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Roman historical writing in the age of the Elder Seneca

The Elder Seneca had a long life – of at least ninety years, if he was born around 50 BC, as most scholars are agreed, and died in the reign of Caligula (although not later than his son's exile in AD 41).¹ The aim of this paper is to consider the historical writing produced during the seventy-odd years of his adult life, and in particular the work of his near contemporaries, rivals and competitors, who concerned themselves with the period from the civil wars to the reign of Tiberius.

At this point it will be well to remind ourselves of the evidence for the historical work produced by the Elder Seneca. According to the well-known fragment of Seneca the Younger's biography of his father,² he produced 'Histories from the beginning of the civil wars, where the retreat from truth first began, carried on practically to the day of his death' (... *historias ab initio bellorum ciuiliū, unde primum ueritas retro abiit, paene usque ad mortis suae diem*). The problems raised by this passage include the precise meaning of *unde primum ueritas abiit* – presumably implying that the civil wars gave rise to untruthful history³ – and the question of when Seneca dated the start of the civil wars.

While many commentators believe that the work began with the crossing of the Rubicon,⁴ others prefer the theory of Rossbach and Hahn that Seneca traced the origin of the civil wars to the period of the Gracchi, and thus inspired a tradition that is reflected in Florus and Appian.⁵ This view has recently been argued at length by Luciano Canfora, who makes a strong case, but his arguments are not as conclusive, and those of his opponents not as worthless, as his rather ill-

1 The dates of Seneca's birth and death are discussed in detail by Griffin (1972) 4–5.

2 *Appendix* - T1; on the discovery and subsequent editions of this text see John Rich in this volume (343 and nn. 43–45).

3 The obvious comparison is with Tac. *hist.* 1.1: *simul* (sc. after Actium) *ueritas pluribus modis infracta*. The parallelism is denied by Sussman (1978) 146 n. 28, in favour of his own interpretation of *ueritas* as 'righteousness, truth, and integrity' (see also his essay in this volume 173 and n. 146; but this is hardly convincing, given that the context is the description of a work of history).

4 Niebuhr (1820) 103–104; Schanz/Hosius (1935) 341; Griffin (1972) 9–10; Levick in *FRHist* I 506; and Rich, in this volume, 343.

5 Rossbach (1888) 163 (quoted by Rich in this volume 344), and in a number of subsequent publications (cited by Rich 344). The theory was taken up and elaborated by Hahn (1964), and has been accepted in broad outlines by Zecchini (1977), Sussman (1978) 142, and Westall (2015) 158–160.

tempered discussion might suggest.⁶ He helpfully points out that *initium* means ‘beginning’, and that *bella ciuilia* means ‘civil wars’ in the plural; but it simply does not follow that *historiae ab initio bellorum ciuiliū* can only describe an account including all the civil wars from the time of Marius and Sulla, still less one that covered the preceding events going back to the Gracchi.⁷ It may do, but equally it may not. The civil wars of the 80s were separated by thirty years of uneasy peace before the next outbreak, in 49, which gave rise to a series of civil conflicts lasting until 31. This second, connected sequence of civil wars forms a historical unity, but the wars are referred to in our sources as *bella ciuilia* in the plural.⁸ If the Elder Seneca’s *Historiae* began in 49, or indeed in 43, it would be perfectly reasonable for his son to characterise them as an account *ab initio bellorum ciuiliū*. On the other hand it would be unreasonable for us to rule out this interpretation. The fact remains that we do not know, and that Seneca’s precise starting point remains a matter of conjecture.

In the end Canfora contrives to undermine his own position, by pointing out that the idea that the path to civil war began with the *sedition Gracchana* was actually widely accepted in Roman historiography, and is clearly present in Sallust,

⁶ Canfora (2015). For some reason, Canfora is especially irritated by *The Fragments of the Roman Historians* (FRHist). The question of whether this edition serves any useful scholarly purpose (doubted by Canfora 2015, 143 n. 8) can be safely left to the judgement of its users, as can his description of the editors as *neofiti* (143), and *schizzinosi* (160 n. 27). But his attack on Levick, the editor of the fragments of Seneca, is as unwarranted as it is distasteful. The merest glance at her discussion of *ab initio bellorum ciuiliū* (FRHist I 506, with nn. 18–19) is enough to refute his charge of *inconsapevolezza* (143), and to show that she is perfectly well aware of alternative theories (and of what the Latin text means).

⁷ Strictly speaking the first Roman civil war, one in which armies of Roman citizens fought each other, began in 88 BC, when Sulla marched his army on the city. This was the beginning of the civil wars (*initium bellorum ciuiliū*), as Asconius pointed out (64C). The preceding Social War (91–88 BC) was regarded as similar to a civil war, but as the Italian insurgents were not citizens it was not strictly a *bellum ciuile*. The political upheavals that led to these events, which began with the tribunate of Tiberius Gracchus, were *seditiones*, or, in Greek, στάσεις ἐμφύλιοι. These distinctions are clearly recognised in our sources, including Florus and Appian. Appian carefully noted the moment, in 88 BC, when στάσεις developed into civil war (E. 1.60.269). As Rich points out (this volume 334), confusion has arisen because of the conventional but misleading translation, since the Renaissance, of Appian’s *Emphyilia* as *Bella Ciuilia* (‘Civil Wars’). On the Roman notion of civil war see Jal (1963) especially 19–69.

⁸ Note for example Vell. 2.89.3: ‘the civil wars were ended in their twentieth year’ (*finita uicesimo anno bella ciuilia*). When Messalla Corvinus memorably described Q. Dellius as *desultor bellorum ciuiliū* (Sen. *suas.* 1.7), he hardly meant to imply that his jumping began at the time of Marius and Sulla.

