

Between Narrative and Interpretation: Writing History in the Ancient World

Unit 9: Livy

Introduction

Titus Livius (best known in English as Livy) was born in Patavium, modern Padua, in north-east Italy in about 60 BC. We know very little about his life. He was obviously a Latin native speaker, but he was not a Roman citizen at birth: the region he was from, Transpadane Gaul, received the Roman citizenship only in 47 BC, after a law passed by Julius Caesar, who had many connections and supporters in that region. Patavium was a reasonably important town, both economically and culturally. It seems that Livy spent his youth there; there is no evidence that he ever held any political or military responsibility. His historical work suggests that he had a thorough rhetorical education, and that he had a significant knowledge of the main philosophical trends of his own time. It is unclear when he moved to Rome, and we do not even know what his personal position was in the troubled times of the Civil War that troubled Italy in the Forties and the Thirties. It is certain, however, that Livy soon joined the close circle of the emperor Augustus, who liked to surround himself with intellectuals and writers, the famous circle of Maecenas, such as Vergil and Horace. Augustus did not mind his expressing a point of view that was different from others (*Ann.* 4.34):

Titus Livius, pre-eminently famous for eloquence and truthfulness, extolled Cneius Pompeius in such a panegyric that Augustus called him Pompeianus, and yet this was no obstacle to their friendship.

We know that Livy returned to Patavium, although we do not know when. We have an inscription that appears to be his tombstone, and was discovered at Patavium (*CIL* 5.2975).

The structure of Livy's work

Livy is known for his extraordinarily wide-ranging work on Roman history, the *ab Urbe condita libri* ('books from the foundation of Rome'): a narrative that started with the foundation of the city and ended with the death of Drusus in 9 BC. It consisted of 142 books: an exceptionally wide compilation, which – despite the obvious difficulties and expense that the transcription of such a long work implied – circulated until the fifth century BC, along with a number of abridgements and short versions. At some point in late antiquity, however, the text of Livy got lost: what we have now corresponds to approximately one fourth of the original. We have the whole text of the first decade (books 1-10), which deals with the history of early Rome, until the Third Samnite War (293 BC); the books from 21 to 30, which cover the history of the Second Punic War (225-201 BC); and the books from 31 to 45, which deal with the Macedonian Wars, and are invaluable evidence for the Roman conquest of the Mediterranean.

The lost sections of Livy's text may be reconstructed – albeit in an imperfect and approximate way – through the abridged version of Livy's work that were produced in antiquity: first of all, the so-called *Periochae*, brief summaries of each book produced in late antiquity, which may be found at the end of all the main editions of Livy (their accuracy can sometimes be questioned, but they remain an excellent document); secondly, the compilation of the prodigies recorded in Livy's work written by the fourth century AD erudite Julius Obsequens, which is invaluable for the understanding of Livy's approach to religious matters. As we would expect, Livy's work was used by many ancient historians, and we can safely recognise more or less clear traces of Livy's narrative in a number of authors from the imperial period: Florus (second century AD), Eutropius (fourth century), Orosius (fifth century), Cassiodorus (sixth century). The main trends of Livy's narrative in the missing portions of his work may be derived with some certainty from these works, although there are some methodological difficulties: while authors like Florus or Eutropius do not appear to be historians of great originality, we cannot be entirely certain that they followed Livy's narrative as consistently, or as uncritically as some modern scholars would think.

The destiny of Livy's work was determined, as we have mentioned, by its size. The problems was perceived as a serious one already in antiquity; it is perhaps for this reason that the text of the *ab Urbe condita libri* always appears divided in groups of ten books, so that the readers could pick and use the section they were interested in. In fact, some modern critics have argued that the whole work of Livy was divided in pentads since its very composition, and that the structure itself of the work was based on this principle. Surely this is impossible to prove, as well as the similar hypothesis that postulates that the work was divided in fifteen books. It is true, however, that Livy's books are not simply determined by chronological consideration (e.g. one year = one book), but follow some thematic division. This is a rough, oversimplified overview of the themes in Livy's work, based on the surviving books and the summaries of the *Periochae*:

Books 1-5: origins of Rome, kingship, beginnings of the Republic; invasion of the Gauls (385)

Books 6-15: Roman conquest of Italy (until 264)

Books 16-20: First Punic War (until 219)

Books 21-30: Second Punic War (until 201)

