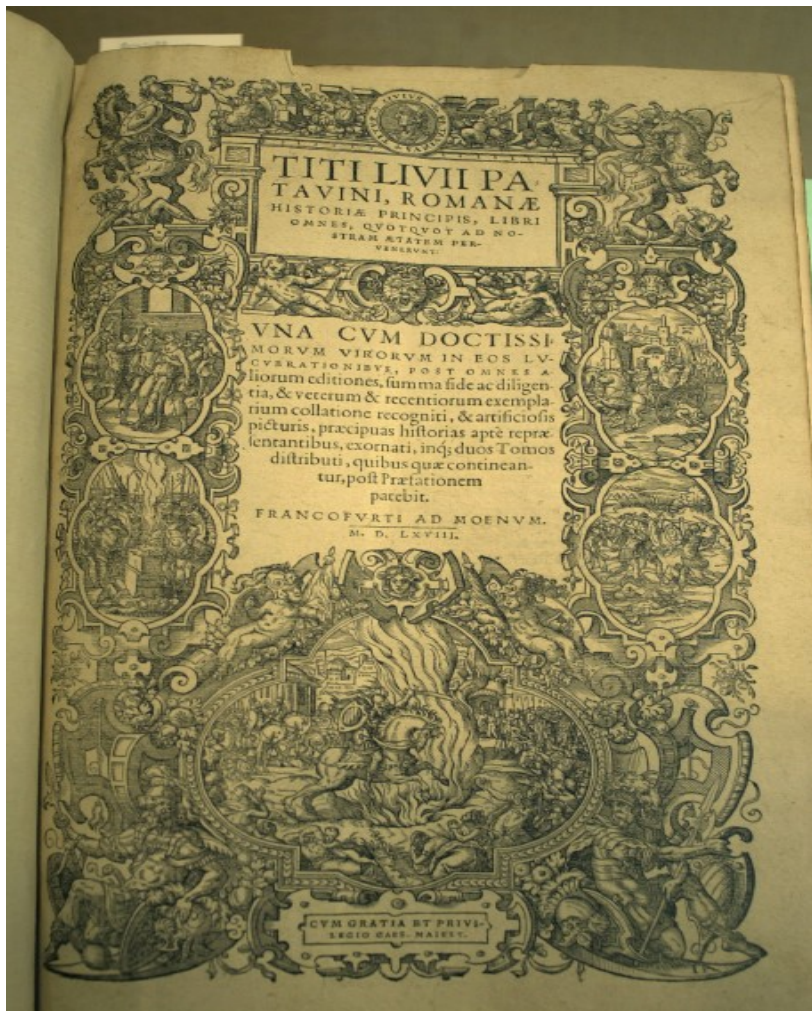


Livy and Roman Historiography

Titus Līvius was born in Padua in 59 B.C. and died there in A.D. 17. We know so little about his life that even these birth and death dates have been disputed. Perhaps in order to obtain his advanced education, Livy went to Rome, where the emperor Augustus eventually took notice of him. Livy was neither a politician nor a military man. Always of the bookish ilk, his intellectual interest first lighted on philosophy; we are told that in his youth he wrote philosophical dialogues and other philosophical works, probably in imitation of his intellectual hero, Cicero. Sometime around the age of thirty, his interest shifted away from philosophy towards history. After this shift, Livy devoted himself to a genuinely monumental historical project: to write a history of Rome from its foundation (which the Romans believed took place in 753 B.C.) down to the period in which he lived. This work eventually comprised 142 books, of which are preserved books 1-10 and 21-45, along with a handful of fragments. This massive undertaking won Livy much fame even in his own day. To cite just one illustration of the fruits of his renown, Livy was selected to act as a sort of tutor of history to the future emperor Claudius

(although, admittedly, at that time Claudius was barely allowed out of the house).

“The historian Livy laments the decline of Roman morals” (pp. 40-41 in *Wheelock’s Latin*) is adapted from the preface to Livy’s history. Whether he actually wrote this preface before he began his history is a matter of scholarly debate, but one point that is clear to all who read Livy and which this passage highlights is the moral perspective from which Livy viewed and judged Roman history. In adopting this moral perspective Livy was by no means unique among Roman historians. All the major Roman historians, including Sallust, Tacitus, and Ammianus Marcellinus, viewed the events they were depicting from a consistently moral point of view; in fact, Roman historians considered it their responsibility as



historians to pass judgment on the historical events about which they wrote. Such a stance seems alien or perhaps even wrong to contemporary American students of history, since they assume

that the purpose of history is to record and/or to interpret what happened in the past and since they assume (probably rightly) that moral judgments introduce bias into historical writing, but Roman historians and readers of history made no such assumptions. For the Romans, history was a source of models for good and bad behavior and right and wrong thinking. In his preface, Livy himself speaks of his history as a fruit-bearing work that allows his readers to look upon examples of human behavior artfully depicted and to learn from those examples what they should embrace and what they should avoid for their own good and for the good of their republic.

In this passage, Livy rather gloomily maintains that Roman morals as a whole have deteriorated with the passage of time. (The historian thus implies that he intends his work to be a bulwark against this onslaught of vice.) Like the historian Sallust, Livy claims that before the Romans attained an empire and the burdensome wealth that goes along with it, they led simple, rustic, virtuous lives. But, the reasoning proceeds, wealth introduced excessive leisure and vice, thereby softening and enfeebling the Romans and their commitment to virtue.

Post-translation questions:

1. What translation of “habēbat” best brings out the sense of this opening line?
2. What does Livy’s statement “glōriam bellī semper laudābāmus” imply about proper Roman attitudes to war?
3. Livy maintains that the Romans used to prosecute wars, but now they idle in leisure, that they used to think about moral responsibilities, but now they think about money. Based on what you know about Roman history, is this sharply drawn contrast fair?
4. What do you think Livy might mean in the last sentence of this passage: “nec vitia nostra nec remedia tolerāre possumus?” (This sentence is nearly a verbatim quotation from Livy’s actual preface and relates to a specific historical context.)
5. Contemporary America is often compared to ancient Rome. Can you think of any examples in contemporary America of our inability to endure both our vices and our remedies?