Appian's History of Rome: The Conquest of Italy

Appian of Alexandria (c.95-c.165) is the author of a Roman History and one of the most underestimated of all Greek historians. Although only his books on the Roman Civil Wars survive in their entirety, large parts of other books have also come down to us. His account of the conquest of central Italy, which we know Byzantine excerpts, is unfortunately not among the best preserved parts, and contains little information that we do not already know from other sources.

Because the text has to be reconstructed from several medieval manuscripts, not all editions of Appian's History of the Italian Wars are numbered in the same way; here, the separate units are counted strictly chronologically. The translation was made by Horace White; additions in green by Jona Lendering.

The story of Coriolanus

[From the Suda dictionary: §1a] The Volsci, in no wise terrified by the misfortunes of their neighbors, made war against the Romans and laid siege to their colonies. [491 Varronian Chronology] The people refused to elect [Gnaeus] Marcius [Coriolanus] when he sought the consulship, not because they considered him unfit, but because they feared his domineering spirit. [489 VC] Marcius being inflamed against the Romans when they banished him went over to the Volsci, meditating no small revenge.

[From the Suda dictionary:] [488 VC] When he arrived there, having renounced his own country and kin, he did not meditate anything in particular, but intended to side with the Volsci against his country.

[From Constantine Porphyrogenitus, The Embassies: §1b] When Marcius had been banished, and had taken refuge with the Volsci, and made war against the Romans, and was encamped at a distance of only 75 kilometers from the city, the people threatened to betray the walls to the enemy unless the Senate would send an embassy to him to treat for peace. The Senate reluctantly sent plenipotentiaries for this purpose.

When they arrived at the camp of the Volsci and were brought into his presence and that of the Volscian chiefs, they offered oblivion and permission to return to the city if he would discontinue the war, and they reminded him that the Senate had never done him any wrong. He, while accusing the people of the many wrongs they had done to him and to the Volsci, promised nevertheless that the latter would come to terms with them if they would surrender the land and towns they had taken from the Volsci and admit them to citizenship on the same terms as the Latins. But if the vanquished were to keep what belonged to the victors, he did not see how peace could be made. Having named these conditions, he dismissed the ambassadors and gave them thirty days to consider.

Then he turned against the remaining Latin towns, and having captured seven of them in the thirty days, he came back to receive the answer of the Romans.

[§2] They replied that if he would withdraw his army from the Roman territory, they would send an embassy to him to conclude peace on fair terms. When he refused this, they sent ten others to beg him that nothing should be done unworthy of his native country, and to allow a treaty to be made, not by his
command, but of their own free will, for he should regard the honor of his country and the principles of his ancestors, who had never done him any wrong.

He replied merely that he would give them three days more in order that they might think better of it. Then the Romans sent their priests to him wearing their sacred vestments to add their entreaties. To these he said that either they must obey his commands or they need not come to him again. Then the Romans prepared for a siege and brought stones and missiles upon the walls to fight off Marcius from above.

§3 Now Valeria, the daughter of [Marcus Valerius] Publicola, brought a company of women to Veturia, the mother of Marcius, and to Volumnia his wife. All these, clad in mourning garments and bringing their children to join in the supplication, implored that they would go out with them to meet Marcius, and beseech him to spare them and their country. The Senate allowed these women to go alone to the camp of the enemy. Marcius admiring the high courage of the city, where even the women were inspired by it, advanced to meet them, sending away the rods and axes of the lictors, out of respect for his mother. He ran forward and embraced her, brought her into the council of the Volsci, and told her to tell what she wanted.

§4 She said that, being his mother, she was as much wronged as he in his banishment from the city; that she saw that the Romans had already suffered grievously at his hands, and had paid a sufficient penalty, so much of their territory had been laid waste and so many of their towns demolished, and themselves reduced to the extremity of sending their consuls and priests, and finally his own mother and wife, as ambassadors to him, and offering to rescind the decree and to grant him forgetfulness of the past and a safe return to his home. "Do not," she said, "cure an evil by an incurable evil. Do not be the cause of calamities that will smite yourself as well as those you injure. Whither do you carry the torch? From the fields to the city? From the city to your own hearthstone? From your own hearthstone to the temples of the gods? Have mercy, my son, on me and on your country as we plead."

After she had thus spoken Marcius replied that the country which had cast him out was not his, but rather the land which had given him shelter. Nothing was dear to him that was unjust, nor was anybody his enemy who treated him well. He told her to cast her eyes upon the men here present with whom he had exchanged the pledge of mutual fidelity, who had granted him citizenship, had chosen him their general, and had entrusted to him their private interests. He mentioned the honors bestowed upon him and the oath he had sworn, and he urged his mother to consider his friends and enemies hers also.

