Platonic Thought in Book I of Livy's Ab Urbe Condita

Plato represents perhaps *the* watershed moment in intellectual history. His obvious philosophical influence is best expressed by Whitehead's assertion, that "all of Western philosophy is but a footnote to Plato." In recent years, there has been an increased interest in Plato's literary impact as well. Certainly, in terms of both thought and style, the major Alexandrian poets are significantly indebted to Plato. In the *Aeneid*, the difference that we observe between Virgil's underworld and that of Homer in the *Odyssey* is due in large part to conceptions of the afterlife developed by Plato. However, one area where Platonic influence seems to not be perceived quite as keenly is historiography. Naturally, many arguments and ideas in Plato have become the domain of political philosophy, but few ever seem to consider how historians, and particularly ancient ones, incorporated Platonic thought into their works. This is especially odd given the fact that so many ancient historians assume a negative outlook, viewing history as something essentially degenerative; this fits so neatly with *Republic* VIII, where Plato discusses the phases of a state's decline, from aristocracy to tyranny. One author who seems to observe this model particularly well is Livy, in the first book of his *Ab urbe condita.* The narrative pattern of the actual history of Rome in this book goes from its founding by Romulus to the expulsion of the tyrant Tarquinius Superbus. Thus we have at the most basic level the frame of a degenerative process, from an ideal beginning to a bad end. While this is simply a function of historical fact--the period of kings *was* essentially one of decline--the purpose of this paper is to show that in the first book of Livy's *Ab urbe condita*, Livy was consciously fitting his narrative to the phases described in *Republic* VIII. The distinguishing feature of each character in the succession of kings is specifically matched to a type of government described in the *Republic*. Livy casts Numa Pompilius as a 'philosopher king',

Tullus Hostilius and Ancus Marcius as violent timocrats, Tarquinius Priscus as an oligarch, Servius Tullius as the 'democratic man', and Tarquinius Superbus as a tyrant. These 'roles' were not necessarily contained in the historical record, but were rather narrative decisions by Livy to promote the view of history contained in the *Ab urbe condita*. In this respect, we shall see how this Platonic reading of the succession of kings in Book I supports the general view of history contained in the *Ab urbe condita*, as first described by T.J. Luce, and later by Gary Miles.

There is no need to consider the *Republic* in detail, but it will be useful to briefly outline the parts that pertain to this discussion. Plato's ideal city is set up to function as a true aristocracy: it is to be ruled by those who are genuinely 'the best.' What makes them 'the best' is their wisdom, which results from the mastery that the rational part of their soul exerts over the spirited and appetitive parts. The dominance of these latter two parts in others gives rise to the other two classes of citizen, who are to be governed by the wise. This, in the scheme of the *Republic*, is the most perfect way of organizing a state. Other methods represent perverted forms of government; Plato focuses on four of these in Book VIII, where he describes how a state can function poorly. The first stage of deterioration from an aristocracy is a timocracy, where honor is prized even above virtue and wisdom, causing such a state to be unduly preoccupied with war and conquest. The next-worse form of government is an oligarchy, where the appetitive elements in the soul and in society exert undue influence, leading to an excessive lust for wealth. From this comes democracy, or mob rule. Finally, the worst form of government is tyranny, because the man who rules the state is in fact its greatest enemy, concerned solely about the maintenance of his own power.

Livy's *Ab urbe condita* aligns itself with this model at the most basic level. In book IV, Socrates describes the constitution (ν□μος) upon which the ideal city should be founded. It

should not, he argues, be a detailed list of statutes, for bad citizens would simply ignore them, and good ones would not need them. Rather, it should primarily legislate religious practice:

