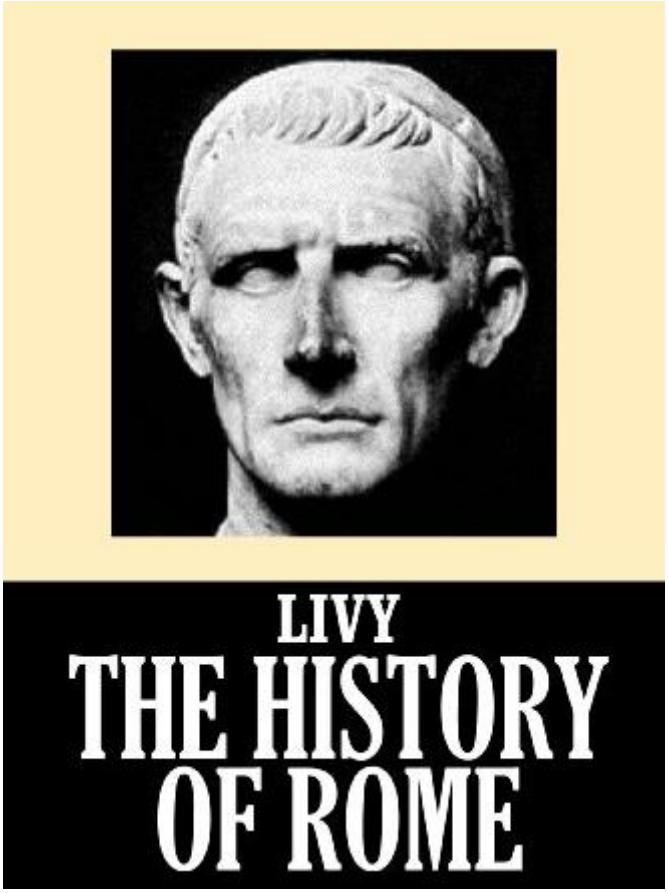

Year 8

AP2 Revision

Sabine Women

Triple Combat

THE SABINE WOMEN

Rome was now strong enough to stand up to any of the nearby tribes. But it looked as though this strength would not continue for more than one generation. The population seemed bound to fall because there were so few women in the city, and so far there had been no marriages between Romans and outsiders. But now the senators suggested that Romulus should send representatives round the towns in the area. He wanted to make alliances with them and persuade them to let their women marry men from Rome.

Everywhere the representatives got a cool reception. Partly it was contempt. But partly it was fear of what this powerful and growing city might one day do, both to themselves and to their descendants. Often the representatives were turned away with taunts such as 'Have you opened your gates to female criminals as well? You could make plenty of suitable matches then!' This sort of remark did not go down well with the young men of Rome. Clearly violence was in the air.

Romulus made up his mind: if there had to be violence, then *he* would choose where and when. So he pretended not to mind these insults. Instead he began to organise Games* in honour of Neptune,* the god of horses. He made it clear that he wanted all the neighbouring towns to know, and the Romans did all they could to make the festival attractive and to spread publicity for it.

A huge crowd turned up. For one thing, they were curious to see what this new town was like. Most of them were from nearby, including the whole population of Sabinum, with their wives and children. The Romans invited them to stay in their homes. Then the visitors went on a tour of the city, looking at the general layout, the fortifications and the large number of private houses. They were amazed at how much had been done in such a short time. Then it was time for the Games. Soon everyone's attention was riveted. This was the moment chosen for the raid. At a given signal, the young Romans dashed into the crowd and grabbed hold of the Sabine girls. Mostly they took the ones who happened to be nearest. Some of the prettier ones, though, had been earmarked as senators' property; they were taken away by specially recruited gangs.

The festival broke up in a panic. The girls' parents rushed off in a terrible state, complaining that the laws of hospitality had been broken. They also prayed to Neptune, to whose festival they had come in good faith, only to be cheated. The girls themselves were just as frantic about what was going to become of them. They were furious too. But Romulus went round and had a word with each of them:

'Really it's your fathers who are to blame. They were too proud to let us marry you. But, now you *are* married, you'll share all our benefits and privileges. What's more, you'll share the greatest blessing of the human race – children. Just calm down! Accept what's happened with a good grace! Rage can often turn to love. And your husbands, I know, will treat you well. They will be trying not only to do their duty as husbands but to make up for the parents and the homes you have left behind you.'

Their new husbands set about flattering them, too, saying 'I only did it because I fell so passionately in love with you' – the sort of thing women find so hard to resist.

Not surprisingly, the outraged visitors decided to fight back. Unfortunately for them, the various tribes could not agree on a plan and Rome was able to pick them off one by one. But the Sabines bided their time.