Varro, Cicero and Velleius Paterculus, as well as in Florus and Appian.⁹ It follows that the Gracchi could have formed the point of departure for anyone writing about the fall of the Roman republic, and that the source of Appian need not be Seneca the Elder: there are many other possibilities among the historians of the period whose works, like Seneca's, are completely lost. Canfora himself points to the lost work of L. Lucceius, the correspondent of Cicero, who had written a History of the Italian and Civil War (*belli Italici et ciuilis historiam*), which may have started with the *seditio Gracchana*.¹⁰ Indeed in these circumstances – if that event was such a widely recognised starting point – it seems unnecessary to assume that the basic framework of Appian's work was based on 'a source' at all. Once again it does not follow that 'una periodizzazione del genere non può venirgli che da una fonte'. Moreover the vexed question of Appian's sources of information is a completely different matter.

Leaving this digression on one side, let us return to the analysis of historiography at the time of Seneca the Elder, and in particular of those historians who wrote about the age of the civil wars and the establishment of the Principate. What we are really talking about is the nature of historical writing in the early Principate (Augustus to Caligula) and the problems faced by historians writing then, and particularly those writing about their own times.

Broadly speaking there were two types of history at Rome, the first being traditional annalistic history *ab urbe condita* to the writer's own time: its first practitioner was Fabius Pictor, who was succeeded by Cincius Alimentus and later authors such as Cassius Hemina, Calpurnius Piso Frugi, and Gnaeus Gellius. These were followed in the first century by Claudius Quadrigarius, Licinius Macer, Valerius Antias, Aelius Tubero, and finally by Livy. Livy is generally reckoned the last of his kind: no other Latin historian, so it is said, either at the time or in the following decades, tried to write the whole history of Rome in one work. The second type of history was contemporary political history, emerging at the end of the second century with Fannius and Sempronius Asellio, and taken up in the first century by Sisenna, Sallust and Asinius Pollio.

According to one simplistic classification that is certainly as old as Verrius Flaccus, the two types could be defined as *historiae* (contemporary or recent history), and *annales* (longer-term history going back to a more remote past).¹¹ This

⁹ Canfora (2015) 148–154; cf. Sussman (1978) 142 and n. 16; see also in the present volume Sussman *infra* 146 and n. 18.

¹⁰ Cic. *fam.* 5.12.2 = Lucceius *FRHist* 30 T1. For its starting point see Canfora (2015) 153.

¹¹ Gell. 5.18.1–2, citing Verrius Flaccus. On this text, and the distinction between *annales* and *historiae*, see Verbrughe (1989); Scholz (1994).

distinction was known to Servius and passed on to the Middle Ages,¹² and no doubt lies behind the application of the conventional titles *Historiae* and *Annales* to the works of Tacitus.¹³ As is well known, there is no good authority for these titles; and the distinction between two types of history is not reflected in book titles even in the republican period, when there is no good evidence that historical works were grouped into *historiae* and *annales* on that basis. By Cicero's time *Annales* was just a general word for history, regardless of format or theme; while the Greek term *historiae* was sometimes used in titles of historical works but with no particular implication about the period studied. For example Aelius Tubero's history was entitled *historiae*, even though it went back to the foundation of the city and was arranged annalistically,¹⁴ while Valerius Antias' work is sometimes cited as *Annales*, but more frequently as *Historiae*.¹⁵

That said, however, we are nonetheless justified in adopting the broad distinction between histories *ab urbe condita* and those that concentrated exclusively on events of the author's lifetime. The point is that, according to current orthodoxy, under Augustus both types of history came to a stop. Livy had no competitors or successors, so it is said, and while some survivors of the Civil Wars were prepared to write about them and record their experiences, contemporary history also gradually dried up as the Principate became established. According to Syme, when Livy set about writing the last nine books of his great work (books 134–142), covering the period from after the triumph of Augustus in 29 down to the death of Drusus in 9 (written, Syme thinks, c. AD 6), he had the field virtually to himself. 'Despite the interest in history aroused by the revolutionary age, the Principate of Augustus can show few historians. Apart from Livy, they are little more than names, and hardly any of them seem to have dealt with the years of peace and order after the end of the civil wars'.¹⁶ This important observation, which has been influential and rarely challenged, deserves careful consideration.

Even if Syme's statement is generally true, it does not mean that all forms of historical writing ceased. In fact it is clear that new types of writing about the past

¹² Serv. *Aen.* 1.373; Isidor. *orig.* 1.44.4 and Schol. Luc. 5.384, all no doubt deriving, directly or indirectly, from Verrius Flaccus. On *annales* in medieval texts see Burgess/Kulikowski (2013) 288–296.

¹³ First established by Justus Lipsius in 1574: see Goodyear (1972) 85 n. 4. Goodyear's whole discussion of this issue (85–87) is useful.

¹⁴ Oakley in *FRHist* I 365.

¹⁵ Rich in *FRHist* I 296.

¹⁶ Syme (1959) 64.

were becoming prevalent. In the first place we should mention antiquarianism,¹⁷ which, at its best, entailed scholarly enquiry into monuments, cults, institutions, and customs, especially in pursuit of a meaningful contemporary agenda. Here the republican Varro is the key figure, providing both a model and an inspiration to a host of successors who were interested in the understanding and preservation of the Roman tradition and directing it to new purposes in the process of renewal and restoration. It has become something of a cliché to say that without the immense posthumous influence of the great Varro Augustus' programme of moral and religious regeneration would have been unthinkable.¹⁸

There was an explosion of interest in the remote past of Rome in the Augustan age, which both contributed to and resulted from Virgil's *Aeneid*, and finds expression in surviving works such as Dionysius of Halicarnassus book 1 and the so-called *Origo Gentis Romanae*, which, as Momigliano famously demonstrated, is a genuine fourth-century work based on an original of Augustan date.¹⁹ The antiquarian writings of Verrius Flaccus and C. Iulius Hyginus are an important feature of the intellectual atmosphere of the Augustan age, and have a strong bearing on its historiography, even if they cannot be classified strictly as historians – although Hyginus wrote a work on the origins of Italian cities which recalls Cato's *Origines*, as well as a series of biographies of famous men (*uiri illustres*), including Valerius Publicola, C. Fabricius and Scipio Africanus.²⁰

Both Verrius Flaccus and Hyginus were freedmen who served the emperor, the former as tutor to Augustus' grandsons and the latter as director of the Palatine Library.²¹ Their antiquarian and historical researches were made to serve the interests of the regime, in Verrius' case through the *Fasti Praenestini* and in Hyginus' by his possible role in the composition of the *elogia* of the *summi uiri* whose

17 On antiquarianism see Momigliano (1950); Rawson (1985) 233–249; Sehlmeier (2003); Stevenson (2004); Bravo (2007); these scholars all deal with the problem, raised in Momigliano's classic study, of the relationship between history and antiquarianism. On the difficulty of distinguishing between categories that have so much overlap see now Smith (2018). Macrae (2018) attempts to cut the Gordian knot by merging them completely, arguing that those Romans who are commonly described as antiquarians were in fact historians, pure and simple. But this suggestion is not borne out by the ancient evidence.