> □ερ□ν τε □δρύσεις κα□ θυσίαι κα□ □λλαι θε□ν τε κα□ δαιμόνων κα□ □ρώων θεραπε□αι· τελευτησάντων τε α□ θ□και κα□ □σα το□ς □κε□ δε□ □πηρετο□ντας □λεως α□το□ς □χειν. τ□ γ□ρ δ□ τοια□τα ο□τ' □πιστάμεθα □με□ς ο□κίζοντές τε πόλιν ο□δεν□ □λλ□ πεισόμεθα, □□ν νο□ν □χωμεν, ο□δ□ χρησόμεθα □ξηγητ□ □λλ' □ τ□ πατρί□· ο□τος γ□ρ δήπου □ θε□ς περ□ τ□ τοια□τα π□σιν □νθρώποις πάτριος □ξηγητ□ς □ν μέσ□ τ□ς γ□ς □π□ το□ □μφαλο□ καθήμενος □ξηγε□ται.[1]
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> ([Laws regarding] The founding of temples, and sacrifices, and other matters concerning gods, spirits, and heroes; procedures for the burying of the dead, and caring for the tombs of the departed in order to keep us in their grace. These are matters we human beings do not comprehend, and in establishing our city we ought to trust no other man, if we are wise, nor should we use any spiritual advisor other than the ancestral one. For the god, the ancestral advisor to all men on such things, expounds, sitting in the middle of the earth, at its navel.)

In the *Ab urbe condita*, there is a strong case to be made that Romulus embodies this role. Livy, after all, at least raises the opinion of some that Romulus did not die, but became a god. Moreover, he was already purported to have been the offspring of Mars. However, Rome required Numa Pompilius to institute a fixed set of religious practices, based upon both the legendary status that Romulus had achieved, and upon other traditions which he himself cultivated. Most significantly, Livy tells us that he pretended to meet the goddess Egeria at night, to receive from her advice about the establishment of religious rituals:

> …ne luxuriarent otio animi quos metus hostium disciplinaque militaris continuerat, omnium primum, rem ad multitudinem imperitam et illis saeculis rudem efficacissimam, deorum metum iniciendum ratus est. qui cum descendere ad animos sine aliquo commento miraculi non posset, simulat sibi cum dea Egeria congressus nocturnos esse; eius se monitu quae acceptissima dis essent sacra instituere, sacerdotes suos cuique deorum praeficere.[2]
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> (Lest minds, which fear of the foe and military discipline had formed, should luxuriate in leisure, he thought it fitting first of all to cultivate a fear of the gods, the most powerful remedy for that crowd, rude and ignorant as it then was. Since he would not be able to reach these minds without some fictitious miracle, he pretended that he had

[1] Plato, *Republic* 427a-c
[2] Livy *Ab urbe condita* I.19.4-5

> nightly meetings with the goddess Egeria; and that by her advice he instituted the rites most acceptable to the gods…)

A very productive comparison can be made between this and what is called in the *Republic* the "Noble Lie". In Book III, Socrates suggests to Glaucon a sort of foundational myth which could be used to make sure that their hypothetical city would always be ruled by the best people:

> Τίς □ν ο□ν □μ□ν, □ν δ' □γώ, μηχαν□ γένοιτο τ□ν ψευδ□ν τ□ν □ν δέοντι γιγνομένων, □ν δ□ ν□ν □λέγομεν, γεννα□όν τι □ν ψευδομένους πε□σαι μάλιστα μ□ν κα□ α□το□ς το□ς □ρχοντας, ε□ δ□ μή, τ□ν □λλην πόλιν;[3]
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> ('What plan, then,' I said, 'might we have for one of these useful lies of which we were just now speaking, so as by one noble lie to persuade if possible the rulers themselves, but if not, at least the rest of the city?")

This 'lie' consists in telling the auxiliary and working classes that they were in reality sprung from the earth, and are therefore compelled to defend their land as they would their mother. Further, the god who fashioned them in the earth mixed gold into those who were to be rulers, silver into the auxiliaries, and bronze into the workers. This distribution must be preserved as much as possible, which means that one may only reproduce with a member of one's own class.[4] Livy's description of Numa is strikingly similar to this in two ways. First, Livy seems to argue that Roman culture was founded upon an intrinsically religious basis; this was the means by which the rude and inexperienced multitude was first civilized. In this respect, we would do well to note what Miles has pointed out on several occasions, that both Romulus and Numa have the name *conditor* applied to them. This title is only granted to a select group of people in the *Ab urbe condita*.[5] With Romulus and Numa, it transparently refers to their creation of Rome's mythological/religious identity. Second, like Plato's Republic, Livy depicts Roman civilization

