1. Introduction

Telling facts about Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus is like traveling through history, starting from mid-5th century B.C. A man - or, better said, an iconic personality - who goes beyond time. And beyond space.

As a people's hero, he became known in Rome during the very early Republican Era, short after the fall of Tarquini's *regnum*. Such hero kept alive during the whole Roman empire. In the early Middle Ages, the penmanship transmission of the First Decade by Titus Livius - whose traces were left in Italy, France and Germany - safeguarded the memory of Cincinnatus. The most ancient illustrated Titus Livius manuscript was prepared between 13th and 14th centuries, by initiative of Landolfo Colonna, an officer in the Roman Curia. After a few attempts, Petrarch was able to purchase that book in 1351: it was a valuable element for the poet's library, and it determined the chance of Cincinnatus in the following centuries.

The icon of Cincinnatus had been magnificently described by Livius; yet Cincinnatus was not included among the Roman heroes mentioned by Virgilio in the sixth book of the Aeneid, and was missing in the list of illustrious men by Plutarch in the Parallel Lives. Nevertheless Petrarch, who admired Livius, did not neglect Cincinnatus but dedicated him a short dissertation in his *De viris illustribus*, Despite short, that dissertation gave Cincinnatus a place among classical antiquity heroes.

In 1370 the *De viris*'s 36 biographies were complete. Petrarch was living in Arquà. Francesco I from Carrara, lord of Padua, asked the poet one last effort: adapting the *De viris* to the iconographic project he intended to make in one hall of his palace in the center of the city. Petrarch died before finishing such remake (which would then be completed by others). Francesco from Carrara, on the contrary, was able to complete his own project; the hall, called the Hall of Heroes, presented frescoes of the 36 Petrarchan *viris illustres*.

Unfortunately, the original paintings were progressively lost. In the 16th century the Venetians made another that included a higher number of illustrious people (44 in total, plus six scholars from Padua). Among them is, as was in the original from the 14th century, Lucius Quinctius Cincinnatus.

Hence, through Petrarch and the Paduan culture of the time, Cincinnatus was introduced in a long commemorative and figurative dimension. Such dimension would be intensely nurtured, at the highest levels, among Humanism and Renaissance. The *Discourses on the First Decade of Titus Livius* are Machiavelli's remarks to *Ab urbe condita* by Livius: ancient Rome, its Republic, its heroes as a spur and model to build, despite over a thousand years had passed, a community of free men, and republics instead of principates.

Machiavelli, just like Petrarch, placed Lucius Junius Brutus in the top position among heroes. He was the founder of the republic and public virtue champion to the extent of uncompromisingly ordering to kill his two sons, guilty of plotting for the return of the king. However, Machiavelli also had Cincinnatus in his mind: to him he dedicated, echoing Petrarch, an artful portrait: for it is also through the example of Cincinnatus that the *Discourses* described a republican model compliant with the constitution of the republican Rome, kept alive by the values of Livius's *History*, which Machiavelli believed could form the basis of the political-constitutional experiences of modernity.

We should acknowledge that Machiavelli's ambition was achieved: both Montesquieu and Rousseau outlined models of republics that, though different, incorporated the indications contained in the *Discourses*. With such a background, the heroes of the Roman Republic, above all Cincinnatus, are entitled to enter modernity; and they actually do.

Cincinnatus becomes one of the mythical heroes, probably the main one, of the American Revolution: the more cultured colonists, educated in the values of classicism, nurture the dream of a community of free citizens and sincerely admire Cincinnatus, with his public and private conduct, his being independent of the lure of power and richness. In short, if the goal was to replace the king establishing a republic, Cincinnatus was to be taken as the model of the good citizen and, above all, the good ruler.

The first was George Washington, since when he had led the Continental Army in the War of Independence against the English mother country: when, the war ended, he renounced all power to return to his farm at Mount Vernon, the former colonists began to call him, and regard him, as the American Cincinnatus.

Iconography conformed: statues and portraits of Washington in the guise of a Roman general and sometimes of Cincinnatus taking up the plow and returning to his farm. In the young federal republic, Italian artists were favored, probably they were the best, when creating iconography inspired by the canons of classicism.

In 1815 North Carolina's House of Commons and Senate asked Antonio Canova to create a life-size statue of Washington dressed as a Roman general. Four reliefs appeared in the pedestal, the last with Washington and the plow at Mount Vernon.

Among the young men who frequented Canova in Rome was the Roman painter Costantino Brumidi. In 1849, he took part in the defense of the Roman Republic, which had been established by a democratic revolution, which the U.S. had immediately looked favorably at. That experience of classical republicanism ended tragically and Brumidi was arrested. He decided to leave Italy and move to the United States. Here he succeeded in gaining such appreciation that he was commissioned to fresco the Capitol. In the vault of the dome, in a sky inspired by Republican values, Brumidi painted the *Apotheosis of George Washington*, where the President is flanked by *Liberty* and *Victory*. But Brumidi's first fresco in the Capitol, and the first to be done in the U.S., is *Cincinnatus summoned by the plow*.

Almost two hundred and fifty years have passed since American independence To a large extent, the U.S. has lost the momentum toward virtue that had marked the Founding Fathers' political thought and action. But the myth of Cincinnatus has not disappeared if still in the early 2000s the city of Cincinnati wanted a statue of the Roman Cincinnatus in the center of its public park, showing him as he hands back the symbol power and takes his plow back. In addition, books and articles about Cincinnatus continue to be published in the U.S.: not so much to contribute to the history of a hero of ancient Rome, but because, as Michael J. Hillyard wrote, "his life and time offers characteristics that serve a model for contemporary behavior and insights into the forces of republican governance as they were unleashed for the first time in history."

