Romulus and the Sabine Kings in Tacitus' *Annales*

The first sentence of Tacitus' *Annales*, "kings controlled the city of Rome from the beginning" (*Ann.* 1.1.1: *urbem Romae a principio reges habuere*), has been taken by some as programmatic: the Julio-Claudian dynasty founded by Augustus should be read as a recapitulation of the Roman monarchy founded by Romulus in 753 BCE. These scholars, however, have ventured little beyond this point of departure to explore how Tacitus associates the Julio-Claudian *principes* with the original *reges* throughout the work. I will argue in this paper that the first sentence implies more than a return to monarchical government. Rather, the Roman kings, especially Romulus, occur frequently throughout the *Annales* as exemplary frames of reference and an heuristic device with which to evaluate Augustus' imperial successors. I will show that Tacitus consistently associates Augustus with Romulus as the standard metric of a Roman monarch, a standard which Augustus' successors, each in their own way, fail to meet. Furthermore, Tacitus illustrates the disparity between the Romulean Augustus and his Claudian successors by consistently emphasizing the latter group's Sabine origins and associating them with Sabine kings such as Titus Tatius and Numa Pompilius.

Associations between Augustus and Romulus, made by Augustus and several other ancient historians and poets are well documented in scholarship, but those made by Tacitus remain largely unexamined. I will elucidate both the explicit and allusive ways that Augustus and Romulus function as parallel *exempla* to be contrasted with later emperors. First of all, intertexts with Livy, Vergil, and Ovid construct the accession of Tiberius as that of Numa after Romulus. Parallels between Augustus' abduction of Livia from her former husband and Romulus' rape of the Sabines introduce the Claudians as Sabine foils to the Romulean Augustus. Tiberius rejects divine honors where Romulus and Augustus had both aspired to godhood.

Tacitus revises his own account (*Hist.* 2.95.2) of the *sodales Augustales* as analogous to the *sodales Titii*, not as a priesthood created by Romulus, but by Tatius "to preserve the rites of the Sabines" (*Ann.* 1.54.1). Tiberius' successor Claudius (after the missing books on Caligula) meddles with traditions and offices inaugurated by the kings and resurrected by Augustus. His holding of the *Ludi Saeculares* is a botched attempt at a Romulean refounding, while Tacitus rewrites Claudius' speech on the extension of the senatorial franchise to emphasize his Sabine ancestors as precedents for innovation. Nero, finally, is presented as a false Romulus. His murder of Claudius' son Britannicus echoes that of Remus by Romulus. Moreover, Nero's attempt to refound Rome instead destroys it and erases the monuments of its origins, and is styled as a foreign, Hellenistic conqueror rather than a proper Roman ruler.

As the many examples above show, Tacitus uses the regal period as a frequent and systematic frame of reference, so that the reigns of the Julio-Claudian emperors may be compared and contrasted with the original models of Roman monarchs. Tacitus takes advantage of the familiar identification of Augustus with Romulus to evaluate the imperial successors, often with various regal successors as additional *exempla*. In employing such comparisons Tacitus had contemporary concerns at heart. Like Nerva, Trajan, and Hadrian, the original kings succeeded one another meritocratically, and a monarchy of six good kings collapsed only after the seventh, Tarquinius Superbus, asserted hereditary succession. Tacitus alludes to the original monarchy, that of proper Roman autocrats beginning with Romulus as the exemplary Roman, to demonstrate that the dynastic principle of the Julio-Claudian principate was at the root of its flaws and failures. From examining such a rhetorical and historiographical device we may appreciate Tacitus' contribution to the practice of previous and subsequent Latin historiography of using the kings as comparative *exempla* for Roman emperors.