Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* is without a doubt the most comprehensive historical account of early Rome. Livy covered the history of the Roman Republic from its mythological foundation through the early Empire. The work was monumental in scope, occupying Livy throughout most of his adult life. In its totality, it consisted of 142 *libri* of which some thirty-five survive intact. From the moment of its publication, the work was in high demand throughout the Roman Empire. By Late Antiquity, however, the very length of the text meant that most students worked from summaries and during the early Middle Ages manuscripts began to be lost, often without replacement. The text was too lengthy (and thus too expensive) to copy and store in its entirety. For this reason, most of the text does not survive. But, by the late Middle Ages a rejuvenated interest in classical culture meant an increased interest in Livy and his *History*. Hence, a large number of extant manuscripts date to fifteenth century Italy. The above manuscript dates from this period. The work was highly valued but for new purposes and in an entirely different cultural context: the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were very different from Livy's own time and they approached the text in ways very different from the first century audience.

In Livy's own time, he was highly successful. Yet even in classical antiquity, the volume of this work meant that it did not receive the same critical attention as, for instance, Virgil had. Nor was Livy typically part of the traditional corpus of study used in the system of Roman education. Nevertheless, Livy's popularity is above question. The question arises, then, if Livy was not used in those capacities, how was it that it achieved such popularity? It is important to note that Livy was roughly contemporary

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1 Syme, 27.
2 Marou, 278.
with a variety of great authors who lived during the reign, and generally under the patronage of Augustus Caesar (r. 31 B.C. – 14 A.D.). As such, his works were, in some sense, popular literature and Livy was something of a celebrity in his own time, but as an historian, he never managed to gain the same prestige as some of his predecessors, especially Sallust.

*Ab Urbe Condita* clearly reflects the zeitgeist of the so-called “Augustan” period. During the reign of the Emperor Augustus, writers like Horace and Virgil, under state sponsorship, wrote poetry that reflected the traditional Roman values that Augustus was trying to manifest. While Virgil used epic to locate Rome in the mythology of the Greek world with his *Aeneid*, Livy used his history to re-construe the Roman past in light of Augustus’ message of traditional values and Roman cultural supremacy. This message is present throughout Livy's text, including in the passage related in the above manuscript. This is plainly evident in Livy's description of the Punic and Pyrrhic wars which were waged between 280-146 B.C. Livy appropriated these events as part of the Augustan agenda. Livy explains:

“How great the weight of these events! How often to come into extreme danger so that the greatness of the empire might be raised to the level where it might hardly be maintained.”

Livy's view is anachronistic in two ways. Firstly, while these conflicts certainly led to a sudden expansion of the Republic outside of Italy, it was in no way so great that the empire “might hardly be maintained.” Instead, that point was reached during the reign of Augustus, the period when Livy was writing, which marked the largest sustainable extent of the Roman Empire. In this way, Livy imposes a first century worldview, that the empire had reached this magnificent territorial extent on to the situation of the 3rd century. Even if Livy should not be understood as referring to territorial gains, the notion of Roman imperial glory was also a fixture of Augustus’ reign. The struggles of the third century B.C. posed severe crises for the Roman state during the wars with both Pyrrhus and Carthage. Livy notes that the empire came into “extreme danger” but sees this as giving way to a renewed glory. Instead, these wars proved highly traumatic to the Roman elite who suffered large numbers of
casualties in the fighting. Indeed, these wars were so distressing that the great senator Cato the Elder finished all his speeches with an entreaty that “Carthage must be destroyed” even decades after the end of the Second Punic War effectively removed Carthage as a threat to Roman hegemony in the Western Mediterranean. This romanticized view of these conflicts, then, is a second form of Augustan anachronism imposed by Livy's history for the benefit of a first century audience. In this way, Livy represents the historical analogue of Virgil insofar as he used the historical genre to reaffirm Rome's empire in the context of the distant past, thus advancing Augustus' cultural message. The fact that Livy's material was presented in a way so integrated into the ideology of the Augustan era explains why his material was so wildly popular during the early Principate.