Books 31-48: Macedonian and Syrian Wars (until 150)

Books 49-52: Third Punic War and conquest of Corinth (until 145)

Books 53-70: Republican history until the tribunate of Livius Drusus (91)

Books 71-76: Social War (91-88)

Books 77-90: Marius, Sulla and Lepidus (88-77)

Books 91-96: the events up to Pompey's victory in Spain (77-72)

Books 97-103: the events until Caesar's campaign against the Helvetii (72-58)

Books 104-108: the conquest of Gaul (58-51)

Books 109-116: the Civil War and Caesar's dictatorship (51-44)

Books 117-123: the Second Civil War and the victory of Octavian (44-28)

Books 124-142: the reign of Augustus until the death of Drusus (28-9)

The chronology of the work is quite difficult to establish, especially because we know so little about Livy's life. It appears that the first five books were published between 27 and 25: there is a reference to the first closure of the gates of the Janus temple, which happened in 29, but not to the second one, which happened in 25, and Octavian is already referred to as 'Augustus', a title that he took up in 27. There are other occasional references to contemporary events in the extant books. Tacitus' reference to Augustus' views on Livy's account of Pompey imply that the relevant books appeared before AD 14. We cannot be certain of any detail, but it seems pretty

certain that a huge achievement like Livy's could only have happened over the space of four decades: we can postulate that about three books were composed every year. It seems quite clear that, as it was often the case in ancient historiography, clusters of books were published at different times – but we cannot say anything meaningful about the various groups.

The scale of Livy's efforts is clear. But what can we say about his value as historian? Again, some caution is necessary. We have only a portion of his work, and we cannot assume that he followed the same methodologies throughout his great project, especially because its composition took such a long time. What applies to his narrative of early Rome may well not apply to his lost narrative of the Civil Wars. There seems to be a serious methodological problem throughout Livy's work. Livy consistently fails to use the original documentary evidence for the facts he deals with. His narrative consistently relies on other literary sources, but it never seems to be based on the rich public records that were produced in Rome, be it the pontifical chronicle, the records of the Senate, the private archives of prominent families and personalities, or the documents produced by the priestly colleges. A case in point is the handling of the case of the Bacchanalia in 186 BC, when a decree of the senate outlawed the practice of the cult of Bacchus throughout Italy: the discrepancies between Livy's account of those measures (39.8-19) and the inscription that records them (*CIL* 1².581) are considerable, and show beyond doubt that Livy did not consult the official records of the Senate.

As to Livy's use of the authors that preceded him, we can be confident that it was widespread and consistent, but we are often not in a position to draw safe conclusions. For many decades one of the main constituencies of Livian studies was the *Quellenforschung* (= study of the sources) of Livy's extant book. Authors like Alfred Klotz would devote the best part of their intellectual energies trying to determine which parts of Livy's narrative depended from which authors. Fortunately, confidence in this sort of exercise has now diminished. Although it is apparent that Livy usually relies on a restricted number of sources for the various sections of his work, scholars seem more prepared to recognise that he was able to use his own critical judgement even when he happened to follow some of his predecessors. For the

first decade the first century annalists Valerius Antias, Licinius Macer and Aelius Tubero were used quite intensively; for books 21-30, the influence of the second century BC historians Caelius Antipater and Polybius has been recognised; for books 31-50, it appears that Polybius was the main source for the events that took place in the Greek East, while Roman authors like Valerius Antias and Quadrigarius were used for the events in Rome and Italy. On some occasions it is Livy himself who specifies what his sources are; in other cases his sources can be inferred from the tone and style of his narrative. The sections that rely on Valerius Antias, for instance, feature an unusually frequent use of public records – a typical practice of Antias. We cannot say anything certain, of course, on the sources of the lost books that dealt with the second and the first centuries; nor can we solve the long-debated issue of whether Livy made use of the works of poets like Ennius or Naevius, who dealt with historical events in their epic poems.