There was nothing wild or hot-headed about the Sabines' campaign. They gave no warning of what they intended to do. Their careful planning included even a measure of treachery. The Roman stronghold was commanded by Spurius Tarpeius. He had a young daughter and one day she went outside the walls to fetch water for a sacrifice. The Sabine king bribed her with gold to let his soldiers into the stronghold. When they did get in, they crushed her to death with their shields. Maybe this was to make it look as if they had captured the stronghold by their own efforts. Or maybe it was their way of saying: 'Never trust a traitor.' Apparently the Sabines used to wear heavy gold bracelets on their left arms and large jewelled rings on their left hands. According to one version of the story, she agreed to betray the city 'in return for what the men are wearing on their left arms'. But instead of gold bracelets, she got shields.

A battle followed and the Romans were getting the worst of it.

The Sabines, led by Mettius Curtius, came rushing down the slope from the stronghold. He drove the Romans headlong, over what is now the forum, and almost up to the Palatine gate.

'We've got them!' he shouted. 'They may be good at cheating, but they can't fight. They've learnt one thing, though. Girl-snatching is a very different business from dealing with men like us.'

In the middle of these brave words, Romulus launched an attack with a small group of his toughest soldiers. At that moment Mettius was on horseback. This made it harder for him to stand his ground. He galloped off, hotly pursued by the Romans. Elsewhere on the battlefield, Romulus' brave example was having its effect. The Sabines were retreating fast. Meanwhile the noise of Romulus' men had scared Mettius' horse. It bolted into a swamp. The Sabines even stopped fighting in order to help their general and, after a lot of shouting and waving of arms, he managed to get out. Then the battle started again in earnest, on the level ground between the two hills. Now the Romans began to win.

At this moment, the Sabine women, without whom there would not have been a battle at all, pushed their way between the two armies, their hair flying and their clothes torn.

'Enough! Stop!' they cried. 'It is a sin for fathers to fight husbands. Think of the disgrace you're bringing to your children – and grandchildren. If you're ashamed of your relationship, of

our marriages, why not be furious with us? This family vendetta is all our fault. We would rather die ourselves than be widows or orphans.' Their words had the desired effect. Common soldiers and generals alike were suddenly silent. Then the leaders stepped forward to arrange a truce. So peace was made, and the two communities were united under a single government. Rome was to be the capital.

Rome went on growing quickly. Romulus was followed as king by Numa Pompilius, and he in turn by Tullus Hostilius. The family name Hostilius suited him. By now, in about 670 B.C., seventy years after Rome had been founded, many of her neighbours were jealous of her, and frightened. Among them was Alba Longa. Cattle raiding led to war. The two armies faced each other, but the Alban leader suggested a way to avoid large-scale bloodshed.

TRIPLE COMBAT: c.670 B.C.

As it so happened, in each army there were three brothers who were triplets. Both sets were also much the same age and build. The two families concerned were the Horatii and the Curiatii, and this is altogether one of the most inspiring of these old stories. (There does seem to be some doubt as to which was on which side, but I will follow the usual version and call the Romans the Horatii.) The two leaders, Tullus and Mettius, put a proposal to the triplets: 'Fight each other for your country, and whichever side wins will be master over the other.' The brothers agreed and a time and place were set. It only remained for the Romans and the Albans to make a formal promise that the losing side would accept the rule of the other without argument.

The promise was duly made and, as agreed, the six men took up their weapons. At once both armies began to shout: 'The gods are with you', 'Remember Rome!', 'Curiatii for ever!' The brothers were eager to get started and these shouts encouraged them still further. They came forward into the space between the two armies. Each army was standing in front of its own camp and although they were in no immediate danger their anxiety was plain – the whole future of their lives hung on the courage and luck of a mere handful of men. This was no relaxing spectacle; their nerves were strained and tense.

The trumpet sounded. The brothers moved towards each other

with enough ferocity, discipline and determination for an entire army. No thoughts of personal danger weighed on them, only the knowledge that they alone were to decide their cities' future, as masters or slaves. Metal clashed on metal, swords gleamed in the sunlight. A terrible excitement ran through the watching armies. At first they were quiet, as the brothers matched blow for blow. But soon it turned to close fighting with writhing bodies and swift thrusts of swords and daggers. Now the spectators could see wounds and blood pouring from them. All three Curiatii were hurt, but two of the Romans fell to the ground, one on top of the other, dying.

