

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

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ANCIENT ROMAN ESSAY

Contents

HISTORY

Livy (59 B.C.-17 A.D.)

Tacitus (56 A.D.-117 A.D.)

PHILOSOPHY

Week 14 Marcus Aurelius (121 A.D.—180 A.D) .

Week 15 Aurelius Augustinus (Saint Augustine) (354 A.D.--430 A.D.)

HISTORY

Overview Cultural self-awareness, the construction of something like national self-consciousness, depends on a group's historical consciousness. You have to know where you have been, as a group or nation, before you can know who you are. The same with an individual person. You have to know your own background, personality, temper, talents and weaknesses, and you need to know them as part of the living narrative which you are. An individual, like a state, comes together around such self-awareness.

The historians of Ancient Rome There was an abundance of historians in ancient Rome, many of them today virtually unknown, and remaining only as references, or in almost illegible fragments. Four of the most influential are these:

Sallust Sallust (86 B.C.E.--35 B.C.E.) was a man of middle class origins, a populist of a sort, and a strong partisan of Julius Caesar. His ruling theme was the moral decline of the Roman state and its citizens; a position he maintained undisturbed by his own felonious past. He is perhaps best known to us for his study of the Catilinarian conspiracy (63 B.C.); his interest in which, apparently, was chiefly to exonerate his ally Julius Caesar from any complicity.

Livy Livy (59 B.C.E.-17 C.E.) Livy is known for one great work, *Ab Urbe Condita (From the time of the Founding of the City)*, an history of the Roman state, chiefly the Republic, through to the imperial accession of Augustus. The work was of wide interest, sparking followers of the craft of history, and setting a model for both anecdotal and chronological history writing.

Tacitus Tacitus (58 C.E.-120 C.E.) was a masterful historian of Imperial Rome from the death of Augustus (14 C.E.) to the Roman-Jewish conflict of 70 C.E. His two great works, *The Histories* (105 C.E.) and *The Annals* (117 C.E.), are preoccupied with the events and intricacies of the courts of the Emperors Tiberius, Claudius, and Nero. He plumbs every depth of the human heart, in a period when corruption was rife and baroque.

Ammianus Marcellinus Ammianus (330-400 C.E.) was a Roman soldier and historian, whose lengthy *Res Gestae (Events; Deeds)* essentially covers the history of Rome from where Tacitus left off, to the death of the Emperor Valens (370 C.E.) Ammianus has provided the foundation of much of what we know of fourth century Rome.

Readings

Dudley, Donald, *The World of Tacitus*, London, 1968.

Matthews, J., *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, Baltimore, 1989.

Discussion questions

The Roman historians were famously conscious of their Greek historian predecessors as models. Do you see the work of Thucydides or Herodotus in the major Roman historians?

What kinds of self-image did the Roman historians bring into their work?

Does each of them mark his history with a distinctive personal trademark? Explain.

What kind of training did the Roman historians have, in writing history? Did they go to graduate school? Did they learn from predecessors? Did they learn from life?

Livy (59 B.C.-17 A.D.)

Virgil and Livy. As we are working through Roman literature on the basis of types of imagination, we should note how ‘history’ differs from the historical epic of Virgil, which might at first glance seem also to be ‘history.’ In fact the *Aeneid* and the works of Livy might also seem to intersect as works of poetry, for we will find, on reading our Livy, that in his story telling mode of history writing he differs greatly from what an age like ours would consider ‘scientific writing of history.’

Apart from the formal matter of prosody itself—Livy in prose, Virgil in highly self-conscious dactyls, which breathe a line by line dialogue with Homer’s own verses—Virgil may be said to thread his material with vision, a purposiveness centered on getting the founder of a new Rome to his destination, while Livy narrates historical material that is itself anecdotal and digressive, though like Virgil Livy too has an ultimate interest in praising aspects of his own culture, and promoting attention to them. When we come to Tacitus, the following week, we will find a more empirical historian than Livy, and have little trouble in distinguishing the historical from the epic view point. With Livy we need to make our distinctions carefully, between the two genres with which we are opening this syllabus.

Livy and the world of Augustus. Like Lucretius and Virgil, though a generation or two later, Livy was born into the turbulent world we have already met, out of which Augustus, formerly Octavian, was to emerge the victor and the first Emperor; the world in which Caesar, Antony, and Pompey had gone down to defeat before the power of historical change.