[3] Plato *Republic* 414b-c
[4] cf. Plato *Republic* 415 ff.
[5] Miles 1988 pp. 194-195

as being founded upon a lie, albeit a 'noble one.' This is foreshadowed in his preface, where he describes how Romans may be excused for claiming Mars as the parent of Romulus.[6]

In addition to being a founder of Roman culture, Numa Pompilius is also cast by Livy as being a 'philosopher king,' of the sort which Plato describes throughout the *Republic*. This is done in way which seems to indicate that Livy was consciously interested in cultivating a resemblance. The initial description of Numa begins with a comment upon his wisdom: he was, according to Livy, a "consultissimus vir" (as much as was possible for that age).[7] It is worth noting in passing that 'consultissimus' is a somewhat odd word choice here; it commonly has the connotation in Livy of being 'in tune' with a deity.[8] This immediately links Numa with the sage-rulers whom Plato's "philosopher king" surely evokes. To further strengthen the identification of Numa with philosophical wisdom, Livy raises the opinion of some that Numa had studied under Pythagoras. This, Livy admits, was plainly false, as Pythagoras (a) spoke a language which Numa could never have understood; (b) settled in the south of Italy, where Numa would not have been able to travel; (c) came to Italy a hundred years after the reign of Numa. These are good reasons, and in fact, too good. Why would Livy raise this opinion if it was so plainly false? The simplest answer is that he wanted to emphasize the Numa Pompilius' philosophical character. It should already seem at least plausible that this was to establish a connection with the *Republic*; further examples will provide even more support for such a correspondence.

In the last chapter that treats Numa's reign, I.21, Livy paints an idyllic portrait of the Roman state, which fits with the flourishing republic that Plato imagines would exist under a philosopher king. At Numa's death, he writes, Romans were as notable for their self-mastery as

[6] Livy, pr. 7
[7] Ibid. I.18.1
[8] cf. Livy I.20.7, 2.42.10, where *consulo* is the technical term for consulting (1) an oracle: "deumque consuluit auguriis, quae suscipienda essent" or (2) auguries: "nunc per aues consulti"

they were for their might ("cum valida tum temperata et belli et pacis artibus erat civitas). "Temperata" refers to the mastery that reason is to exercise over the appetites, according to the Platonic model of virtue. Moreover, rather than fear punishment, Romans acted well because they were attached to virtue: "ea pietate omnium pectora imbuerat ut fides ac ius iurandum †proximo† legum ac poenarum metu ciuitatem regerent" ("the sacredness of promises and the sanctity of oaths were a controlling force for the community scarcely less effective than the fear inspired by laws and penalties"). This virtue had even influenced those who once were Rome's enemies; Livy says that these came to revere the Roman community, and would have considered it a sacrilege (*nefas*) to violate it. Thus Livy clearly presents us with a picture of perfection; the fact that this perfection in the state occurs under a philosophical ruler provides a strong argument that he is following Platonic thought here.

Livy goes on to cast the subsequent kings of Rome as models of the four forms of government which Plato considered defective. The first of these, in that it represents the smallest departure from aristocracy, is a timocracy, i.e. a society where prowess at war and conquest is the primary basis for power. Insofar as it is the first corruption of aristocracy, it will maintain a hierarchy by honoring its ruler.[9] However, his aims will lead the state to war, and not to happiness: instead of wise counsel, plans and stratagems for war will be held in honor, and it will be the chief concern of the people.[10] The ruler of a timocracy, then, will naturally be the man who best excels at matters of warfare: "ο□κ □π□ το□ λέγειν □ξι□ν □ρχειν ο□δ' □π□ τοιούτου ο□δενός, □λλ' □π□ □ργων τ□ν τε πολεμικ□ν κα□ τ□ν περ□ τ□ πολεμικά" ("not from his ability to speak, nor from any such thing, but from his prowess at military exercises and

[9] Plato *Republic* 547d
[10] Ibid. 548a

at war").[11] It requires no subtle argumentation to view Tullus Hostilius as this sort of ruler. Livy characterizes him as "ferox," and as a war-monger: "senescere igitur ciuitatem otio ratus undique materiam excitandi belli quaerebat" ("having judged the state to have lapsed into senility, he sought by all possible means a basis for starting a war").[12] After he starts a war with the Albans, he has a conference with Mettius Fufetius, who locates precisely the cause of the war: "cupido imperii duos cognatos uicinosque populos ad arma stimulat" ("lust for rule drives our kindred and neighboring peoples to arms").[13] Later, Tullus' cruelty is emphasized in his execution of Mettius by quartering, a scene so brutal that Livy says it was never again used as a punishment in Rome.[14]

