The Roman Salute

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1. Livy’s Account of the Horatii and Curiatii

The Roman historian Livy (59 B.C.–17? A.D.) gives the following account of the two sets of brothers and the aftermath of their championship fight. About the middle of the seventh century B.C., hostilities between the cities of Rome and Alba Longa had reached a crisis. At that time Tullus Hostilius was king of Rome; Mettius Fufetius was the last ruler (or king) of Alba. By the third century B.C. the episode of the Horatii and Curiatii had taken a prominent place in the mythic-heroic tradition about early Rome. Livy describes in detail the ceremony accompanying the treaty between the Romans and the Albans, the oldest instance of a formal treaty on record. The oath sworn by both sides as part of this treaty is the only one to appear in the entire story.

My translation of Livy’s text (From the Foundation of the City 1.24–26) is indebted for some turns of phrase to R. M. Ogilvie, A Commentary on Livy: Books 1–5 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965; rpt. with addenda, 1970), 109–17, and to Livy: Book I, ed. H. E. Gould and J. L. Whiteley (1952; rpt. London: Bristol Classical Press, 1987 and later), 145–53. Ogilvie, 114–15, describes the legal background to Horatius’ trial for high treason (penhuellio), which contained a provision not for acquittal but instead for an appeal to the people (provocatio), and his sister’s guilt of proditio (“treachery,” for mourning an enemy). Fetial priests presided over peace ceremonies or declarations of war. The lictors (lit., “binders”), who attended Roman magistrates, carried out their sentences; the fasces were their insignia of office and indicated their power to inflict corporal (rods) and capital (axe) punishment. On the etymology of the term sororium tigillum (“Sister’s Beam”) in connection with an archaic rite of passage see Ogilvie, 117.

By chance there were at that time in the two armies two sets of three brothers, quite equal in age and strength. That they were the Horatii and
Curiatii is clear enough, and scarcely any other ancient tradition has been known better. But even in such a famous matter there remains a doubt about the names: to which people the Horatii, to which the Curiatii belonged. Sources tend to either view, although I find more who call the Roman brothers the Horatii, and I am inclined to follow them. To each set of brothers the kings proposed that they should take up the sword on behalf of their country and that supreme rule should go to the victorious side. There was no objection, and a time and place were agreed upon. Before the fight a treaty was struck between the Romans and the Albans on these terms, that whichever country’s citizens should win this battle, that people should rule over the other in peace and quiet. Different treaties are concluded on different terms, but in their formalities they are always the same. So we understand it to have been on that occasion, too, with the oldest treaty on record. The Fetial priest asked King Tullus as follows: “Do you command me, king, to enter into a treaty with the representative of the Alban people?” The king so commanded. The priest said: “I ask you, king, for the sacred herbiage.” The king replied: “Pluck fresh, untainted grass.” The Fetial priest brought a fresh plant from the citadel and then asked the king: “Do you, king, appoint me royal ambassador of the sovereign Roman people, with my sacred implements and companions?” The king answered: “I do, without harm to myself or the sovereign Roman people.” Marcus Valerius was the Fetial priest, and he appointed Spurius Fusius as spokesman, touching his head and hair with the sacred grass. Such a spokesman is appointed to pronounce the oath formula by which a treaty is solemnly ratified. He does so in a long incantation, which I need not report here. When finally the terms had been read out, he said: “Hear, Jupiter; hear, representative of the Alban people; hear you, too, Alban people. What has been read out publicly from beginning to end from these wax tablets without any intent of deception, and what has been correctly understood here today, from those terms the Roman people will not be the first to depart. But if it does so depart by public consent and intent of deception, then, Jupiter, on that day strike the Roman people just as I will here strike this pig today, and strike it the more fiercely the greater your power and might.” Then he struck the pig with a knife of flintstone. In the same way the Albans carried out their own formal ritual and took their own oath through their supreme leader and priests.

