PREFACE

Pierre Grimal
Institut de France

THERE IS USUALLY some ulterior motive behind any discussion of Rome's beginnings. It is quite probable that Louis de Beaufort, in writing his famous *Dissertation* (which will be considered at length in this book), was not sorry to bring the tradition of the imperial city—and by virtue of it, the pontifical city as well—back down to earth, to amputate it from the supernatural. Do bad intentions make for “good” history? Beaufort's intentions did not; rather, in virtually repeating what Livy had already said in his preface to *Ab urbe condita libri*, Beaufort destroyed the history we thought we knew. Livy was more subtle.

And Alexandre Grandazzi is infinitely more circumspect. When he had read everything that has been written on the origins of Rome, he looked at the object of that inquiry and saw it was possible to imagine the most diverse responses. Only one fixed point remains: the very existence of a city, established on the left bank of the Tiber, in a place that seems not to be a matter of indifference. But how was it chosen? Did it occur by chance? Or did a man of genius found it as Cicero claimed, a man that he, along with everyone else at the time, called Romulus? Or perhaps it was the result of the kind of fatality that historians liked to invoke in the past: conditions favorable for production and preservation, and for traffic in all sorts of resources, from the most commonplace to the most rare—salt from the sea as well as porphyry and marble. Discussion of the origins of Rome disrupts all our ways of conceiving of history and casts doubt on the very existence of the past that history claims to grasp. The subject matter exerts an irresistible fascination. Everything is or can be called into question, including what the ancients have told us, though such questioning entails a certain presumptuousness on the part of moderns. The people of the “Enlightenment,” harboring a secret desire to reduce the universe to something within reach of individual reason, wished to believe that anything outside their reach was lies. Thus they came to imagine that the Romans, beginning at the (inaccessible!) origin, had told one another fables, explanatory myths. Romulus was said to have a brother because the consulate was occupied by two men simultaneously. Quite an astonishing explanation, since one brother supposedly killed the other! Similarly, the fact that tradition asserted that Romulus's men had ravished the Sabines' daughters meant that, in ancient times, marriage began with violence.

And historians went on to cite customs practiced among various peoples, none of whom had had the slightest contact with the Romans.

The author of this book abandons nearly every aspect of the theories that have won credence until now. He can do so, first, because the very notion of origin, or, as he prefers to write, *primordia* (a term that does not exclude the idea of continuous development and does not imply creation *ex nihilo*), has been diluted. It is now easy to imagine that a religious and spiritual pre-Rome eventually took shape on the banks of the Tiber. And we no longer believe that a city has to be founded in a space devoid of human presence. To make his point, Grandazzi introduces the contributions of archeology. He knows them well, knows that in themselves they are not sufficient to provide the solutions to all problems but are merely one element in the great reconstruction desired. He knows there is a great distance, an abyss, between Livy's account—itself a synthesis of diverse and contradictory traditions—and the brute facts revealed by excavations. The bridge between the two fields, that linking the shard, the wall, or the traces of piles—driven into the soil three thousand years ago—to the texts that tell us the nature of the pomerium, is obviously precarious and perilous. It is always dangerous to infer one sort of reality based on another. Nonetheless, the risk must be assumed. As Grandazzi observes, history abhors a vacuum.

This study of the *primordia* of Rome begins with ruins: the ruins of theories, which appeared simultaneously or one after the other nearly two hundred years ago, designed to explain the presence of the city of Rome—in a place where it was solidly rooted—and the forces that assured its cohesion from the earliest times, its existence as a spiritual entity, a settlement, and already a nation. Beginning as early as the tenth century B.C.E., there existed many Romes “in germ” throughout the territory of Latium, villages and townships spread out between the sea and the Apennines and the hills. Only one held its ground. This book seeks to discover why, with so many throws of the dice, there was only one winner.

Through the problems raised by the nature of Rome's origin, Grandazzi provides a reflection on what historical method ought to be. He will not confuse in a single category of knowledge objects of different orders, will not totalize, by simply adding up texts and shards, well-attested facts—the existence of rituals and cults, legal concepts valid for a particular period—and generalizations that are grounded in modern and anachronistic presuppositions. It is quite certain that human beings have an irresistible tendency to reconstruct their own past endlessly, to color it in ever-changing hues. No object, no human memory, is immutable, nor is it acquired once and for all. History is a category of the mind; it is living and cannot be objective. History is by its very nature a creator of myths. That may be the most profound lesson of this book: from the very moment of birth, Rome in its beginnings has continued to be rethought. Hence hypercriticism is no longer destructive. On the contrary, it valorizes the very things it was designed to condemn, makes them into what they always were, moments in a history, which, in the end, exists only in human memory.

THE
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This was the order of human things: first the forests, after that the huts, thence the villages, next the cities, and finally the academies.

Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, 65.239