The military state that Rome had become reached its full flowering under Ancus Marcius. The way in which Livy portrays him as a sort of 'anti-Numa' is fascinating. Numa was concerned with cultivating religious practices, but these had been entirely directed towards the peaceful operation of the state. Ancus, according to Livy, was also of the belief that that nothing was more important than the establishment of religious practice; however, he fit this practice exclusively to war: "Ut tamen quoniam Numa in pace religiones instituisset, a se bellicae caerimoniae proderentur, nec gererentur solum sed etiam indicerentur bella aliquo ritu…"[15] (So that, as Numa had established religious institutions in peace, he might provide ceremonies of war, and thus wars might not simply be *fought*, but might also be *declared* by some ritual…). Ancus, according to Livy's portrayal, was actually a man who would have preferred peace, but realized that he ruled Rome at a stage where the tranquility that Numa enjoyed was simply not feasible. Livy writes, "temporaque (erant) Tullo regi aptiora quam Numae" (the times were

[11] Ibid. 549a
[12] Livy I.22
[13] Ibid. I.23
[14] Ibid. I.28
[15] Ibid. I.32.5

more suited for rule by a Tullus than a Numa."[16] The state, it seems, had itself become timocratic, and as such could no longer revert to any previous phase.

At this point we should consider something which may answer those who find the comparisons made in this discussion a bit forced. One might argue that the correspondences between Plato and Livy noted here are simply coincidences. Livy, after all, was recording historical events, and he could not be held responsible for the remarkable way in which Roman history mirrors Plato's conception of how governments deteriorate. To this, I respond that Livy tailored his narrative to emphasize how the kings fit the Platonic model. The best example of this is Tullus Hostilius, whom Livy depicts as a war-monger, as we have seen. However, this is not the only account we have of Tullus. R. Penella has written a paper where he observes that Dionysius of Halicarnassus as a more multifaceted king. Whereas Livy's Tullus is notable only for being *ferox*, Dionysius' Tullus "is shown as recognizing the importance of good counsel as well as of military might, and is said to have not entered war precipitately;" Penella goes on to say, "Dionysius' Tullus is less one sided than Livy's: he is shown as performing an act of domestic *philanthropia* and demanding religious expiation after Horatius was acquitted of the murder of his sister."[17] We thus have the possibility that Tullus was less *ferox* than Livy would have us believe. This selective characterization would indicate that Livy did in fact have a broader schematic purpose in his depiction of the kings. Given the similarities, it makes sense to think that this purpose had something to do with the model found in Plato's *Republic*.

Plato writes that a state deteriorates from a timocracy to an oligarchy when military successes enrich private citizens. These cultivate undue influence based solely on their wealth. This ultimately leads to a shift in the city's values: virtue of any sort is no longer prized, and

[16] Ibid. I.32.4
[17] Penella, p. 236; cf. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, 3.11.9, 35.1

instead wealth merits the highest honors. In the end, there is no qualification for the highest office other than one's ability to buy it. Book I of Livy's *Ab urbe condita* indicates that this became the situation in Rome around the last years of Ancus' reign, and that a man named Lucumo came from Tarquinii to take advantage of it. Livy emphasizes the fact that he was a foreigner, born in Corinth. Upon coming to Rome, however, he used his wealth in such a way as to gain the throne in spite of his birth. First he obtained a Roman name, Lucius Tarquinius Priscus. Next he gained favor with the citizens:

> Romanis conspicuum eum nouitas diuitiaeque faciebant; et ipse fortunam benigno adloquio, comitate inuitandi beneficiisque quos poterat sibi conciliando adiuuabat, donec in regiam quoque de eo fama perlata est.[18]
>
> (Among the Romans, his wealth and foreignness made him conspicuous, and he augmented his fortune with a kind word, with his liberal hospitality, with his winning by favors whomever he could, until his fame rose even to the royal household.)