The treaty concluded, the sets of triple brothers took up their arms as agreed. On either side their fellow soldiers encouraged their champions, reminding them that their native gods, their country, their parents, all their fellow citizens at home, everybody in the army would now be
watching their weapons and the prowess of their hands. With high-spirited confidence in their abilities, and still hearing the voices of everybody urging them on, they proceeded into the middle between the two armies. On either side the two armies had taken their positions in front of their fortifications; they took no part in the immediate danger but very much in the anxiety over the result, since the sovereignty that was at stake depended on the bravery and good luck of such few. Therefore tense and full of suspense, they gave their whole attention to the spectacle that was by no means pleasant.

On a given signal and with weapons at the ready, the triplets rushed against each other with the courage of a large army, as if they were an entire battle line. Neither side was concerned with their mortal danger but only with their country’s fate of sovereignty or slavery as their actions would decide it. On their very first collision, shields clashing and gleaming swords flashing, huge awe struck those watching, and they were left speechless and breathless. Hope of victory did not yet incline to either side. Then they joined in hand-to-hand combat. The swift movements of their bodies, the whirlings of weapons and shields, still indecisive, but also their bloody wounds were on display, for all to see. The three Albans were wounded, but two of the Romans, the one after the other, sank to the ground and breathed their last. At their fall the Alban army raised one shout of joy; the Roman levies, deathly pale, had already lost all hope but not yet their anxiety for the only one left, whom the three Curiatii had now surrounded.

By chance he was unharmed, and although he alone was no match for the three together, he was still boldly confident against each of them individually. So, in order to keep his fights with them separate, he took flight, calculating that they would each pursue him to the extent that their bodies, weakened by wounds, would allow them. When he had fled a bit from the earlier place of battle, he looked back and saw them in pursuit at considerable distance from each other, but one quite close to himself. He turned back and attacked this one with great force, and while the Alban army was still shouting to the other Curiatii to help their brother, Horatius had already killed his enemy and, triumphantly, was rushing toward his next duel. Now the Romans spurred on their warrior with the kind of shouts heard from sports fans who cheer at an unexpected event, and he hastened to end the fighting. So before the third Curiatius, who was not far away, could reach him, he had already killed the second one, too. Now only one was left on either side, and the odds of battle were equal, but the two were not equal in hope or energy. The one went into his third engagement highly confident through his lack of wounds
and his double victory; the other, exhausted from his wounds, exhausted from running, dragged himself along, already as good as defeated. The slaughter of his brothers before his eyes, he met his victorious enemy. It was not even a real battle any more. Jubilant, the Roman shouted: “Two men I have already handed over to the shades of my brothers; the third I will dedicate to the cause of this war, so that Roman may rule over Alban.” From high above he planted his blade deep in the throat of the other, who could barely hold up his shield, and stripped him of his armor as he was lying on the ground.

Cheering and congratulating him, the Romans received Horatius among them, their joy all the greater as the matter had come very close to the result they had feared. Then both sides turned to burying their dead, but with very different feelings, because the ones were exalted by sovereign rule, the others had become subject to a foreign power. The tombs still are where each man fell, the two Roman ones in one and the same place closer to Alba, the three Alban ones nearer Rome but separated, just as the fights had taken place.

Before everybody left the place, Mettius asked Tullus according to their treaty what he commanded him to do. Tullus ordered him to keep his fighting men in arms: he would use them if there were a war with Veii. So the armies were led back home. Horatius was walking at the head of the Romans, displaying his triple set of spoils. His sister, a young girl, who was engaged to be married to one of the Curiatii, met him before the Capena Gate. She recognized on her brother’s shoulders her fiancé’s cloak, one she had made herself, tore loose her hair, and weeping called her dead fiancé by his name. The grief of his sister in the midst of his own victory and the great rejoicing of all the people aroused the young man’s fury, and he drew his sword and stabbed her to death, berating her at the same time. “Go to your fiancé with your childish love,” he shouted, “you who have forgotten your dead brothers and your surviving one, you who have forgotten your country. Thus let every Roman woman go to hell who mourns for an enemy.”

