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The topic of this paper is how cities are founded. My method will be to do a selective reading of Michel Serres' little known and, I would say, neglected book, *Rome: The Book of Foundations*. This book is, itself, largely based on a selective reading, in this case of the ancient Roman historian, Livy, and his *History of Rome*.

Serres' first problem in utilizing Livy for a theory of how cities are founded is that, particularly in discussing Rome's earliest period, even Livy himself admits that he is merely dealing with legends. Serres' idea is that, actually, legends can be informative because they provide plausible accounts of what happened, once we see them as metaphors.

As a start, there is the event that supposedly occurs at the exact moment that Rome is founded:

A twin, Romulus, has just killed his twin...and he offers up a sacrifice. To Hercules in particular. (9)

What Serres thinks he can decipher is why commemorating the Hercules event that is said to have occurred at this exact place is fitting for the moment of foundation. The story is that it was here that Hercules was nearly misled into thinking oxen stolen from him were permanently lost because their tracks led forward from where he had been sleeping. But then he hears them bellowing in a cave from which the tracks appear to leave. Hercules realizes that the cunning thief has attempted to deceive him by leading the beasts backwards into a cave, pulling them by the tail, so that their tracks are turned forward toward the outside.

Serres' idea is that this story is like how we are likely to be deceived in understanding foundations. We tend to look *forward* from what is thought of as the foundation, thereby overlooking the preceding events that produced the 'beginning.' A further resonance to the Hercules story is that these earlier events are very dark ones, hence the kinds of things that we would prefer to happen where we cannot see them.

Serres' deciphering of the more well known aspects of Rome's foundation legend will provide ample evidence of how dark these beginnings are. The legend states that the god of War, Mars, raped the vestal virgin, Rhea Silva. She gives birth to twins, Romulus and Remus. Romulus kills Remus and then founds Rome. Livy makes a vague, somewhat embarrassed, reference to the fate of Rhea Silva which Serres interprets as meaning that, as traditionally happened to vestal virgins who were violated, she was 'buried alive.' (70)

The killing of the mother is the first aspect of the legend that exercises Serres. Rhea Silva was said to be an inhabitant of Alba Longa, likely a real place on the site of what became Rome. Romulus and Remus, then, could be said to be Albans by birth. Part of Livy's history that does not seem to be mere legend tells of battles that the early Romans fought over territory with this place from which they themselves sprung. Serres points to passages in Livy that depict Alba as a peaceful but also indecisive and unambitious place. Unlike Rome, it is as if it is going nowhere. Drawing on what its name means in Latin, i. e. white, Serres says we can think of it as a kind of blank. It is the blank from which Rome sprung. Rome conquers Alba and comes to exist on its former territory. Alba is no more. It disappears from the world: 'Alba precedes Rome and Rome destroyed it.' (49) It does, then, seem right to say that the foundation of Rome requires something very much like 'the audacity to kill one's mother.' (54)

Further support for the idea that mother killing might be a metaphor for a real aspect of the work of founding is provided by another text cited by Serres. Like him, Shakespeare has utilized Livy as a source, in his case for *Coriolanus*. The most relevant scene is when this great Roman general, having defected to Rome's enemy due to his anger at how his home nation has treated him, is at the gates of Rome with his army and in a position to destroy his land of birth. Shakespeare has his mother plead Rome's case. 'Certain drops of salt' (Shakespeare), i. e. his mother's tears, are what at the last moment make Coriolanus relent, thereby saving Rome from the same fate as Alba. That Coriolanus lacks the audacity to kill *his* mother, both his actual one and his metaphoric one (Rome) with the consequence that Rome does not cease to exist, provides further evidence that one thing it takes to found a new city is a form of action that is like killing one's own mother.

Ancient Rome, as we now understand it, cannot be said to be fully founded when it just became a city. It also had to expand to the extent that it amounted to an empire. Serres locates this additional aspect of Rome's foundation in the metaphoric meaning he attaches to the part of the founding legend that refers to one twin killing another. Whereas we tend to think of a country's wars as either ones in which it is defending itself against a foreign attack or, alternatively as ones on which it is the clear-cut attacker, the wars by which Rome grew had a very different nature. In the Roman case, trying to differentiate aggressor from innocent party proves impossible:

Who moved into another's territory first, who pillaged the other's possessions first? Try to find out. The grounds for war are the same on all sides, each accusing the other of having started it; so each is justified in having recourse to arms. (146)

It therefore follows that:

The powers present on the eve of war resemble each other so closely that each could be mistaken for the other. (146)

And, of course, what could be more easily mistaken for someone else than a twin? Rome's wars, then, are like one twin killing another.

Serres even reads the motivation, the *casus belli*, for this sort of war as discernible in who the myth identifies as the twins' father. Instead of being provoked by particular causes, this sort of war must be the province of a country which approaches all others with enmity, and whose fundamental *modus vivendi* is, therefore, hostility. Such a country would have an unending appetite for war. As Serres describes what such a taste for war could look like:

War, more than maintaining itself, maintains and feeds, in return the reasons that bring it to life. That is hostility's law of expansion. (154)

Feeding one who brings one to life in the first place with more and more war certainly makes sense if that father were like Mars. That is, the 'food' that sustains people like him is a diet of wars.

Again, Serres finds additional support for his reading in another author who has mined Livy for source material. Corneille's play *Horace* retells the story of a battle in which all three of a father's sons are fighting for Rome. The father hears that two of his sons have been killed but not the third, who is erroneously reported to have fled the scene. Instead of being relieved, the father 'regrets that the last of his sons is not killed.' (276) While this man is no god, he is certainly Mars-like in his relish for war. Rome, then, depends for its

foundation on this sort of person, persons with such an appetite for war that they want not just enemies but even twins killed.

