

Lewis A. Sussman

# The Lost *Histories* of the Elder Seneca (1972)

**Abstract:** Written in the early 70s but never published until now, this paper offers an overview of what we can reconstruct of Seneca the Elder's *Histories*. The scant fragmentary evidence handed down to us is analyzed to determine the possible scope and date of this work, while the attitude and the method of Seneca as an historian are assessed based on his extant rhetorical anthology. Particular attention is devoted to the selection and the critical evaluation of sources by Seneca, his philosophy of history, and the purpose and value that historiography had in his eye. The overall reading of our available clues regarding the lost *Histories* leads us to draw the profile of an independent thinker for his age, interested in the absolute nature of the moral values which he espoused in his work.

## 1 Introduction: the fragments

As his two names suggest, the fame of the elder Seneca, or Seneca Rhetor (as he is most inappropriately called)<sup>1</sup> rests either on the family relationship to his more renowned son, or on the tattered collections of extracts he gathered from the declaimers of the early Empire (the *Controversiae* and *Suasoriae*). One therefore learns with some degree of surprise that he also wrote a monumental history of Rome extending from the beginning of the civil wars until nearly the day of his own death, usually dated to AD 39.<sup>2</sup> Our sole undisputable evidence for this work is a brief notice in the younger Seneca's fragmentary biography of his father (*De vita Patris*; Appendix - T1), in which the work's moralistic overtones and preoccupation with the motif of decline are both plainly apparent.<sup>3</sup>

---

1 Throughout this paper, I shall refer to the elder Seneca by that title or as just "Seneca." His son will always be designated the "younger Seneca."

2 The evidence for this dating is collected conveniently in Rossbach (1894) 2238; cf. Bornecque (1902a) 12–13; Schendel (1908) 50; Edward (1928) xxiv–xxv; Ferrill (1964) 54; and *infra*, n. 18. The arguments stand even if we disregard the fragment in Suet. *Tib.* 73. Weinrib (1968) 150–151 finds it possible to date the death before the summer of AD 39.

3 See also Müller (1887) 548 n. 1. On the text of the fragment and its significance see Studemund (1888) *passim* and Rossbach (1888) 162–184. "If I had already published whatever works my father wrote and wanted to have published, he would sufficiently have seen to the fame of his own

The importance of the *Histories*, as the younger Seneca entitles the work, is underscored by the assertions of such eminent scholars as Syme, Hahn, Rossbach, and others who believe that it was probably a source for a number of important later writers, including Lucan, Tacitus, Suetonius, Florus, and especially Appian.<sup>4</sup> If their beliefs are correct (and Hahn's argument that Seneca was a source for Appian is very persuasive), then the *Histories* are clearly a work of pivotal importance in the historiography of the early Empire.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, of this extensive work we have only two fragments, and the authenticity of these has been hotly disputed for a century. In fact, scholarly discussion of the *Histories* has focussed on this authenticity question, nearly to the exclusion of equally important considerations with which this paper will primarily deal.

One fragment is a vivid and rhetorical description of Tiberius' death, ascribed only to Seneca, in Suetonius' life of that Emperor (*Appendix* - F1).<sup>6</sup>

The ambiguity of the attribution has caused the contention between two rival camps: one claiming it for Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *pater*, in view of the fact that

---

name. For unless my filial devotion deceives me, and even the error arising from this is honorable, he would be considered among those who, because of their innate ability, have deserved to be famous by the mere titles of their writings. If anyone had read his *Histories* from the beginning of the civil wars, the point where righteousness declined for the first time, nearly up until the day of his own death, he would consider it important to know who the parents were of the man who [recorded] Roman events// . . . "

4 As a source for Lucan, see Brisset (1964) 35; Ferrill (1964) 55 and n. 70; Hahn (1964) 197–198; 201; Rossbach (1888) 168–169; Wuilleumier–Le Bonniec (1962) 4. As a source for Tacitus, see Syme (1958) I 277. Cf. the parallelism of thought in Tacitus and the elder Seneca on the fate of delators; *contr.* 10 *praef.* 7 ~ *ann.* 1.74, and those noted by Preisendanz (1908) 105, n. 101. As a source for Suetonius, see Grisart (1961), who believes the elder Seneca is the source not only for *Tib.* 73, as many others do, but also for *Ver.* 28. Seneca is also the apparent source for an incident in the life of Albucius, *rhet.* 6; cf. 7 *praef.* 7. As a source for Florus, see Peter (1914<sup>2</sup>) II CXVIII–CXVIII; Rossbach (1909) 2761; 2765; Forster (1929) xi; Forster (1949) 365; Tibiletti (1959); Hahn (1964) 172–206, especially 174; 197; Jal (1967) I XXIX–XXX (with much citation); LXXXIX. Castiglioni (1928) 460 asserts that the debt of Florus to Seneca is that of imitator to model. For Seneca as a source of Appian, see Hahn (1964) 196–206. For the influence of the elder Seneca on his son, see Rolland (1906). Castiglioni (1928) 456–457 would like to attribute a number of historical references in the younger Seneca to his father's historical work, especially some which mention the imperial family.

5 The references to the extensive literature on this question of their authenticity are conveniently listed in Schanz/Hosius (1935) 341. See also the more current bibliography (here primarily in reference to the Lactantius fragment) in Lausberg (1970) 3, n. 10. Grisart (1961) should be consulted on the Suetonius fragment.

6 Suet. *Tib.* 73.

he wrote a history which covered that event, and the other for Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *filius*, in the belief that the reference to Seneca *sic nude* could refer only to him. The weight of the evidence, and in particular an ingenious argument made by Grisart,<sup>7</sup> tend in my view towards ascribing the fragment to *pater*.

Lactantius apparently preserves another, and more extensive passage from the *Histories* (Appendix - F2).<sup>8</sup> He attributes the piece to a Seneca who has cleverly divided up Roman history into periods analogous to the various ages of man. Starting with birth and infancy under Romulus, Rome progressed successively through childhood under the kings and, at the termination of royal rule, into adolescence, which lasted until the first Punic war. Then, according to the fragment, Rome entered a vigorous manhood. Declining old age began after the third Punic war when Rome lacked other nations to fight and so began to make war upon itself. Finally, under the rule of Augustus, after the civil wars had ended, Rome entered into another infancy.<sup>9</sup>

Again, the debate has raged about which Seneca is meant, primarily for the reasons described above. Quintilian, who is usually thorough on such matters, does not mention that the younger Seneca wrote history<sup>10</sup> and since the fragment in Lactantius almost certainly comes from such a work,<sup>11</sup> many have persisted in ascribing it to the elder Seneca. Also, the younger Seneca displays such a distinct bias against history that it is difficult to conceive of him ever entering this field.<sup>12</sup> The other side points out that this description could just as easily have come from a lost philosophical work of the younger Seneca, and that in any event Lactantius was so familiar with the younger Seneca that he could not have made such a mistaken ascription.<sup>13</sup> In support, they point out several close parallels in wording with extant works of the younger Seneca. Of course, it could be said in rebuttal that the style and thought of the younger Seneca were deeply influenced by his father, and that, even if the fragment were from a lost philosophical work, the conception could originally stem from the *Histories*. In any event, the style of the

---

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *supra* n. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Lact. *inst.* 7.15.14–16.

<sup>9</sup> See the discussion of this passage in Archambault (1966) 193–200.

<sup>10</sup> Quint. *inst.* 10.1.129.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Sall. *Catil.* 10; *hist.* 1, fr. 9; 11; 12; 16 Maurenbrecher; Liv. *praef.* 9; Flor. *epit.* 1 *praef.* 4–8; Script. Hist. Aug. *Car.* 2.3; Amm. 14.6. See Archambault (1966) 193–200.

<sup>12</sup> Noted by Kühnen (1962) 20–27; cf. Sen. *nat.* 3 *praef.* 5ff.; *epist.* 83.13; *dial.* 4.3.22.1. But on 78, he attributes the Lactantius fragment to the younger Seneca mainly because of the plain attribution to “Seneca” only, adding (85–86) that it does not necessarily have to originate in a historical work, but could be from a lost philosophical tract.

<sup>13</sup> Kühnen (1962) summarizes these arguments well.

fragment has been shown to be primarily Lactantian, and ascription on stylistic grounds to one or the other Seneca is therefore difficult.<sup>14</sup> From several comments in the *Controversiae* and information in the *De Vita Patris*, we know that the elder Seneca was greatly interested in the cyclical conception of decline.<sup>15</sup> In fact, this fragmentary biography, which also happens to be the only evidence for the existence of the *Histories*, describes the work as the elder Seneca's "histories from the beginning of the civil wars, the point where righteousness declined for the first time," a close reminder of the Lactantius fragment. Again, the evidence points towards the elder Seneca's *Histories* as the source. And to those who rest their argument on the impossibility of Lactantius' confusing the two Senecas, one need only point out the card catalogues of many large research libraries, where professional librarians have themselves made the same error (repeatedly, I might add).<sup>16</sup>

Thus the battle rages, and no doubt will continue to do so with little prospect of a definite settlement. Nevertheless, given the importance of the *Histories* and the possibility of learning more about them through sources other than the fragments, we ought to detour around this one troublesome area and attempt to obtain independently more important information; e.g., the scope of the work, the elder Seneca's philosophy of history, his sources, purposes, and style. If, on analysis, the fragments fit into a reconstruction of the *Histories*, then we have added an independent argument for authenticity. Likewise, if one or the other contradicts the reconstruction, then we have even firmer evidence for rejection.

---

14 For discussion see Castiglioni (1928) 462–475; Hartke (1951) 394–395 n. 4; Kühnen (1962) 78–79; Hahn (1965), 24–38.

15 E.g., the elder Seneca's comments on the decline of Roman eloquence: *contr.* 1 *praef.* 6–7: *Deinde ut possitis aestimare, in quantum cotidie ingenia decrescant et nescio qua iniquitate naturae eloquentia se retro tulerit: quidquid Romana facundia habet, quod insolenti Graeciae aut opponat aut praeferat, circa Ciceronem effloruit; omnia ingenia, quae lucem studiis nostris attulerunt, tunc nata sunt. In deterius deinde cotidie data res est, sive luxu temporum – nihil enim tam mortiferum ingeniis quam luxuria est – sive, cum pretium pulcherrimae rei cecidisset, translatus est omne certamen ad turpia multo honore quaestuque vigentia, sive fato quodam, cuius maligna perpetuaque in rebus omnibus lex est, ut ad summum perducta rursus ad infimum, velocius guidem quam ascenderant, relabantur.* See also his discussion on the growth of declamation, where the closing statement clearly reveals the biological viewpoint: *contr.* 1 *praef.* 12: *ideo facile est mihi ab incunabulis nosse rem post me natam.*

16 The two Senecas have been constantly confused because of their names: both are Lucius Annaeus Seneca. See Müller (1887) VII and n. 1; also Edward (1928) XXIII n. 1. It is indeed possible that confusion began at a very early date. Grisart's (1961) discussion is of interest in this regard.

## 2 The scope and date of the *Histories*

From the *De Vita Patris* it is apparent that the *Histories* covered Roman events (*res Romanas*) from the inception of the civil wars until nearly the day of the elder Seneca's own death, in the early part of Gaius's reign.<sup>17</sup>

Although different points have been proposed for the beginning of the civil wars (e.g., the Gracchi, Social War, Marius and Sulla), the phrase *ab initio bellorum civilium unde primum veritas retro abiit* is in itself decisive for identifying the beginning of the *Histories*. Seneca has associated the outbreak of these wars, probably as an effect, with growing luxury and moral decadence. Ancient writers, among them Sallust, Velleius, Lucan, Florus, Appian, Victorinus, and Ammianus are practically unanimous in assigning the inception of moral decay to the period encompassing the destruction of Carthage and Corinth in 146 BC, and, likewise, they all date the beginning of Rome's disastrous civil wars to the period of the Gracchi shortly thereafter.<sup>18</sup> The Lactantius fragment itself also reflects this tradition, and this is not unusual since Roman historians were essentially conservative. The tradition was established long before Seneca, and it would be hard to

---

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *supra*, n. 2. The work was not just a history of the civil wars: the wording of *De Vita Patris* is clear: (1) It obviously covered events far beyond the end of the wars, and (2) it dealt with *res Romanas*, indicating a wide scope.

<sup>18</sup> It is of particular importance in this regard to note the opinions held by at least one of the *Annaei*; cf. Lucan 1.158ff, especially 173–182; also Florus (if we admit him into the family) *epit.* 1.47.2; *epit.* 2.1–2; cf. Rossbach (1894) 2239. On the apparent inconsistency between Florus *epit.* 1.19 and his proem, see Hahn (1964) 175. For this dating, see Sall. *Catil.* 10.1; *hist.* 1 fr. 11= 15 La Penna/Funari; 12 Maurenbrecher = 16 La Penna/Funari; cf. Clausen (1947); Hahn (1964) 173; 203; Vell. 2.1.1–2; cf. 1.12.6; 2.2.2; 2.3.3; Plin. *nat.* 33.150; App. *BC.* 1.2; Victorin. *rhet. Cic.* 158 Halm; cf. Aug. *civ.* 2.18; 2.21; also 1.30; Oros. *hist.* 5.8.2. In general see Rossbach (1888) 162–163; Rossbach (1894), Rossbach (1903) 85; Earl (1961) 47. One may interpret Tac. *hist.* 1.1 as opposing this dating; he says that before Actium Roman history was written *pari eloquentia ac libertate*, but that afterwards, when *omnem potentiam ad unum conferri pacis interfuit, magna illa ingenia cessare; simul veritas pluribus modis infracta*. Schanz/Hosius (1935) 341 also believes the Gracchan dating to be wrong; cf. Klotz (1901), especially 438. Weinrib (1968) 137 apparently takes the disappearance of *libertas* with the death of Brutus as the equivalent of the decline of *veritas*, and therefore the starting point in accordance with the text of the Lactantius fragment (*amissa enim libertate*); cf. Castiglioni (1928) 458–475. However, decline was shown in the fragment after the destruction of Carthage when Rome's first old age began (*bellis lacerata civilibus atque intestine mala pressa*). It is hard to believe that the elder Seneca, who was obviously preoccupied with the notion of decline and equated it with the civil wars, would have this decline take place so soon before the reign of Augustus. The point *ab initio bellorum civilium unde primum veritas retro abiit* must surely go further back in the Republic, especially given the time and conditions (the Julio-Claudians were still reigning) under which Seneca wrote.

imagine his straying from the generally accepted pattern, especially in view of his own deep conservatism.<sup>19</sup>

In keeping with the common practice of Roman historians, we may also assume that Seneca treated events in greater detail as the account progressed. Thus we could expect the work to deal most extensively with the period beginning in 43 BC, at which time we know that the elder Seneca was a schoolboy greatly disturbed by the frenzy of the civil wars, which had interfered with his studies in rhetoric.<sup>20</sup> We know also that he possessed an astounding memory, an extensive knowledge of historical writings, personal acquaintance with the leading politicians of the day, and a marked propensity for treating events or anecdotes which he knew well in full detail.<sup>21</sup> Assuredly, it was not a brief work.

Extensive treatment of Spanish affairs can also be surmised. Many of the bloodiest and most decisive campaigns of the civil wars were waged there, and the people who figured prominently in many of these events, or their families, must have been well known to Seneca, a native of Cordova, who was in that city during the turbulent early 40's BC.

The elder Seneca wrote the *Histories* in the early years of Gaius's reign. This dating helps explain the appearance of this historical narrative,<sup>22</sup> for under Tiberius the authors of similar ones were punished and the works were burned. Asinius Pollio thought it prudent to end his historical account at 42 BC, and even the young Claudius was dissuaded from covering the more sensitive parts of this

---

**19** Hahn's (1964) discussion of the scope of the *Histories* (176ff.) is the most sensible. He argues that it must go back at least to the fighting between Marius and Sulla, or the *Bellum Sociale*, if not to the Gracchi, who could then be linked to the fall of Carthage; cf. Studemund (1888) 163; Roszbach (1894) 2239; Roszbach (1903) col. 85. Roszbach (1888) rightly considers the mention of *unde primum veritas retro abiit* as a vital piece of evidence and more suitable to the times of the Gracchi than to the later civil conflicts. On the elder Seneca's conservatism, see the younger Seneca, *dial.* 12.17.3–4.