Livy’s popularity. Where Livy was born was relevant to his world view. He was born and raised in the north of Italy, near the present city of Padua, a region traditionally conservative, and accustomed to praise of Old Roman Values. To that viewpoint Livy remained faithful throughout his life, though by the 30’s B.C., when he moved semi-permanently to Rome, he was exposed to the intense new world forming around him, and was in fact a close friend, and distant relative, of the Emperor to be, Augustus. Though Livy’s one surviving work, a *History of Rome From the Founding of the City* (753 B.C.), became a popular text, and indeed a touchstone for his compatriots, as they formulated their own history for themselves, Livy remained in favor with the new imperial culture, the tendencies of which unmistakably moved away from the ‘old simplicity’ and ‘staunch rural values’ which Livy admired in the early centuries of his culture.

Annals and Traditional History. The history Livy constructs was by his time part of ancient oral tradition, as well as of written histories by predecessors whose works are now lost. His history opens with the founding of the city of Rome by Aeneas—the same narrative as Virgil’s—and is left to us in three main sections, devoted, respectively, to the origins of Roman culture, various consulships in the sixth century B.C., and then incidents in the political history of Livy’s own time. We might say, today, that the way Livy’s historical mind works—a mixture of annals, which report the administrative leaders of the Republic for each year, with critical narration of traditional material—is cunning in its human perceptions but naive in its ‘notion of historical method.’ An example may help us nail down this point.

Roman origin tales. Origin tales are central to Livy’s *History*, which begins credently with the tale of Aeneas’ founding, the same launch point Virgil employed. There follows a sequence of generations, several hundred years, in which peace dominates, the new nation flourishes; but then, as with the struggle of Cain and Abel, conflict comes in, needed to generate the birth pangs of the new world. The struggle pits two brothers, both candidates for the kingship, and turns violent when the younger flouts the rule of seniority, and sets off a train of consequences—it’s an intricate read, here—which eventuates in the rape of a Vestal Virgin, whose twin offspring barely escape the homicidal plans of the wronged king. At this point myth, rather than putative history, enters to divinize the lineages in store for Rome. The twin infants, as we all know, find themselves on the river bank ready to be washed away, when a she-wolf appears, on her way for a drink of the river, gives teat to the babes, saves their lives, and readies them, Romulus and Remus, for a role as the true legislative founders of the Roman State.

The voice of Livy. What is the voice of Livy, as he tells this historical tale? In many ways he delights in the telling, and gratefully plugs these hallowed events into the ongoing tale. But Livy is, remember, living

more than five centuries after the origin tale, and in a culture of world sophistication, in the milieu of speakers and creators like Virgil, Cicero, and Catullus. Unable even slightly to wink at us, as he maintains the old tradition, he feels obliged to comment as follows, on the reaction of the Emperor's flock-master, to the advent of the twins in his hut:

his (the flock master's) name was Faustulus. He took the children to his hut and gave them to his wife Larentia to bring up. Some writers think that Larentia, from her unchaste life, had got the nickname of "She-wolf" amongst the shepherds, and that this was the origin of the marvellous story.

As an historian, we have said, Livy accepts a mission not wholly different from that of the poet. But he does so with a clear acknowledgement, that he knows how to undercut his tale when he needs to.

Readings: Livy, *The Early History of Rome, Books I-IV, translated by Ogilvie* (London, Penguin, 2002.) Read entire text.

Dorey, T.A., *Livy* (London, 1971.)

Discussion questions:

To what extent are Livy and Virgil similar, in their efforts to reconstruct the origins of Rome through literature? Do they both 'glorify' those origins?

What do you think of the 'historical value' of founding tales—Horace at the Bridge, Romulus and Remus—such as Livy uses to construct the early parts of his history?

Does Livy write as a friend of the new Imperial world, or as an old Roman democrat, fundamentally opposed to the new?

Tacitus (58 A.D.-117 A.D.)

Livy and Tacitus. From our reading in Livy we note that the Romans were intensely interested in their own past, which, like all peoples, they manipulated in part for the sake of establishing their national image. This very motive, as we have seen, may parallel that of Virgil, in writing the *Aeneid*—for the Romans of the late first century B.C. were preoccupied with using the past to shape the present and gain power over the future. When we come to the historian Tacitus, however, our account must be different. Tacitus observes human affairs dispassionately, without projecting them into a future where they would acquire their meaning.