With the founding of Rome seen to require two sorts of war, neither of which is at all easy to justify, the Roman preference to look forward rather than back now seems fully understandable. The assessment Serres arrives at after uncovering Rome's foundations seems fair:

What greatness? What culture makes us believe that this is greatness? A history so bloody and a culture so disgusting makes us sick. (276)

However, while lacking the specific depiction of the dynamics involved that he has extracted from Livy, this was roughly Serres' assessment of Rome *before* he embarked on this book:

I admit to having scorned Rome, as so many have. Its foolish people, rough and rude, neither had nor gave access to what makes our life worth living: real knowledge, science and philosophy, and the crazy mythology that lights up shadow ecstatically...Rome suffers, despite its size, by reason of its weight, from the nearness of the Greeks and Semites. (57)

His change of heart, leading to the decision to attend to Rome by writing this book, occurred because: 'Athens is mind, Jerusalem sign, and Rome object.' (58) He means that if we want to study how things or in this case a city are actually made (become objects) we really cannot avoid focusing on Rome. But if all that focus yields are phenomena that makes us sick, then it seems the best option is the despairing and deeply passive decision to abandon the whole idea of making any such thing.

This would seem the necessary conclusion from all Serres has discovered so far. And so it will remain unless he can find another, less bloody, version of foundation. Exactly this is what Serres manages to do, and he does so without having to abandon the method of his book because he finds this alternative in another story in Livy. As Serres summarizes the key passage:

Rome has just driven out its last king...The domain of the Tarquins...has been consecrated to Mars...It bore a rich harvest, but to consume the wheat of the field of Mars would have been sacrilege. The crowd gathered to harvest the wheat of the field...Without separating the grain from the straw in their full baskets, the crowd emptied the wheat into the Tiber...These piles or heaps...formed, little by little, an island...thus making the place high enough and firm enough to support temples and porticoes. A place emerges that is solid enough for foundation. (263)

What is striking about this story is that it does offer a novel version of foundation. Here we have foundation, not as the way a thing is initiated-started in time-, but as the way it manages a base upon which further development can occur. And what is equally striking is that foundation in this sense explicitly rejects being fed by violence. However, it is very tempting to be dismissive of this story as, after all, the events it refers to are a physical impossibility:

It is positively not possible, not probable that a heap of grain and straw ...could have left a sandy beach...on which someday someone would build a solidly planted portico. (273)

But to be dismissive would be to forget that, throughout, Serres' method has been to decipher what only becomes both relevant and possible once he does not take it literally.

In this case, such deciphering can begin by noticing that certainly there has been a 'rich harvest' from all the wars that Rome has fought, namely the territory gained from both its mother killing and twin killing. And certainly, it would be possible, at any point, to refuse to continue with either or both the forms of war that produced the harvest.

However, what is most striking about the story is that it does *not* report refusing to harvest the wheat. Nor does it say that it was merely thrown away. Instead it tells of using what can be harvested in a different way than previous Roman generations have done. Thus, putting himself in the shoes of the crowd who face the dilemma of how to deal with a harvest that has such a bloody history, Serres asks:

What to do, then, with violence, with Mars' field, with the straw and grain of his harvest that is not consumable? (265)

Pouring it into the river is not exactly throwing it away. While it is refusing to perpetuate what has gone before, it is also not refusing to accept violence's results. It is doing something different with the results-the harvest-than what has been done before. Obviously, it is doing something non-violent. The non-violent act is said to take the form of making a support firm enough to support building.

Rome can, then, in another sense, be founded by accepting the territory that previous violence has bequeathed to it but treating that territory as needing to be developed rather than needing to be expanded, the latter inevitably perpetuating violence. One treats the territory, in this new approach, then, as a sufficient -firm enough-*foundation* on which to build.

Just to be clear, the two versions of foundation need to be seen as complementary in the sense that both are necessary. Because there are really no empty spaces in the world, founding anything new will require mother killing and some twin killing as well (in order to produce a large enough space). However that emphatically does not mean that the only way forward for a city is endless further violence. Instead, it is possible to accept-to 'harvest' - what the previous violence has produced and yet refuse to use it just to 'feed' further violence. Instead, what is harvested becomes the basis on which what has been started can be built on.

That there can be this two stage process of foundation leads to the question of when the second type of founding is likely to replace the first. Deciphering another feature of the story can offer guidance on this point as well. It is certainly true that the commitment of followers as well as leaders is required at every stage of the founding process, people of course being needed to form the armies any and all of Rome's violent conquests depended upon. Furthermore, so is support at every stage from the rest of the population who, while not involved in the actual fighting, are crucial to the maintenance of the city. However, it is true that without leadership (founders such as Romulus and Remus, generals such as Coriolanus), the originating violence necessary for the place to come into existence and also grow would never have happened.

On the other hand, the story locates the timing of the second sort of foundation as when Rome expelled its last king. This can be deciphered as suggesting that it will not be a leader who takes the initiative in stopping the violence, thereby decisively changing a city's direction. The trouble with the leader is that he or she will probably be too used to the method of violence, so steeped in this tradition as to think it is the only way forward. Instead, this move is likely to take the form of a mass movement, the population as a whole, no doubt aware of the costs, understanding that there is no desire to spill more blood but also, crucially, no more need to do so because the results of the past are such that there is something that, having been founded, can be a foundation.

Reference

Serres, Michel (1991) *Rome: The Book of Foundation* Translated by Felicia McCarren
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