**20** Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 11.

**21** On his memory see *contr.* 1 *praef.* 2–5; on his broad knowledge of Roman historical writings see *suas.* 6 and 7 (also discussed below as are Seneca's acquaintance with the leading political figures of his day and his love of anecdotes).

**22** According to the *De Vita Patris* Seneca was working on the *Histories* and also covering the period nearly up until the day of his death, which can be dated about AD 39. Cf. Schanz/Hosius (1935) 341; Peter (1914<sup>2</sup>) II CXVIII; Teuffel (1920<sup>7</sup>) 170–172; Roszbach (1894) 2239; and *supra*, n. 2. Seneca may have begun work at the end of Tiberius' reign. In any event, from the tone of *suas.* 6 and 7, and other remarks in his extant works, it is evident that he must have been considering writing history. Weinrib (1968) 151–153 maintains that his time schedule was so tight that he must have been writing the *Suasoriae* and the *Histories* at the same time.

period.<sup>23</sup> But at Gaius's accession there was a brief period of *libertas* and optimism. The old histories, once banned or burned, were now republished and a new one was written.<sup>24</sup> It was a propitious time for a project which had evidently been on Seneca's mind for some time.

Nevertheless, Alfred Klotz and others have suggested that the elder Seneca's *Histories* were never published.<sup>25</sup> In their opinion it would have been extremely dangerous to release a work narrating the history of a period so recent and so likely to irritate the imperial government. Other evidence contradicts their assumption.

First, the wording of the *De Vita Patris*, especially the beginning, clearly shows that it was not so much a biography as the publisher's introduction to the *Histories*.<sup>26</sup> Would the younger Seneca have published the introduction and not the book? Or would he have mentioned the *Histories* at all, if they were as dangerous as Klotz believes?<sup>27</sup> The slightly apologetic air of the *De Vita Patris* is important. Three reasons help to explain this tone and fit in well with the general purposes of an introduction:

1. The work lacked the *ultima manus*, since the elder Seneca was plainly working on it almost to the day of his death;
2. The elder Seneca was not primarily a literary man, but a talented amateur;

---

**23** Cf. on Pollio Peter (1914<sup>2</sup>) II LXXXVI. Claudius wrote a voluminous history, *Post Caedem Caesaris*, which opened with the death of Caesar and picked up again after the civil wars. The intervening period was too sensitive to be covered in any detail (Suet. *Claud.* 41). Claudius began the work when young and resumed it while Emperor. Cf. Peter (1914<sup>2</sup>) II CXX–CXXIII; Brisset (1964) 8.

**24** See Suet. *Calig.* 13–16; D.C. 59.24.4; Sen. *dial.* 6.1.2–4; cf. Ferrill (1964) 32–33.

**25** Klotz (1901) 427; 440; 442; Klotz (1909) 1527; Westerborg (1882) 48–49; Teuffel (1902<sup>7</sup>) 171. Those who believe that the work was published include Rossbach (1888) 164ff.; Rossbach (1894) 2239; Rossbach (1903) 85; Bornecque (1902a) 14–15 (asserts that *De Vita Patris* indicates that the work had not yet been published, but does not preclude later publication); Peter (1914<sup>2</sup>), II CXVIII; Schendel (1908) 48–50; Faider (1921) 171; Schanz/Hosius (1935) 340; 341; 398; Syme (1958) I 277; Brisset (1964) 7; Weinrib (1968) 152–153; Whitehorne (1969) 20.

**26** The wording emphasizes the *Histories* and their content while mentioning the other works in an elliptical fashion. The *Histories* were so unlike the *Controversiae* and *Suasoriae* that they deserved a prefatory explanation of the author, his background, and how a municipal equestrian from Spain came to write an account of Roman history, especially since this field was usually considered the prerogative of the senatorial class. Among those favoring the *De Vita Patris* as an introduction to the *Histories* are Schendel (1908) 50; Faider (1921) 171; Schanz/Hosius (1935) 340; 398. Rossbach (1888) 162 maintains that it was not a *laudatio funebris* in n. 1, and also that it was published before the *Histories* which followed shortly thereafter.

**27** Klotz (1901) 442; cf. Rossbach (1903) 85.

3. His morals and politics (and therefore the *Histories*) were somewhat old-fashioned and anachronistic for the times.

Next, it strains credulity to believe that the elder Seneca would write a history so politically outspoken and candid that it could endanger the political fortunes of his sons and prosperity of the Annaean *gens*, both of which he carefully nurtured. He was also aware that a work of this nature would certainly be banned or burned.

Another possible objection is that the *Histories* were written for a very limited private circulation and not for general publication. Here again it seems unlikely that a man of the elder Seneca's advanced years would work so assiduously at such a demanding task if there were no prospect that the fruits of his labors would ever see the light of day.

Martial indicates eventual publication; for he says that eloquent (*facunda*) Cordova talks of its two Senecas and unique Lucan.<sup>28</sup> Clearly the transferred epithet *facunda* would not apply to an anthologist of rhetorical specimens. The term is more appropriate to a historian, whose works Martial must have read.<sup>29</sup>

Of course, if the fragments in either Suetonius or Lactantius are genuine, then the argument for eventual publication is conclusive.<sup>30</sup> Undoubtedly the *Histories* appeared after the elder Seneca's death (about AD 39). Publication could have occurred in one of three time periods:

---

**28** Cf. Mart. 1.61.7–8: *Duosque Senecas, unicumque Lucanum / facunda loquitur Corduba*.

**29** Another reference in Martial may be relevant: *Atria Pisonum stabant cum stemmate toto / et docti Senecae ter numeranda domus* (4.40.1–2). If he is referring to the younger and elder Senecas and Lucan, we have the convergence of two terms typifying these three representatives of the Annaei: *facundus* (1.61.7–8; see *supra* n. 28) and *doctus*. *Facundia* could be exhibited in the law courts, or more so, in the Senate. It refers also to literature, including poetry and history. *Doctus* implies great learning and erudition. For this reason it seems inappropriate to apply such terms to a man whose published works were two anthologies of extracts from declaimers. However, they would fit a man who had written a history of Rome. That Martial expected these terms to be understood without further explanation would suggest that the *Histories* were published and well known. One must accept the possibility that in 1.61.8 Martial is speaking of the younger Seneca and one of his brothers (Novatus or Mela) and that in 4.40.2 he is referring to all three. But with our knowledge of the sketchy literary careers of the brothers, one if not both of the references should bring to mind the elder Seneca. Friedländer (1886) in his notes does not attempt to identify the two Senecas of 1.61.7. But for 4.40.2 (*et docti Senecae ter numeranda domus*) he specifies the three Seneca brothers. While this is a distinct possibility, the parallel reference of 1.61.7 with its additional qualification of the poet Lucan again for a total of three seems to argue against Friedländer's interpretation.

**30** Also, if one allows that other writers used the elder Seneca's *Histories* as a source (*supra* n. 4), one must suppose eventual publication.



1. *Under Gaius*: Optimism and freedom characterized the inception of his reign. Freedom of speech was renewed and previously banned works were allowed to be republished.<sup>31</sup> This would seem an auspicious time for the younger Seneca to publish his father's work, and also the most likely possibility of the three periods.

2. *The Early Years of Claudius' reign*: In the years 41–49 the younger Seneca was exiled to Corsica, and it was during this enforced absence that his literary career really began in earnest. Perhaps he also filled his leisure with editing his father's *Histories* and then, with a deprecatory preface, had the work published in Rome. A number of his own compositions were published in this manner to keep the name of Seneca before the influential and literary public.<sup>32</sup> In so doing, he hoped to win sympathy for his cause from these *literati* and perhaps from the Emperor himself, who also had a great interest in historical writing and oratory, and would certainly have heard of the elder Seneca's earlier works. Thus another of these works might please the Emperor, especially since both men harbored a deep respect for Cicero, whose personal and literary reputation had waned greatly during this age of declamation. The elder Seneca would no doubt give Cicero his full due.<sup>33</sup>

3. *The Reign of Nero*: This is another possibility which has not yet been explored. The wording of the *De Vita Patris* in no way implies that the younger Seneca wrote it and published the *Histories* shortly after the elder Seneca's death. Therefore, publication could also have occurred while Seneca was Nero's tutor and first minister, or during his retirement. Perhaps he released the work in response to his nephew Lucan's request for an account of the period which he planned to treat in his epic poetry.

---

<sup>31</sup> See *supra* n. 24.

<sup>32</sup> See Ferrill (1964) 75; cf. 102–103.

<sup>33</sup> The pro-Ciceronianism of Claudius, no doubt fostered by his erstwhile preceptor, Livy, took literary form in a defense of Cicero (Suet. *Claud.* 41.3; cf. Ferrill (1964) 75 and n. 32). The elder Seneca's pro-Ciceronian bias is apparent throughout his extant works, particularly in matters of style; cf. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 6–7; 11; 7.4.6; 10 *praef.* 6; *suas.* 6.12; 6.14–27; 7.10; also Ferrill (1964) 55–56; Sussman (1969) 152–155. On the declining regard for Cicero, see *contr.* 3 *praef.* 15 ff.; *suas.* 7.13–14. His works were often plagiarized: *suas.* 2.19; 7.14; Sussman (1969) 154–155. It is of interest to note the younger Seneca's comment that Claudius could serve as the model of a good historian: *Plb.* 8.2; cf. Ferrill (1964) 85.

### 3 Seneca's opinion of history as a calling

Although the elder Seneca wrote extensively on declamation, obviously enjoyed it, and spent considerable time frequenting the declamatory displays, he never lost sight of its importance relative to the other genres of eloquence. As a preparatory study he applauded declamation, but he stressed its ability to prepare the declaimer for advancement in other fields: philosophy, literature, oratory, and history.<sup>34</sup>

The testimony of Seneca's remarks and his own literary career indicate that if he preferred a substitute for oratorical eloquence, it was history. This he considered a more substantial field than declamation,<sup>35</sup> and he encouraged his sons to ponder it as a field for future endeavor. Although Seneca apologizes for introducing historical accounts into the *Suasoriae*, nevertheless he confesses that he does it intentionally in order to whet his sons' appetites for the study of history.<sup>36</sup> This did not conflict with the half-hearted permission given his son Mela to devote himself to rhetoric, which Seneca viewed as a preparation for more serious studies later.<sup>37</sup>

In his attitudes to history and its relation to oratory and declamation, Seneca closely parallels Tacitus. Both men favored historical education for young men,<sup>38</sup> both were aware of cyclical movements in history and oratory<sup>39</sup> and both made the transition from rhetorical pursuits to history. Quite possibly Seneca renounced oratory and rhetoric for the same reason as Tacitus—the decline of oratory:

*omissis forensium causarum angustiis in quibus mihi satis superque sudatum est, sanctiorem illam et augustiorem eloquentiam colam.*<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Cf. *contr.* 2 *praef.* 3: *Facilis ab hac* [i.e., declamation] *in omnes artes discursus est; instruit etiam quos non sibi exercet*. Declamation in itself, he thought, was an honorable part of oratory (*contr.* 2 *praef.* 5; cf. 1 *praef.* 7), but it did not approach the summit of literary achievement (*contr.* 1.8.16), which he assigned to oratory and history (*suas.* 5.8; 6.16). Two of Seneca's prefaces are damning indictments of declamation (3 *praef.*, quotation of Cassius Severus; 9 *praef.*, quotation of Votienus Montanus.) Their statements are not contradicted. The elder Seneca himself emphasizes the triviality of the exercises; cf. *contr.* 10 *praef.* 1. In general, on this question, see Sussman (1969) 158–168.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Sen. *suas.* 5.8.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Sen. *suas.* 6.16.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Sen. *contr.* 2 *praef.* 3–4; 1.8.16.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Sen. *suas.* 6.16 ~ Tac. *dial.* 30.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 7 ~ Tac. *dial.*, *passim*.

<sup>40</sup> Tac. *dial.* 4 (cf. Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 7), Maternus speaking. On Tacitus' identification with Maternus, see Gudeman (1894) xxxviii; cf. Michel (1962) 201.

The political conditions of the Empire and the decline of oratory caused both men to retire and devote themselves to history, in their eyes a higher pursuit and a more suitable outlet for eloquence.<sup>41</sup> But Seneca realized that the hand of autocracy did not leave history alone either. As he frequently observes, those who expressed outspoken views often suffered the destruction of their works, exile, and even death.<sup>42</sup> Seneca understandably betrayed great indignation when this, the only worthy outlet left for eloquence, seemed closed off during the reign of Tiberius.<sup>43</sup>

## 4 Subjects and ideas which chiefly interested the elder Seneca

The particular interests of the elder Seneca undoubtedly influenced the shape of the *Histories* greatly. And since in his extant works the elder Seneca was obviously preoccupied with the old Republican notions of morality, it is here that we must find a major focus of the *Histories*.

A fervid admirer of the elder Cato, the elder Seneca was himself a man of *antiquus rigor*.<sup>44</sup> In the preface to the first book of *Controversiae* and to a lesser extent elsewhere, he expounds at length on the degeneracy of the age and the corruption of the youth.<sup>45</sup> Thus we can assign a pervasive moral tone for the work, especially in view of the period covered.

Closely linked to the extensive discussion of deteriorating morality is a short section speculating on the causes of the decline of Roman eloquence,<sup>46</sup> which he envisioned as the result of a cyclical process and also related to the decline of

---

<sup>41</sup> See Sussman (1972).

<sup>42</sup> E.g. the case of Labienus, *contr.* 10 *praef.* 7; perhaps Cassius Severus, *contr.* 3 *praef.* 3 (cf. Tac. *ann.* 4.21; Suet. *Calig.* 16); cf. Timagenes, *contr.* 10.5.22; Scaurus, *contr.* 10 *praef.* 3 (also *suas.* 2.22; Tac. *ann.* 6.29; D.C. 58.24.3–5; Suet. *Tib.* 61). Votienus Montanus, whose reported quotation comprises *contr.* 9 *praef.*, was exiled in AD 25 for some intemperate remarks (Tac. *ann.* 4.42). In the same year Cremutius Cordus' historical writings were burned by order of the Senate (Tac. *ann.* 4.34ff.; D.C. 57.24.2–4; cf. Suet. *Calig.* 16; Sen. *dial.* 6.1.3).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Sen. *contr.* 10 *praef.* 6–7.

<sup>44</sup> Sen. *dial.* 12.17.3. The elder Seneca's laudation of Cato is emphatic and sincere (*contr.* 1 *praef.* 9). On the former's character in general, see the good summaries in Bornecque (1902a) 16–21 and Edward (1928) xxvii–xxx.

<sup>45</sup> Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 8–10; cf. his disgust with obscenity, *contr.* 1.1.23; also 2 *praef.* 5.

<sup>46</sup> Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 6–7.

morality.<sup>47</sup> His remarks here and in other parts of his works, and also the testimony of the *De Vita Patris*, indicate that the elder Seneca saw a similar cycle, of moral decay, in history.<sup>48</sup> The whole conception seems to have fascinated him, and we can assume that it was an important and perhaps unifying theme of the *Histories*, as we shall see later.

The partial description of the work in the *De Vita Patris* as *historias ab initio bellorum civilium* reveals yet another focus. During his impressionable youth at Cordova, the elder Seneca and his family lived through, and probably participated in, some of the bloodiest fighting and civil discord of these wars.<sup>49</sup> He pointedly refers to the *furor* of the period<sup>50</sup> and, as did Lucan, who may have used his grandfather's *Histories* as a source, he quite conceivably emphasized the horror of civil war.<sup>51</sup> Events in Spain would certainly receive full notice. A passage in the *Suasoriae* may reveal another tendency of the *Histories*. Here, the elder Seneca mentions an fascinating man named Dellius, who, during the civil wars, constantly changed sides. Led astray by his unusual character, he devotes a full paragraph to Dellius, and ends with a plea for indulgence since, Seneca says, the attraction of the anecdotes he retells often carries him too far from the subject.<sup>52</sup> From this and similar instances the implication is plain: the elder Seneca was an irrepressible raconteur who enjoyed telling a good story about unusual people, and especially relating anecdotes tinged with the bizarre.<sup>53</sup> We could reasonably

---

47 On this see Sussman (1972).

48 One may compare the statement in Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 6: *Deinde ut possitis aestimare in quantum cotidie ingenia decrescant et nescio qua iniquitate naturae eloquentia se retro tulerit*. Both passages strongly imply a cyclical conception with the use of *retro*; see discussion *infra*.