Tacitus and the imperial world. Tacitus was born well into the imperial period of Rome—Augustus Caesar died in 17 A.D.—and in his most famous works, *The Histories* and *The Annals* he writes directly of his own time, specifically of the Imperial reigns of Tiberius (42 B.C.-37 A.D.), Claudius (10 B.C.-54 A.D.), and Nero (37 A.D.-68 A.D.). His own life brought him into contact with the major players on the political/imperial scene. Born in the provinces—probably in Gallia Narbonensis—Tacitus soon entered political life in Rome, where throughout his career life he was brilliantly active as a Senator/orator, a sought after lawyer in the increasingly litigious atmosphere of imperial Rome, and a provincial governor in the East, where he gained experience and great distinction. In other words, when it came to the dense historical material of the present, Tacitus had much personal awareness to bring to bear. While he proudly commented that he wrote his histories *sine ira et studio, without anger or zeal*, they nonetheless bear the marks of the hot fire of political action. There is no mistaking, in those works, a hatred of tyranny, and a surgical scorn for the kinds of voluptuous infighting which marked the struggles, among the successors of Augustus, to occupy the center of power in Rome.

Tacitus' style as historian. The unusual mixture of personal involvement with terse and observant style, a style both intense and withdrawn, forces our attention onto the way Tacitus went about informing himself, as an historian. (We have noted that Livy turned to earlier and anecdotal Roman historians, in constructing his history.) The answer is that Tacitus is both working from his personal experience, and from a consultation of contemporary documents, to which he devotes analytical attention (*sine ira et studio*.) Among his written sources were: the *Acta*, the official records, of the actions of the Roman senate; copies of official speeches; copies of personal letters to which he had access; the *acta diurnala populi romani*, the official news of daily developments in Rome.

The Annals. In *The Annals* Tacitus plunges into the complexities of high level political struggle—for stakes richly involving love and power—the material of a sitcom like *Dallas*, but played out on the stage of Imperial rule. His presentation of the Death of Agrippina, the mother of Nero, shows his historical hand. The years following the death of Augustus presented a bewildering tangle of personal interrelations, among ambitious, lustful, perverse, greedy competitors for imperial power, or for the voluminous perks that spilled on all sides of the royal throne. The attempts of Agrippina, to raise her son Nero to imperial status, involve her in complex machinations which, because she is trying to manipulate a nest of vipers like Nero, Sejanus, and Britannicus, leads to her brutal and brilliantly described death.

Cluvius relates that Agrippina in her eagerness to retain her influence went so far that more than once at midday, when Nero, even at that hour, was flushed with wine and feasting, she presented herself attractively attired to her half intoxicated son and offered him her person, and that when kinsfolk observed wanton kisses and caresses, portending infamy, it was Seneca who sought a female's aid against a woman's fascinations, and hurried in Acte, the freed-girl, who alarmed at her own peril and at Nero's disgrace, told him that the incest was notorious, as his mother boasted of it, and that the soldiers would never endure the rule of an impious sovereign. Fabius Rusticus tells us that it was not Agrippina, but Nero, who lusted for the crime, and that it was frustrated by the adroitness of that same freed-girl. Cluvius's account, however, is also that of all other authors, and popular belief inclines to it, whether it was that Agrippina really conceived such a monstrous wickedness in her heart, or perhaps because the thought of a strange passion seemed comparatively credible in a woman, who in her girlish years had allowed herself to be seduced by Lepidus in the hope of winning power, had stooped with a like ambition to the lust of Pallas, and had trained herself for every infamy by her marriage with her uncle.

The mind of Tacitus. A close look at the present passage lets the reader into the labyrinthine complexity of Tacitus' historical analysis. (You will want to read this historian with a fine toothed comb.) There are two interpretations of Agrippina's behavior toward her son: one of which lays the stress on the mother's lust, the other on that of the son. (The preference given to the second is backed up by other authorities, and given credence by further biographical evidence from Agrippina's youth.) Tacitus manages, in this passage, to generate subtle psychology-- *it was Seneca who sought a female's aid against a woman's fascinations--*

and to introduce the subordinate motivations of two smaller players in the paragraph's drama, Acte and Seneca. This rich crowding of perspectives is characteristic of the never simplistic texture of Tacitus' history.

Readings: Tacitus, *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, translated by William Brodribb (Digireads.com, 2005.)

Martin, Ronald, *Tacitus* (Berkeley, 1981).

Discussion questions:

What is Tacitus' personal attitude toward the intrigues and machinations at the imperial court? How does he view the death of Agrippina?

How does Tacitus differ from Livy as an historian? Which of the two seems more to fit the 'modern model' of the critical historian?

What evidence do you see, in Tacitus' work, of his career as a politician and orator?

Essay

Does Livy, as historian, at all carry out the same project as Virgil, in the *Aeneid*? Is Livy, too, concerned to 'glorify' the origins of his culture?

Tacitus declares that he writes his history 'objectively.' Do you think he is correct about that? If not, what do you see as his 'point of view'? Does he in any way write like what we today call an investigative reporter?