Outside the U.S., in the European West, Cincinnatus did not attract similar civic and political interest; nor did he have any particular fortune since Machiavelli. Every now and then someone, out of a vein of self-praise, compares himself to Cincinnatus: someone like Boris Johnson did it, for example, for no reason.

Where power is perceived as personal property to be preserved as long as possible, it is necessary to prevent Cincinnatus from being regarded as a model still valid and current: he must remain unknown or, at best, be relegated to elementary school books or reserved exclusively for the circuits of professional historians. In the U.S. things have been different; it is thanks to Cincinnatus, and to Washington who wanted to imitate him by refusing a third term, that the president can only be reelected once. In contrast, it remains almost incomprehensible to Europeans that the icon Cincinnatus can still be taken as a benchmark for assessing the seriousness, honesty, and public spirit of political leaders in the United States.

In the ancient references the story of Cincinnatus is not what we would expect, but it is preparatory to what will be of him in the future. In them, too, the goal pursued is to inspire a code of conduct for public men. Thus, in the historians' accounts, the variants confirm that the focus was not so much on the historical man (perhaps one who did not even exist) but selectively focused on building the archetype of the perfect *gubernator* of a republic of citizens ready, as educated by the *exempla*, for sacrifice, even extreme sacrifice, for Rome and its fate in the world.

A figure assembled well after the fifth century B.C., that is, after the historical era in which Cincinnatus is believed to have lived and acted. In the affairs of this character some reflections of the political and institutional struggles of the age of the crisis of the republic are reliably recognizable; the period is between the 2nd and 1st centuries B.C.: from the reforms of Tiberius Gracchus to the establishment of the principate by Augustus. All, or almost all, of Cincinnatus' *gesta* or *virtutes* appear to have the purpose to support, through the model of the *vir romanus*, highly debated political projects and actions, but attributable to three or four centuries after Cincinnatus. Even the Augustan lie of restitution of the *res publica* to the senate and people, accompanied by the simulated renunciation of all power acquired during the civil war against Antony, is related to Cincinnatus' renunciations of the consulship and dictatorship and his deep respect for the *maiestas populi romani.*

With these premises, the book will not try to prove the historical existence of a man who, perhaps, was never born. Yet, from a critical analysis of all the available sources, a prolonged effort will emerge – by authors who lived in or after the first century B.C. – for the creation of a symbol, or even a myth, of the ideology of the free *res publica*, then composed and reassembled over a period of time spanning almost two millennia. In it, the man is to be recognized as the aggregation of the qualities assumed in idea of a politician, especially in republican and democratic regimes, despite its representation being variously considered, even forgotten, however always recovered and rearranged.

Rediscovered by Petrarch and launched by Machiavelli in the Anglo-Saxon world, the icon of Cincinnatus has had different fates on the two sides of the Atlantic. In Cato's Letters, specifically in no. 38 of July 22, 1721, Thomas Gordon reflects on power and what men of government should be like: "those who possess it," Gordon writes, "having it often more at heart to increase their power than to make it useful; and to be terrible, rather than beneficent." Gordon describes the distinction between corrupt rulers and honest rulers, and to be concrete he brings the example of Cincinnatus who, having performed the task he had received for the sake of Rome, turned away from power and its dealings by resigning "with universal applause."

Cincinnatus was not, and is not, merely the icon of an era and a republic. Resumed and nurtured through time in a republican dimension, his myth has become, in a particularly propitious political and ideal context, a normative agent: if it sometimes succeeded in guiding the concrete behaviors of men, the fact that it inspired the institutional arrangements of some modern republics, especially the American one, is even more significant.

Cincinnatus was not a democrat, but certainly a republican; he was an aristocrat, but not an oligarchic extremist; he sought a balance between the different interests of citizens and his actions were rather inspired by moderation. He considered the existence of a strong and independent senate essential to this end. But Cincinnatus had also shown, guided by his public spirit, that the Roman option of granting a strong power – to the consuls and, when necessary, to the dictator – was the best to ensure the effectiveness of government action and, at the same time, immune from the danger of authoritarian degeneration since the temporary nature of each judiciary, reinforced by the prohibition of renewal of office terms, guaranteed just as effectively in this regard.

Americans at the time of the Revolution, the most educated among them, were imbued, indeed enraptured, by this institutional culture, which they drew upon before the Childcraft by reading in Latin Tully, the Cicero of *de legibus*, and other works that had quickly provided a vocabulary that soon became the vocabulary of American republicanism: most of them were not exactly democratic, but republican and convinced, and feared, in a sense, the power of a Parliament, such as was given in England. This *elite* would guide the drafting of the 1987 Constitution, in which the governing role assigned to the President-Senate dyad is primary: again, an indication from classical sources attesting to Cincinnatus' concrete thought and action.

A wide-ranging, historically and spatially exhaustive survey of the genesis and circulation, over a couple of millennia, of the Cincinnatus paradigm is absent in Western juris-political literature; and it promises interesting developments in order to capture substantial differences in the political-constitutional regimes of the West. While it is true that the management, especially prolonged management, of power easily makes the managers believe that they belong on a higher level than the common people, the choice of Cincinnatus as a model of republican man, as the statue in Cincinnati's park may suggest, still has an educational function, following the best republican tradition, which has regularly relied, albeit in very different contexts, upon the *exempla* of strongly virtuous men to spread in citizens and, primarily, in rulers that public spirit without which no republic could recognize and maintain itself as such.

The following pages will recount the creation and development, between history and legend, of an icon of modern, revolutionary republicanism: through Cincinnatus and his myth, the production of evidence of the existence of a political culture common to the entire West, from one side of the Atlantic to the other.

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