18 See e.g. Galinsky (1996) 290–291; Wallace-Hadrill (2005) 65–66.

19 Momigliano (1958), and see especially 70–71 for similarities between the OGR and Dionysius book 1.

20 On Hyginus' historical and antiquarian writings see Levick and Cornell in *FRHist* I 475–481 (especially 480–481 on their relationship with Virgil); Smith (2018) 126–128.

21 Suet. *gramm.* 17.2 (Verrius), and 20.2 (Hyginus)

statues adorned the Forum of Augustus.²² The role of imperial freedmen as intellectual functionaries in the emperor's service was a well-known feature of the imperial court under Claudius, who was himself a historian. So it is a very remarkable fact that one of his freedmen, a certain Ti. Claudius Herma Sideropogon ('Ironbeard'), is described on his funerary inscription as 'a writer of histories'.²³ This is a wholly isolated piece of evidence, but its potential significance is considerable, implying as it does the possibility of a world of learned historiography under imperial patronage.

Antiquarian writing could of course be both nostalgic and evasive – a way of avoiding sensitive topics and thus of putting their authors' consciences to sleep, in Momigliano's words,²⁴ and at worst became the mindless cataloguing of curiosities and relics of the remote past, with the objective effect of serving the oppressive and reactionary aims of the regime. Formal historiography was not immune from such tendencies. The Elder Seneca's younger contemporary, Q. Curtius Rufus (if he is to be identified with the suffect consul of 43, a senator whom Tiberius so memorably described as self-made – *ex se natus*: Tac. *ann.* 11.21) turned to the history of Alexander the Great. Others wrote about Rome's glorious past. L. Aruntius (*FRHist* 58), probably the consul of 22 BC, rather than his son, cos. AD 6 (whom Augustus on his deathbed is said to have considered *capax imperii*: Tac. *ann.* 1.13.2) chose to write a history of the First Punic War, a choice of subject no doubt prompted by his own experience of naval warfare.²⁵

Another who chose this course was Clodius Licinus (*FRHist* 64), the consul of AD 4 and a close friend of Iulius Hyginus. His *Res Romanae* ran to at least 21 books (*FRHist* 64 F3), and covered events of the second century BC. Of its scope and range, however, we know nothing. It may have been a complete annalistic history, and if so would have continued to his own time. Others have suggested that it was more of an antiquarian compilation than an annalistic history, but that is not a legitimate inference from the title *Res Romanae*; Suetonius' description of him as 'the consular historian' (*gramm.* 20.2 = *FRHist* 64 F4) clearly implies a work of formal history.²⁶

But historiography and antiquarianism are not easily separated, as is clear from the case of another key figure writing at this time. I refer to Fenestella

²² *Fasti Praenestini*: Degrassi (1963). Hyginus and the *elogia* of the Forum of Augustus: Levick and Cornell in *FRHist* I 478

²³ *Historiarum scriptor*: see Grigori in Friggeri *et al.* (2012) 32 = *FRHist* 76 T1.

²⁴ Momigliano (1961b) 5.

²⁵ He had probably served as an admiral under Sex. Pompeius, and he certainly did so under Octavian at Actium: see Levick in *FRHist* I 449.

²⁶ Thus Oakley in *FRHist* I 483.

(*FRHist* 70), a writer as mysterious as he is important. Even his name is unknown; we have only his (rare) cognomen, and his status (senator? equestrian? freed-man?) is a matter of pure conjecture. The most likely reconstruction of some difficult evidence is that he died aged 70 in the later part of the reign of Tiberius, and was therefore born in the 30s BC.²⁷ His work, called *annales* by the authors that cite it, probably went back to the kings and early republic, and extended at least to the first century BC. An event of 57 BC is cited from book 22 (*FRHist* 70 F2). It may have gone down to the later years of Augustus. The general picture that emerges from the fragments (of which *FRHist* prints 31 that can be considered genuine) is that Fenestella was conventional, moralising, and interested in cultural matters (such as the growth of luxury, which he evidently deplored: he therefore appealed to Pliny), religious events (for example he is cited by Macrobius on the trial of the Vestal Virgins in 114 BC: F13), literary events (e.g. the life of Terence: F11) and other matters (e.g. Frontinus quotes him for cost of the aqua Marcia: F12).

That he had antiquarian interests is beyond doubt, but the balance of the fragments reflects the concerns of the citing authorities, not of Fenestella (although they evidently found much in him worth quarrying); and it may be unfair to regard him as a mere antiquarian, as does Momigliano, who includes him among those with sleeping consciences (n. 24, above). Asconius, a good judge of such things, evidently regarded Fenestella as an important source for political events of the first century BC, alongside Cicero and Sallust. A politically conservative viewpoint is suggested by fragments dealing with the age of Marius and Sulla (F16–17), but it is also possible, as e.g. Mazzarino argued, that Fenestella took a hostile view of Cicero (F21).²⁸ Perhaps, as Drummond says, his overall assessment was ‘cynical but balanced’.²⁹

Another feature of Fenestella’s work that is shared by many others writing at this time (for example by Velleius Paterculus) is its strong emphasis on great personalities. This is also reflected in the many dedicated biographies – encomiastic lives of Pompey, Caesar, Cicero, Cato, Brutus, etc. – often written by relatives, dependants or freedmen of the individuals concerned; and memoirs, autobiographies, *commentarii* or (in Greek) ὑπομνήματα by the men themselves – a tradition going back to the time of Marius and Sulla, but then flourishing in the period of the civil wars and subsequent decades. Augustus and Agrippa took up the mantle, and were followed by other emperors, including Tiberius and Claudius.

