills southeast of Rome. Deeming the other consul not up to the challenge of rescuing the besieged army, the Senate decreed that Cincinnatus should be named dictator, a special office that in times of crisis permitted them to put the best qualified citizen in charge of the state for up to six months. The Senate's representatives found Cincinnatus at his four-acre farm across the Tiber, intent on his work of digging ditches and plowing. After an exchange of greetings, they asked him to put on his toga and hear the Senate's instructions. The startled Cincinnatus ordered his wife to run to their hut and fetch his toga. Once he had wiped off the dust and sweat and put on his toga, the senators hailed him as dictator, asked him to come to the city, and explained the dangerous circumstances of the army. The next day Cincinnatus ordered every citizen of military age to muster on the Campus Martius, armed, provided with five days' supply of food, and each carrying twelve poles to be used for building a palisade. With this army Cincinnatus marched from Rome and arrived at Mt. Algidus at midnight. In the darkness he deployed his troops in a circle, surrounding the enemy. On command, his army started shouting as they dug a trench and built a palisade that fenced the Aequi in between the two Roman armies. The enemy quickly surrendered. Within days Cincinnatus resigned his dictatorship and returned to his farm. Here, indeed, was a Roman driven by **pietās** rather than by hunger for wealth or power.

The Romans passed along legendary anecdotes such as these about their heroes from generation to generation as an inspiration to their children.

1. Explain how each of these heroes embodied **pietās**.
2. All Roman children learned these stories as part of their education. How do *you* react to heroes such as Horatius Cocles and Cloelia?
3. George Washington was referred to as a modern Cincinnatus. In what ways do you find this comparison appropriate or inappropriate?