Finally, he made himself indispensable to the king, which led to his being included in the king's will: "ut…tutor etiam liberis regis testamento institueretur" ("such that he was even written into the king's will, as guardian of the children).[19] It is not difficult to see an echo in this last line of Plato, who lists as one of the specific characteristic of the oligarchic man his readiness to act falsely with impunity--especially in assuming the guardianship of children (Ε□ς τ□ς τ□ν □ρφαν□ν □πιτροπεύσεις, κα□ ε□ πού τι α□το□ς τοιο□τον συμβαίνει, □στε πολλ□ς □ξουσίας λαβέσθαι το□ □δικε□ν).[20]

This all culminated in Tarquin being a viable possibility for the throne after Ancus died. He used his wealth to canvass votes, in much the same way that a modern politician would campaign. This behavior rightly gives us the sense that he was a 'wheedling' character, marked

[18] Livy I.34.11
[19] Livy I.34.12
[20] Plato *Republic* 554c

by "ambitio," as Livy puts it in I.35.6. Tarquin was selected to the throne overwhelmingly, and once there he cemented his power by expanding the senate to include new, lower-class members who constituted a branch of archaic *novi homines*, and who naturally were fiercely loyal to him.[21]

Everything about Tarquin's character in Livy aligns him with Plato's oligarchic man. However, perhaps most significant in this respect is the ease with which Rome slides from being oligarchic under Tarquin to being democratic under Servius Tullius. That Servius represents 'democratic man' can be seen by the way he ascends to the throne. Livy several times points out that he was reputed to be the son of a slave (although he does suggest this may not have been true).[22] His rise was due entirely to his popular appeal, and specifically, to everyone's amazement that his hair would spontaneously catch fire. The popular excitement reached Tarquin and Tanaquil, who immediately welcomed him to their household. The shrewd Tanaquil made a superstitious argument for doing this, but it is relatively clear that Livy wants us to see that this merely veiled the argument from political expediency. We are told, "non apud regem modo sed apud patres plebemque longe maximo honore Ser. Tullius erat" ("not only with the king, but among the senators and the people Servius Tullius was held in high esteem").[23] What was the cause of this esteem? We are given no indication of personal excellence; we are merely told that his hair miraculously caught fire. Surely Livy intends this as emblematic of the worst impulses of the masses.

When Lucius Tarquinius began to mount his assault against Servius, he based a substantial portion of his complaint on the latter's courting of public opinion. This is the area in which we see Servius most conform to the Platonic model. His greatest achievement, the census

[21] Livy I.35.6
[22] See Livy I.39
[23] Ibid. I.40.1

(for which reason he is one of the few whom Livy calls, as Miles notes, a *conditor urbis*), is blasted by the younger Tarquin as pandering to the masses: "[dixit Servium] instituisse censum ut insignis ad inuidiam locupletiorum fortuna esset et parata unde, ubi uellet, egentissimis largiretur" (He said that Servius had instituted the census in order that the wealth of the rich might be made plain to arouse envy, and so that it might be a ready source from which he might enrich the needy").[24] Tarquin was not far from the truth: Livy tells how Servius had courted popular favor by distributed land captured in war to private citizens, and only then submitted to have his rule ratified by popular vote.[25] Plato describes the situation perfectly: "ο□δ□ν φροντίζει □ξ □ποίων □ν τις □πιτηδευμάτων □π□ τ□ πολιτικ□ □□ν πράττ□, □λλ□ τιμ□ □□ν φ□ μόνον ε□νους ε□ναι τ□ πλήθει" ("[A democracy] cares nothing about what sort of practices a person coming into politics may have had, but it will reverence him if only he will say that he is well disposed to the crowd").[26]

There is little need to discuss at length the role Livy assigns to Tarquinius Superbus, as he is one history's archetypal tyrants. However, let us look at two areas of his narrative where the echoes of Plato's *Republic* are especially clear. First, as has been the case with tyrants throughout history, both Tarquinius Superbus and Plato's tyrant rule by fear. They conduct trials which function as purges, where they exercise sole authority. Plato writes, "□λλ' □δίκως □παιτιώμενος, ο□α δ□ φιλο□σιν, ε□ς δικαστήρια □γων μιαφον□,"[27] ("accusing people unjustly, as such are wont to do, dragging them off to the courts he stains himself with blood"). Later, we are shown that his victims are his personal enemies: whoever is wise, or rich, or brave, must be gotten rid of by the tyrant, until the 'body' of the state has had all of its good elements