49 The date of the elder Seneca's birth is usually deduced from a statement in *contr.* 1 *praef.* 11, where, in pointedly alluding to the events of 43 BC, he says that if it had not been for the civil wars, he could have traveled to Rome and heard Cicero declaiming. Since boys usually left the *grammaticus* and began declamatory training with the *rheto*r between the ages of twelve and sixteen, this would give a birthdate between 58 and 54 BC and make the elder Seneca at least eleven years old during the civil discord in Cordova (cf. Schanz/Hosius (1935) 340; Bornecque (1902a) 9–10). Edward (1928) XXIII–XXIV, for various reasons, says that Seneca's birthdate need not be placed earlier than 50 BC. A fair compromise would be 53 BC (cf. Sussman (1969) xi). In any event, the bloody events could not have failed to make a vivid impression upon the prodigious memory of the elder Seneca.

50 Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 11.

51 The opening lines of Lucan's *Bellum Civile*, especially 1.1–32, are noteworthy. Cf. *infra* n. 197.

52 Sen. *suas.* 1.7.

53 On Seneca's love of anecdotes and the anecdotal style see discussion below. According to at least one observer, his vivid portrayal of character in these excelled Cicero's pioneering efforts in the *Brutus*; cf. D'Alton (1931) 544–545. The extended description of Seneca's friend Latro is a

expect that his *Histories* contained many such amusing asides, highlighted by personal recollections of people he knew.

The period which Seneca covered in the *Histories* was one replete with the deaths of many great and often tragic figures. In reporting these, he could not have failed to employ with great frequency a type of character sketch which summed up a person's qualities, achievements, and character. Termed *epitaphia*, these provided the writer with an opportunity to display his mastery of the terse *sententia* and rhetorical point. Seneca himself had studied the use of this device. In a notable passage he traces its sparing use in Thucydides, occasional appearance in Sallust, and then its increasingly elaborate and ornate aspect in Livy and those who followed him.<sup>54</sup> Following this discussion, Seneca provides a series of six *epitaphia* composed by Roman writers on Cicero.

A brief remark and an extended quotation in the *Suasoriae*<sup>55</sup> are indicative of another Senecan tendency. When discussing the attempts of various declaimers to describe the ocean, he quotes at length Albinovanus Pedo's hexameters from a lost epic portraying Germanicus' voyage at sea during a storm. Greatly admired, says Seneca, is the section's *spiritus*, which, he claims, surpasses any declaimer's efforts on a similar subject. All of this suggests that Seneca was strongly attracted to the poetical,<sup>56</sup> dramatic, rhetorical, and descriptive aspects of historical writing.

## 5 Sources of the *Histories*

In the *Controversiae* and particularly in the *Suasoriae*, Seneca displays time and again his wide acquaintance with the writings of many historians whose works embraced or touched upon the period of his *Histories*. For instance, there are quo-

---

minor classic (*contr.* 1 *praef.* 13–24). Cf. his portrayal of the acidic historian-declainer, Labienus (10 *praef.* 4–8), and the weird declaimer Seneca Grandio (*suas.* 2.17).

54 Cf. Sen. *suas.* 6.21: *Quotiens magni alicuius <viri> mors ab historicis narrata est, totiens fere consummatio totius vitae et quasi funebris laudatio redditur. Hoc, semel aut iterum a Thucydide factum, item in paucissimis personis usurpatum a Sallustio, T. Livius benignus omnibus magnis viris praestitit. Sequentes historici multo id effusius fecerunt. Ciceroni hoc, ut Graeco verbo utar, ἐπιτάφιον Livius reddit.*

55 Sen. *suas.* 1.15.

56 Cf. Sen. *suas.* 6.25–26, on Cornelius Severus.

tations from the works of Sallust, Livy, Pollio, Aufidius Bassus, Cremutius Cordus, and Brutteditius Niger.<sup>57</sup> Equally absorbing is his apparent personal acquaintance with many of the men themselves.<sup>58</sup> Perhaps, as his tone indicates at times, Seneca was either contemplating this vast project or actually engaged in the preliminary research.

Seneca also had the good fortune to be alive for a large part of the period covered by the *Histories*, and thus he may well have been acquainted with many events first-hand or through some of his many highly placed friends.<sup>59</sup>

From all that we know of his life, he was present in Spain (although very young) during the important and turbulent early 40's BC and thereafter spent long periods in Rome, that were probably interrupted by trips home. Whether he was an active participant in events is hard to say in the absence of direct evidence. But, as mentioned above, Seneca knew personally many of the leading political and military figures of the time. Whether this was due to a common interest in declamation or is indicative of some official governmental post at one time is unclear. The wealth, ambition, and shrewd marriages of the Annaei point to a combination of the two. Whatever the reason, the elder Seneca, equipped with an astounding memory, was accepted in the circles of such notables as Augustus, Pollio, Messalla, Tiberius, the important Vinicii, Maecenas, and others. He therefore had unusual access to first-hand accounts of events.

Other primary sources existed in profusion: numerous autobiographies of prominent men, eyewitness reports, personal papers, and official government records. Although many of these documents may have been private in nature,

---

<sup>57</sup> Sallust: Sen. *contr.* 9.1.13 (cf. 3 *praef.* 8; 9.1.14; *suas.* 6.21). Livy: *suas.* 6.17; 6.22 (on the death of Cicero, cf. *contr.* 9.1.14; 9.2.26; 10 *praef.* 2; *suas.* 6.21). Pollio: *suas.* 6.24; cf. 6.15. Aufidius Bassus: *suas.* 6.18; 23. Cremutius Cordus: *suas.* 6.19; 23. Brutteditius Niger: *suas.* 6.20–21. The historian/poets Albinovanus Pedo (*suas.* 1.15) and Cornelius Severus (*suas.* 6.26). Labienus: *contr.* 10 *praef.* 5; 7–8. M. Valerius Messalla Corvinus: *suas.* 1.7 (he, too, wrote a history of the civil war). Timagenes: *contr.* 10.5.22. A check of the index to Kiessling (1872) reveals the names of numerous well-known historians and others who are better known for their efforts in different fields, yet who dabbled also in writing history: Maecenas, Agrippa, Arruntius, Augustus, Dellius, the elder Cato, Sextilius Ena, Julius Caesar.

<sup>58</sup> From his comments it seems that he knew the following writers of historical works: Messalla (*contr.* 2.4.8; 10; *suas.* 3.6; 6.27; cf. 1.7 and 2.20); Labienus (*contr.* 10 *praef.* 4–8; 4 *praef.* 2; 10.2.19); Pollio (*contr.* 4 *praef.* 2–6; *suas.* 6.27); Augustus (*contr.* 2.4.12; 2.5.20; 4 *praef.* 7; 10 *praef.* 14); Agrippa (*contr.* 2.4.12–13); and Maecenas (*contr.* 2.4.13; 9.3.14; *suas.* 1.12; 2.20). He also may well have known Livy, Cremutius Cordus, and Aufidius Bassus.

<sup>59</sup> On the many and highly placed connections and friends of the elder Seneca, see the valuable compilations of Weinrib (1968) 32–182.

through his highly placed friends and connections, Seneca may have enjoyed access to them. Other material, widely published, was also available, among them were the letters of Cicero, the autobiography and letters of Augustus, various published speeches, and numerous monographs.<sup>60</sup>

Many histories of the period were published and the elder Seneca was familiar with nearly all of them. For example, in the sixth *Suasoria*, which deals with Cicero, he mentions and gives examples from the works of Livy, Pollio, Aufidius Bassus, Cremutius Cordus, Bruttidius Niger, and Sallust. Seneca is not averse to poetically flavored history,<sup>61</sup> and he offers examples of historical epic from the poets Albinovanus Pedo and Cornelius Severus.<sup>62</sup> Elsewhere in his writings Seneca mentions a number of historians and dilettantes in the field including Labienus, Lucius Arruntius, Messalla, Maecenas, Dellius, Tuscus, and the Greek Timagenes.<sup>63</sup>

Seneca's admiration for Sallust probably points to extensive Sallustian influence in the *Histories*.<sup>64</sup> Livy, and perhaps to a lesser extent, Pollio, Aufidius Bassus, and Labienus, would also leave their mark. The elder Seneca's great respect for the elder Cato<sup>65</sup> suggests familiarity with the style and content of the *Origines*, and it is possible that the *Histories* take up approximately where Cato's *Origines* left off.<sup>66</sup> The Lactantius fragment, if we accept it as genuine, may well reflect

---

<sup>60</sup> For an account of the various sources, primary and secondary, that were available, see Wilkes (1972).

<sup>61</sup> Literary people of the period thought history and poetry to be closely related: cf. Quint. *inst.* 10.1.31.

<sup>62</sup> Sen. *suas.* 1.15; 6.26.

<sup>63</sup> See *supra* n. 57.

<sup>64</sup> Seneca is particularly attracted to Sallust's prose style; cf. *contr.* 9.1.13–14. There are occasional similarities of expression: cf. Sall. *Catil.* 11.1: ... *quod tamen vitium propius virtutem erat* ~ Sen. *contr.* 7 *praef.* 5 *nec tamen mirum est, si difficulter adprehenditur vitio tam vicina virtus*. Also, Sall. *Catil.* 12.3: *operae pretium est* ~ Sen. *suas.* 6.23: *non est operae pretium* (*suas.* 6.23). There are extensive similarities also between the fragments of Sallust's preface to his *Histories* and the elder Seneca's preface to the first book of the *Controversiae*: Sall. *hist.* 1. fr. 5 Maurenbrecher = 9 La Penna/Funari: *In quis longissimo aevo plura de bonis falsa in deterius composuit* ~ Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 7: *in deterius deinde cotidie data res est*; Sall. *hist.* 1. fr. 16 Maurenbrecher: *Ex quo tempore maiorum mores non paulatim ut antea, sed torrentis modo praecipitanti; adeo iuventus luxu atque avaritia corrupta, ut merito dicatur genitos esse qui neque ipsi habere possent res familiaris nee alios pati* ~ Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 7: *in deterius deinde cotidie data res est, sive luxu temporum – nihil enim tam mortiferum ingeniis quam luxuria est... ut ad summum perducta rursus ad infimum, velocius quidem quam ascenderant, relabantur*. See also Vell. 2.1.1; Klingner (1928); Clausen (1947).

<sup>65</sup> Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 9.

<sup>66</sup> They ended apparently with the praetorship of Servius Galba (151 BC), cf. Peter (1914<sup>2</sup>) II CXXXXII. Thus the elder Seneca's *Histories* may well have had a brief reference to the third Punic

Varro's theory in his *De Vita Populi Romani* that the life span of a nation falls into periods analogous to the ages of man. However, Seneca does not mention Varro anywhere in his extant works, nor does he cite Claudius Quadrigarius, Nicolaus of Damascus, and Strabo.<sup>67</sup>

We can form some idea of Seneca's worth and reliability as an historian if we suppose that he used as major sources the historians whom he most frequently mentions. It should be noted, however, that the *Controversiae* and *Suasoriae* are primarily concerned with matters of style, and the historians are usually mentioned in this regard. Nevertheless, the historians whom he cites represent a broad selection in both matters of style and political philosophy. Again, a look at the sixth *Suasoria* is instructive. In it Seneca, a fierce partisan of Cicero, announces that he will strive for completeness in the depiction of Cicero's character by presenting both the positive and the negative sides.<sup>68</sup> He then proceeds to give excerpts from pro- and anti-ciceronian writers: men themselves of such diverse political points of view as the literary Republicanism of Cordus, the vehement anti-Ciceronianism of Pollio, the Republican-tinged Augustanism of Livy, the pro-Ciceronianism of the highly regarded Bassus, and the shifty sycophancy of the *delator* Brutteditius Niger. Seneca has therefore reproduced an extremely broad and impartial selection of sources, while plainly stating his own conclusion, or, if you will, his own bias.

This crucial section also provides some valuable insights into Seneca's working methods. Violently opposed to plagiarism in any form,<sup>69</sup> Seneca must have identified his sources wherever possible in the *Historiae* as he did in *suas.* 6. The passage under discussion also indicates that he used a multiplicity of sources and recognized their discrepancies, which he sought to resolve by taking into account individual prejudices of the authors. In this respect he may have adopted and refined the methods of Livy.

---

War, the destruction of Carthage, and the ending of the *metus Punicus*, whose absence, according to many Roman writers, contributed to the causes of the civil wars. On this see discussion *supra* nn. 18, 19.

<sup>67</sup> But Bardon (1940a) 66–67 finds considerable influence of Varro on Seneca in his vocabulary of literary critical terms.

<sup>68</sup> Sen. *suas.* 6.14ff.

<sup>69</sup> See especially Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 10–11 and *suas.* 2.19; cf. *contr.* 10.5.20. On this see also Sussman (1969) 54–55.



## 6 The elder Seneca's critical attitudes towards his sources

One of the faults most frequently ascribed to Roman historians is the improper use of secondary materials. In particular, they are often guilty of overvaluing second-rate historians, insufficient familiarity with the full range of sources available, conscious selectivity to affirm their own prejudices, reliance on a single source though obviously slanted or flawed, and suppression of contradictions among various sources. Judging from the methods employed in writing his works, and in particular *suas.* 6.14ff mentioned above, we can justifiably conclude that Seneca made a conscious effort, if not necessarily a successful one, to avoid these failings.

Of interest with regard to Seneca's critical acumen is his stated goal to aid the great men of declamation who are threatened with oblivion. He says that he intends to preserve at least a portion of their works.<sup>70</sup> For many of these, Seneca tells us, not even any lecture notes remained except counterfeits and forgeries. Such remarks typify his close attention to primary materials which, we can in turn assume, characterized the *Histories*. To be sure, Seneca adds also the conventional but probably accurate equivalent of *sine ira et studio* to this discussion: *summa cum fide suum cuique reddam*.<sup>71</sup>

In another revealing passage, Seneca reports his findings on the tradition regarding Cicero's relation to his supposed killer, Popilius. Here also he has surveyed the sources on both sides to search out the truth of the matter.<sup>72</sup> Also notable in this discussion is the division Seneca sees between declaimers and writers of history, and his apparent feeling of kinship with the latter rather than with the former in the discussion that follows. He affirms this impression in *suas.* 6.14, where he criticizes the declaimers for making up a *suasoria* theme about Cicero that violates probability and historical fact. Throughout this *suasoria*, as we have pointed out above, Seneca shows that he has obviously studied with care all the

---

<sup>70</sup> Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 11.

<sup>71</sup> Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 11; cf. 10 *praef.* 16; *suas.* 6.14. On this ideal of historians, see Ullman (1943). To his enumeration of the influences on the memorable phrase from Tacitus (*ann.* 1.1), one could add Sall. *Catil.* 4.2: *statui res gestas populi Romani carpatim perscribere; eo magis, quod mihi a spe, metu, partibus rei publicae animus liber erat*.

<sup>72</sup> Sen. *contr.* 7.2.8: *Popillium pauci ex historicis tradiderunt interfectorem Ciceronis et hi quoque non parricidi reum a Cicerone defensum, sed in privato iudicio; declamatoribus placuit parricidi reum fuisse. Sic autem eum accusant, tamquam defendi non possit, cum adeo possit absolvi, ut ne accusari quidem potuerit*.

major sources on the death of Cicero, even the very hostile Pollio,<sup>73</sup> and in his case noted the discrepancy between his accusations against Cicero and the weight of all the other authorities. Seneca also noticed an inconsistency in two works of Pollio. This orator had made several charges in a speech against Cicero which were so outrageous that he did not dare to repeat them in his historical work. But Seneca reproduces the offending passage from the speech, despite their most unfavorable and untrue criticisms.<sup>74</sup>

Seneca praises Livy, whom he terms *natura candidissimus omnium magnorum ingeniorum aestimator*,<sup>75</sup> and quotes with approval his even-handed appraisal of Cicero. Although openly a great admirer of Cicero, Seneca is fully prepared to admit both the man's good and bad sides, and to praise even a somewhat damaging critique from a historian he admires. Of interest also are his preservation and rather full treatment of Aufidius Bassus' account of Cicero's death.<sup>76</sup> Bassus, evidently a first-rate historian, was well known to Tacitus.<sup>77</sup>

In general, these passages represent a fairly sophisticated attitude towards the use of source material, and Seneca's disclaimer of partiality rings true.<sup>78</sup> If we assume that he followed this pattern in the *Histories* of full, diligent, and impartial use of sources, then we have lost an extremely valuable account of this crucial period, a loss at least somewhat mitigated by its partial preservation in Appian and perhaps Florus.<sup>79</sup>

## 7 Criticism of Greek and Roman historians

The very nature of Seneca's extant works precludes extensive historiographic criticism, although he makes an occasional foray into the field. For instance, as

---

<sup>73</sup> Sen. *suas.* 6.15.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. Sen. *suas.* 6.15. In *suas.* 6.18–19 Seneca interrupts a quotation from Aufidius Bassus to notice that both he and Cremutius Cordus preserve a tradition that Cicero had considered seeking out either Brutus, Cassius, or Sextus Pompey, but decided finally against it and to accept death. Here Seneca has reported an additional point where two writers record information which others have not. It is plain that in regard to the life of Cicero Seneca knows his sources very well.