The Albans screamed in triumph. The Romans' future looked hopeless. In dread their eyes clung to their single champion, surrounded now by his three enemies. Somehow he had come through unscathed. He was still no match for three men together but in single combat his chances were good. With this in mind he took to his heels, knowing they would follow him as fast as their wounds allowed them. He ran on some way, then turned round. The three were widely strung out with the leader not far behind him. The Roman rounded on him furiously. The Alban army were yelling at the other Curiatii to help their brother. But Horatius had already killed him and was confidently waiting for the second encounter. Meanwhile the shouts of encouragement from the Roman side showed that they could hardly believe this change in their luck. Horatius did not keep them waiting. The third of his enemies was not far away. Before he could reach him, Horatius despatched his second opponent and now it was down to single combat. But there was no comparison in their morale and stamina. The Roman was still unhurt and buoyed up with his double victory; his opponent was exhausted from running and loss of blood, and he had seen the fate of both his brothers . . . There was no real contest. From the start he was a beaten man.

Horatius was jubilant. 'I have killed two men in honour of my brothers' memory. This one will settle the war. We Romans are the masters now.' A downward slash broke through the man's wavering guard and pierced his throat. Horatius took the armour off the body and walked back to the Roman ranks, to a storm of cheers and congratulations. The excitement was overwhelming, all the more so because disaster had been so close.

The two armies then marched home, the Romans led by Horatius carrying the spoils of his triple victory. He was met outside the Capena gate by his young sister. She had been

engaged to one of the Curiatii and now she saw, on her brother's shoulder, a cloak which had belonged to her fiancé; she herself had made it for him. Letting down her hair she burst into tears and began to call out her dead lover's name. Her wailing, at the moment when every other Roman was cheering her brother's success, struck right at his heart. He drew his sword.

'I see you have no thought for your dead brothers, or me, or Rome', he said. 'Go and join your lover, you and your girlish passion! There shall be no tears for the enemy while I'm alive.' And with these harsh words he drove the sword through her body. The crowd were horrified at this appalling deed. In spite of his recent heroism he was arrested and brought before the king. Tullus realised that by law the verdict must be 'death'. This would certainly be highly unpopular with the mob and he had no intention of passing such a sentence himself. So he called an assembly and said: 'As I am entitled by law, I hereby appoint two *duumvirs** to pass sentence on this man.' The law he was referring to was a savage one. It ran as follows: 'The *duumvirs* have the power to convict on a charge of treason. If the prisoner appeals, the people shall consider the appeal. If the appeal is turned down then the prisoner's head shall be covered and he shall be hanged by a rope from a barren tree. He shall then be whipped whether he hangs inside or outside the city walls.'

So the *duumvirs* were appointed. As far as they could see, the law meant they had no choice but to condemn the prisoner whether he was guilty or not. So one of them announced: 'Publius Horatius, I find you guilty of treason. Lictor,* bind the prisoner's hands.' The officer came forward and was just fastening the chains when the king intervened. He was anxious to be as merciful as he could without breaking the law, so he urged Horatius to appeal. As a result the final decision was now left in the hands of the people.

In making up their minds, they were influenced most of all by the evidence of the prisoner's father. 'My daughter', he said, 'deserved to die. If I didn't think that, I would have done my fatherly duty and punished my son myself. A few hours ago you knew me as the head of a fine family. Don't take the last of my children from me!' He embraced his son and then pointed to the spoils of the Curiatii, fixed in the place now known as the 'Horatian Spears'.

'This is the man', he went on, 'the man you saw entering the city victorious, triumphant. Fellow Romans, can you stand and see him forced under the yoke,* his hands bound, his body lashed

into agony? Why, even the men of Alba could hardly bear to watch something so obscene. Lictor, bind the prisoner's hands! After all they have just saved Rome from slavery. Go on, cover the hero's head and hang him from a barren tree! Lash him here, inside the walls – surrounded by the spoils of his enemies; or why not out there, where his enemies are buried? Wherever you take him, reminders of his bravery will stand in the way of such a wicked punishment.'

The old man's tears and Horatius' total fearlessness had their effect. The verdict was 'not guilty'. Personal admiration had more to do with this than any real sense of justice; he *had* murdered his sister and somehow this crime must be paid for. So his father was given a sum of money from public funds to perform some ritual ceremonies that would clear his son's guilt (in fact these ceremonies became a tradition in the family). A wooden beam was put up across the road and Horatius was made to walk underneath it with his head covered, as though he was going under the yoke. This is the origin of the so-called Sister's Beam which the state authorities still renew from time to time. The sister in question was buried where she had been murdered. A monument of shaped stone blocks marked the place.

Around 625 B.C., Tullus Hostilius died after a reign of some forty-five years. Still the population was growing fast. One result, Livy says, was that 'the difference between right and wrong became rather vague'. The fourth king, Ancus Martius, built Rome's first prison. Another result was that being king of Rome was a prize worth working for – and plotting for.