Livy's rhetoric

Whatever conclusion one may reach on his sources and his working method, it is undisputable that Livy was not the sort of the historian that Polybius claimed to be. Factors like personal experience or detailed knowledge of the issues at stake in the narrative were not paramount in his concerns: Livy comes across as a scholar, and as a skilful rhetorician. He was deeply aware, however, of the limits of historical knowledge, and of the problems posed by his sources. The *praefatio* (introduction) to his work spells out some important working principles (6-7, transl. Rev. Canon Roberts):

The traditions of what happened prior to the foundation of the City or whilst it was being built, are more fitted to adorn the creations of the poet than the authentic records of the historian, and I have no intention of establishing either their truth or their falsehood. This much licence is conceded to the ancients, that by intermingling human actions with divine they may confer a more august dignity on the origins of states. Now, if any nation ought to be allowed to claim a sacred origin and point back to a divine paternity that nation is Rome. For such is her renown in war that when she chooses to represent Mars as her own and her founder's father, the nations of the world accept the statement with the same equanimity with which they accept her dominion. But whatever opinions may be formed or criticisms passed upon these and similar traditions, I regard them as of small importance.

Livy was quite aware of the complexity of the historical tradition that he had to work on. On many occasions do we find him weighing the different, and sometimes conflicting interpretations that the same authors give of the same event. He often presents his view on a given event, sometimes specifying where he derived his favoured version from, sometimes using clauses like 'it appears that' (*constat*), 'no doubt' (*haud dubie*); on other occasions he uses more cautious formulas like 'I find this in some authors' (*invenio apud quosdam*), without explicitly committing himself to a given version. His acceptance of a version does not necessarily depend on the same method. On some occasions, we see him accepting the version of the authors who wrote nearer the period in question; on other occasions, we see him following the version voiced by the majority of his sources. We may see this as a symptom of inconsistency; but we can also interpret it as evidence of independent critical spirit, and of the ability of adapting his judgement to different problem, and different material. Let us see this interesting example of Livy's respect for his sources, and awareness of the limits of the historical tradition (29.14.5-9):

The attention of the senate was engrossed by a very difficult question; they had to decide who was the best and noblest man in the State. Every one felt that to gain this distinction would be for him a real victory, far outweighing any official position or honourable distinction which either patricians or plebeians could confer. Of all the great and good men in the State they adjudged the best and noblest to be P. Scipio, the son of the Cnaeus Scipio who had fallen in Spain; a young man not yet old enough to be quaestor. What special merits of his induced the senate to come to this conclusion I should have been glad to record for posterity had the writers who lived nearest to those days handed them down. As it is I will not obtrude my conjectures upon a matter hidden in the mists of antiquity.

There are, however, some significant limits to the quality of Livy's narrative. His reliance on his source, or sources, at times becomes excessive: some figures are reproduced without any scruple as to their resemblance; there is plenty of inaccuracy about the geography of their results; the attitude to religious problems, such as the reliability of prodigies, is rather inconsistent too.

Livy and the Augustan age

Praefatio 6-13:

There is this exceptionally beneficial and fruitful advantage to be derived from the study of the past, that you see, set in the clear light of historical truth, examples of every possible type. From these you may select for yourself and your country what to imitate, and also what, as being mischievous in its inception and disastrous in its issues, you are to avoid. Unless, however, I am misled by affection for my undertaking, there has never existed any commonwealth greater in power, with a purer morality, or more fertile in good examples; or any state in which avarice and luxury have been so late in making their inroads, or poverty and frugality so highly and continuously honoured, showing so clearly that the less wealth men possessed the less they coveted. In these latter years wealth has brought avarice in its train, and the unlimited command of pleasure has created in men a passion for ruining themselves and everything else through self-indulgence and licentiousness. But criticisms which will be unwelcome, even when perhaps necessary, must not appear in the commencement at all events of this extensive work. We should much prefer to start with favourable omens, and if we could have adopted the poets' custom, it would have been much pleasanter to commence with prayers and supplications to gods and goddesses that they would grant a favourable and successful issue to the great task before us.

We should ask ourselves how Livy's attempt to write the history of Rome fit in the Augustan period, and in its intellectual climate. We know almost nothing about Livy's political positions, as we have seen, but some elements may be drawn from his own work: he seems to have very little sympathy for the popular role in government, and a general sympathy towards the position of the Senate and the propertied classes. The importance of defending public freedom against the threat of would-be monarchs is often restated – some affinities with the rhetoric of a figure like Cicero have been recognised, and indeed we know that Livy wrote a very sympathetic account of Cicero's death. There is no doubt, however, that the fabric of Livy's narrative was clearly and comprehensively favourable to Augustus and his agenda. Livy, after all, was an Italian new citizen, who must have had a very clear understanding of the advantages of the Augustan peace after decades of war and instability throughout the peninsula. His sympathy for Pompey or Cicero must not have distracted him too much from this fundamental ideological point. Quite cynically, but plausibly, we could also argue that Livy's work would have never had such a wide circulation under the Principate if he had contained any serious criticism of the Augustan regime. After all, Livy consistently comes across as a passionate patriot, who was proud of Rome's

achievements and identity, and viewed its celebration as one of his great literary missions. His account of the disappearance of Romulus is a summary of historical method and patriotism (1.16, transl. Rev. Canon Roberts):