<sup>75</sup> Sen. *suas.* 6.22.

<sup>76</sup> Sen. *suas.* 6.23; cf. 6.18.

<sup>77</sup> See Syme (1958) I 274; Peter (1914<sup>2</sup>) II CXXV ff. Our only fragments of Bassus are the two quotations in Sen. *suas.* 6.18; 23.

<sup>78</sup> Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 11 (though given in a slightly different context. See *supra* n. 71).

<sup>79</sup> See *supra* n. 4.

we have already observed, he is quick to denounce Pollio's deliberate falsification or slanting of the facts about Cicero.<sup>80</sup> But to Seneca's credit as an impartial critic, where Pollio is fair in a summation of the great orator's life, he praises Pollio's eloquence.<sup>81</sup>

Elsewhere he mentions silliness of Tuscus, who injected anachronism<sup>82</sup> into a *suasoria* on the three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae – indicative of Seneca's standards in such criticism. Seneca also criticizes excessive freedom of speech in the historians Labienus and Timagenes.<sup>83</sup>

For the most part, however, the elder Seneca's comments center on matters of style. He makes no secret of his admiration for Sallust's brevity and considers his achievement in this aspect superior to that of Thucydides and Livy.<sup>84</sup> Nevertheless, Livy receives praise for his emphasis on clear diction<sup>85</sup> and his excellent *epitaphia*.<sup>86</sup> Criticism of style is implicit also when Seneca describes how Bruttedius Niger's powers of description failed him in one instance because of the magnitude of the event, and also in an unfavorable comment on Cremutius Cordus's laudation of Cicero.<sup>87</sup>

## 8 Merits and shortcomings of the elder Seneca's *Histories*

In the discussion of Seneca's sources we have already touched on his merits as an historian. He apparently did not suppress what was personally distasteful and also took care to identify the source of an account. In the case of conflicting versions he exercised his own critical judgment in an attempt to arrive at the truth.

---

<sup>80</sup> Sen. *suas.* 6.15; 24.

<sup>81</sup> Sen. *suas.* 6.24–25.

<sup>82</sup> There is a reference to *veni, vidi, vici* (Sen. *suas.* 2.22; cf. 2.14; 4.5).

<sup>83</sup> In the case of Timagenes, this criticism seems more in connection with the spoken word; cf. Sen. *contr.* 10.5.22. On Labienus see *contr.* 10 *praef.* 5: *Libertas tanta, ut libertatis nomen excederet et, quia passim ordines hominesque laniabat, Rabienus vocaretur* (cf. *contr.* 10. *praef.* 8).

<sup>84</sup> Sen. *contr.* 9.1.13–14. The example taken from Thucydides to compare with Sallust is erroneous; see discussion *infra*. We should note, however, that Seneca reports without dissent Cassius Severus' opinion that Sallust's speeches were markedly inferior to his historical works, obviously here a judgment also of style (*contr.* 3 *praef.* 8).

<sup>85</sup> Sen. *contr.* 9.2.26.

<sup>86</sup> Sen. *suas.* 6.21–22.

<sup>87</sup> Sen. *suas.* 6.20–21; 23.

He appears to have made a sincere effort at impartiality and to have detested anachronisms.<sup>88</sup>

Writing an historical work was undoubtedly attractive to Seneca, since it unquestionably offered a more congenial medium of expression than an anthology. He must have imposed a thematic unity on the *Histories*, as he did in the *Controversiae*, a work less amenable to this.<sup>89</sup>

So much for the virtues of the *Histories*. There must have been shortcomings as well. First of these had to be the serious difficulties in narrating an account of the period from the Gracchi to the reign of Gaius, many of which Ronald Syme has detailed in an important article.<sup>90</sup> We may note, for example, the great complexity in the events of the early 40's BC, and the misrepresentations, subtle or striking, which partisan sources had injected into their accounts. In the Principate many of the most important transactions were shrouded in secrecy, especially those dealing with the imperial family. Also, the very size and complexity of the new government were an impediment to understanding and relating its workings for all but those most closely associated with it. Accounts of military campaigns also presented serious problems. There was always the danger of telling the truth, where it could be determined, rather than the official version. Slighted generals or their families could be vindictive. Generals related by blood to an emperor required especially careful treatment. Brilliant subordinates who actually supervised much of the campaigning could not receive too much credit. A history written to please an emperor, or, at any rate, not to displease, might prove dangerous to the author when a new *princeps* was installed. To these factors we usually attribute the failings in Livy, Velleius, Florus, and the others. There is no reason to believe that Seneca succeeded where they did not, given the state of the art in the early Empire.

In addition, Seneca's commitment to factual veracity could also be called into question. An obvious case concerns the fictional themes on Greek and Roman history that he included in the *Suasoriae*. But these, I believe, can be summarily dismissed on the grounds that the themes were traditional and conventionalized at this time. By no means were they intended to be taken as serious historical narrative.

---

<sup>88</sup> On Seneca's impartiality see discussion above; cf. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 11; *suas.* 6.14. On his distaste for anachronisms, see *supra* n. 82.

<sup>89</sup> See Sussman (1971) and (1977). For the apparent unifying theme of the *Histories*, see discussion *infra*.

<sup>90</sup> Syme (1959).

A more serious indictment is the apparent number of improperly ascribed quotations on historical subjects in Seneca's works, and an occasional inaccurate historical "fact". We can list the following:

1. In the introductory statements to the second *Suasoria* the numbers of Greeks at Thermopylae are inaccurately given. Seneca does not criticize these lapses.
2. Seneca does not criticize Cestius' ascription of a speech to Callisthenes<sup>91</sup> variously ascribed to Antipater,<sup>92</sup> Anaxarchus,<sup>93</sup> or Alexander himself.<sup>94</sup>
3. Arellius Fuscus' faulty ascription of a quotation to Thucydides is not criticized by Seneca.<sup>95</sup>
4. Seneca attributes a quote to Herodotus not found in his works.<sup>96</sup>
5. The content of a letter from C. Cassius to Cicero is reported as containing much urbanity, whereas the text of that letter does not quite support such an interpretation.<sup>97</sup>
6. Seneca does not call into question Porcius Latro's statement that Verres died before Cicero.<sup>98</sup> This is apparently at variance with Lactantius,<sup>99</sup> who says Verres died *after* Cicero, but in the same proscription.

Reflection reveals that these lapses are not very damaging. As for point (1), the use of historically inaccurate numbers in rhetorical enlargement was customarily allowed in rhetoric.<sup>100</sup> In any event, this *suasoria* was an old favorite, and Seneca could hardly have changed the theme.

The inaccurately ascribed quotation in point (2) is in an extract from Cestius, and point (3) is a slip on the part of Arellius Fuscus. In this case Seneca himself

---

**91** Sen. *suas.* 1.5.

**92** D.C. 64.21.

**93** D. L. 9.10.60.

**94** Plut. *Alex.* 28. See Müller (1887) 523–524 *ad loc.*; Rolland (1906) 22–23; Sen. *nat.* 6.23.2–4. See also Bornecque (1902b) II 389 *ad* Sen. *suas.* 1.5; the speech, attributed to Callisthenes, is otherwise recorded as from Clitus: Curt. 8.1.45; 8.5.13; Plut. *Alex.* 50ff.; Arr. 4.9.4; the same comments apply.

**95** Sen. *contr.* 9.1.13; apparently from Demosthenes, either *In epist. Phil.* 13 or *Olynth.* 2.20. See Müller (1887) 380, *ad loc.*

**96** Sen. *suas.* 2.11. It closely resembles D. S. 11.9.4 and Plut. *Apoth. Lac.* 225 D, 13. Cf. Edward (1928) 109; Müller (1887) 539, and Bornecque (1902b) II 391.

**97** Sen. *suas.* 1.5; cf. Cic. *fam.* 15.19, and Edward (1928) 92, *ad loc.*

**98** Sen. *suas.* 6.3.

**99** Lact. *inst.* 2.4.36–37.

**100** Cic. *Brut.* 42; cf. Edward (1928) 101, *ad loc.*

seems somewhat unsure and qualifies the quotation: *aliquam Thucydidis sententiam*.<sup>101</sup> We should further note with regard to point (2) (the supposed misquotation of Callisthenes) that the ancient sources themselves are hopelessly confused. Seneca also qualifies his mistaken quotation from Herodotus (4) with *puto*; he is plainly unsure, but unwilling to take the time to check the reference.<sup>102</sup> Thus the misquotations are not the fault of Seneca, and we can only blame him for not taking the effort to check through cumbersome scrolls which lacked indexes and to correct each man he quotes.

Where he inaccurately reports the tone of the Cassius letter (5) there is room for more pointed criticism than in the other four cases. In point (6) we merely have a conflict between Latro and Lactantius on the relative order in which Verres and Cicero died. Lacking more precise external evidence, we plainly have a case of Latro's word against Lactantius: Latro, a contemporary of Cicero's, was certainly closer to these events than the later Christian writer.

A more damaging assessment of Seneca's value as a historian arises from his confusion over the history of declamation.<sup>103</sup> He has apparently misunderstood the role played by several types of preparatory exercises in the development of declamation and the differences between declamation of the Republic and that of the Empire. Here we can detect a serious misreading of the forces and trends in the evolution of this genre. This does not reflect well on Seneca's abilities as an interpreter of primary material, much of which was then available to him.<sup>104</sup>

How then can we estimate Seneca's reliability as an historian? An examination of quotations and data in the *Controversiae* and *Suasoriae* reveals few errors directly ascribable to Seneca. In fact, where we can verify him, he is generally accurate, but it is obvious that he lacks the will to track down an individual quotation or fact if unsure. If not entirely pardonable, this is somewhat understandable in view of the nature of these works. His failure to deal satisfactorily with the history of declamation and to provide a sound interpretation of its growth gives room for speculation on his ability to deal with contemporary forces and trends not treated specifically in a secondary work. But in handling secondary sources Seneca shows strength because of his ability to select widely, synthesize from conflicting accounts, reject what is obviously slanted or false, and thus usually

---

<sup>101</sup> Sen. *contr.* 9.1.13.

<sup>102</sup> Sen. *suas.* 2.11: ... *sed in hac materia disertissima illa fertur sententia Dorionis, cum posuisset hoc dixisse trecentis Leonidam, quod puto etiam apud Herodotum esse.*

<sup>103</sup> Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 12.

<sup>104</sup> There were apparently no secondary sources on the subject then. In general, on this point, see Bonner (1949) 1–50, and Sussman (1969) 1–48. For additional references, see Whitehorne (1969) 19–20.

provide accurate historical information. The *Histories*, a more specialized project, would display these qualities even more.

## 9 The elder Seneca's philosophy of history

In determining an historian's grand philosophy of history, the first point to examine is whether the historian himself subscribed to any philosophical system. According to his son, the elder Seneca detested philosophy and philosophers. But a critical examination of the two passages on which this assessment rests is revealing.<sup>105</sup> The passage from the *Epistles* seems to reflect more upon the political realities of the early Empire, when philosophers were often considered suspicious and dangerous by the government. Obviously, then, ostentatious adherence to a particular philosophical system would not recommend itself to a young man (in this case, the younger Seneca) preparing for a political career.<sup>106</sup> In the other passage the younger Seneca reports that his father dissuaded his own wife Helvia from extensive study of philosophy because he believed that it was unbecoming to a Roman matron.

One notices with interest, on the other hand, that the elder Seneca's attitude towards two Stoic philosophers is one of high praise and he terms the philosophy itself *tam sanctis fortibusque praeceptis*.<sup>107</sup> All this is not to argue that the elder Seneca was a Stoic, although his wife and son were obviously deeply interested in Stoicism, but rather that he was not so deeply anti-philosophical as has been

---

**105** Cf. Sen. *epist.* 108.22: *In primum Tiberii Caesaris principatum iuventae tempus inciderat. Alienigena tum sacra movebantur, sed inter argumenta superstitionis ponebatur quorundam animalium abstinencia. Patre itaque meo rogante, qui non calumniam timebat, sed philosophiam oderat, ad pristinam consuetudinem redii.* See also *dial.* 12.17.3–4: *Quantum tibi patris mei antiquus rigor permisit, omnes bonas artes non quidem comprehendisti, attigisti tamen. Vtinam quidem uirorum optimus, pater meus, minus maiorum consuetudini deditus voluisset te praeceptis sapientiae erudiri potius quam inbui! Non parandum tibi nunc esset auxilium contra fortunam sed proferendum. Propter istas quae litteris non ad sapientiam utuntur sed ad luxuriam instruuntur minus te indulgere studiis passus est.*

**106** On this see Ferrill (1964) 26–27. Philosophers were expelled from Rome in AD 16 and 19.

**107** Sen. *contr.* 2 *praef.* 1 (in the case of the Stoic philosopher Papirius Fabianus, who had given up the study of declamation to devote himself to philosophy). See also Seneca's laudatory remarks on Attalus Stoicus in *suas.* 2.12: *qui solum vertit a Seiano circumscriptus, magnae vir eloquentiae, ex his philosophis, quos vestra aetas vidit, longe et subtilissimus et facundissimus...*; cf. Weinrib (1968) 94–95.

usually thought, and also that he may well have absorbed some Stoic doctrine from his family.

The elder Seneca's own comments, and those of his son, tell us that the old man was deeply imbued with the traditional Roman virtues and morals; he was religious, conservative, industrious, patriotic, opposed to sensuality, an admirer of *gravitas*, a man whose model was the elder Cato – in short, as his son tersely states, *virorum optimus antiquo rigore maiorum consuetudini deditus*.<sup>108</sup> Thus, as is so often the case, the doctrines of Stoic virtue and the ancestral Roman ethic meet once again. So when he came to write history, his deeply held personal feelings influenced his selection of the work's central theme – the decline of *veritas*.<sup>109</sup>

## 9.1 Seneca's Politics

In a man whose philosophical outlook seems so closely linked to the Republic, there may be an implicit political motive in such a theme as the decline of *veritas* for a history, although the motif was conventional enough, and to some extent tolerated by the various imperial regimes.

But the elder Seneca's political views, for a man of his sentiments and character, are not as simple as one would expect. Perhaps this is due to his provincial origins in Cordova, a deeply Romanized colony founded in 151 BC, made up of distinguished settlers, and possessing the *ius Latii*.<sup>110</sup> Famed for its poets, prosperity, and schools, during the civil wars the city passed at various times through the hands of Pompey, Caesar, and perhaps Sextus Pompey.<sup>111</sup> Although Pompeian *clientela* seems predominant in this part of Spain, there was also a strong and distinguished Caesarian party – the position of Cordova throughout was characteristically, then, ambiguous.<sup>112</sup> Apparently the Annaei emerged from the wars

---

<sup>108</sup> Sen. *dial.* 12.17.3, quoted *supra* (n. 105).

<sup>109</sup> Cf. Vell. 2.1.1–2.

<sup>110</sup> Strab. 3.2.15. It is referred to in the early Empire as a *colonia patricia* (Plin. *nat.* 3.1.10; cf. *CIL* II *Suppl.* 1143), and was composed of an elite group (Strab. 3.2.1). See also Hübner 1900. The inhabitants of the city vigorously asserted their devotion to Roman ways (Cic. *Arch.* 10.26).

