

Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* Book 21

Born in 59BC, in the northern Italian city of Patavium in Cisalpine Gaul,¹ the historian Livy differed from his predecessors in more than just his representation of Roman history. Having only been incorporated into Italy in 49BC, thus gaining Roman citizenship, the local elite of the area – of which Livy was a member – were already highly Romanized. In contrast to Rome during the period, Patavium retained a relatively strict moral outlook, which is evidenced by the emphasis Livy places on morality throughout his work. Not only did Livy never sit in the Senate, or have any recorded public career to speak of, he also never had experience in the Roman military. Due to this lack of experience Livy's work lacks political acumen and military awareness.² This lack of a recorded public career, coupled with his lack of autobiographical detail, means that our knowledge of Livy as a man is limited.

Livy's major work '*From the founding of the city*' is potentially the most important single work in the Roman tradition of history. Livy wrote his history for numerous reasons including: sheer enjoyment in retracing Roman greatness of the past, the narration of Rome's steady moral decay from the foundation of the city and a sense of patriotism.³ Livy's history could be seen as representing the moderately conservative political views and moral standards of the non-political classes of Italy, as he supported senatorial authority over the demagoguery of tribunes.⁴ Livy's histories were deeply influenced by the concept of Roman Stoicism as a desirable trait, with an aim to nurture traditional Roman values by presenting

¹ Mellor (1999), 48.

² Mellor (1999), 50.

³ Livy. 1.1; Mellor (1999), 49.

⁴ Lintott (1989), 235; Mellor (1999), 48.

examples of true Romans. Livy's work aimed to remember the past as it embodied the duty of *pietas* towards earlier Roman generations.⁵ The underlying concept which most characterised Livy's work was not reason or religion, but '*Virtus Romana*', the concept of a 'true Roman.'

The structure of Livy's history followed in the Roman tradition of annalistic history as opposed to a thematic style of recording,⁶ treating events year by year, allowing him to incorporate change of theatre and location within single sections of his work. This was necessary in the compiling of a history; using available sources as there was no simple chronological indicator. This was due to Roman's identifying years by reference to consular names and the years they served their terms.⁷ His history was divided into 142 books covering the period from the founding of Rome to the death of Drusus (753-9BC), though only 35 books survived to modern days including the first ten, and books 21-45. Book 21 is divided into 63 chapters.⁸

In Book 21, Livy describes the beginning of the Second Punic War (21.1), and how Hannibal, the general of the Carthaginians, crossed the river Ebro in violation of the treaty (21.20). Besieging Saguntum, a city belonging to allies of the Roman people, he captured it after an eight month period (21.14). These affronts against Rome, through the assault on one of her allies, led her to dispatch ambassadors to the Carthaginians to voice their complaints. Livy states that following Carthage's refusal of culpability for the violence against the town

⁵ Mellor (1999), 57.

⁶ Yardy (2006), 3.

⁷ Walsh (1961), 5; Yardy (2006), 22.

⁸ Yardy (2006), 1.

of Saguntum, war was declared against Carthage (21.18). Hannibal set off from Spain and after overcoming the passes of the Pyrenees (21.24), traversed Gaul. Livy describes Hannibal's routing of the Volcae against the banks of the Rhone (21.28) after they had attempted had to stop him crossing, and his arrival at the foot of the Alps. After a difficult passage through the Alps, during which he defeated the Gallic mountaineers in several battles when they blocked his way, he descended into Italy (21.38) and routed the Romans in a cavalry skirmish near the river Ticinus (21.46). In this battle Publius Cornelius Scipio was wounded and was saved by his son, who later received the name of Africanus. Again a Roman army, comprised of new recruits, was routed near the river Trebia following Hannibal's use of ambush tactics to conceal men (21.56). After this, Hannibal crossed the Apennines with great distress to his soldiers due to violent storms, with much suffering and many men lost (21.58). Rome sent Gnaeus Cornelius Scipio to Spain, who fought successfully against the Carthaginian armies and captured the enemy's general, Mago (21.60).

Livy's narrative can be considered a literary work, combined with that of a history in the way it expresses events, though at times it seems as if Livy sacrifices historical accuracy in favour of rhetoric embellishment.⁹ Compared with the work of Polybius the difference in focus is obvious, as Polybius' focus upon institutions contrasts with Livy's concentration on the workings of the character which in turn determines success or failure.¹⁰

As history was a medium for moral instruction, Livy's history is conspicuous as it shows the view of the author. The moralistic style of Livy's history is imbued with a

⁹ Walsh (1961), 208.