27 See Andrew Drummond’s discussion in *FRHist* I 489–490.

28 Mazzarino (1966) 2.1.384–386.

29 Drummond in *FRHist* I 492.

History itself, according to Tacitus, descended into flattery. The work of Velleius Paterculus, with its emphasis on personality and its adulation of Tiberius and the imperial regime, represents for some the depths to which things had sunk.³⁰

The conventional view, then, is that historical writing lapsed into escapist antiquarianism, self-serving autobiography and servile accounts of the lives and times of great dynasts. What was no longer produced was serious political history by independent men of high standing; any historians that we do happen to know about were not serious and can therefore be discounted. What is required, according to this orthodoxy, is an explanation of why no serious work was produced.

One obvious answer that can be given is that the new political regime was not disposed to encourage free inquiry and independent analysis of sensitive political events and situations. It was not simply that people were deterred by the risks of taking a critical stance, although examples exist of historians who were persecuted for their republican sympathies and driven to suicide: famously T. Labienus under Augustus, and Cremutius Cordus under Tiberius (in both cases their books were burned on the orders of the Senate).

But the effects of political repression can be exaggerated. State censorship of an effective kind was neither possible nor necessary in the conditions of ancient technology, in which surveillance of what people were writing, saying and thinking was hardly possible, and where levels of literacy and methods of mass dissemination of material were so poorly developed that subversive writing was unlikely to worry the authorities overmuch. No emperor was in serious danger of being overthrown by historiography.

On the other hand, as Tacitus explained so well, despotism promoted servility. Where the emperor was the source of all rewards and advancement, no public figure who wished to prosper could afford to give offence, or even show too much independence. In other words, the new political situation gave rise to an understandable self-censorship, and the deterioration of historical writing, in Tacitus' eyes, resulted not so much from political direction and repression as from deliberate choice; it became a matter of opting for adulation or silence, as men of principle were deterred by the slide into sycophancy: *gliscente adulatione deterrerentur* (*ann.* 1.1.2).

An alternative and perhaps more subtle answer is that in the new political climate, and the new institutional set-up, historical writing had rather lost its point.³¹ The end of *libertas*, which as Peter Brunt showed was defined politically

³⁰ For a classic statement to this effect see Syme (1958) 367–368.

³¹ Toher (1990).

as the right of a narrow exclusive group to compete openly and freely for honours that were fairly shared out,³² meant the end of traditional politics and therefore, to adapt a modern cliché, the end of history.³³

It has always been an interesting question what ancient historians thought they were doing and why, and what audience, if any, they had in mind. According to the standard view of this matter, traditional senatorial historiography was a political weapon, and was aimed rather exclusively at the political class to which the historians themselves belonged. In the words of Raaflaub and Samons, ‘Roman history was always the history of the ruling class, and Roman historiography as a literary genre was by its very nature *republican* [authors’ italics]. Leading men of the Republic wrote accounts of the state that they governed.’³⁴ With the collapse of the Republic historiography came to be practised, and to be read, by new classes of people, outside the traditional elite. Professional non-political historians (of whom Livy is the classic example) emerged and wrote a new type of literary history designed to appeal to the cultured and leisured elite. As Gabba showed, under the Principate historians spoke for municipal Italy – most obviously Velleius Paterculus and the source of Appian *E. I.*, whoever he was; and it is worth saying that the strongly ‘Italic’ slant of Appian’s account does not encourage the identification of Seneca the Elder as the source – and eventually for the provinces, with figures such as Pompeius Trogus in the Latin West, and Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Strabo, Arrian and Appian from the Greek east – men who found they could celebrate and identify with a universal Roman empire that brought peace, prosperity and the opportunity for advancement to the propertied elites of the provinces, and created a unified society based on Greek culture.³⁵

There is of course a great deal of truth in all of these observations. But years of studying the fragments of the lost Roman historians has suggested to me a rather different approach, and a different way of characterising the situation we have been discussing; and the problem, which I think is real enough, but not

³² Brunt (1988) 281–350.

³³ The phrase was coined, notoriously, by Fukuyama (1992), who claimed that the collapse of communism and the triumph of capitalism put an end to a secular struggle between competing ideologies and economic systems (which had hitherto given world history its meaning). There is something analogous in the Tacitean idea that the end of political freedom meant the disappearance of historical events worth recording (*ann.* 4.32), and consequently of serious historians (*hist.* 1.1). The same point was made by Jacoby (1949) 110–101, arguing that Attidography (that is, on Jacoby’s view, political historiography at Athens) ‘ceases with the loss of political liberty in the same way ... as the writing of *Annales* ceases in Rome’.

³⁴ Raaflaub/Samons (1990) 437.

³⁵ Gabba (1984). Cf. also Yarrow (2006).

quite as it has traditionally been understood, can be simply resolved by a straightforward solution – namely the proposition that the supposed absence of serious historians is not a sign of the demise of historiography in the early Principate but rather the result of a gap in our knowledge.

What I propose from now on is an exercise in the *ars nesciendi*, the principles of which were clearly set out by Donald Rumsfeld (the US Secretary for Defense under George W. Bush). There are, as Rumsfeld famously observed, known knowns (things we know we know), known unknowns (things we know we don't know), and unknown unknowns (things we don't know we don't know).³⁶ Of course, such a lucid statement of principle does not necessarily mean that you can apply the lesson in reality (as Rumsfeld perhaps discovered in Iraq). The point of the *ars nesciendi*, what makes it an art, is being able to acknowledge what you don't know, and then to ask questions and draw conclusions in the light of your acknowledged ignorance. In other words, a bit of humility and a bit of caution should be the consequences of knowing that you don't know.