<sup>111</sup> Sextus Pompey is not definitely known to have molested Cordova, though he was in the general vicinity (Broughton (1952) 329; Cic. *Att.* 16.4.2). Some trouble may have occurred fairly close to the city (*Anth. Lat.* 409 R 9–12). But Sextus was, at least for a time, harbored in Cordova (Dio 45.10.1; cf. 43.39.1).

<sup>112</sup> During the civil wars, Caesar summoned an assembly in Cordova, and at one time it refused entrance to Varro, a Pompeian general (Caes. *civ.* 2.19). In 48 BC Cordova begged not to be forced to move against Caesar (*Bell. Alex.* 58.4), but later it became a stronghold for Pompeians (*Bell.*



with their fortunes flourishing and, soon, imperial favor. This situation suggests Caesarian connections.<sup>113</sup> Seneca also speaks of the historian Labienus in terms suggesting that he found it distasteful and inappropriate to hold Pompeian sympathies.<sup>114</sup> However, pro-Pompeian sentiments seem to appear in the works of the younger Seneca and Lucan, but a useful study made by Wolverson shows a more balanced opinion of Julius Caesar among the Annaei than previously supposed.<sup>115</sup>

A family *clientela* of Asinius Pollio appears to be another possible political alliance and, through him, allegiance to the Caesarian cause. A long-time acquaintance of the elder Seneca, Pollio was also in Cordova during the crucial years 44–43 BC.<sup>116</sup> During this period the elder Seneca was a scant ten or twelve years old, impatient to continue his rhetorical education in Rome, but forced to remain at home because of the wars.<sup>117</sup> Then, when the wars subsided, he went to school in Rome and evidence of connection with Pollio appears shortly thereafter.<sup>118</sup> Next, Seneca enjoyed the acquaintance of and intimacy with the top literary and political luminaries of the day, including Maecenas, Messalla, Ovid, Gallio, Cassius Severus, Augustus, Labienus, and others.<sup>119</sup> Seneca had the abundant wealth, leisure, and ability necessary to become welcome in the salons of the wealthy, powerful, and talented, where declamatory exhibitions were enjoying a

---

*Hisp.* 33; *Cic. fam.* 9.13.1; *D.C.* 43.29.3). There were still Caesarian stalwarts, however, ready to betray the city (*Bell. Hisp.* 2; 34; *D.C.* 43.32.3), one of whom apparently was the father of Clodius Turrinus, a friend of the elder Seneca. See on this Weinrib (1968) 32–33; 37; 54–55, and *infra* n. 113.

**113** As does the close relationship with Clodius Turrinus and his family (*Sen. contr.* 10 *praef.* 14–16); cf. Weinrib (1968) 54; 104–105. The elder Seneca was sent by his family to school at Rome soon after the events of 43 BC. Thus the basis of their wealth must have been essentially intact.

**114** *Sen. contr.* 10 *praef.* 5.

**115** Wolverson (1964) 82–88.

**116** Cf. Broughton (1952) 327; 343.

**117** *Sen. contr.* 1 *praef.* 11.

**118** We know from Seneca's own statement that Pollio did not declaim in public (4 *praef.* 2). Yet Seneca was a member of that select group which was allowed admittance to Pollio's private declamatory sessions, both at the time Pollio was in his prime and much later, when he was an old man: cf. *Sen. contr.* 4 *praef.* 3: *Audiui autem illum (sc. Pollionem) et viridem et postea iam senem cum Marcello Aesernino nepoti suo quasi praeciperet.* “*Viridem*” would suggest a rather young age for Pollio when Seneca saw him; cf. *Verg. Aen.* 5.295; *Ov. trist.* 4.10.17; *Curt.* 10.5.10. This, the detailed description which follows (*contr.* 4 *praef.* 3–6) of Pollio's declamatory and oratorical styles, and the vivid portrayal of his personal qualities testify to much more than a casual friendship between the two.

**119** See *supra* n. 59; Ferrill (1964) 13; 16–21; 34–37. The index to Kiessling (1872) provides a handy form of reference since it records not only the place where a particular name occurs, but also Seneca's remarks on that person.

surge of popularity. Such connections hint at a possible imperial post, perhaps a staff position with Augustus in Tarracoenensis.<sup>120</sup> The elder Seneca's familiarity with Augustus and his high regard for him (also the tone of the younger Seneca) might indicate that the Annaei cast their lot with him early and so reaped the rewards.<sup>121</sup> Thus they take their place as another equestrian provincial family deeply imbued with old Roman traditions, upon whom the new regime depended so heavily. Ambitious for wealth, power, influence, and office, through alliances, connections by marriage, and literary prestige, the Annaei began making their way to the heights during the elder Seneca's lifespan.<sup>122</sup> This conclusion is supported by the political variety in the friends and acquaintances of the elder Seneca—it is hopeless to reconstruct his politics from a study of theirs; no clear trends emerge.<sup>123</sup>

The elder Seneca's marriage to Helvia made him brother-in-law through Helvia's sister (also named Helvia) to C. Galerius, the equestrian prefect of Egypt under Tiberius for an unprecedented 16 years, and "the most important equestrian official in the imperial administration of the Emperor Tiberius".<sup>124</sup> There is also some evidence that through Galerius the Annaei were adherents of Sejanus.<sup>125</sup> Significantly, the younger Seneca lavishly thanked his mother's sister for helping

---

**120** Cf. Sen. *contr.* 10 *praef.* 14; Syme (1939) 356; Weinrib (1968) 131. Perhaps Seneca was on the staff of Asilius Sabinus, since his narration of the latter's predicament on Crete sounds first-hand (*contr.* 9.4.17–21).

**121** Sen. *contr.* 2.4.13: *Tanta autem... sub divo Augusto libertas fuit...*; 4 *praef.* 5: *...divus Augustus, ut erat mos illi clementissimo viro...*; cf. 2.4.12; 2.5.20; 10 *praef.* 14; 10.5.21–22. The younger Seneca's opinions reflect those of his father: see *dial.* 4.3.23.7–8; *benef.* 3.27.1–4. See also Ferrill (1964) 122 and note 85. One may compare the remarks of Velleius, who saw and similarly appreciated the Principate as the reestablishment of a stable order (2.131.1); cf. Anderson (1962) 53–54 (with much citation); 56ff.; 65–66.

**122** Again, Weinrib's (1968) compilation of prosopographical evidence is valuable in ascertaining this; cf. especially 88–164 *passim*. Also, see Ferrill (1964) 29–46 for an account of the Annaei and the Sejanian "party"; cf. Stewart (1953) 70–85.

**123** Except, perhaps, for a tinge of anti-authoritarianism; e.g., Pollio, Messalla, Cassius Severus, Labienus. Cf. Weinrib (1968) 109–114.

**124** Ferrill (1964) 12; cf. Weinrib (1968) 88; 130. Other shrewd marriages of the Annaei are attested: Mela and the daughter of a prominent Cordovan orator (Weinrib (1968) 90), the younger Seneca and Pompeia Paulina, whose father was a *praefectus annonae* and whose brother was a consul (Weinrib (1968) 89), Lucan and Argentaria Polla, a wealthy, cultured lady (Weinrib (1968) 90–91). The geographic origin of the wives was diverse: "What mattered was not geographic origin but wealth, social standing, and education, and these were elements which all the women of the Annaei shared in various degrees" (Weinrib (1968) 91–92).

**125** Cf. Ferrill (1964) 29ff.; Stewart (1953) *passim*; but Weinrib (1968) 153.

him in his political career.<sup>126</sup> Sejanian connections may also explain the younger Seneca's vitriolic hatred of Tiberius. Another important though usually unnoticed connection existed between the elder Seneca and the powerful Vinicii, one of whom was briefly a candidate for emperor.<sup>127</sup>

## 9.2 The Elder Seneca's View of the Republic and the Principate

Indispensable for reconstructing the elder Seneca's *Histories* is a knowledge of his attitude towards the great political change which occurred in his lifetime. The topic of the change from Republic to Principate would comprise a large and essential share of his work. Such a knowledge is attainable, if allowances are made for the conventional pose of Republicanism assumed by most writers of the period.

Undoubtedly the experiences of his impressionable childhood spent in Spain during intense and bitter civil discord left their mark on the elder Seneca – it was a time he characterized by *furor*.<sup>128</sup> In other parts of his works, he continues to dwell on the civil wars: two *controversiae* deal with the period of the proscriptions<sup>129</sup> as do *Suasoriae* 6 and 7. Seneca describes in sympathetic tones the varying fortunes of his fellow-Spaniards, the Clodii Turrini, caused by the ebb and flow of war in that province.<sup>130</sup>

Because of his experiences there can be little doubt that the elder Seneca welcomed the stability and order of the Principate. He also appreciated the opportu-

---

<sup>126</sup> Sen. *dial.* 12.19.2.

<sup>127</sup> The elder Seneca mentions several members of the Vinicii, at some length, and usually in a very complimentary way: *contr.* 1.2.3; 1.4.11; 2.5.19; 7.5.11; 7.6.11; 10.4.25. Velleius dedicated his historical work to a member of this family, M. Vinicius, cos. AD 30 and 45, who was briefly mentioned as a candidate for emperor after the death of Gaius (I. *AI.* 19.251). There is a connection between this Vinicius and the Annaei: the younger Seneca was apparently a member of his circle of friends and a political ally of his wife, Julia Livilla, with whom he was accused of conducting an adulterous liaison and therefore exiled by Claudius at Messalina's behest in AD 41. Julia Livilla was a daughter of Germanicus and a granddaughter of Tiberius (see Tac. *ann.* 6.15; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> 4.1674). The Vinicii are an extremely important family of the early Empire, and one which has not received the attention it merits. A useful and excellent beginning in this regard has been made by Sumner (1970) 288–297. The genealogy of the Vinicii offers some difficulties, compounded by textual problems in the elder Seneca. Helpful is Syme (1933).

<sup>128</sup> Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 11.

<sup>129</sup> Sen. *contr.* 4.8; 5.1; cf. 7.2.

<sup>130</sup> Sen. *contr.* 10 *praef.* 16.

nities afforded the provincial *equites* under Augustus for new prospects of enrichment, participation in the government, and advancement to the senatorial order.<sup>131</sup> We have had occasion to remark on the special affection and regard which Seneca had for Augustus.<sup>132</sup>

However, the elder Seneca also deeply admired Cicero in a period when that orator and his works were in low favor.<sup>133</sup> He surely did not forget the young Octavian's complicity in the death of his cherished hero. But Seneca was not blind to Cicero's faults,<sup>134</sup> and must have recognized that the days of the Republic were over. In any event, the idealization of such men as Cato, Cicero, or Brutus in no way forces us to concede Republican politics.<sup>135</sup>

Seneca showed a curious interplay of political forces; membership in the conservative provincial gentry; admiration of Republican ideals and politics; horror of bloodshed and civil war; deep regret at the death of men he admired during wars and proscriptions; relief at the introduction of stability and prosperity in the Principate; political ambitions for his family and the hope of senatorial rank for his descendants.

He had seen the Republic's worst possible aspect and the best face of the Principate. Yet in his old age, while he was compiling the *Controversiae* and *Suasoriae*, there is detectable a disillusionment with the system and perhaps some uncovering of former (and not literary) Republicanism. He recognized the Princi-

---

**131** See Sen. *contr.* 2 *praef.* 3–4, where he dwells on the political ambitions of the younger Seneca and Novatus as opposed to their lack in Mela, who is content to remain an equestrian. Cf. the remarks of the younger Seneca on his rank, *dial.* 12.18.1–3 (echoed in a different context, Tac. *ann.* 14.53).

**132** See *supra* n. 121.

**133** Seneca frequently mentions (and censures) the *obtrectatores Ciceronis*, who were so prominent when he was writing; e.g., Cestius (*contr.* 3 *praef.* 15ff; *suas.* 7.13) and Pollio (*suas.* 6.14–15, 27; cf. Edward (1928) 140, *ad loc.*). Cicero was little read and Seneca says that it was possible to deliver a Verrine oration as one's own without detection (*suas.* 2.19). Also on the *obtrectatores* see Quint. *inst.* 9.4.1; 11.1.17; 12.1.14, 16ff; 12.10.12; Tac. *dial.* 18. Seneca sees Cicero as equal to the best orators whom Greece could offer (*contr.* 1 *praef.* 11; cf. 1 *praef.* 6–7; 7.4.6; *suas.* 6.14–27 *passim*; 7.10; also see Quint. *inst.* 10.1.105). He considered Cicero's career as marking the high point of Roman eloquence (*contr.* 1 *praef.* 6–7; 7.4.6; 10 *praef.* 6). Seneca is also deeply indebted to Cicero's style and critical vocabulary; see Bardon (1940a) 65–67. In general, see also Sussman (1969) 152–155. Seneca's interest in Cicero is reflected also in the three declamations in his collection which deal with events in the last days of the orator's life (*contr.* 7.2; *suas.* 6 and 7).

**134** Seneca repeats and praises Livy's impartial assessment of Cicero's life (*suas.* 6.22).

**135** A point made well by Wirszubski (1950) 127–128. The younger Seneca is able to admire Brutus, Cato, and the other heroes of the Republic, yet he could criticize their inability to recognize the political realities of their day (*epist.* 14.13; *benef.* 2.20.2).

pate for what it was; not a *res publica restituta*, but an autocracy, often benevolent, but potentially and sometimes actually despotic. Although these views may possibly have been crystallized by the actions of Tiberius in the 30s AD, they may also be traced in their origins to the waning years of Augustus, when *libertas* was first curtailed, histories burned, and Seneca's friend Ovid exiled. Such a view of the Principate is gleaned from several statements:

1. The elder Seneca blames the decline of eloquence on any one of three possible causes; two of these implicate the new system:<sup>136</sup>
  - a) *The immorality of the present age*: Obviously the grand Augustan attempts at moral regeneration had failed, and Seneca's lengthy discussion of contemporary moral corruption is scathing.<sup>137</sup>
  - b) *The lack of rewards for eloquence*: This intimates that political distinction could no longer be gained in the forum through eloquence. He also remarks that because of this people were turning to other ways of gaining prestige and power, perhaps meaning delation or sycophancy, both perversions of true eloquence.
2. Seneca pointedly<sup>138</sup> warns his sons that politics in the Empire is a dangerous game.
3. He violently opposes imperial interference with *libertas* and freedom of speech, and in particular the burning of books.<sup>139</sup>
4. Some of the elder Seneca's closest acquaintances were at times critical of the regime: Cassius Severus, Labienus, Pollio, and perhaps Gallio.<sup>140</sup>
5. Some of his friends had been persecuted by Augustus or Tiberius, e.g., Ovid, Labienus, Gallio,<sup>141</sup> and Attalus Stoicus.<sup>142</sup>

---

**136** Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 6–7. The last mentioned cause of decline, a natural cycle of growth and decay in all matters, is apparently without political significance. Cf. Sussman (1972).

**137** Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 8–10.

**138** Sen. *contr.* 2 *praef.* 3–4.

**139** See Sen. *contr.* 2.4.13; 10 *praef.* 5–7. Cf. 3 *praef.* 3, a veiled reference to the suppression of Cassius Severus' writings; also those of Scaurus in 10 *praef.* 3. On this general topic see Forbes (1936).

**140** See *supra* n. 123.

**141** Tac. *ann.* 6.3.

**142** Sen. *suas.* 2.12.

6. If the Lactantius fragment is genuine, we have a sixth indication of anti-imperial feelings, especially on the subject of lost *libertas*.<sup>143</sup>

These critical attitudes in no way hindered the Annaei from enjoying the advantages of influence and prosperity, not to mention public office:

The Annaei provide the best attested and most spectacular example of the advancement of provincials under the regime of the Julio–Claudians.<sup>144</sup>

Thus, the elder Seneca recognized that the day for Republicanism was past, and that the Principate, although sometimes repressive, was necessary to maintain order. The best way to deal with such a system was to accept it, work within it, and manipulate it to one's own advantage. In just this fashion the Annaei gained wealth, prestige, and power. The sons became establishment figures in literature and government through the influence of shrewd political and marital alliances and, of course, their own native abilities. The elder Seneca himself must have been a well-known figure in Rome; the ambitious, wealthy, and witty provincial, who was laying the foundation of an ill-starred dynasty which enjoyed a brief but brilliant period of political and literary ascendancy. His political views, then, may be characterized as neither Republican nor Augustan; rather, cold realism mingled with regret, and opportunism. A comparison with the politics of Tacitus is instructive.<sup>145</sup>

## 10 Grand design of the *Histories*

Given the elder Seneca's personal philosophy – adherence to the old Roman moral code (if one can call that a philosophy) – it is not surprising that he almost surely molded his *Histories* on an aspect of this theme, which has been touched on before: the decline of *veritas*. Let us discuss, then, the younger Seneca's choice of word in the *De Vita Patris*, one which must reflect his father's. Conventional Roman thought

---

**143** Lact. *inst.* 7.15.16: *Amissa enim libertate, quam Bruto duce et auctore defenderat, ita consenuit, tamquam sustentare se ipsa non valeret, nisi adminiculo regentium uteretur.* Cf. Brisset (1964) 6.