¹⁰ Luce (1977), 230.

traditionally Pro-Republican outlook, with an emphasis on adherence to a strict moral code. This moral dimension of his work can be seen being emphasised by Livy's penchant for over exaggerating virtue or vice through dramatic writing.¹¹

With the opening of Book 21, Livy sets the scene for the 2nd Punic War whilst bringing characters as individuals to centre stage (21.1). The focus of the book is on Hannibal Barca. Livy keeps the focus of the book on him via methods such as protagonists' speeches and direct speech, to refer to him and to demonstrate his virtues and nature through his actions and responses.¹² Despite this, the reader is often left to make up their own mind about Hannibal through his endeavours and the battles he engages in. Livy's early characterisation of Hannibal, and its favourable nature despite his status as an enemy of Rome, suggests his importance in the coming narrative. Livy describes Hannibal as a man of great tactical skill, dash and confidence with the power to command (21.4). The image of Hannibal that Livy creates to fit his narrative is a charismatic brave leader, who is quick on his feet, but lacking in moral weight and wisdom.¹³ Livy also enumerates Hannibal's vices including his reported cruelty, dishonesty, impiety and lack of general honour. These traits indemnify Hannibal as a distinctly un-Roman commander, whilst Livy acknowledges his tactical skills, who is able to provide Rome with a worthy adversary for the moral and stoic Roman characters. Hannibal is shown as less than Roman generals, if not tactically then morally.

Livy's portrayal of Roman characters, though not flawless, provides a contrast to the Carthaginians. Livy individualises Romans as positive moral figures in line with his

¹¹ Mellor (1999), 57.

¹² Foulkes (1999), 1.

¹³ Foulkes (1999), 2.

description of the Roman people as a whole throughout Book 21. The Roman people are shown as moral, though not faultless, with Livy providing contrasts between the actions of the two sides during the war, focusing on Scipio and Hannibal's treatment of captured settlements as juxtapositions. Scipio's restrained treatment of Antanagrum upon its surrender, directly (21.61) contrasts with the Carthaginian sack of Victumlae (21.57), where Hannibal allows his men to inflict atrocities, emphasised by Livy's use of dramatic rhetoric to maintain the interest of the reader. The contrast is obvious between the morality of Rome and Carthage's lack of such virtue. Publius Scipio is used by Livy as a mouthpiece and an idealistic Roman, highlighted by his appeal to a Roman sense of solidarity between soldiers (21.40). This shows Livy depicting him in tune with the Roman values that Livy considers important, and an imperative ingredient in Roman historical military success.¹⁴

Though Livy took considerable pains with the artistic arrangement of his narrative, he paid even more attention to the composition of his speeches due to their importance in the telling of his history. The insertion of composed speeches was an ingrained factor in Roman history writing.¹⁵ Characterisation of participants through multiple literary methods remains the ultimate purpose of Livy's narrative. Unlike the speeches of Polybius' history, Livy composes his speeches not according to what was said, but with words which would have been appropriate for the occasion.¹⁶ This is evidenced by the differing speeches that Polybius and Livy grant Hannibal when he addresses his men prior to the battle of Trebia (21.43).¹⁷ Livy's speeches provide an insight into his opinion of the character, conveying any criticisms

¹⁴ Foulkes (1999), 4.

¹⁵ Walsh (1961), 223.

¹⁶ Walsh (1961), 38.

¹⁷ Polybius. 3.63.3.

or partiality. The use of speeches to portray Roman morality and its defining importance is particularly evident in Livy's comparisons of the characters of Hannibal and Scipio (21.40-44). Scipio's arguments to his men stress not only the simple and possible, but also the religious, the pious and the right, as would be expected of an idealised stoical Roman. Hannibal's emphases are placed more upon materialistic motives, profit and the possible.

Livy's complete lack of experience meant that he would not have visited the places he wrote about, nor was he a contemporary of the 2nd Punic War period and so, he could not interview eye-witnesses on the subjects. Due to these to prevailing factors Livy's is heavily dependent on his sources including public records from the time and other histories. Livy's reliance upon sources more contemporary to the period led to many failings with his narrative, whilst drawing its reliability as a source of history into question.

Livy relies heavily on the accounts of the Greek historian Polybius and of the Roman annalist Coelius, though it would appear due to Livy's form of referencing that Coelius is relied on more for Book 21 (21.38). Dorey is of the opinion that these two sources used the same primary sources when writing their accounts, which he suggests is why the accounts of Livy and Polybius are similar, despite Livy's reliance on Coelius as a source.¹⁸ Livy's reluctance to synthesise sources means that he uses one religiously as his guide for a specific period, before changing abruptly to a different source. This practice leads to issues with the works cohesion and makes it confusing as Livy repeats events and contradicts himself. In Hannibal's Spanish operation Livy appears to repeat events (21.5), and when Livy discusses Hannibal's crossing of the Apennines he makes mention to the operation twice, claiming that

¹⁸ Dorey & Dudley (1971), 27.

the first was merely an attempt in 218BC.¹⁹ As Livy declares that Hannibal crossed the mountains in the spring of 217BC it would appear that Livy possessed two accounts with conflicting dates which he coalesced.