Such a deed appeared terrible to all, patricians and commoners, but his recent great service to them stood in the way of any punishment for his crime. Still, he was arrested and brought to trial before the king. So as not to become himself responsible for such a tragic and unpopular sentence and inflicting the death penalty, the king called an assembly of the people and said: “I appoint two prosecutors to judge Horatius for high treason according to our law.” This law had the most ominous wording: “Let the committee of two judge cases of high treason; if the defendant appeals from them to the people, let him argue his appeal;
if their judgment stands, let the defendant’s head be veiled; let him be hanged by a rope from a barren tree; let him be thrashed either inside or outside the city’s walls.” According to this law the prosecutors were appointed. They did not believe that they could acquit even someone innocent when they had charged him, so one of them said: “Publius Horatius, I judge you guilty of high treason. Come, lictor, tie his hands.” The lictor came forward and was about to tie the rope when Horatius, on the urging of Tullus, who was a more lenient interpreter of the law, said: “I appeal!” So the appeal was brought to the people. During this hearing the father, Publius Horatius, affected everybody most because he declared that, in his judgment, his daughter had deserved to be killed; otherwise he would have punished his son himself, as a father has every right to do. Then he begged the people not to deprive him completely of his children, him whom they had seen only a short time before in the company of such excellent offspring. During this speech the old man embraced his son, pointed to the spoils taken from the Curiatii, which had been set up in the spot that is now called The Spears of Horatius, and exclaimed: “This same man, whom you have just now seen walking in honor and celebrating his victory, can you, people of Rome, really bear to see him bound under the yoke and beaten and tortured? Even the eyes of the Albans could hardly endure such a horrendous sight. Go ahead, lictor, tie his hands which, holding sword and shield, won supremacy for the Roman people. Go ahead, veil the head of this city’s liberator; hang him from a barren tree; thrash him either inside the city walls, right among the spears and spoils he took from the enemy, or outside the city walls, right among the tombs of the Curiatii. For where can any of you possibly take this young man where his glorious deeds and honors do not completely absolve him from such an utterly vile punishment?”

The people could not hold out against the father’s tears or the son’s courage, equally high as it was in any danger, and they acquitted him, more because they admired his bravery than because he had justice on his side. So in order that the evident murder yet be atoned for by some act of expiation, the father was ordered to perform the purification of his son at public expense. When certain expiatory sacrifices had been completed, which from then on became a tradition in the clan of the Horatii, a wooden beam was put up across the street, and the young man, head veiled, was led under it by his father as if under the yoke. It is still in place even today, always repaired at public expense; they call it the Sister’s Beam. Horatia’s tomb was built of square stones on the spot where she had been struck to the ground.
2. The Roman Salute According to
Il Capo-Squadra Balilla

The Opera Nazionale Balilla was the Fascist party’s youth organization. Originally Balilla was the nickname of a boy from Genoa—balilla means “urchin”—who had thrown a stone at Austrian soldiers and in this way started the revolution which expelled the Austrians from Genoa in 1746.

The organization’s handbook provided young Italians (ages 8–14) with information and instructions necessary to conduct themselves as good Fascists in all areas of public and private life. Section 15 deals with the raised-arm salute. My source of the text quoted below is Carlo Galeotti, Saluto al Duce! I catechismi del Balilla e della piccola italiana (Rome: Gremese, 2001), 24–25 and 72–73. This book reprints the fourth edition, dated “Anno XIII” of the Fascist era, i.e. 1934, of Il Capo-Squadra Balilla (for boys) and, from the same year, La Capo-Squadra piccola italiana (for girls). Both contain illustrations of youngsters giving the raised-arm salute with the requisite dedication and snappiness. Except for some typographical differences and the change from il Comandante to la Comandante in the girls’ edition, the text of Section 15 is identical in both versions. I give the text from pages 17–18 of the boys’ handbook, followed by my translation. Section 16, here omitted, lists those to whom such a salute is owed. (The king, the Duce, and the pope head the list in this order.) Galeotti, 10–11 and 16–17, explains the importance of the salute and the name Balilla and its origin. Heller 2008, 110 (ills. 174–78) and 111, provides instructive illustrations.