After these immortal achievements, Romulus held a review of his army at the 'Caprae Palus' in the Campus Martius. A violent thunder storm suddenly arose and enveloped the king in so dense a cloud that he was quite invisible to the assembly. From that hour Romulus was no longer seen on earth. When the fears of the Roman youth were allayed by the return of bright, calm sun-shine after such fearful weather, they saw that the royal seat was vacant. Whilst they fully believed the assertion of the Senators, who had been standing close to him, that he had been snatched away to heaven by a whirlwind, still, like men suddenly bereaved, fear and grief kept them for some time speechless. At length, after a few had taken the initiative, the whole of those present hailed Romulus as 'a god, the son of a god, the King and Father of the City of Rome.' They put up supplications for his grace and favour, and prayed that he would be propitious to his children and save and protect them. I believe, however, that even then there were some who secretly hinted that he had been torn limb from limb by the senators—a tradition to this effect, though certainly a very dim one, has filtered down to us. The other, which I follow, has been the prevailing one, due, no doubt, to the admiration felt for the man and the apprehensions excited by his disappearance. This generally accepted belief was strengthened by one man's clever device. The tradition runs that Proculus Julius, a man whose authority had weight in matters of even the gravest importance, seeing how deeply the community felt the loss of the king, and how incensed they were against the senators, came forward into the assembly and said: 'Quirites! at break of dawn, to-day, the Father of this City suddenly descended from heaven and appeared to me. Whilst, thrilled with awe, I stood rapt before him in deepest reverence, praying that I might be pardoned for gazing upon him, 'Go,' said he, 'tell the Romans that it is the will of heaven that my Rome should be the head of all the world. Let them henceforth cultivate the arts of war, and let them know assuredly, and hand down the knowledge to posterity, that no human might can withstand the arms of Rome.' It is marvellous what credit was given to this man's story, and how the grief of the people and the army was soothed by the belief which had been created in the immortality of Romulus.

One could hardly think of a more deeply Augustan statement.

Livy's ideology

Livy is in many ways a discreet narrator. He is not keen on general methodological or ideological statements. His handling of religion is quite typical: he never sets out his basic principles on how to handle the evidence for the religious history of the Republic, or indeed his opinions about the reliability of prodigies or divination. It seems quite clear, however, that Livy was persuaded of the importance of public religion as a factor of cohesion and identity for the State. In his view, there

was a solid link between the practice of *pietas* (piousness), the fulfilment of religious obligations, and the prosperity of the State. The emphasis on religious factors is a factor for the analysis of the political and military events, and the destiny of the State. This is perfectly consistent with what we know of Livy's belief in the importance of respecting traditions and ancestral morals, both at the private and public levels: Livy is one of the many Roman intellectuals of the first century BC who expressed their concern for the political and moral decline of the State. His scruple towards *religio* and its observance was a serious issue; it seems that Livy could not be more distant from Polybius' view that religion was a formidable political tool for the cohesion of the State, and for the elites' control of the populace.

Despite his belief in the importance of religion for the development of the Republic, Livy was prepared to use some critical enquiry for the information on the mythology. Let us see some examples (always in the translation of transl. Rev. Canon Roberts).

1.4.1-4: But the Fates had, I believe, already decreed the origin of this great city and the foundation of the mightiest empire under heaven. The Vestal was forcibly violated and gave birth to twins. She named Mars as their father, either because she really believed it, or because the fault might appear less heinous if a deity were the cause of it. But neither gods nor men sheltered her or her babes from the king's cruelty; the priestess was thrown into prison, the boys were ordered to be thrown into the river.

3.8.1-2: Whether it was that the gods graciously answered prayer or that the unhealthy season had passed, people gradually threw off the influence of the epidemic and the public health became more satisfactory. Attention was once more turned to affairs of State.

