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LAKE REGILLUS: THE ROMAN REPUBLIC'S FIRST MAJOR BATTLE: 496 BCE

Valentine J. Belfiglio, PhD

Professor Emeritus, Texas Woman's University

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ABSTRACT

Thesis statement: As frequently happens during a revolution against a foreign power, Rome required a second conflict to assure sovereignty and independence. This happened in America during the War of 1812, In Russia during the war between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, and Rome during the Battle of Lake Regillus. Methodology: Historiography and conceptual analysis of the writings of ancient and modern historians. Results: Roman forces defeated The Etruscan monarchy near Rome in 509 BCE, and the Etruscan and the Latin League in 496 BCE. Conclusion: Rome assured its independence and sovereignty in 496 BCE.

Keywords: Dictatorship, Republic, Revolution, Oppression, Freedom

INTRODUCTION

The historian, Titus Livius (Livy) wrote that the original Roman ethnic group formed through the intermarriage between refugees of the Trojan War in 1178 BCE with the indigenous Latin tribe near Rome.ⁱ One of his descendants, Romulus, founded the city of Rome in 753 BCE.ⁱⁱ Romulus established the basic institutions of government during his reign. Examples are the Roman Senate, Curiate Assembly and 12 lictors. He also led Roman victories over several nearby tribes, fortified the city and established the Tiber River as the boundary between Etruria and Rome.ⁱⁱⁱ The sixth king, Servius Tullius, who ruled from 578-534 BCE, established several laws and customs which facilitated the subsequent

military might of Rome. The basic military unit of the army was the century of 100 men. Tullius arranged the heavy infantry as a phalanx. Light infantry covered the flanks of the phalanx. Two Consuls, elected to office by popular vote commanded the army. In emergencies a dictator, exercised complete authority over the state and armed forces for a period not to exceed six months.^{iv}

The last king of Rome was an Etruscan, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, who ruled from 534-509 BCE. Superbus achieved power by violence, after the assassination of Servius Tullius. He ruled as a tyrant and was cruel and capricious. He assumed the right to try capital cases without consulting the Roman Senate. Romans feared Superbus intended to reduce the authority of the Roman Senate and Curiate assembly. Much of the plebs objected to forced conscription in building sewers, roads, city defenses and temples. Livy wrote that Superbus “always kept himself protected by armed men, for he had taken the throne by force-neither the people nor senate had consented to his usurpation. He accepted that there was no hope of his being accepted into the hearts of his subjects, so he ruled by fear.”^v Meanwhile, the Consuls gained popular legitimacy to rule, while the legitimacy of the king waned. The rape, and subsequent suicide, of a noble woman, Lucretia, by Sextus, the son of Superbus, while her husband, Lucius was away in battle, catalyzed a Roman revolution against Etruria, led by Lucius Junius Brutus and Publius Valerius Publicola. Success led to the creation of a (Res Publica) Roman Republic in 509 BCE.^{vi} Two magistrates, named consuls (Praetor Maximi), were chief executives of the state. They commanded the army, conducted elections, presided over the Senate, and carried out Senatorial decrees.

Lucius Junius Brutus and Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus became the first Consuls of the Republic.^{vii} Tacitus wrote: “Brutus created the consulate and free Republican institutions.”^{viii} The new Republic faced threats from its neighbors. Superbus wanted to subdue Roman independence and return Rome to Etruscan control. Warrior tribes, such as the Volsci, Aequi, Sabine, Samnites, and others desired to invade Roman territory, and seize its valuable resources. To the north fierce Gallic tribes posed a danger to the survival of the Republic. During the early republic, the Romans developed virtues and ideals. Three ideals had serious meaning: *virtus*, (strength), *gravitas* (seriousness), and *pietas* (sense of duty). The ideal of a Republic caused the Romans to displace tribal loyalty with patriotic loyalty to Rome and its territories (Romanita). The Romans developed discipline and stubbornness as part of their culture because of the fears and insecurities they faced. They would allow no threat to their autonomy and independence to go unchecked. Failure in war was not acceptable, no matter the cost. Religious and secular symbols enhanced this fierce loyalty. One symbol was the Goddess Roma, a female deity who personified the city of Rome, and, more broadly, the Roman state. Another symbol was The Eagle. The Eagle was the bird of the chief divinity of the Roman pantheon, Jupiter. It represented courage, strength, and immortality, and the Romans adopted the Eagle Standard as the heroic nobility of the legionnaires^{ix} To lose this standard in battle was a momentous dishonor.