At the same time the extent to which Ab Urbe Condita reflects a first century worldview also accounts for the book being largely lost during the later years of the empire and during the early Middle Ages. Livy's material made sense in a Roman society that saw itself as reflecting the perfected traditions of Republican Rome. As those social and governmental paradigms shifted during and after the third century, the work declined in popularity. The Roman government during the late third, fourth, and fifth centuries is known as the Dominate because, during this period, the structure of the government drifted farther from the old Roman institutions and towards a more involved, militaristic governmental structure. The old Roman, pagan, virtues advanced by Augustus largely gave way to those of the Christian religion and the mystery cults that increased in popularity during this period. This society did not abandon the old classics, entirely. Virgil, for instance, weathered the storm. But Livy's text was much longer and was no longer important in terms of the construction of a Roman identity.

It would not be until the Renaissance that Livy again became the subject of significant attention. Beginning in the fourteenth century, Italian scholars, artists, and politicians consciously looked to the Roman past to provide answers to the social and political problems that plagued the Italian cities. This gave rise to that resurgence of classical culture and literature known as the Renaissance. An increasingly wealthy class of merchants, bankers, and other burgeoning bourgeoisie had been chaffing
under the yoke of the feudal lords for generations. Drawing on the traditions of the thirteenth century Italian communes, this new class looked away from the institutions of the feudal magnates and struck upon the republican ideals of ancient Rome as a governmental and social model they could take up in opposition to the feudal narrative of the high aristocracy.

The above manuscript dates to the latter half of the fifteenth century. The date can be ascertained primarily from the style of the hand. This manuscript uses a variant of Carolingian minuscule semi-cursive that became popular in Italy during the Renaissance. Italian scholars went back through many of the archives and were impressed by the beauty and elegance of the Carolingian hand used in eight and ninth century manuscripts. Presuming that this hand was the original hand of the Romans, they opted to use a variant of this script instead of the gothic script that had been predominant during the high Middle Ages. For this reason, Carolingian minuscule of the type seen above came back into vogue during the later Middle Ages.

The late fifteenth century was also a high point for Livy in particular. Statistical analysis of printed editions shows that Livy was among the most popular of the classical historians studied by early Renaissance thinkers but that he declined in popularity over the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In particular, two outstanding Renaissance figures are associated with the study and analysis of Livy during the Renaissance. Firstly, Francesco Petrarcha (1304-1374), a fourteenth century Renaissance figure, though famous today for his sonnets, was known to his contemporaries as a great scholar of Livy. Although his name is not often associate with the study of ancient history, Petrarch is known to have produced two outstanding manuscripts of Ab Urbe Condita which he personally annotated and were highly valued by scholars of Livy in the generation after his death. Secondly, Niccolò Machiavelli, famous for his treatise on principalities, wrote a treatise on Livy in which he uses the material as a tool to analyze the politics of republican government. Machiavelli

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3 Janson, 276.
4 Burke, 137.
5 Billanovich, 138.
explains his purpose as well as anyone might in the preface to this text:

“Whence it happens that by far the greater number of those who read History, take pleasure in following the variety of incidents which it presents, without a thought to imitate them; judging such imitation to be not only difficult but impossible; as though the heavens, the sun, the elements, and man himself were no longer the same as they formerly were as regards motion, order, and power.

Desiring to rescue men from this error, I have thought fit to note down with respect to all those books of Titus Livius which have escaped the malignity of Time, whatever seems to me essential to a right understanding of ancient and modern affairs; so that any who shall read these remarks of mine, may reap from them that profit for the sake of which a knowledge of history is to be sought”.

This passage reflects the sociopolitical situation in early Renaissance Italy. The city states of Northern Italy were emerging as truly sovereign republics. Machiavelli is an inscrutable figure: though best known for his masterpiece of realpolitik, *The Prince*, he was likely a staunch advocate of republican government. Like many men of his time, he looked to the Roman Republic as a source of knowledge and experience on Republican government and culture. It is this usage of Livy that is most common during the Renaissance. The Italians found in Livy a wealth of information on the republican institutions that formed the basis for their Renaissance states and their preoccupation with classical culture.

Though much did not survive, the works of Titus Livy have been used and reused for two thousand years. Written during and reflecting the values of the reign of Augustus, this work, wildly popular in its own time, constitutes a key component of what has been termed the “Golden Age” of Latin literature. While much of the text did not survive the sands of time, renewed interest in the classical past during the fourteenth and fifteenth century sparked a flurry of attention. Here, Livy was used to polish a new republican culture, a culture that consciously imitated the Roman Republic, and looked on Livy as an important source of material and knowledge.

6 Thomson, 10, 11.
Bibliography