5.13.3-5: In consequence either of the unhealthy weather occasioned by the sudden change from cold to heat, or from some other cause, the severe winter was followed by a pestilential summer, which proved fatal to man and beast. As neither a cause nor a cure could be found for its fatal ravages, the senate ordered the Sibylline Books to be consulted. The priests who had charge of them appointed for the first time in Rome a *lectisternium*. Apollo and Latona, Diana and Hercules, Mercury and Neptune were for eight days propitiated on three couches decked with the most magnificent coverlets that could be obtained. Solemnities were conducted also in private houses. It is stated that throughout the City the front gates of the houses were thrown open and all sorts of things placed for general use in the open courts, all comers, whether acquaintances or strangers, being brought in to share the hospitality. Men who had been enemies held friendly and sociable conversations with each other and abstained from all litigation, the manacles even were removed from prisoners during this period,

and afterwards it seemed an act of impiety that men to whom the gods had brought such relief should be put in chains again.

The combination between piety and rationalism has been viewed by some authors as a symptom of Livy's interest in Stoicism, a philosophical school that allowed a space for divination. His belief in the gods' protection of Rome and its destiny could in fact recall the Stoic concept of *pronoia* (providence), a governing principle of the world. This is a possibility, but it should be considered with caution. We cannot rule out that the attitude that Livy shows towards religion was determined, to some extent at least, by the sources that he used in different sections of his work. There is, however, a leading theme throughout Livy's work, which must be taken into account, notwithstanding the reservations that we can have on his working method. The narrative of Livy depicts the history of Rome as a series of tests and challenges, which constantly proved the worth of the city and its inhabitants. Livy's history is deeply moralistic, and to an extent it may be regarded as the history of several abstract concepts in the historical development of Rome: *pietas*, *fides* (loyalty), *concordia* (concord), *disciplina* (discipline), *dignitas* (gravity, decency), *gravitas* (seriousness).

This leads us to the last point of our survey: Livy's literary skills. There is no separation between the historian and the writer in the ancient world, and Livy is no exception. His emphasis on the moral dimension in Roman history is mirrored by a great interest in the psychology of the individuals that populate his narrative. The well-known broadness of his style is intended to give his narrative the solemnity and the broadness of scope that the events deserve. Livy demonstrates on various occasions his knowledge of ancient historiography. The account of the Second Punic War, for instance, shows some significant affinities with the narrative of the Sicilian expedition in Thucydides (books 6 and 7), with its strong emphasis on the moral and psychological dimension of that campaign. For Livy, writing about history is primarily writing about men, about their passions and their flaws.

Suggested reading

1. J. W. Liebeschuetz, 'The Religious Position of Livy's History', *The Journal of Roman Studies* Vol. 57, No. 1/2 (1967), 45-55 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/299342>]
2. P. A. Stadter, 'The Structure of Livy's History', *Historia* vol. 21 (1972) 287-307 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4435265>]
3. R. Syme, 'Livy and Augustus', *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 64 (1959) 27-87 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/310937>]
4. A. Feldherr, *Spectacle and Society in Livy's History*, Berkeley 1998 [available through California Digital Library, <http://www.escholarship.org/editions/>]
5. P. G. Walsh, 'Making a Drama out of a Crisis: Livy on the Bacchanalia', *Greece & Rome* vol. 43, no. 2 (Oct., 1996), 188-203 [<http://www.jstor.org/stable/643095>]
6. T. J. Luce, *Livy: the Composition of His History*, Princeton 1967.
7. J. D. Chaplin, *Livy's Exemplary History*, Oxford 2000.
8. J. L. Moles, 'Livy's Preface', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 49 (1993) 141-168.
9. M. Fox, *Roman Historical Myths: the Regal Period in Augustan Literature*, Oxford 1996, ch. 4.
10. R. Morello, 'Livy's Alexander Digression (9.17-19): Counterfactuals and Apologetics', *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 92 (2002), 62-85 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3184860>]
11. B. S. Rodgers, 'Great Expeditions: Livy on Thucydides', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* vol. 116 (1986) 335-352 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/283923>].

You should also consult, whenever relevant, the commentaries on Livy published by Oxford University Press, by R. M. Ogilvie (books 1-5), S. Oakley (6-10), and J. Briscoe (31-40).

Short assignment: Can we say anything meaningful about Livy's interest in the history of his own times?