History as a Moral Example

In his history, Ab Urbe Condita, Livy regards Rome as the finest civilization to ever grace the earth. Compared to Rome there is no “commonwealth greater in power, with a purer morality, or more fertile in good examples” (Livy Preface). However, “avarice and luxury” as well as “poverty and frugality” eventually become “highly and continuously honored” in place of Rome’s former virtues. Thus, as his mission, Livy endeavors to use his history to remind his fellow citizens of the greatness and morality of Rome’s past which has so recently been neglected. The dominant concern of Livy’s first book is to praise values such as virtus and pietas that the figures of Rome’s beginning possessed in order to contrast them with the fledgling moral standards of his modern Rome and to provide a moral example for her citizens to follow.

Livy portrays his concern for the deteriorating state of Rome first in the preface of his Ab Urbe Condita. He urges the reader not to “hurry on to these modern days in which the might of a long paramount nation is wasting by internal decay” (Livy Preface). Instead, he requests that his reader to first observe Rome’s beginnings and use his history as a tool with which to “follow the decay of national character, observing how at first it slowly sinks… until he reaches these days” (Livy Preface). He asks his reader to pay special attention to the “life and morals of the community” and “the men and qualities by which… dominion was won and extended” (Livy Preface). Through this special attention, his reader may discern “what to imitate” (Livy Preface). Therefore, in the preface, Livy makes explicitly clear that his history is meant to provide a moral example
for the citizens of his modern day. After stating his concern and his mission, he delves into the qualities of the city’s founder as his premier example.

Livy does briefly recount the deeds of Aeneas and his son Ascanius, but the most dominant moral example that he portrays in his first book is his depiction of Romulus, Rome’s founder. He begins his portrayal by describing Romulus in his youth as one who, along with his brother, “did not neglect their pastoral duties” and as one who possessed “strength and courage” (Livy 1.1). The pastoral reference is particularly apt because the virtuous ideal was initially based upon the virtues of a successful farmer because Rome was originally an agricultural society. The most exemplified attribute of Romulus, however, is his pietas. This virtue is essential because of the centrality and prevalence of religion in everyday Roman life. Before assuming power, Romulus “decided to consult the tutelary deities of the place by means of augury” to determine who should rule (Livy 1.6). This piety and need for divine sanction would be practiced by his progeny for generations to come. He is also responsible for the building of the first temple in Rome which he intended “posterity following (his) example” to witness in the future (Livy 1.10). Romulus also gave Rome a “body of laws” over which he would use his auctoritas and imperium, symbolized by twelve lictors at his side, to oversee and enforce (Livy 1.8). He was thus a source of civilization and piety for Rome at her beginning, but his greatness also extended to his might. Romulus, by means of his virtus, or manly virtue, militarily led Rome until it became “so strong that it was a match for any of its neighbors in war” (Livy 1.9). Overall, Romulus’s “courage,” “wisdom,” “strength through war and peace alike,” and his pietas elevate him to immortality. A figure of this status and integrity is thus the perfect moral example for Livy’s purpose.
Livy also uses lesser known figures as moral examples, however. During his account of the war with the Sabines, Livy describes how Hostius Hostilius bravely “engaged in single combat” despite “fighting on disadvantageous ground” (Livy 1.12). Hostius “upheld the fortunes of Rome,” and he sacrificed his life for her glory when “at last he fell” (Livy 1.12). He is the perfect example of *virtus* for generations of Romans to follow. His example is particularly useful because of his more ordinary and lesser known status. As a common soldier rather than a famous founder who has essentially been deified, his example is more relatable and attainable for the Roman who Livy is trying to influence with his moral examples.

Livy portrays Romulus and lesser figures like Hostius Hostilius in such a manner as to convey that former Rome was filled with figures that possessed traits such as *virtus* and *pietas* that have been neglected in his modern Rome. Through his account therefore, he hopes not only to attest to the magnificence of Rome’s history but also to provide moral examples for his fellow Romans to emulate. In this way, Livy offered hope that Rome’s future generations would restore her to her former glory and virtue.