§5 While he was still speaking, she, in a burst of anger, and holding her hands up to heaven, invoked their household gods. "Two processions of women," said she, "have set forth from Rome in the deepest affliction, one in the time of King Tatius [1], the other in that of Caius Marcius. Of these two Tatius, a stranger and downright enemy, had respect for the women and yielded to them. Marcius scorns a like delegation of women, including his wife, and his mother besides. May no mother, unblessed in her son, ever again be reduced to the necessity of throwing herself at his feet. This I must submit to. I must prostrate myself before yours."
So speaking she flung herself on the ground. He burst into tears, sprang forward and lifted her up, exclaiming with the deepest emotion: "Mother, you have gained the victory, but it is a victory by which you have lost your son."

So saying he led back the army, in order to give his reasons to the Volsci and to make peace between the two nations. There was some hope that he might be able to persuade the Volsci, but on account of the jealousy of their leader Attius he was put to death.

[From the Suda dictionary:] Marcius did not think proper to gainsay either of these [demands].

The story of the Fabii

[From the Suda dictionary: §6] [477 VC] [The Fabii] were as much to be pitied for their misfortunes as they were worthy of praise for their bravery. For it was a great misfortune to the Romans, on account of their number, the dignity of a noble house, and its total destruction. The day on which it happened was ever after considered unlucky.

A defeat against the Volsci

[From the Suda dictionary: §7] [471 VC] The army was incensed against the general [Appius Claudius] from remembrance of old wrongs, and refused to obey him. They fought badly on purpose, and took to flight, putting bandages on their bodies as though they were wounded. They broke up camp and tried to retreat, putting the blame on the unskilfulness of their commander.

The fall of Camillus

[From the Peiresc manuscript: §8] [395] Bad omens from Jupiter were observed after the capture of Veii. The soothsayers said that some religious duty had been neglected, and [Marcus Furius] Camillus remembered that it had been forgotten to appropriate a tenth of the plunder to the god that had given the oracle concerning the lake.[2] Accordingly the Senate decreed that those who had taken anything from Veii should make an estimate, each one for himself, and bring in a tenth of it under oath. Their religious feeling was such that they did not hesitate to add to the votive offering a tenth of the produce of the land that had already been sold, as well as of the spoils. With the money thus obtained they sent to the temple of Delphi a golden cup which stood on a pedestal of brass in the treasury of Rome and Massilia until Onomarchus melted the cup during the Phocaean war.[3] The pedestal is still standing.

[§9] [391] Camillus was afterwards accused before the people of being himself the author of those bad omens and portents. The people, who had been for some time set against him, fined him heavily, having no pity for him although he had recently lost a son. His friends contributed the money in order that the person of Camillus might not be disgraced. In deep grief he went into exile in the city of Ardea, praying the prayer of Achilles that the time might come when the Romans would long for Camillus. [390 VC = 387/386 CE] And in fact this came to pass very soon, for when the Gauls captured the city, the people fled for succor to Camillus and again chose him dictator, as has been told in my Gallic history.
The story of Marcus Manlius Capitolinus

[From the Peiresc manuscript: §10] When Marcus Manlius [Capitolinus], the patrician, saved the city of Rome from a Gallic invasion, he received the highest honors.

[384 VC] At a later period when he saw an old man, who had often fought for his country, reduced to servitude by a money lender, he paid the debt for him. Being highly commended for this act, he released all his own debtors from their obligations. His glory being much increased thereby, he paid the debts of many others. Being much elated by his popularity, he even proposed that all debts should be canceled, or that the people should sell the lands that had not yet been distributed and apply the proceeds for the relief of debtors.

Note 1:

After the rape of the Sabine women, the Sabine king Titus Tatius declared war upon the city of Romulus. The Sabine women intervened in this conflict between their brothers and husbands.

Note 2:

There had been an omen involving the Alban Lake, after which the Romans had offered one tenth of the spoils from Veii to the god Apollo.

Note 3:

The "Phocaean war" is also known as the Third Sacred War (354-346). It started as a conflict between Phocis and Thebes, but escalated to a much larger war that involved the Peloponnesse, Sicily, and Thessaly. The fighting in Thessaly led to interference by its northern neighbor, Macedonia. In the end, it was king Philip II of Macedonia, who won the war. The independence of Greece was forever lost; the famous battle of Chaeronea in 338 was merely a confirmation of what had already been decided during the Third Sacred War.