Roman Philosophy

Greece and Rome The adage which says that Greece (meaning Greek culture and thought) conquered Rome even while the Roman military was overwhelming Greece, in the final two centuries of the classical era, applies in spades to the influx of Greek philosophy into early Roman thought.

Lucretius Lucretius (*The Nature of Things*, 50 B.C.E.) is an epic poem, in the same dactylic-hexameter meter we know from Homer and Virgil, and is an excellent instance of one of the greatest Roman philosophical texts highly dependent on Greek writing, in this case on the thoughts of Epicurus, the fourth century Greek moralist. Lucretius also thrived on the cosmological speculative physics of the Milesian (Asia Minor) philosophers. From those writers Lucretius formed or enriched his idea that the fundamental substance is atoms linking to one another in the void, and conjoining to form such random developments as organic life.

Seneca and Stoicism In the years following Lucretius (d. 55 B.C.) two of the finest Roman minds—Cicero (d. 43 B.C.) and Seneca (d. 65 A.D.)—drew their spiritual inspiration largely from the fund of Stoic ideas, a world view founded in late fourth century B.C. Athens, and destined to grow in strength throughout the Roman Empire. The basic thrust of this worldview was to promote self-control and the human peace that comes from co-operating with others, as well as from understanding how the world works. Cicero imposed a skeptical spin—‘our knowledge is limited—on this philosophy, while Seneca stressed control over the passions, and the dangers of sacrificing our independent judgments of things.

Marcus Aurelius To the modern reader, the most accessible of Roman philosophers is the Emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180 C.E.), whose *Meditations* continue the Stoic trend of much Roman thought, while inflecting it with the standpoint from which he wrote—as a military commander on the front line, snatching a night time respite whenever he could, to write the text of his deeply human memoir, which he had no thought of publishing. Life lasts but a moment, he says, and we should coolly observe and enjoy our brief moment, meanwhile keeping our eye on the whole cosmos, and avoiding the delusions of vanity or flattery. While the world view of Marcus Aurelius still belongs to the Greek sphere, and is far from the Christian—lying ahead—it seems a harbinger of that one-god Platonism which was to shake Saint Augustine (354-430 C.E.) and to make of his *Confessions* a new kind of voice in the Roman world.

Saint Augustine Is it a philosophical voice we hear in Augustine? His speculations on God interweave with his reflections on memory, despair, guilt, hope. The fund of moral investigations that swarms through Roman Stoic and Epicurean thought, and that links Greek to Roman intellects, emerges in Augustine at the far end of considerations, intimate and sweeping, which will no longer be contained inside the framework of Greco-Roman thought.

Reading

Farquharson, A.S.L., *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*, Oxford, 2008.

Inwood, B., ed. *Seneca: Selected Philosophical Letters*, translated with introduction and commentary, Oxford, 2007.

Discussion questions

Were the leading philosophies of ancient Rome all derived from Greek thought? What was the relation of Augustine’s thought to the Greeks? Did he inherit many of his ideas from the Greek Neoplatonists who were a formative element in later Roman cultural development?

The philosophical perspectives dominant in Roman philosophy were largely ethical, centered on questions about how to live the good life. Is there an element of logic, metaphysics, or theory of history in the Roman intellectual tradition?

While it is true, as in the adage above, that the Romans were in some sense conquered by their Greek subjects, would we say that the Romans made something new and fresh from what the Greeks gave them? What would you see as the distinctively Roman contribution to world thought?

Marcus Aurelius (121 A.D.- 180 A.D.; Emperor 161 A.D. -180 A.D.)

Stoics and Epicureans. We have been advancing through Roman literature by way of genres, and come at the end to philosophy, which requires a special prologue. At its peak, *Greek* philosophy, especially in Plato and Aristotle, had tried out systematic speculation, and established a power of rigorous dialectic with imagination which has left its mark on the formal study of philosophy to this day. But there were other themes in Greek philosophy, most influentially the schools of Stoicism and Epicureanism which came to flower in the third century B.C. These two branches of thought devoted their attention to the moral life, though not without concern for the ontological background of the universe in which human behavior is framed. Both the Stoics and the Epicureans, with their emphases on self-discipline, moderation, and toleration, exercised huge influence on Roman society and culture.

The Meditations. All this by way of direct approach to Marcus Aurelius, for whom Stoicism was an inspiration and staff of support throughout a hectically busy life at the top of the social/administrative ladder. Marcus' philosophy is embedded in a single book, which he called *To Himself*, and which we call the *Meditations*, and which is a living masterpiece of Stoic—and broadly human—wisdom. We will return to the book. Who was the man?