**144** Weinrib (1968) 164. It is apparent that the elder Seneca saw himself as the patriarch of a growing political dynasty; cf. Sen. *contr.* 2 *praef.* 3–4; also see Waltz (1909) 22–23, and further discussion below.

**145** See Sussman (1972).

and usage here would call for *virtus*, the more inclusive term. Instead, we find *veritas* in the sense of truth, righteousness, and integrity.<sup>146</sup> *Virtus* was a term current during the earlier Republic, in its proper sense, but with changing times and political conditions in the late Republic it had become debased. Thus the use of *veritas* signifies the elder Seneca's realization that the older term was no longer descriptive of the moral qualities which he wished to convey:

The decline of the old tradition can be measured by the debasement of *virtus* itself into merely a conventional laudatory formula, requiring the support of extreme adjectives. As such, it is accepted by Cicero and used by him from his earliest letters and speeches to his latest. In the face of this debasement two courses were possible: to reassert the old tradition or to redefine it to suit the changed circumstances. Cicero, as an admirer of the old Republican tradition and, at the same time, a *novus homo*, followed both courses, and that either was considered necessary or even desirable again underlines the decline of the original ideal. Finally, while accepting the conventional debased signification of *virtus* in his speeches, Cicero seems to have turned partly from the Roman tradition and sought his ideal standard more in the ideas of Greek philosophy.<sup>147</sup>

Thus it is greatly to Seneca's credit as an observer and historian that he not only recognized this trend, but also sought to substitute another term to replace the worn out noun which had, essentially, lost its original meaning. The use of a new term, *veritas*, therefore emphasizes his preoccupation with precise terminology and reveals again his pervasively moralistic outlook on history.

Though at times various writers have personified or deified *veritas*, here the elder Seneca's usage differs substantially from the rest.<sup>148</sup> The only close parallel in Latin literature seems to be in Martial, where he describes a personified *veritas* which rises again from the underworld after the reign of the oppressive Emperor Domitian:

*Non est hic dominus, sed imperator,  
sed iustissimus omnium senator,  
per quem de Stygia domo reducta est  
siccis rustica Veritas capillis.  
Hoc sub principe, si sapis, caveto  
verbis, Roma, prioribus loquaris.*<sup>149</sup>

---

**146** Tacitus' use of the term *veritas* in *hist.* 1.1 is not parallel. He is clearly referring to historical accuracy and candidness.

**147** Earl (1961) 38; see also his useful chapter, "Sallust's Concept of Virtus", 28–40.

**148** Gell. 12.11.7; Varro *Men.* 31; Hor. *carm.* 1.24.7; Plin. *paneg.* 84.1.

**149** Mart. 10.72.8–13.

In the phrases *de Stygia domo reducta est* and *verbis, Roma, prioribus loquaris* Martial's text strongly suggests a biological/cyclical conception of *Veritas* parallel to the younger Seneca's description of the *Histories* in the *De Vita Patris, unde primum veritas retro abiit*. The concept of death and then renewal is implicit in both passages. *Veritas* is a rural virtue, characterized by the peasant qualities of bluntness and candor. This is apparent from the use of *siccis... capillis*; her hair does not reek with the liquid perfumes which typify the extravagances of city life.<sup>150</sup> Again, this finds a close parallel in Seneca's denunciation of the luxurious and depraved manner in which the youth of his day is living. Their vices are those of the city dweller: laziness, dancing, singing, effeminacy, high pitched voices, elaborate hair dressings, body depilation, and, finally, dishonesty, which is to Seneca the most serious of them all<sup>151</sup> and calls to mind his preoccupation with the opposite quality of *veritas*. The similarities in both conceptions of *veritas* do not find parallels in Latin literature and suggest very strongly that Martial was familiar with the *Histories* of another fellow Spaniard whom he admired.<sup>152</sup>

That the decline of *veritas* was a predominant motif of the *Histories* is plain from the wording of the *De Vita Patris* (Appendix - T1):

*Quisquis legisset eius historias ab initio bellorum civilium, unde primum veritas retro abiit, paene usque ad mortis suae diem, magni aestimaret scire quibus natus est parentibus...*

The younger Seneca chooses to mention only three facts about the work:

1. Its inception point, a conventional rubric which often became the title, e.g., Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita*, the elder Pliny's *A Fine Aufidii Bassi*, Tacitus' *Annales Ab Excessu Divi Augusti*.
2. Its end limit, also obviously an important fact.
3. The starting point was coincident with a decline of morality. With this, the younger Seneca qualifies the scope of the work even more precisely. It was not a history of just the recent civil wars, but goes back to the Gracchi (discussed previously). He also reveals to us the theme which his father emphasized in the work: the collapse of old Republican morality and the effect which this had on the state.

<sup>150</sup> Cf. Mart. 3.12.1; 3.63.4.

<sup>151</sup> Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 7–10.

<sup>152</sup> See discussion *supra*. Cf. again Mart. 1.61.7–8 *Duosque Senecas, unicumque Lucanum / facunda loquitur Corduba*.



The moralistic emphasis in general was closely related to the concept of cyclical history, widely accepted throughout antiquity.<sup>153</sup> One variant of this cycle started with a Golden Age, followed by progressively more degenerate stages: thus, a view of history that was not one of advancement towards an ideal state, but degeneration from it.<sup>154</sup> From the old Etruscan lore, and perhaps from eastern influences, but particularly from Stoicism came also the idea of a new cycle which began after the old one had run its course.<sup>155</sup> A third ancient viewpoint, obviously related to the cycle theory and probably one origin of it, was the metaphor of the various ages of man applied to a nation's growth. In this manner the different stages of national development could be likened to birth, infancy, childhood, young manhood, mature manhood, and old age.

In the much discussed Lactantius fragment, all three traditions are melded into a somewhat eloquent (if not pessimistic) summation of Roman history from its very beginning. Here the different periods are compared to the ages of man from birth to old age (during the civil wars), after which Rome was finally renewed into a second infancy under Augustus. If the fragment is genuine, it would be natural to assume that it came from an introductory passage in which Seneca summed up the whole of Roman history, marked off the starting point for his own particular work, and perhaps the plan and philosophy of the work. Such an assumption is consistent with our knowledge of the *De Vita Patris*, in which the *Histories* are said to begin with the civil wars, when *veritas* first began to decline. The probable date for this turning point (noted earlier) was the period following the destruction of Carthage, the emergence of the Gracchi, and the beginning of civil discord. This agrees with the dating of the decline's inception in Lactantius (*Appendix* - F2). The use of the word *retro* in the *De Vita Patris* points very convincingly not only to a cyclical conception of the *Histories*, but also to the association of a biological metaphor with it. Horace employs this word in exactly such a manner when referring to the biological aging process in man.<sup>156</sup>

---

153 See Archambault (1966) 193–228, especially 193–200.

154 For references, see Archambault (1928) *passim*. Also Häussler (1964).

155 See Brisset (1964) 59.

156 Hor. *carm.* 2.11.5: *Fugit retro / levis iuventus et decor....* Thus, like Lactantius, Horace identifies *iuventus* (cf. Lact. *iuvlescere*) as the apex of the human cycle. The climb then reverses direction downward (*retro*); cf. Verg. *georg.* 2.200; 4.495; *Aen.* 4.489; 9.539. An easily recognized parallel in thought exists between *georg.* 1.199–200 (*sic omnia fatis / in peius ruere ac retro sublapsa ferri*) and the elder Seneca's discussion of the decline of eloquence (*contr.* 1 *praef.* 7: *sive fato quodam, cuius maligna perpetuaque in rebus omnibus lex est, ut ad summum perducta rursus ad infimum, velocius quidem quam ascenderant, relabantur*).

In addition to the authority of the *De Vita Patris* and the questionable Lactantius fragment, there are two references in the *Controversiae* which reveal the elder Seneca's preoccupation with the cyclical theme and indicate also that later, in the *Histories*, he probably used it as a unifying motif.<sup>157</sup> In any event, we can determine that in the work he heavily emphasized a decline of morals and increased luxury, common enough motifs in the late Republic and early Empire.<sup>158</sup> Of interest in this regard is Sallust, a historian whose style the elder Seneca greatly admired.<sup>159</sup> Sallust regards the dispersal of the *metus Punicus* as one cause, along with increased luxury, of the decline of Roman morals, thus a dating consonant with the one deduced for the elder Seneca, and indicating that he may have used Sallust as a source.<sup>160</sup> The views of two writers who would certainly be familiar with the *Histories* of the elder Seneca, his grandson Lucan and his possible kinsman Florus are also important. Both in general reflect this cyclical-moralistic view of the elder Seneca.<sup>161</sup>

---

**157** The elder Seneca described the development of Roman oratory in cyclical terms (*contr.* 1 *praef.* 6–7; see also *supra* n. 15, 136) and traced declamation in a biological cycle, cf. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 12: *facile est mihi ab incunabulis nosse rem* [i.e., declamation] *post me natam*.

**158** Seneca himself sees that these are causes for the decline of eloquence (*contr.* 1 *praef.* 6–7), and documents his argument by describing the then current state of low morality (*contr.* 1 *praef.* 8–10). As Hahn (1964) 203 points out, it was conventional at this time to blame the outbreak of civil wars on the lapse of morality. Elsewhere in the elder Seneca's extant works are numerous references to contemporary low morality; e.g., *contr.* 2.5.7; 2.6.2; 2.7.1; 10.4.18. The influence of this sort of thinking on the younger Seneca was profound; see Rolland (1906) 36; 42.

**159** Cf. Sen. *contr.* 9.1.13–14; *suas.* 6.21.

**160** Sall. *Catil.* 10.1: *Sed ubi labore atque iustitia res publica crevit, reges magni bello domiti, nationes ferae et populi ingentes vi subacti, Carthago, aemula imperi Romani, ab stirpe interiit, cuncta maria terraeque patebant, saevire fortuna ac miscere omnia coepit*. Cf. *hist.* 1 fr. 11; 12; 16 Maurenbrecher = 15, 16, 17 La Penna/Funari; Vell. 1.12.5. Other parallels are listed by Ernout (1964<sup>6</sup>) 64. See also Hahn (1964) 203.

**161** See Lucan. 1.67–97; 158–182; cf. Brisset (1964) 49; 59–60; Marti (1945) 357–358. A concept of renewal is implicit in 1.72–80; see Brisset (1964) 59. In Florus see *epit.* 1 *praef.* 4–8, and especially *epit.* 1 *praef.* 4: *Si quis ergo populum Romanum quasi unum hominem consideret totamque eius aetatem percenseat*. Although the importance of the destruction of Carthage is not lost on Florus (*epit.* 1.31.1–6), he believes that the cause of the decline was more closely related to the conquest of Syria and its aftermath of increased luxury which then corrupted Rome (1.47.7ff). Renewal of the cycle for Florus occurs under Trajan (*epit.* 1 *praef.* 8). A contemporary of the elder Seneca offers parallels. See Vell. 1.17.5–7; 2.3.4; 2.10, in whose opinion the loss of *metus Punicus* played a vital role in the decline (2.1.1). Cf. Anderson (1962) 52–54. Tacitus also offers parallels for a cyclical-moralistic pattern of history in *ann.* 3.55; cf. *hist.* 1.16; but see also *hist.* 3.34; *ann.* 3.34; Sen. *benef.* 1.10.1. Cf. Amm. 14.6.4; Script. Hist. Aug. *Car.* 2.1–3.2. All of the preceding may have been influenced in some measure by the elder Seneca's *Histories*.

## 11 The elder Seneca's concept of historical causation

The elder Seneca touched upon the topic of historical causation in relation to the decline of oratory, mentioned above, when he tried to isolate the factors responsible: these were either (1) moral degeneracy, (2) the lack of incentives and consequent transfer of energies to other spheres, or (3) an inevitable and fated cycle (which operated in all matters) of a rise to preeminence and then an accelerated decline.

Historically speaking, the second cause is an astute insight into the effect of the Principate on public speaking,<sup>162</sup> and says much for the elder Seneca's historical sophistication.

However, the two other causes lend themselves more to a general theory of historical causation for the period embraced by the *Histories*. Interestingly enough, in the younger Seneca's fragmentary life of his father, where he is describing the extent and scope of this work, both inevitable cycle and immorality are melded into one: *...ab initio bellorum civilium unde primum veritas retro abiit*. As we have already noted, *veritas* must be understood in its broad moral sense here, i.e., "righteousness", while *retro* refers to the downward turn of a cycle, and most probably a biological cycle.

The evidence, then, points convincingly to the use of a cyclical (if not biological-cyclical) framework for the *Histories*. What relationship did Seneca see between the decline of *veritas* and the downward turn of this cycle? It surely was not accidental that both occurred nearly simultaneously. Cause and effect are surely implied. Because of an inevitable process of senescence and a concurrent confluence of other factors certain to occur sooner or later, changes effecting decline were produced. To the Romans of the late Republic, the elder Seneca included, this change was the decline of morality. In turn, they also saw similar causes for this decline: the great conquests during the Republic, which introduced *luxuria* and *avaritia*, thus corrupting the ancient *mos maiorum*; the conquest of Greece and Asia, and the removal of the *metus Punicus*. These are the turning points generally mentioned.<sup>163</sup> We should also note that Lucan, who must have been familiar with his grandfather's *Histories*, views the decline in a similar

---

**162** The elder Seneca was apparently the first to recognize this. The subject is, of course, better articulated in Tac. *dial.*, written nearly 70 years later, and may have been suggested to Seneca by certain statements of Cicero. See on this Sussman (1972) *passim*.

**163** A wealth of citation is conveniently collected in Brisset (1964) 41–42. See also *supra* n. 162.

way. He envisions an inevitable cycle of history in which the downward swing is closely linked to a lapse of morality, itself caused by the great conquests, the consequent luxury which effected neglect of the old Roman ways, and, finally, the internal sedition which arose and was occasioned by avarice and ambition.<sup>164</sup> Here also the model of causation resembles the one found in Sallust.

A Stoic origin seems likely for Seneca's reference to malign fate when he is speaking of the causes for the decline of oratory: ... *fato quodam, cuius maligna perpetuaque in rebus omnibus lex est, ut ad summum perducta rursus ad infimum, velocius quidem quam ascenderant, relabantur*.<sup>165</sup> This, too, agrees with an inevitable biological scheme.<sup>166</sup> A similar concept of *fortuna* or *fatum* appears in all the Annaei – the elder and younger Senecas, and Lucan – it is irrational, incomprehensible, and immutable.<sup>167</sup> The reason why the elder Seneca and many other Roman historians (e.g. Sallust, Caesar, Livy, Velleius, Tacitus, and Florus) resorted to *fortuna* / *fatum* as an explanation for events is simple.<sup>168</sup> As Polybius observes perceptively, it is an easy way to explain a complex chain of causes and effects.<sup>169</sup> The elder Seneca quite conceivably pointed to the immutable dictates of *fortuna* / *fatum* as an explanation for the course of Roman history during the incredibly complex and even bizarre events which he narrated. Such an explanation well complements the use of a cycle theory, whose movements are themselves predestined.

The Stoics thought that the end point of the decline cycle was a universal chaos, followed by renewal.<sup>170</sup> If we liken this chaos to the *furor* of civil war, and

---

**164** Lucan. 1.159–182. Here again there is a close correspondence to the Lactantius fragment. See also Brisset (1964) 41ff. Lucan posits two causes for the fall of the Republic: (1) the decadence of the Roman state, and, more immediately, (2) the triumvirate.