The labaro mentioned in the text is originally the Christogram, a late Roman and early Christian symbol combining the Greek letters chi and rho (X and P), which begin the name Chrestos (Christus). The Fascists adopted it as insignia of their militia and combat teams ( associazioni combattentistiche ).

Text

15) IL SALUTO
Il saluto è la forma di rispetto comune anche nella vita privata. Il saluto deve essere quello romano che si esegue portando vivacemente il braccio destro in avanti con il gomito all’altezza dell’occhio destro e la mano distesa.

Se da fermi si saluta nella posizione di attenti; camminando, mentre si esegue il saluto romano, si rivolge lo sguardo a chi saluta, continuando a camminare e muovendo il braccio sinistro. Il saluto va eseguito col braccio destro anche se il superiore o l’insegnare che si saluta rimane sulla sinistra. In occasione di sfilata, rassegna ecc. il solo comandante del reparto saluta alzando il braccio; i Balilla in rango si limitano a prendere la posizione di attenti.

Il saluto romano si fa anche in abito borghese, nella vita civile. La stretta di mano, residuo dei vecchi tempi, è abolita.

Vi è obbligo di saluto anche tra pari grado. Il saluto deve essere fatto circa tre passi prima della persona, bandiera, labaro, gagliardetto
che si saluta e tale posizione deve esser mantenuta per circa quattro passi dopo.

Quando si riceve il saluto si deve restituire. Il saluto di un reparto inquadrato è il sequente:

da fermo: saluta il Comandante dando prima l’attenti;
in marcia: saluta il Comandante dando prima l’attenti a destra (o sinistra).

A questo comando i componenti del reparto volgono vivacemente la testa a destra o a sinistra mantenendo questa posizione per circa quattro passi dopo la persona che si saluta. *Nell’attenti a destr’ (o a sinistr’) il naturale movimento delle braccie non deve arrestarsi.*

**Translation**

15) The Salute

The salute is the common form of respect also in private life. The salute has to be the Roman one, which is executed by *carrying one’s right arm lively to the front, with the elbow at the level of the right eye and the hand outstretched.*

When standing still, one greets in the position of standing at attention; when walking while the Roman salute is being given, one’s eye is turned toward the person saluted while continuing to walk and moving the left arm. The salute is to be given with the right arm even if the higher-ranking person or the insignia being saluted remain on the left. During a parade, inspection, etc., only the commanding officer of the detachment salutes by raising his arm; the Balilla in the ranks are restricted to standing at attention.

The Roman salute is also given in civilian clothing [when the Balilla is not in uniform] in private life. The handshake, a relic of past times, is abolished.

It is obligatory to salute someone of equal rank as well. The salute must be given about three steps in front of the person, flag, *labaro,* or pennant which is being saluted, and this position must be maintained for about four steps past.

When the salute is being received, it must be returned. The salute of a detachment in block formation is the following:

from standing position: salute the commanding officer by first standing at attention;
on the march: salute the commanding officer by first standing at attention to the right (or left).
At this command the individual members of the detachment turn the head lively to the right or to the left, maintaining this position for about four steps past the person who is being saluted. *When standing at attention to the right (or to the left), the natural movement of the arms need not be stopped.*

5. Modern Scholarship on Fascism, Nazism, and Classical Antiquity

The following are among the standard or most readily accessible works on the subject. Except for the documentary film, all contain further references. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, and Payne, *A History of Fascism, 1914–1945*, provide a modern introduction to the topic, with updated bibliographies. Works cited in the notes to chapters 1–7 are not again listed here, except to point to any chapters or articles in them that have not been mentioned.

Italy


Germany