Roman historical writing, like all of ancient literature, is full of known unknowns – that is, lost historical works that we know once existed, but about which we know little or nothing. Within this general category I would want to make a further distinction between well-known unknowns (historians such as Cato, Sisenna, Claudius Quadrigarius, or the Histories of Sallust and the lost books of Livy), and poorly or very poorly known unknowns – namely the historians, and actually there are many of them, who were writing in the crucial period between 30 BC and AD 40 (the 'age of Seneca the Elder'). Some of these, as I have said already, are little more than names.

This situation also raises the very real possibility of unknown unknowns – that is, of lost historical works by unknown writers. The possibility has attracted scholars in the past. For instance, Eduard Schwartz famously accounted for similarities in the accounts of the accession of Tiberius in Tacitus, Suetonius and Cassius Dio by postulating an unknown annalist writing soon after the death of Tiberius, who skillfully created the familiar portrait of the emperor that we find

³⁶ "As we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns – the ones we don't know we don't know." The comment was made at a Department of Defense News Briefing on 12 February, 2002 (for the full text see <http://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636>).

in all our sources.³⁷ Schwartz's theory was very influential and is still widely accepted;³⁸ admittedly it was dismissed by Syme,³⁹ but Syme himself was not averse from calling upon the possibility of an Ignotus when it suited him – that is, when he felt he could detect signs of a source that could not be identified with a known historian.⁴⁰

At this point I should like to consider some of the known unknowns – that is, lost historians of the time of Seneca who concerned themselves at least in part with the transition from republic to empire and went on to cover at least some of the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius. We have already looked briefly at Fenestella and Clodius Licinus, both of whom dealt with earlier history but may well have gone on to narrate events of their own time. Mention has also been made of T. Labienus, the orator who was notorious for his republican sympathies and his violent invectives, and who is known to us largely thanks to a passage of Seneca's *controuersiae*, which tells us that he was nicknamed 'Rabienus'.⁴¹ He wrote a history, of unknown scope, which the senate ordered to be burned along with his other books, causing him to commit suicide. The history included passages so offensive that even their outspoken author regarded them as too dangerous for recitation during his lifetime. This almost certainly means that the work dealt (in whole or in part) with recent events, and probably that it was flagrantly 'Pompeian'.

A parallel case is that of Cremutius Cordus (*FRHist* 71), the historian who was prosecuted for treason in AD 25 because of his republican sympathies and driven to suicide; his History, which praised the murderers of Caesar and called Cassius the last of the Romans, was burned on the orders of the Senate. It certainly dealt with the civil wars and the triumvirate, and perhaps also covered the principate of Augustus.

Cremutius Cordus is one of those cited by Seneca the Elder in his comparative analysis of how the death of Cicero was treated by historians.⁴² The others include Livy, in his now lost book 120; Livy then wrote a further 22 books to take the story down to the death of Drusus and the *clades Variana* in 9 BC; and Asinius Pollio (*FRHist* 56), the great Caesarean marshal (cos. 40) who retired from active politics after his triumph in 39 and from then on devoted himself to oratory and literary

³⁷ Schwartz (1899) 1716–1717.

³⁸ E.g. Champlin (2008) 418.

³⁹ Syme (1958) 272.

⁴⁰ Syme (1958) 180–190; (1964) 408; and, notoriously, (1968) 92–93; (1971) 30–53, 111–134.

⁴¹ Sen. *contr.* 10 *praef.* 4–8 = *FRHist* 62 T2.

⁴² Sen. *suas.* 6.14–25.

pursuits; he lived on through most of the reign of Augustus, whose friendship he maintained, while cultivating a reputation for independence of thought and speech. His history, which began with the 'First Triumvirate' in 60 BC, went down to at least 43 BC and probably to Philippi; it contained seventeen books, and may have gone on to cover some or all of the triumviral period and perhaps part of Augustus' reign. But, in spite of a vast amount of speculation, the fact is that nothing remains of the work beyond a pitiful handful of fragments.

Another great man of the time, M. Valerius Messalla Corvinus (*FRHist* 61), was a contemporary of Augustus and a leading orator, who reached the consulship in 31 and died in AD 8. Messalla seems to have written a historical work which dealt with Philippi (he served with Cassius) and possibly went on into the 30s and beyond. Although it is sometimes assumed to have been an autobiographical memoir, there is actually no evidence whatever for its scope and character.

Even less is known about one Cornutus (*FRHist* 54), another contemporary of Livy. He is probably to be identified with M. Caecilius Cornutus, the son of a republican victim of the proscriptions, who reached the praetorship and was one of the first Arvals in the 20s BC. He died probably toward the end of the millennium. According to an entry in the *Suda* his readings were well attended because he was rich and childless, and legacy hunters (*captatores*) came in large numbers to fawn upon him, whereas poor old Livy got hardly anyone to listen to him. Cichorius assembled three fragments from the Berne scholia on Lucan;⁴³ unsurprisingly they concern the Civil War between Pompey and Caesar, but whether the work extended more widely is unknowable.

A comparable (and equally comic) story is told of one Octavius Ruso (*FRHist* 48), referred to by Horace (*sat.* 1.3) as a moneylender who compelled debtors who couldn't pay to listen to recitations of his historical work. He may have been a man of senatorial family and a descendant of the Cn. Octavius Ruso who was quaestor in 105 BC (*Sall. Jug.* 104) and praetor before 91.⁴⁴ Horace is clearly mocking a man who had literary pretensions as a historian, but we know nothing about the title, nature, or scope of his historical work or works.

Horace also furnishes information about C. Furnius (*FRHist* 50), a senator (tr. pl. 50, pr. 42) who fought with Antony but was spared by Octavian and received consular rank in 29; we also know that he outlived his son, the consul of 17 BC. He is hailed by Horace (*sat.* 1.10.86) as a man of literary distinction alongside Pol-

⁴³ Cichorius (1922) 261–267.