[24] Ibid. I.47.12
[25] Livy I.46.1
[26] Plato *Republic* 558b
[27] Plato *Republic* 566a

purged. Livy makes a point of noting this behavior in Tarquinius Superbus. His reign is characterized from the start as being a bloody one. He executed the senators who supported Servius. He made himself judge and jury in capital cases, through which he was able to target not only his suspected enemies (of which there were presumably many) but also those whose money he coveted: "perque eam causam occidere, in exsilium agere, bonis multare poterat non suspectos modo aut inuisos sed unde nihil aliud quam praedam sperare posset"[28] (Through this office he was able to kill, to banish, to confiscate the property of not only suspected men or enemies, but also those from whom he could hope for nothing except money").

The second, and perhaps less significant similarity between Plato's and Livy's description of a tyrant involves the way each at some point links such a reign to a tragedy. Somewhat curiously, Plato singles out tragedians as the sycophants of tyrants. He cites a line from Euripides which reads "σοφο τύραννοί τ ν σοφ ν συνουσί " ("tyrants are wise by the company of the wise"), and also mentions how Euripides calls a tyrant's power 'like god's' (" σοθεόν").[29] In other words, they function like the propagandists of a tyrant. Feldherr has noted how in Livy, the reign of Tarquinius Superbus is framed by episodes explicitly described as dramas.[30] Specifically, the murder of Servius Tullius is called a "tragicum scelus," while the event which ultimately brings about the end of the monarchy, the rape of Lucretia, is introduced with the imagery and language of comedy, in that it results from a "iuvenalis ludus."[31] Feldherr essentially argues that at this point in Livy's history, the monarchy has become a tragedy in the purgative or cathartic sense, expelling the pollution of tyranny from Rome. While this seems reasonable, we may want to consider where Livy would have gotten such an idea. Given the

[28] Livy I.49.1-4
[29] Plato *Republic* 568b
[30] Feldherr p. 188
[31] Ibid. p.188; see Livy I.46.3 and I57.11 respectively.

numerous correspondences that we have looked at which suggest that book I contains a reading *Republic*, it is certainly possible that Livy based this extended metaphor on Plato.

To conclude, we ought note that the 'purgation' of the monarchy is also crucial in linking the Platonic succession of book I with the general theory of Roman history espoused by Livy throughout the *Ab urbe condita*. T.J. Luce was the first to perceive specific pattern in the work, and a great deal of work has subsequently been done by G. Miles to refine Luce's original findings.[32] Both authors have perceived the cyclic nature of Livy's history, with various stages of history individually evidencing a pattern of decline, while on the whole comprising a march toward some greater end. Thus, for instance, while the reign of Numa is certainly a good thing for Livy, the fact that Rome even had kings at that time made it basically inferior to later phases, e.g. Republican Rome. The Romans preferred Numa because they had not yet experienced liberty ("libertatis dulcedine nondum experta"[33]). In this sense, Livy viewed Roman history a series of concentric circles, each emanating from the last and more closely approximating the full realization of "Rome." In this light, the patterning after Plato that we observe in book I casts the progress of Roman history as more than simply the story of *a* republic, but *the* Republic. The dialectical process by which a society becomes just and free is *embodied* in Rome; it is her nature to manifest such a progression. Thus, the purgation accomplished by the tyrant-tragedians enables the advent of a new, better phase of the cycle. We have seen how a strong argument can be made for reading elements of Plato's *Republic into* book I of the *Ab urbe condita.* The degenerative process by which a city goes from aristocracy to tyranny in Plato provided Livy with a model perfectly suited to an individual phase of Roman history, while giving him the opportunity to incorporate the motifs of purgation and rebirth at the end.

[32] Cf. T.J. Luce, *Livy: the Composition of his History*. Princeton, 1977; G. Miles, "The Cycle of Roman History in Livy's First Pentad." in *The American Journal of Philology*, 107.1 (Spring 1986) pp. 1-33.
[33] Livy, I.17.3

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