**165** Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 7. Convincingly argued and supported by Brisset (1964) 53–54. Cf. Hahn (1964) 203.

**166** Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 7. It should further be noted that Seneca traces the history of declamation in *contr.* 1 *praef.* 12, and likens its growth to the human process.

**167** The conception is Stoic in origin according to Brisset (1964) 55–56. *Fatum* and *fortuna* are two aspects of the same fundamental force. For further references and discussion, see *ibid.* The declaimers were fond of expounding on the nature of *fortuna*. The topic constituted a stock commonplace, *de fortunae varietate locus* (Sen. *contr.* 1.8.16; cf. 1.1.3; 1.1.5; 1.1.17; 2.1.1; 2.1.7ff; 7.6.18).

**168** E.g.: Sallust *Catil.* 8.1; 41.3; 51.25; *Iug.* 102.9; *epist. ad Caes.* 1.2 (but not quite so emphatic, *Iug.* 1.3); Caes. *civ.* 3.68.1; in Livy, see Bayet/Baillet (1954) xl; cf. Brisset (1964) 56; in Velleius, e.g., 2.47.2; 2.48.1; 2.57.3; 2.75.2; 2.116.3; in Tac. *Germ.* 33; see also Lacroix (1951) 263–264; in Florus, *epit.* 1.19.2, cf. *epit.* 1.18.2.

**169** Plb. 2.38.5; see Walbank (1957) 221 *ad loc.*; cf. Brisset (1951) 57 n. 2.

**170** See *supra* n. 155.

the renewal to the restoration of order and morality under Augustus, then perhaps we have reconstructed the relationship between Seneca's concepts of historical causation and the theme of his *Histories* as preserved cursorily in the *De Vita Patris*.

## 12 Purpose and value of history as seen by the elder Seneca

Both Seneca and Tacitus (in the *Dialogus*) obviously considered history a form of eloquence superior to oratory for the time in which they were writing.<sup>171</sup> Apparently both believed that under the Empire, and in the absence of *libertas* true history could not be written.<sup>172</sup> And yet, as we know from the *De Vita Patris*, the elder Seneca persisted in writing history, even though he well realized the dangers in recording events from the beginning of the civil wars to nearly the day of his own death. Furthermore, he was to a great extent writing contemporary history, the most perilous sort; a type which Tacitus refrained from writing – with good reason – and the young Claudius had to be restrained from attempting.

There were only limited opportunities for an equestrian like Seneca to display his eloquence, and these lay chiefly in the sterile arena of declamation. Political oratory and, to a lesser extent, court oratory were closed off because of rank or the political conditions of the age, or both. That Seneca considered declamation a genre distinctly inferior to oratory and history is clear,<sup>173</sup> and one can easily detect in the *Suasoriae* his impatience to proceed with the more important historical work for which he had been doing extensive preparatory thought and research.

---

**171** On Tacitus, see *supra* n. 40. Also Sen. *suas.* 6.16: *Nolo autem vos, iuvenes mei, contristari, quod a declamatoribus ad historicos transeo. Satisfaciam vobis, et fortasse efficiam ut his sententiis lectis solida et verum habentia recipiatis. Et quia hoc propositum recta via consequi non potero, decipere vos cogar, velut salutarem daturus pueris potionem, summa parte poculi.* Cf. also *suas.* 5.8.

**172** See Tac. *hist.* 1.1; cf. Kühnen (1962) 21; Klingner (1928) 199 (but he misinterprets the meaning of *veritas* in *De Vita Patris*, see *supra* n. 146); Sen. *dial.* 6.1.3–4. So much is implicit in the elder Seneca's statements regarding book-burning; see *supra* n. 139.

**173** Sen. *contr.* 1.8.16; *suas.* 5.8; 6.16. The prefaces to books 3 and 9 of the *contr.* contain exhaustive and damaging criticism of declamation: cf. 3 *praef.* (Cassius Severus speaking); 9 *praef.* (Votienus Montanus speaking). In 10 *praef.* 1, Seneca reveals fatigue with the entire subject of declamation: *iam res taedio est ... me iam pudet tamquam diu non seriam rem agam.* In general, on this see Sussman (1969) 158–168.

One motive for writing his two rhetorical anthologies helps us to understand why Seneca later wrote a history. In the very beginning of the *Controversiae* he announces his intention of undoing the damage of time so that his sons could form some idea of the great declaimers of the past.<sup>174</sup> That is, his work will preserve the memory of those declaimers whose works are no longer extant, or those whose supposed works are not genuine. He adds later: *Itaque ne aut ignoti sint aut aliter quam debent noti, summa cum fide suum cuique reddam*.<sup>175</sup> Therefore, we can assume a similar objective in the *Histories* – to preserve accurately the events of the past for future generations and also to give persons and events their due.

Seneca undoubtedly valued history as a source of moral object lessons in conduct from the past. These *exempla*, as they were called, were also an integral part of the rhetorical system of the times. The Romans linked rhetoric and history very closely, and so the historians and speakers of this period regularly supported their arguments with *exempla*. These practical Romans considered history to be particularly valuable as a source of instruction on morality and behavior. This moral-didactic emphasis so characteristic of Roman historical writing certainly must have been a predominant motif in the *Histories*. But the utility of these historical *exempla* was not limited to their didactic function. They could also be a helpful aid to orators or declaimers in ordinary persuasion by analogy.<sup>176</sup> Seneca's best friend, the famous declaimer Latro, was very well versed in history and could reel off the exploits of any great general instantaneously.<sup>177</sup> The *exemplum* could be used either as a commonplace itself, or to confirm a commonplace with an illustration drawn from history.<sup>178</sup>

---

174 Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 1; cf. *suas.* 6.5–6.

175 Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 11; cf. 1 *praef.* 20, where he states that he will try to correct a then currently erroneous impression of his friend Latro, and then proceeds to do so.

176 Quint. *inst.* 10.1.34. The use of *exempla* in ancient rhetoric is conveniently traced by Kühnen (1962) 40–41. The passion of rhetors for these often led to the use of irrelevant *exempla*, a practice denounced by Martial (6.19).

177 Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 18; a rather narrow concept of the term *historiae* here – merely names and exploits: *Historiarum omnium summa notitia: iubebat aliquem nominari ducem et statim eius acta cursu reddebat*.

178 E.g., Sen. *contr.* 2.1.1; 2.1.7ff.; *suas.* 1.9; 6.8.

Naturally, the *Suasoriae* abound with *exempla* because of their historical subject matter and deliberative nature, but *exempla* are not absent in the *Controversiae*; <sup>179</sup> in fact, Seneca is himself fond of using *exempla* to prove a point. <sup>180</sup> Although they are useful primarily for persuasion by analogy, it would be hard to deny their emotional impact when a speaker recited a list of Roman heroes and their exploits. Extensive knowledge of *exempla* would also display the erudition of the speaker and so impress the audience in much the same way as Seneca's sons were astonished at Latro's wealth of historical knowledge.

The discussion so far might suggest that Seneca's primary reason for writing the *Histories* was his desire to provide his sons, now embarking on their careers, with a treasury of useful *exempla* to employ in their speeches and writings. But why, at his advanced age, would he have written a work of such relatively narrow scope, which also dealt with a period treated adequately by many writers before? Other reasons must be found.

(1) The tone permeating the *Controversiae* and the *Suasoriae* strongly conveys the impression of a man guiding the education of his sons. <sup>181</sup> Two important themes in the works are the development of a good speaking style and shedding the bad habits acquired in the rhetorical schools. <sup>182</sup> Both works are a practical guide for young men especially interested in political careers, since, in addition to instruction in public speaking, they offer the following:

- a. the exercises themselves, which were good training for young men preparing for the bar, a calling considered indispensable for building a reputation, acquiring influential friends and developing skill in public speaking; <sup>183</sup>
- b. the development of memory; <sup>184</sup>

<sup>179</sup> E.g., Sen. *contr.* 1.8.12; *suas.* 2.2; 6.3. Cf. *supra* n. 183.

<sup>180</sup> Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 19.

<sup>181</sup> E.g., Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 1–12; 19; 2 *praef.* 3–4; *suas.* 6.16. Note also the didactic air of *contr.* 2 *praef.* 1; 3 *praef.* 1; 9 *praef.* 1. Seneca addresses the prefaces as letters to his sons, who have been continually asking their father to tell them about the various declaimers whom he has known and heard (*contr.* 1 *praef.* 1; 4 *praef.* 1; 2; 7 *praef.* 1; 10 *praef.* 1). See also Waltz (1990) 57.

<sup>182</sup> See especially on this Sen. *contr.* 7 *praef.*; 9 *praef.*; also Sussman (1969) 158–168.

<sup>183</sup> Although the writers of the 1st Century AD talked much of a decline in eloquence, there was never any question of the importance of oratorical and rhetorical skill in pursuing a political career. The courts were still flourishing, as was political deliberation, although both, of course, not to the extent that was true during the Republic. This is the well supported and argued thesis of Parks (1945), especially 19–20, and also Bonner (1949) 42–50. The best critics of Roman oratory in the period were still convinced of its importance, e.g., Petron. 46; Quint. *inst.* 12.7.10; Plin. *epist.* 4.9; Tac. *dial.* 5–6 (Aper speaking).

<sup>184</sup> Not only for delivering speeches by heart, but also for the recognition of names and faces (a necessity for any politician). So much is made clear in the anecdote about Cineas, a man with

- c. moral instruction;<sup>185</sup>
- d. mental exercise (particularly in plotting argumentation in the *divisio*)
- e. familiarity with literary backgrounds and criticism,<sup>186</sup> and
- f. pride in their Spanish backgrounds.

The *Controversiae* are obviously preparatory for court oratory, but the *Suasoriae* would offer an introduction to deliberative speaking (i.e., the oratory characteristic of deliberative bodies). This explains the apparent lack of order in the composition of both works,<sup>187</sup> since the *Suasoriae* were composed after the *Controversiae*, though practice with *suasoriae* preceded the *controversiae* in the schools of rhetoric.

The function of the *Histories* in such a framework is then readily apparent. In addition to the secondary consideration of providing a fund of *exempla* for his sons' speeches, the work would mark the final stage of their education for public life – *exempla* in the broadest sense. Thus the *Histories* were a handbook for future statesmen. In the progression of his writings, the elder Seneca may have followed his much admired ideal, the elder Cato, who first wrote, among other works, a book on rhetoric and then, as an old man, a history for the education of his son.<sup>188</sup>

(2) The span of time included in the *Histories* provides a clue to another purpose the elder Seneca may have had for composing the work. This period itself

---

a truly remarkable memory, whom Pyrrhus sent to negotiate with the Senate (Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 19).

**185** Although some of the declamations in the collection would be considered racy, if not obscene, even by today's relaxed standards (e.g., Sen. *contr.* 1.2; 1.5; 5.6; cf. 1.2.23), nevertheless, in general, the declamations were replete with commonplaces, *exempla*, and *sententiae* of high moral tone. Note also the high moral tone of *contr.* 1 *praef.*, and the comparison of the strong Pollio with the weak Haterius in *contr.* 4 *praef.* A chance remark is also enlightening: *suas.* 2.15 (speaking of Potamon and Lesbocles): ... *in quibus quanta fuerit animorum diversitas in simili fortuna puto vobis indicandum, multo magis quia ad vitam pertinet quam si ad eloquentiam pertineret.*

**186** E.g., the discussion of Ovid in Sen. *contr.* 2.2.8–12.

**187** Cf. Sen. *contr.* 2.4.8.

**188** This is the commonly accepted reason why Cato wrote the *Origines* (e.g., Plut. *Cato* 20, cf. 25), but Peter (1914<sup>2</sup>) I CXXVIII–CXXX sees problems here, especially in regard to dating. Nevertheless, the tradition, not the truth, may have been the influencing factor in Seneca's case. The system in which the Roman father took a direct hand in the education of his sons is characteristic of the older, conservative Republican practice, as Plut. notes (*Cato* 20), and in particular its emphasis on morals. Cf. Marrou (1964<sup>3</sup>) 309–324, especially 313–315. We should also consider the slight possibility that Seneca envisioned his son Mela's turning to writing history: *contr.* 2 *praef.* 3–4.



was intrinsically interesting and exciting, including as it did the transition from Republic to Principate. Before him was the attractive task of recording a series of bitter political and military struggles in which numerous extraordinary politicians and generals played leading roles. Many authors were deeply interested in the period and wrote about it, even during the early Empire when such an inquiry into the recent past was not only difficult but dangerous.<sup>189</sup> The elder Seneca may also have believed that he had a unique explanation for events of the period in the cycle theory and his closely related concept of moral deterioration.

The events, the men, and the situations begged rhetorical amplification, especially the horrors of the civil wars and their bloody proscriptions. Seneca had undoubtedly witnessed at first-hand some of their *furor*,<sup>190</sup> and perhaps his work heavily influenced the pervasive theme of Lucan, the horror of civil war.<sup>191</sup>

Also, at the time in which the elder Seneca was writing, a whole new generation or two, his sons among them, had grown up after Actium, and they would naturally wonder at the course of events that had led to such momentous changes.<sup>192</sup> Their interest would wax as the account drew nearer to contemporary events,<sup>193</sup> particularly members of the new families, Seneca's sons included, which rose into prominence under Augustus and Tiberius. They naturally desired to know the roots of their family prosperity.

(3) The historian held in perhaps the highest esteem during the lifetime of the elder Seneca was Asinius Pollio, a rabid anti-ciceronian, as Seneca himself records.<sup>194</sup> It was a time, too, when Cicero's literary, personal, and political reputations had seriously declined. This development appalled Seneca, and thus, as his comments in the rhetorical works strongly suggest, one motive of the *Histories*

---

**189** On the dangers and difficulties, see discussion *supra*; among those writing about the approximate period in question were Sallust, Livy, Varro, Pollio, Aufidius Bassus, Cremutius Cordus, Bruttidius Niger, Labienus, Lucius Arruntius, Messalla, Maecenas, Augustus, Dellius, Tuscus, Timagenes, Claudius, and Lucan. The elder Seneca was familiar with the works, if not the persons, of most of these; see discussion *supra*.

**190** Sen. *contr.* 1 *praef.* 11.

**191** "No single quotation, or even any moderate number of lines selected for the purpose, can demonstrate the extent to which the theme of the horror of civil war underlies the poem," Sanford (1933) 124. She detects, and, a reading of Lucan confirms, the impressive effect on a man born in AD 39. Perhaps some of the color and emotion sprang from his grandfather's description.

**192** Cf. the remarks of Tacitus on the latter part of Augustus' reign: *Domi res tranquillae, eadem magistratum vocabula; iuniores post Actiacam victoriam, etiam senes plerique inter bella civium nati: quotus quisque reliquus qui rem publicam vidisset?* (*ann.* 1.3).

**193** Cf. Liv *praef.* 4. Seneca would resist their appeals to emphasize only those events closest to the present (*contr.* 4 *praef.* 1).

**194** Sen. *suas.* 6.14–15; 27.

was to restore Cicero to his rightful position.<sup>195</sup> It might be objected that Livy would have given Cicero his full due, and indeed the elder Seneca quotes him approvingly on the subject of Cicero's death and the summation of his life.<sup>196</sup> However, the young Octavian's complicity in his proscription may have dictated a somewhat jaundiced view of Cicero's career elsewhere in Livy, particularly in the later years of the orator's life.

The publication of a first-rate historical work would also tend to increase the prestige of the *gens Annaea* at the crucial period when the elder Seneca's sons were actually beginning their political careers. There may also have been a family ax to grind, or damaging political alliances to explain.