The Life of Marcus Aurelius. Marcus Aurelius was born in Ucubi, south east of Cordoba, Spain, to a family of wealth and distinction. His great grandfather had been a Senator, while Marcus' mother had inherited great wealth from her own father. This was already the formula for success, and Marcus, following the expectations of his class and educational aspirations, moved to Rome, where he spent his formative youth years in a upscale neighborhood, the Caelian Hill. (It will have struck us all, in this class, that Rome served as the magnet for all its future luminaries, though the leaders of Roman literary culture hailed widely from distant parts of the Empire.)

Education. In Rome Marcus was home-schooled, as were all young men of his class and expectation, Attracted by the ideal of the 'philosopher,' he went through a stage of dressing in dark rough cloaks, and sleeping on the ground—occupational traits of one kind of 'ancient philosopher'—until falling under the influence of Fronto, whom the Emperor Hadrian appointed tutor to Marcus Aurelius, and who—himself a wealthy and independent scholar---remained a prudent and affectionate guide to Marcus Aurelius throughout his life. Marcus was studious as well as active, and seemed destined for a superior role in practical political administration.

Imperial succession. In 138 B.C. the Emperor Hadrian chose Antoninus Pius to succeed him—Hadrian morbidly concerned with the decline in his health. As part of the succession deal, Hadrian stipulated that Antoninus should adopt Marcus Aurelius as his son. Pursuant to that deal Antoninus, taken as all were by the abilities of Marcus Aurelius, passed a law permitting his 'son' to assume the (very important) role of *quaestor*, before the age of twenty-four; and from there on the Emperor made all the necessary maneuvers required to prep Marcus as *his* successor. In 161 the death of Antoninus Pius opened the way for (a thoroughly reluctant) Marcus Aurelius, to become the last of the Antonine Emperors.

The worries of ruling. We are making our way back to a book, *The Meditations*, which Marcus Aurelius jotted down 'to himself' in intervals of camp and court life between 170 A.D. and 180 A.D. By the time Marcus was pushed to that brilliant literary survival tactic, his reign had become more than difficult, and more than a challenge to a man who, though a quick learner and a brilliant 'ruler,' had a strong withdrawal streak of the private intellectual in him. (Marcus' reign had started well, but already in 162 A.D. Rome had been hit by devastating floods which had killed most of the livestock in the city, destroying whole settled areas, and setting off a long lasting famine which had to be countered by opening emergency grain supplies. Not much later the frontiers of the Empire fell under attack from a wide variety of Marcomanni, Quadi, Sarmatians, and Germanic tribes avid to get their pillaged share of the Imperial fruits. The worries of ruling soon beset Marcus Aurelius, who was above all conscientious, and the literary result is a world classic of Stoic wisdom and good sense. The end of his life was essentially the conclusion of this book, which, as you will see, was essentially his life turned inside out.

Supreme self-help book. You will have little trouble following the themes of this work, which highlight the importance of self-control, self-examination, indifference to petty behaviors, a sense of our cosmic setting, a refusal to be bullied by the seeming urgency of the moment. No self-help book, on the shelves at Barnes and Noble, can light a candle to the wisdom of the *Meditations*.

Here is a passage from Book One, in which Marcus is praising his father, for the virtues he learned from him:

whenever any business upon some necessary occasion was to be put off and omitted before it could be ended, he was ever found, when he went back to the matter again, the same man that he was before. He was accurate in examination of things and in consultations, and patient in the hearing of others. He would not hastily give over a search into any matter, as one easy to be satisfied with sudden notions and apprehensions. He was careful to preserve his friends; nor at any time would he carry himself towards them with disdainful neglect, and grow weary of them; nor yet at any time would he be madly fond of them. He had a contented mind in all things, a cheerful countenance, care to foresee things afar off, and to take order for the least, without any noise or clamour.

Readings

Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. Hammond (New York, 2006.)

A Companion to Marcus Aurelius, ed. Van Ackeren (New York, 2012.)

Discussion questions

What explains the great attraction of Marcus Aurelius to Stoicism and Epicureanism? Do those philosophies contain the potential for the kinds of insight Saint Augustine (as a Christian) will instinctively work from? Does the Stoicism of Seneca—you may want to research this—resemble that of Marcus Aurelius?

In what ways is Marcus Aurelius' *To Himself* a response to the immediate pressures of his own life? What were those pressures? What finally was his attitude toward them?

Would you call Marcus Aurelius a philosopher, or a practical man of considerable wisdom? To answer this you would need to establish a working definition of 'philosopher,' which is not so easy. In Greco Roman times the philosopher was sometimes the sage, sometimes—as in Plato—the brilliant dialectician. What does 'philosopher' mean to us today?