⁴⁴ *MRR* II 24 n. 2.

lio, Messalla Corvinus, Ser. Sulpicius Galba and L. Calpurnius Bibulus. The scholiast *ad loc.* explains that Furnius was renowned for the elegance of his histories; but alas, nothing more is known about them.

Next we may consider C. Sulpicius Galba (*FRHist* 57), the grandfather of the emperor. Born around 68 BC, he held the praetorship (probably under the Triumvirs) and then governed Achaea, either in the 20s, or perhaps as late as 10 BC. He wrote a history described by Suetonius (*Galb.* 3.3) as *multiplex nec incuriosa* – meaning that it was either variegated or voluminous (*multiplex*), and painstaking (*nec incuriosa*). One fragment (F1) deals with Tarpeia (i.e. the age of Romulus), the other with troop numbers in the war of Sertorius (F2). Nothing more can be said; but it may have been a complete annalistic history going down to the author's own time.

Alongside these historians writing under Augustus we should briefly mention the many contemporary writers of biographical and autobiographical memoirs. These include the Life of Cicero by his freedman Tiro (*FRHist* 46), reminiscences of Brutus by P. Volumnius (*FRHist* 47) and C(?). Calpurnius Bibulus (*FRHist* 49),⁴⁵ and the salacious 'kiss-and-tell' memoirs of Q. Dellius (*FRHist* 53), who claimed that it was he who persuaded Cleopatra to seduce Antony. Mention should also be made of the autobiographies of M. Agrippa (*FRHist* 59) and Augustus himself (*FRHist* 60); on the other hand Horace's suggestion that Maecenas should write a history in prose (*carm.* 2.12.10) cannot be taken as evidence that he actually did so.

In this connection we may mention a group of writers who are known only from Suetonius' life of Augustus. Julius Marathus (a freedman–secretary in the imperial household: *FRHist* 65), and C. Drusus (*FRHist* 66) are cited for biographical details about Augustus' early life. Perhaps more interesting, but also more mysterious, are two evidently anti-Caesarian writers, Aquilius Niger (*FRHist* 67), who claimed that Octavian himself killed the consul Vibius Pansa during the battle of Mutina, and Julius (or Junius) Saturninus (*FRHist* 68), who wrote that Octavian prevented Lepidus from bringing the proscriptions to an early end. Like Suetonius' other sources, these were probably contemporaries who could provide first-hand evidence from their own knowledge; but whether their histories went back into the past, or extended down into the principate of Augustus, we have no means of knowing.

The foregoing list of writers surely amounts to a substantial catalogue. There can be no denying that the age of the civil wars and transition from republic to

⁴⁵ On the identity and status of this Bibulus (possibly a senator who was aedile in the 20s BC) see Syme (1987) 197.

monarchy gave rise to a large body of historical literature produced by men who had lived through the events and were profoundly affected by them. But it is equally true that our knowledge of what these works were like and what they contained is absolutely pitiful; that we know about them at all is in many cases due to the purest chance. That there were many more that we know absolutely nothing about (unknown unknowns therefore) seems to me extremely likely. The record of the following generation, from the last years of Augustus to the reign of Caligula – that is, the age of those who, as Tacitus so memorably said (*ann.* 1.3.7), had not seen the Republic – is less extensive, but this may result from the fact that it is less well documented in general; and in any case there is enough to show that the alleged demise of historiography is greatly exaggerated.

It is to this period that we can assign the aforementioned Fenestella, Clodius Licinus, Labienus/Rabienus, and Cremutius Cordus. They are shortly followed by Velleius Paterculus, the one prose historian from the age of Seneca whose text actually survives for us to read; that it does so is the purest chance. Had it not done so we should know almost nothing about it.⁴⁶ Although often dismissed as a servile panegyric or ignored altogether in studies of imperial historiography,⁴⁷ Velleius' work has recently drawn the attention of scholars who have shown that it deserves to be taken seriously;⁴⁸ although only a summary account in two books, Velleius frequently speaks of his intention to write a full-scale history, but whether he ever did so is unknown and perhaps unlikely.⁴⁹

Brutteditus Niger (*FRHist* 72) was a contemporary of Velleius, and like him a loyalist and a senator; he was also a close associate of Sejanus, and perished in his downfall. All we know about his history is that it included the death of Cicero (he is one of those cited by the elder Seneca in his famous comparison of different historians' accounts of that event). Whether it went back into the republican past, or forward to cover more recent events, we cannot say.

We know a bit more about Aufidius Bassus (*FRHist* 78) and M. Servilius Nonianus (*FRHist* 79), who were younger contemporaries of Seneca the Elder, although Bassus must have published at least part of his work during Seneca's lifetime because he too is quoted in *suasoria* 6 (18 and 23 = F1–2) on the death of

⁴⁶ Velleius is cited once by Priscian *GL* 2.248.4, once by Servius (*ecl.* 5.11) and twice by the scholiast on Lucan (8.663; 9.178).

⁴⁷ He is disparaged by Syme (1958) 367–368, and ignored by Klingner (1958) 194–195.

⁴⁸ Sumner (1970); Woodman (1975a); (1975b); (1977); (1983); Elefante (1999); Cowan (2011).

⁴⁹ Vell. 2.48.5; 89.1; 96.3; 99.3; 103.4; 114.4; 119.1. Discussion in Sumner (1970) 280–284, and Woodman (1975a), 287–288, explaining why some scholars doubt Velleius' seriousness.

Cicero. It went on to cover the period from 8 BC to AD 31 (F4), but its precise starting and finishing points are a matter of guesswork.⁵⁰ That it began with the death of Caesar is a reasonable possibility, but we have no idea how far it extended beyond 31, if at all. The only thing we know is that it was continued by Pliny the Elder (*FRHist* 80), who wrote 31 books *a fine Aufidii Bassi*; the earliest event recorded by Pliny was in 55 (*FRHist* 80 F4). Pliny evidently regarded him as an authority, and also followed him in another respect: both historians wrote separate works on the German Wars, although Pliny's twenty books almost certainly overshadowed Aufidius' *Bellum Germanicum* (in the singular), which may have been no more than a monograph on the campaigns of Tiberius. There is no evidence that he was a senator, but that should not be taken to indicate that he was not.

