

## LECTIO V: FRANCISCI PETRARCAE DE VIRIS ILLVSTTRIBVS

(fourteenth century, ca. 1342–1374)

NB: I have translated and adapted some of the following from *Francesco Petrarca. De viris illustribus*, a cura di Silvano Ferrone (Firenze, 2003).

PETRARCH'S collection of historical biographies, *De viris illustribus*, belongs to a genre with a long, illustrious lineage stretching from Jerome's fourth-century *De viris illustribus* to Giovanni Colonna and Guglielmo Pastrengo's fourteenth-century works of the same title. Work seems to have begun on the collection in 1338 at Vacluse, starting with the *Vita Scipionis*, the twenty-second of the initial twenty-three Roman lives. Perhaps the initial work on Scipio was the historical background for Petrarch's poetic treatment of the same subject in his unfinished Latin epic, *Africa*, begun around the same time. Petrarch likely continued work on the text at Selvapiana in the early 1340s, when the life of Scipio was supplemented by other Roman lives. This accords with the (roughly contemporaneous) comment in Petrarch's *Meum secretum* that he was working at a book of histories from Romulus through Titus (*librum historiarum a rege Romulo in Titum Caesarem*) and Petrarch's own marginal note (in a manuscript of Seutonius) that refers to his *liber de uiris illustribus populi romani*. A second version of the text, expanded to include 'illustrious men from all lands and centuries' (*Familiares* 8.3), was completed during Petrarch's final residence at Vacluse in 1351–1353. In addition to the twenty-three original lives, this version includes twelve *vitae* of biblical and mythological figures: Adam, Noah, Nimrod, Ninus, Semiramis (Queen of Assyria), Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Jason, and Hercules (this last remains incomplete). Later still – probably in the 1360s – Petrarch added a twenty-fourth Roman life, the long *Vita Caesaris* (some 70,000 words). In the early 1370s, during Petrarch's final years at Padua, he was invited by Francesco da Carrara, Lord of Padua, to take up the work once again and produce a new version to be depicted in the *Sala Virorum Illustrium* (the frescoes by Altichiero da Zevio were destroyed by fire in the late fifteenth century and repainted with a new theme; only a portion of the portrait of Petrarch still survives). This final version of the work, bearing the title *Quorundam illustrium uirorum et clarissimorum heroum epithoma*, was to include a further twelve Roman lives (through Trajan) for a total of thirty-six. Petrarch left it and a projected abridgment of the same (known as the *Compendium*) unfinished. Lombardo della Seta, his secretary, completed both after Petrarch's death.

Petrarch's primary sources were Lucan and Livy, though he drew freely from other Roman historians as he saw fit: *quedam enim que apud unum desunt ab altero mutuatus sum, quedam brevius, quedam clarius, quedam que breuitas obscura faciebat expressius dixi, quedam que apud alios carptim dicta erant coniunxi et ex diversorum dictis unum feci*. His account of Romulus, our reading, is based primarily on Livy's *Ab urbe condita libri*. Because Petrarch often compresses his source, sometimes to the point of obscurity, I summarize here Livy's treatment of Romulus (and Remus):

Rhea Silva, daughter of Numitor (the king of Alba Longa, who had recently been deposed by his brother, Amulius), claimed to have been raped by Mars, and she bore Romulus and Remus. Amulius wanted the rightful king, Numitor, to have no blood line, so the boys were ordered to be thrown, in a cradle, into the Tiber; the river, however, was flooded, and the standing water did not pull the boys into the main channel. After the boys were exposed by the retreating water, a she-wolf, attracted by their cries, nourished them as her own. The king's shepherd, Faustulus, subsequently found them and adopted them. The boys were raised for

pastoral duties, but they were outstanding in strength and courage. They roamed widely, plundering brigands and distributing their booty amongst their fellow shepherds.

One group of brigands fought back successfully. Romulus escaped, but Remus was taken prisoner and handed over to Numitor on the charge of invading Numitor's lands. Faustulus had suspected that his adopted sons were the exposed royal offspring, and Numitor confirmed the suspicion. Numitor immediately supported Romulus and Remus in a surprise attack on the king. The attack succeeded, Amulius was killed, the government of Alba was restored to Numitor, and Romulus and Remus founded a new city in the region. Both were ambitious and began to quarrel over its name and right of rule. Augury was to decide, but they quarreled over the interpretation of the received omens. Remus contemptuously jumped Romulus's new walls, and so Romulus killed him. The city was thus called Rome, and Romulus became its sole ruler. Romulus established a body of laws and extended the city walls, he increased the city's population by establishing an asylum, and as the city grew he strengthened its government by the establishment of a senate with one-hundred senators.

Because the Roman state had few women, it threatened to last only a single generation. The neighboring cities refused intermarriage, and thus Romulus, as a ruse, established games in honor of Neptune. The games were well attended by citizens of three neighboring towns (Caenina, Antemnae, and Crustumerium) as well as by the Sabines. When all were distracted by the spectacle, the Roman youth carried off the maidens in a surprise ambush. The abducted maidens were indignant, but Romulus was persuasive, and they all happily married Romans.

The three cities retaliated but not successfully, for they acted with passion not strategy. The Sabine retaliation, however, was carefully considered. Titus Tatius, leader of the Sabines, bribed Tarpeia, the daughter of Spurius Tarpeius, commander of the Roman citadel, to allow them in. She was subsequently killed in the stampede. (Of the various interpretations of Tarpeia's death, none is flattering.) In the ensuing battle between Sabines and Romans, Mettius Curtius, for the Sabines, and Hostius Hostilius, for the Romans, engaged in single combat. Hostius was defeated, and Rome appeared lost. Romulus invoked Jupiter the Supporter (*Iuppiter Stator*), promising a memorial in exchange for a victory. The Romans rallied behind Romulus and seemed to gain the upper hand. But the Sabine women intervened and begged peace. A treaty was struck and Romans and Sabines were united, with Rome the seat of power.

There were further conflicts with Etruscan cities, first with Fidenae, which was uncomfortable with the size of its new rival. Romulus defeated the Fidenians with a clever battle strategy. A second conflict broke out with Veii, another a close neighbor, and the Veientes were overcome by the brute force of the Roman troops. Such was the history of Rome's military campaigns under Romulus. One day, as he reviewed his troops on the Campus Martius, a storm broke and Romulus was enveloped in a thick cloud. He was never seen again. Julius Proculus, a man honored for wise counsel, addressed the senate upon Romulus's disappearance and reported his last words: tell Rome that it is heaven's will that she be the greatest city; may its soldiers be strong; may it teach its children that no power can overcome her.