In 503 BCE two Latin colonies, Pometia and Cora, defected from Rome to join the Aurunci, an Italic tribe that lived in southern Italy. In reprisal, the Romans invaded Auruncan territory. The next year the two consuls, Opiter Verginius and Spurius Cassius, led an army to attack Pometia. Livy wrote: “Its

leaders were beheaded, surviving colonists sold into slavery, the city demolished, its territory sold.”^x Roman leaders feared these acts could cause a general uprising of the Latin tribes. They named Titus Larcus as Dictator for six months, and Spurius Cassius as his master of the horse (Cavalry Commander).^{xi}

THE BATTLE OF LAKE REGILLUS

Between 502 and 496 BCE, Rome dealt with several political and economic problems, while Latin tribes (Latin League) built a united army to confront them. The seething hostility between the Romans and Latins led to the Battle Near Lake Regillus in central Italy. The Latin League amassed 40,000 warriors, and 3,000 cavalries, under the command of Octavius Mamilius of Tusculum. Tarquinius Superbus, and his son, Sextus, joined the League in battle. The Romans, under the command of Dictator Aulus Postumius, had 23,700 men, with 1,000 cavalries^{xii} under Titus Aebutius as master of the horse.¹ Typical weapons used during the battle were: the trusting spear, sword, round shield, helmet, and armor.^{xiii} The consuls, Servius Sulpicius and Manius Tullius also fought in the battle. The leaders did not stay behind the lines as strategists but entered the fray in person. Florus wrote: “The Romans fought “in defense of their frontier.”^{xiv}

To neutralize the larger Latin cavalry, the Romans occupied three hills; Posthumius occupied one, Aebutius the second, and Legate Titus Verginius the third. Posthumius learned from a captured courier that the Volscians were sending a large army to aid the Latins, and that this force would arrive in two days. Posthumius knew he must engage the Latins at once.

Both sides lined up in phalanx formations with cavalry on their wings and in the center. Posthumius gave a rallying speech to his men before battle. He promised them the Gods were on their side, that they had confidence in one another, that the struggle was in their highest interests, and the enemy was not formidable.^{xv} The legionnaires responded with a cry: “Be of good courage and lead us on.”^{xvi} Trumpets’ sounded, and the light-armored men and cavalry engaged. Arrows and slings flew in both directions and struck the enemy. Then the solid ranks of the phalanxes collided. A severe battle ensued in which men fought hand to hand. An initial onslaught forced the Latin lines to give ground. Then, Latin leaders sent a company of Roman exiles to reinforce their front and used their cavalry to attack the Roman phalanx. This ploy pushed the Roman phalanx back. Posthumius ordered his cavalry to dismount and join the battle on foot.^{xvii}

During the engagement, several individual duels took place. Superbus attacked Posthumius on horseback, but a missile pierced his side, and his men rushed to his aid and dragged him to safety. Aebutius galloped at Octavius Mamilius, the Latin general, and the clash was horrific. The two men, lances lowered, bore down on each other. Mamilius’ lance pierced Aebutius’ arm but was himself struck in the chest. Marcus Valerius spurred his horse to attack Sextus Tarquinius with his lance, but some

¹ There may have been additional cavalry raised from the Celtic regions. Karen R. Dixon & Pat Southern. 1992. *The Roman Cavalry*: London: B.T. Batsford: 20.

Latin blind-sided him with a spear, and Valerius tumbled to the ground and died. Mamilius confronted Centurion Titus Herminius and both men died.^{xviii}

Meanwhile, the brutal battle continued. Posthumius made a tactical maneuver which changed the momentum of the struggle. Trumpets blared and standards ordered a change in formation. Part of the Romans formed a wedge against the troops of Suoerbus' men, while other legionnaires formed several smaller units to make their attacks more mobile and maneuverable. Without warning, Postumius seized a standard and hurled it into the midst of the enemy ranks. This trick spurred the Roman soldiers to frenzy. The fighting was bloody and brutal, and the ground was slick with blood, and body parts from dying men and horses. The land of the battlefield was uneven and gave the Romans an opportunity to exploit gaps in the Latin Phalanx. The Romans took advantage of this to plunge their swords into their enemies with deadly force. The clang of clashing arms, neighing of horses, and cries and groans of men combined into a frightening crescendo. Finally, the Latin lines broke and the Latins fled, pursued, and cut down by the Roman cavalry. Only 10,000 Latins escaped the carnage. There are no figures for the Roman losses, but Nathan Rosenstein provides a careful study of mortality rates in the Roman Republican Army. He found that victories saw mortality rates of around 4.2% for participants.^{xix} This would give the Roman mortality of 1,053 legionnaires. Sextus and Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, and Mamilius died in the conflict. With their leaders dead, the Latins fled, abandoned their camp, and the Romans seized valuable plunder. The Roman Dictator and Master of the Horse returned in triumph to Rome. For three years there was neither an assured peace nor open war between the Romans and Latins.^{xx}

CONCLUSION

The Roman people had lived under a tyrannical regime, and after independence, they faced severe threats from hostile tribes in their vicinity and beyond. In response they developed virtues, discipline, and a fierce stubbornness in war. The Roman ideal was a serious, steadfast, purposeful man who subordinated himself to public responsibility. The discipline and stubbornness demonstrated at Lake Regillus would serve Romans well in future wars Rome assured its independence and sovereignty in 496 BCE.

Keywords:

Stubbornness stemmed from fear and insecurity, a belief that the Gods favored them, and faith in Roman exceptionalism, based on a new form of government, not otherwise known in the ancient world.

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