M. Servilius Nonianus, on the other hand, was definitely a senator; consul in 35 and proconsul of Africa in (probably) 47. His death in 59 is marked by Tacitus, whose obituary describes him as a distinguished orator and historian (*FRHist* 79 F4). Of his work we know little, but he is often invoked as one of Tacitus' sources for the *Annals*.⁵¹

Last but not least among the contemporaries of Seneca the Elder was the emperor Claudius himself (*FRHist* 75). During his youth Claudius famously devoted himself to history, with the encouragement of Livy (T1). He started with the murder of Caesar, but broke off after two books on the advice of his mother and grandmother, and started again with the end of the civil wars (i.e. after Actium), and completed 41 books. We do not know how far he got; the speculation that he covered the period from 27 BC to AD 14 with one book per year is clever but far from compelling.⁵² He also wrote histories of the Etruscans and Carthaginians in Greek, and his oratory (especially the so-called Table of Lyons: *ILS* 212) betrays extensive and abstruse knowledge of the distant past. Syme famously argued that the antiquarian digressions in Tacitus' *Annals* are based on Claudius.⁵³

Concluding remarks

After this exhausting catalogue I should like to draw attention to two contradictory things. First, we know that a great deal of historical writing was practised

⁵⁰ Discussion in Syme (1958) 697–700.

⁵¹ E.g. by Syme (1964), who thinks his status as a consular and man of affairs would lead Tacitus to prefer him over Aufidius.

⁵² Levick in *FRHist* I 511 and n. 8.

⁵³ Syme (1958) 514–515; 703–710.

during the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius – the age of the Elder Seneca. We also know that in this period there was a flourishing culture of literary historiography – witness the many references to readings and recitations. Cornutus was surrounded by legacy-hunters at his readings, while Livy's were sparsely attended; Octavius Ruso compelled his debtors to attend his recitations. Augustus attended a reading by Cremutius Cordus (Suet. *Tib.* 61.3); Labienus omitted from his recitations bits that were too offensive (with the instruction that they be publicised after his death: Sen. *contr.* 10 *praef.* 8); Claudius when emperor dropped in on a reading by Servilius Nonianus (Plin. *epist.* 1.13.3; Servilius was also heard by Quintilian: *inst.* 10.1.102). Claudius' own readings were a disaster: he kept drying up, and when someone fell off his chair, he kept remembering the incident and couldn't stop laughing (Suet. *Claud.* 41.1).

But these external facts relate to known unknowns. In spite of the extensive evidence for the existence of this historiography, of the nature and content of the actual works we know almost nothing at all. Our problem therefore is not to explain an absence of historiography, but to explain why we know so little about what there was. The poverty of our knowledge can be illustrated by a comparison with the earlier historiography of the Republic. The interesting and paradoxical fact is that there is far more evidence for historical works produced in the early period, from Fabius Pictor down to c. 40 BC, than for the succeeding century: there are far more fragments and *testimonia* for Fabius Pictor, Cato, Cassius Hemina, Coelius Antipater, Piso, Sisenna, Claudius Quadrigarius, Valerius Antias, Licinius Macer – indeed more for each one of these – than for any historian of the civil wars or early principate, including major figures such as Pollio or Messalla Corvinus. The predecessors of Tacitus, the historians of the early empire (Cremutius Cordus, Aufidius Bassus, Servilius Nonianus, Pliny the Elder, Cluvius Rufus and Fabius Rusticus) are also pitifully represented in the surviving evidence and are very rarely quoted by later authors. Seneca the Elder also belongs to this group.

There is a tendency in some quarters to dismiss little-known historians as figures of no importance – as 'mere names'. Syme for instance writes that 'the Principate of Augustus can show few historians. Apart from Livy, they are little more than names ... a certain Cornutus has been disinterred, who appears to have written about the Civil Wars: surely of slight importance'.⁵⁴ But this overlooks the fact that we know no more about the work of Servilius Nonianus, whom Syme values highly, seemingly on the grounds that he was a consular and someone who can be investigated prosopographically (*supra* n. 51). Another historian in whom

⁵⁴ Syme (1959) 64.

scholars have invested heavily is Asinius Pollio, a very important figure in the political and cultural life of his time. Syme indeed came close to identifying himself with Pollio, and in *The Roman Revolution* reconstructed a version of the history he thought Pollio might have written.⁵⁵ But in the words of Raaflaub and Samons: 'That Pollio's fame as an historian of the Augustan Age today stands second only to Livy's is an amazing fact, considering the dearth of fragments from his histories.'⁵⁶

The explanation lies in the fact that quotations from lost authors exist because of the interests of the writers who choose to quote them, and have nothing to do with the relative significance or even literary merits of the works from which they are taken. The republican historians are quoted extensively by grammarians and others interested in their quaint or old-fashioned language. Cato was a favourite quarry; and Sisenna is represented by 143 fragments, almost all cited by grammarians, no fewer than 127 of them by Nonius Marcellus; similarly Claudius Quadrigarius is known to us largely because his old-fashioned language appealed to Aulus Gellius, who preserves around half of the 98 fragments, the rest coming from other grammarians – with the exception of a handful from Livy, who, unlike imperial historians such as Tacitus, Dio and Appian, quotes his sources frequently.

By contrast, Augustan and early imperial historians were of no interest to grammarians, who concentrated overwhelmingly on the language and style of the *ueteres*. Admittedly Pollio is cited once by Charisius (*FRHist* 56 F9) and three times by Priscian (F10–12), but these fragments may well come from other works by Pollio (most obviously speeches), and are included only as 'possible fragments' in *FRHist*. A similar source of bias is the fact that very many fragments of the republican historians are quoted by antiquarians and others interested above all in the legendary origins of Rome. This peculiarity accounts for most of the fragments cited by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Festus, Macrobius, the *Origo Gentis Romanae* and the scholia on Virgil's *Aeneid*.