This use of multiple sources occasionally causes continuity issues within Livy's histories; when he possesses contradicting sources he often gives both, using no apparent methodology to evaluate their merit. Mellor agrees with this perception of Livy, stating that he does not work hard enough to root out the falsifications of the annalistic historians.²⁰ In Book 21 when discussing the numbers of men in Hannibal's army after the crossing of the Alps, Livy states his distrust for the numbers provided to him by the records of annalists. Despite this he includes them anyway, in spite of the fact that Polybius' account is the most accurate as it was taken from a column Hannibal had inscribed himself.²¹

Another failing of Livy is his inability to account for the biases of sources he relies heavily upon. Walsh states that Livy struggles to gain objectivity due to his uncritical patriotism, with his use of distinctly pro-Roman sources such as Fabius Pictor.²² However, Walsh is not entirely correct. Livy does not make Romans out to be flawless characters in his narrative; showing anger clouding the judgement of Lucius Manlius upon learning of the capture of Roman envoys by the Gaul's.²³ Despite wishing to portray the characters of Rome's past as true Romans, he is not so blinded by this mission as to conceive the Roman people as perfect.

¹⁹ Dorey & Dudley (1971), 36.

²⁰ Mellor (1999), 68.

²¹ Livy. 21.38; Polybius. 3.56.4.

²² Walsh (1961), 36.

²³ Livy. 21.25.

Detrimental to the reliability of Livy's work is his chronological presentation of events, which is often confused or out of sync. This is due to the differing ways in which the chronology of Livy's sources were recorded, with Roman sources based on consular years and Greek sources not, causing him difficulties in reconciling them.²⁴ This is evident at Saguntum where Livy places the capture of the city in 218BC instead of 219BC, more than likely due to following a wrong source.²⁵ Another failing of Livy in Book 21 is that he shows dubious inaccuracies in geographical details, with the route Livy suggests for Hannibal's crossing of the Alps still impossible to trace even in modern days.²⁶ Livy's initial narration generally consistent with that of Polybius, though it suddenly diverges with Hannibal travelling further north than stated in the account of Polybius,²⁷ meaning that in Livy's account Hannibal's force emerged into the lands of the Taurini and in Polybius' account they came to the lands of the Insubres. The most likely explanation is that Livy is again adhering to Nissen's law and switching sources mid narrative, unwittingly describing a different part of Hannibal's journey. Proctor's presumption is that Livy put his narrative together from multiple accounts, suggesting why his portrayal is irreconcilable with the Polybian description of Hannibal's march.²⁸

Livy is limited by his lack of detailed understanding of the Roman political system, never able to fully analyse the workings of public opinion or politics. These shortcomings in Livy's passage is evidenced by the stereotyped appearance of the 'senate' who are mentioned

²⁴ Dorey & Dudley (1971), 36.

²⁵ Livy. 21.15.

²⁶ Dorey & Dudley (1971), 37.

²⁷ Livy. 21.31; Polybius. 3.49.5.

²⁸ Proctor (1971), 180; Polybius. 3. 46-56.

as deciding or enacting policies though we are granted no further insight into Roman political machinations within the passage.²⁹ His work is heavily reliant upon his sources as his inexperience means that he cannot make a judgement on political actions and as such, is dependent upon the experiences of those whose sources he uses. The same issues are prevalent in Livy's depiction of battle scenes and the tactical flow of the conflict. Livy simplifies battles for the main reason that he simply does not have enough experience or knowledge of war to provide an accurate representation. Livy's battle account at Trebia (21.56) is representative of battle as a concept in Livy's histories, formulaic and basic in approach. When compared with the account of Polybius,³⁰ Livy's inexperience becomes obvious. The level of detail provided by Polybius is far greater in comparison than what we are told by Livy, for example Polybius describes the breaking of the Roman flanks which is completely disregarded by the account of Livy. Polybius, being a man experienced in war, is able to provide insights into the tactics employed that Livy purely does not understand.

Livy's account of the outbreak of the 2nd Punic War is a comprehensive compendium of historical knowledge on the period though detracted from due to its reliance upon other accounts. Livy writes in a useful style and his rhetoric makes the reading of the book enjoyable, though his dramatic writing style is better suited to the speeches he gives his leading characters than to descriptions of the battlefield. The confusion shown by Livy in the handling of sources, in both his expression of chronology and his understanding of topography, limits the sources usefulness. These factors, combined with Livy's inexperience

²⁹ Livy. 21.40.

³⁰ Polybius. 3.72.7.

in political and military aspects of history means that his work, while a useful piece, is essentially flawed.

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