The result is that the surviving fragments represent a grossly biased sample of the lost works of Roman historiography, heavily slanted toward the earlier republican authors, and then toward their treatment of the earliest history of the city. The imperial historians lose out by comparison, and the resulting data give a wholly misleading picture of imperial historiography, both of the number of historians and of their importance.

⁵⁵ Syme (1939) 4–6; (1958) 136.

⁵⁶ Raaflaub/Samons (1990) 43.

Seneca the Elder is one of the historians to have suffered from this unbalanced state of affairs. His historical work is often overlooked in discussions of imperial historians, and of such questions as the possible sources of Tacitus. Because so little survives of this work, it is thought to have been of little importance or influence. Indeed, some scholars have even doubted that it was ever published⁵⁷ – a notion that has now been dashed by the discovery that a copy was held in the library of the *Villa dei Papiri* at Herculaneum, in itself a fact of great importance.

A second observation that can be made about the data we have been discussing is that they undermine the idea that there was a change in the social status of historians – that historiography was the exclusive preserve of the senatorial aristocracy in the early days, but that in the late Republic history began to be written by a wider class of professional litterateurs from outside the political elite. While it is true that writers such as Livy (certainly) and Fenestella (probably) were non-senators, it is not certain how much of a novelty this was, since the status of some early historians, such as Cassius Hemina, Vennonius, Cn. Gellius, and Coelius Antipater is wholly uncertain, not to speak of Claudius Quadrigarius and Valerius Antias; and conversely the historians who were writing in the age of Seneca the Elder continued for the most part to be drawn from the senatorial class. The statistics are set out in Table 1.

Of the 28 historians listed, the status of six is completely unknown. Of the remaining 22, more than 70% were from the political elite (three emperors, thirteen certain or possible senators, of whom six were consulars). Two were equites and four were freedmen. As Antonio La Penna argued in an important paper, the distinction between senatorial historians and literary historians has been overdrawn; and among the former group the presence of statesmen of the first rank has been exaggerated.⁵⁸ Cato the Censor is wholly exceptional in this sense. A number of the important senatorial historians of the republic were of praetorian rank or below: Fabius Pictor, Cincius Alimentus, C. Fannius C.f. (not the consul of 122 BC!), Sempronius Asellio, Sisenna, Licinius Macer, Sallust. Even among the consulars, only a very few were outstanding political figures (perhaps L. Calpurnius Piso Frugi, Asinius Pollio and Messalla Corvinus).

The social diversity of Roman historiography goes back to the second century BC, as indeed does the diversity of different types of history. Before 100 BC traditional annals had been joined by contemporary *historiae*, monographs and personal memoirs (by such as M. Aemilius Scaurus, P. Rutilius Rufus and Q. Lutatius

⁵⁷ Klotz (1901) 441–442.

⁵⁸ La Penna (1967).

Catulus). This diversity continued into the Principate. It may not even be true that Livy was the last of the republican annalists, and that no one else tried to write the whole history of Rome from the beginning to his own time. We know that Velleius planned to do precisely that, and it is perfectly possible that complete annalistic histories were compiled by Galba (the emperor's grandfather), Clodius Licinus and Fenestella.

The foregoing remarks suggest a picture of the development of historical writing at Rome that is very different from the one traditionally presented in modern scholarship. Historiography did not cease with the end of political freedom; on the contrary, there were as many historians active in the generations after Actium as there had been in the preceding period, and the great majority of them continued to be men of senatorial standing. What changes – and it is a very dramatic change – is the availability of evidence. Our knowledge of republican historiography is poor enough, consisting as it does of scattered and often uninformative fragments and *testimonia*. But for the succeeding period of the early Principate the evidence dries up to the merest trickle, and for reasons that have nothing to do with the quality or quantity of the historical writing that was produced. Our knowledge of the historical works of Seneca and his contemporaries is pitifully small – so much so, in fact, that it is actually quite probable that there were many more historians active at the time of whom we know absolutely nothing. The problem of course is that these are speculations, and that we cannot be more precise. We simply do not know. But the *ars nesciendi* requires us to be aware of this fact and to take full account of it. We *know* that we do not know.

Tab. 1: Historians writing between c. 30 BC and c. AD 40 ('the age of Seneca the Elder'), in order of appearance in *FRHist* (with *FRHist* numbers).

46. M. Tullius Tiro
47. P. Volumnius
48. Octavius Ruso
49. L. Calpurnius Bibulus
50. C. Furnius
53. Q. Dellius
54. M. Caecilius (?) Cornutus
56. C. Asinius Pollio
57. C. Sulpicius Galba
58. L. Arruntius
59. M. Vipsanius Agrippa
60. Imp. Caesar Augustus

61. M. Valerius Messalla Corvinus
62. T. Labienus
63. C. Iulius Hyginus
64. Clodius Licinus
65. Julius Marathus
66. C. Drusus
67. Aquilius Niger
68. Julius (Junius?) Saturninus
70. Fenestella
71. Cremutius Cordus
72. Brutteditus Niger
73. Ti. Claudius Nero (Ti. Julius Caesar Augustus)
74. L. Annaeus Seneca (Maior)
75. Ti. Claudius Caesar Augustus Germanicus
76. Ti. Claudius Herma Sideropogon
78. Aufidius Bassus

Social status of the 28 historians listed:

- 3 emperors (Augustus, Tiberius, Claudius)
- 10 senators: 6 consulars (Pollio, Agrippa, Messalla Corvinus, Furnius, Arruntius, Clodius Licinus)
- 2 praetorians (Galba, Cornutus)
- 1 aedilician (Brutteditus Niger)
- 1 other, possibly praetorian (Cremutius Cordus)
- 3 possible/probable senators (Bibulus, Octavius Ruso, Aufidius Bassus)
- 2 equestrians (Labienus, Seneca)
- 4 freedmen (Tiro, Julius Marathus, Hyginus, Herma Sideropogon)
- 6 of unknown status (C. Drusus, Aquilius Niger, Julius (Junius?) Saturninus, Fenestella, Volumnius, Dellius)