A history could contribute more directly to the fortunes of Seneca's family in the early days of Gaius's reign. As was pointed out earlier, the unifying theme for the *Histories* was a cycle describing the decline of *veritas* as an explanation of the events starting with the inception of the civil wars. If as the evidence indicates, for the unifying theme of the *Histories* the elder Seneca employed a historical cycle analogous to the ages of man and also a cycle which renewed itself, we must wonder when he dated this regeneration. He could hardly, in any event, have continued the decline after the demise of the Republic. Even if the Lactantius fragment is disregarded, the reign of Augustus must mark the rebirth from chaos. Now the cycle swings upward, and at what more opportune time could the elder Seneca mark Rome's entry into flourishing youth than at the beginning of Gaius's reign? The political atmosphere had become freer, burned and banned books could now be republished, political exiles were recalled, the Sejanian sympathizers (among them, possibly, the Annaei) came out into the open.<sup>197</sup> This era of good feeling offered greater opportunities for political advancement, and less danger. It was a time for optimism, then, in place of the veiled political cynicism apparent in the *Controversiae*.<sup>198</sup>

In this respect, as in numerous others, there is a parallel to the career of Tacitus, who came to the writing of history as an older man; he waited for *libertas et principatus*, and so he wrote under the successive reigns of Nerva and Trajan, when we hear of the *felicitas temporum*.<sup>199</sup> So the elder Seneca's account, penned

---

195 He would be relatively even-handed. Cf. *supra* n. 134.

196 Especially Sen. *suas.* 6.22, cf. 6.16–17.

197 On the atmosphere of the early reign of Gaius, see *supra* n. 24; cf. Ferrill (1964) 31–33. On the possible Sejanian sympathies of the Annaei, see *supra* n. 125.

198 See discussion above.

199 Tac. *hist.* 1.1. See Syme (1957).

in this other felicitous time, calling attention to the benevolence of the new regime, and also placing it into perspective as part of the fated plan of Rome, would attract, the favor of Gaius and his party, thus ensuring the political prospects of the young Annaei.

(4) In addition to furthering the prestige of the *gens Annaea*, Seneca may also have felt the necessity to improve the standing of the Spanish provinces in Roman literary circles. He must have emphasized the deep attachment of Cordova to Roman literature and culture when narrating the important events which occurred there during the various civil wars.

But even more prominent than this emphasis on Cordova would be an attempt to dispel the prejudices and misconceptions deeply felt at Rome against the citizens from Spain.<sup>200</sup> The seeds of this defense are easily detected in the *Controversiae*, a work which pointedly attributes importance and even greatness to Spaniards in the field of eloquence.<sup>201</sup>

Bitter fighting continued in Spain through 26 and even into 13 BC, when Apian finally terminated his account of the civil war there.<sup>202</sup> The Spanish reputation for political frenzy, violence, rebelliousness, and cruelty would not highly recommend the sons of a Cordovan provincial equestrian for high political office. But the *Histories* would afford an opportunity for the *Annaei* to refute these widely held views and to record their own and their province's devotion to the *divus Augustus*, who was later looked upon as a patron deity of Spain until well into the Middle Ages.<sup>203</sup>

We can thus reasonably assume that an important purpose of the elder Seneca was to record Spanish events in more detail or in a more sympathetic light than writers such as Caesar and Pollio, or perhaps even Augustus in his autobiography. The courage of the Spaniards fighting at Munda would call for some expansion, and perhaps he provided a more revealing insight into the mysterious Aeserninus affair.<sup>204</sup> It does not seem probable that the elder Seneca played down

---

**200** The subject is treated extensively, with many citations, by de la Ville de Mirmont (1912) 341–349.

**201** Seneca sets up a tetrad of the greatest declaimers (*contr.* 10 *praef.* 13), two of whom are Spanish (Latro and Gallio). Half of *contr.* 1 *praef.* 13–24 deals with Latro, and undoubtedly one of the lost prefaces discussed Gallio in some detail. *Contr.* 10 *praef.* ends with an account of the two Clodii Turrini, also Spanish. On the declaimers of Spain, see de la Ville de Mirmont (1910–1913); see especially (1912) 29.

**202** de la Ville de Mirmont 14 (1912) 344–345.

**203** de la Ville de Mirmont 14 (1912) 348. On the elder Seneca's acquaintance with and favorable opinions of Augustus, see *supra* n. 121.

**204** D.C. 42.15.

the well-known negative qualities of Spain by omission. His attitude and method in the *Controversiae* preclude this.

### 13 The style of the elder Seneca's *Histories*

In Latin literature the genre determines the style. Excellence in one genre does not predetermine greatness in another, a fact well known to the elder Seneca.<sup>205</sup> Thus, caution is required to infer the style of the *Histories* from the *Controversiae* and *Suasoriae*. Except for the prefaces to the *Controversiae*, these works are primarily extracts quoted from other speakers, interspersed with Seneca's usually informal and discursive comments.<sup>206</sup> Such a style is obviously inappropriate to historical work. For this reason alone, we should neither ascribe to the elder Seneca's *Histories* the style of the anthologies nor, for this reason, the grave deficiencies of vocabulary and thought recounted by Bardon in his book on the elder Seneca's vocabulary of literary criticism.<sup>207</sup> Furthermore, many of Bardon's conclusions are highly questionable and flawed by numerous errors of method and judgment.<sup>208</sup>

Of more value is Bardon's later article, which addresses itself more specifically to style.<sup>209</sup> Here he isolates several aspects of Seneca's style and notes whether or not they were mirrored in the rhetoricians (almost invariably they were). Thus Bardon is able to establish successfully that the elder Seneca's style was extensively influenced by the practices of the rhetoricians, and probably had a significant influence on his son, on his nephew Lucan, and, through them, on the literature of the period in general. For instance, Bardon describes Seneca's predilection for the following: picturesque expression (p. 6), brachylogy (7), parallelism and antithesis (7–8), architectural word grouping (8), asyndeton (8–9), *sententiae* (9), *variatio* (9–10), disjunctive word placement and word order (10–12), *tricola* and *tetracola* (12–13), use of *et* for *etiam* (13–14), lack of imagination

<sup>205</sup> Sen. *contr.* 3 *praef.* 8.

<sup>206</sup> The emotional outbursts in *contr.* 1 *praef.* 8–10 and 10 *praef.* 6–7 are notable exceptions.

<sup>207</sup> Bardon (1940a) especially 68–89; 106–114. The deficiencies he particularly notes are in regard to vocabulary, word-choice, and literary criticism. History was recognized as requiring a distinctly different style from oratory, and of course, from declamation. Cf. Cic. *de orat.* 2.54ff; *orat.* 66; Quint. *inst.* 10.3.7ff; Plin. *epist.* 5.8.

<sup>208</sup> Bardon's book (1940a) was reviewed somewhat critically by his mentor, Marouzeau (1940). But see also Cordier (1943) 221; Sussman (1969) 171–181.

<sup>209</sup> Bardon (1943).

in presenting quotations from the rhetoricians (14–15), sententious style (16–17), word repetition without apparent point (18–19), and, in general, sclerotic style (e.g., 15) and lack of intelligence (24).

In the main, and as far as he goes, Bardon has effectively described Senecan style, but there are several areas where his criticism is gratuitous or prejudiced. One could point out that a lack of variation in the introduction of quotations is necessitated by their vast volume, and also because in the body of the work Seneca makes no literary pretensions whatsoever. It is primarily in the prefaces to the books that Seneca is being literary, and it is on these that his style should be evaluated.<sup>210</sup> Prose rhythm is cursorily treated in Bardon's paper, and completely lacking is the stylistic analysis of a specific passage. His work suffers from the attempt to defend his controversial earlier dissertation by prejudging the case. Bardon also insults Seneca's intelligence wholly on the basis of his style and does not take into account the content of his remarks.

The style of Seneca's historical work would of necessity differ from the informal and discursive anthologies. Yet from the material contained in the extant works it is possible to draw certain conclusions about the style of the *Histories*. For instance, we can readily assume the same concern for balance and proportion in a literary piece as he called for in the architecture of a declamation.<sup>211</sup> Thus, although Seneca possessed the engaging ability to tell an interesting story (which he frequently indulged), he is nevertheless aware of this tendency and returns to the topic in time.<sup>212</sup>

The question of inserted speeches in the *Histories* must remain a puzzle. Many of those that would demand reporting were already published by their authors. In the case of the speakers who were dead, he may have followed the tactic of Tacitus, who reproduced the major points but in a shorter, more succinct

**210** On some of the literary qualities and devices of the prefaces, see Sussman (1972).

**211** Cf. Sen. *contr.* 7 *prae*f. 2 on Albius: *Erat et illud in argumentatione vitium, quod quaestionem non tamquam partem controversiae, sed tamquam controversiam implebat.... Non omnis quaestio per numeros suos implenda est? Quidni? Sed tamquam accessio, non tamquam summa. Nullum habile membrum est, si corpori par est.* Cf. 2.3.15.

**212** He usually returns to the subject quickly enough with a short apology for the digression (*contr.* 2.1.37; 7.3.8–9; 9.2.23–24; 10.5.21–22; *suas.* 1.7; 2.12–13; 2.15; 2.19–20; 2.5–7). In other instances the digressions or anecdotes are cleverly worked into the flow, and there is no return transition (*contr.* 2.2.8–12; 2.4.6–8; 2.4.13; 9.1.13–14; 9.3.12–13; 9.4.17–21; 9.5.15–17; *suas.* 1.5; 2.17; 4.4; 6.14–21; 6.21–27; 7.13–14). The number and extent of the digressions progressively increase, indicating Seneca's desire to vary the essentially monotonous format and subject matter dictated by the project. Also demonstrated is his growing impatience with the work, and perhaps his desire to proceed to a more original and creative project: the writing of history.

form.<sup>213</sup> But for those speakers still alive, the problem is more troublesome. He may well have reproduced parts of the speech if it were well known, and summarized the rest. In any event, he must have been careful to have the words fit the speaker in the speeches he composed, since he dwells on this problem at some length.<sup>214</sup>

One of the elder Seneca's most successful stylistic talents was his mastery of the brief character sketch which delved into a man's motives, psychology, and the effects of these on his actions or literary works. Such sketches, often similar to the *epitaphia* mentioned above, would naturally be a prominent feature of an historical work on a period which encompassed the careers of so many unusual and great men. The eloquent though emotional outbursts which occur occasionally in the *Controversiae*<sup>215</sup> probably occurred more frequently in the *Histories*. In this respect and others, the elder Seneca, an ardent admirer of Cicero, may well have followed his principles in writing history.<sup>216</sup> An ornate narrative style was called for, interspersed at reasonable intervals with battle or geographical descriptions, and also speeches. The object was a smooth flow (though not poetic), and not the vigorous manner used in oratory. A moderate in questions of style, Seneca would not be excessive in his use of declamatory adornment, then the current rage in Roman literary circles.<sup>217</sup>

A touch of the poetic seems a distinct possibility for the *Histories*. As noted above, Roman historical writing of the period employed extensive poetic descriptive passages. In the *Suasoriae* we find similar passages, often geographical or ethnological, as the elder Seneca himself describes them: *locorum habitus fluminumque decursus et urbium situs moresque populorum...*<sup>218</sup> These stylistically ornate descriptions were a conventional part of historical prose. One such description, that of Germanicus caught in an ocean storm, written by Albinovanus Pedo

---

**213** As we know from comparing the actual text of a speech made by Claudius (recovered at Lyons in 1524) and Tacitus' version in *ann.* 11.24. See Furneaux (1907<sup>2</sup>) I 54–55; Syme (1958) I 317–319; 459–460; II 624; 709–710. Syme refers to two other studies in particular which at the time of this writing are unavailable to me: Vittinghoff (1954), and Wellesley (1954).

**214** Sen. *suas.* 1.5ff.

**215** E.g. 1 *praef.* 8–10; 10 *praef.* 6–7.

**216** Cic. *orat.* 66; cf. *de orat.* 2.54ff.

**217** Cf. Sen. *contr.* 7 *praef.* 5. In general, for his ideals of style as observable through his criticism of other writers and declaimers, see Sussman (1969) 49–190, especially the ending summary, 181–190, and also Sochatoff (1939).

**218** Sen. *contr.* 2 *praef.* 3.

in hexameters, was particularly liked by Seneca.<sup>219</sup> Seneca genuinely admired certain poetic descriptions as he indicates elsewhere. He says that of all the very eloquent men who wrote about Cicero's death, all historians, none was more eloquent than the poet Cornelius Severus.<sup>220</sup> This underscores the close relationship envisioned in Rome between poetry and history, and strongly suggests that the *Histories* displayed poetic tone.<sup>221</sup>

Another important stylistic influence on Seneca can be inferred from his own (and his son's) admiration of Sallust's style and in particular, his brevity.<sup>222</sup> From his other remarks and criticisms, we can assume that Seneca would not be carried away to an excess of Sallustian imitation and brevity; in fact, he clearly recognizes the dangers of overly terse style, but adds that a tendency toward slightly tumid expression is preferable since it is more easily corrected.<sup>223</sup> Nevertheless, Sallustian tone is a safe guess.

Livy's Ciceronian-inspired style may also have had some effect on the *Histories*. Seneca obviously knew the works of both and admired each man's style. In one instance, he approves of Livy's dictum on the avoidance of obscure words.<sup>224</sup>

---

**219** Sen. *suas.* 1.15. No disclaimer, Seneca comments, could match the *spiritus* with which Pedo described this scene. See discussion *supra*.

**220** Sen. *suas.* 6.25; cf. 6.27.

**221** Quint. *inst.* 10.1.31. In this he may have differed somewhat from the dictates of Cicero (*de orat.* 2.54ff; *orat.* 66). Seneca may have felt the influence of the many poets at home in Cordova; the town was famous for these, if not for their style (Cic. *Arch.* 10.26; cf. Sen. *suas.* 6.27). Because poetry and history were thought to be so closely related, Maternus (speaking for Tacitus in his *Dialogus*) could indicate that he was forsaking oratory for poetry, to signify Tacitus' own departure to history from that same field. On this identification, see *supra* n. 40. The elder Seneca seems preoccupied with the relationship of poetry to prose throughout his digression on Ovid, *contr.* 2.2.8–12; cf. Ov. *trist.* 4.10.23–26.

**222** Sen. *contr.* 9.1.13–14; Sen. *epist.* 20.5 (imitation of Sallust's definition of friendship; *Catil.* 20.4; cf. Sen. *epist.* 109.16); 60.4; 114.17–21. The elder Seneca preferred Sallust's brief style to Livy's less terse expression, *contr.* 9.1.14.

**223** Sen. *contr.* 9.2.26. He would not slavishly imitate Sallust because he well recognized the danger of adopting someone else's style for one's own: *Non est unus, quamvis praecipuus sit, imitandus, quia numquam par fit imitator auctori. Haec rei natura est: semper citra veritatem est similitudo.* (*contr.* 1 *praef.* 6). The lesson was not lost on his son, who specifically warns against excessive imitation of Sallust (*epist.* 114.17–19).

**224** Sen. *contr.* 9.2.26; cf. 9.1.14. Evidently Livy wrote a treatise on style, cf. Quint. *inst.* 2.5.20; 8.2.18; perhaps addressed to his son, 10.1.39. There are two extended quotations from Livy: *suas.* 6.17; 22; cf. 6.21. Castiglioni (1928) 454 would add influence from the spirit of Cordus and Labienus, but not from their styles.

Although the elder Seneca becomes increasingly discursive as he proceeds in the *Suasoriae* (and was also preparing for the task of writing an extensive history), it would not be accurate to infer from this tendency an extremely anecdotal and rambling historical work. For even in the anthologies he is always careful to digress for only a short time and then return to the subject – a collection of declamatory extracts would be extremely dull without this occasional personal touch.

In the *Controversiae* Seneca employed transitional devices from the prefaces to each of the books, and also unified thematically the prefaces with the theme of *meliores annos* and memory, thus applying a structure of general unity to the work.<sup>225</sup> The structure, unity, and a thematic progression which characterized the *Controversiae* would be even more necessary and apparent in the *Histories*.

## 14 The plan of the elder Seneca's *Histories*

The state of the evidence for the plan of the *Histories* consists primarily of inference from the meager information provided in the *De Vita Patris* and the possible influence that may be discerned in Appian and Florus. Nevertheless, the terms used by the younger Seneca in describing the work are both significant and valuable. First, there is the title itself, *Historiae*, which would tend to preclude a work in the strict old annalistic format, yet it could quite conceivably have dealt with events in a modified year-by-year fashion. Such a narrative technique would be convenient for treating a lengthy and complex series of events taking place throughout the broad expanse of the Empire. One could also more easily gloss over dangerous events, while leaving sufficient scope for introducing entertaining anecdotes, rhetorical descriptions, and, of course, elaborated speeches.

In our previous discussion of the usage of *veritas*, we touched upon the importance and novelty of the elder Seneca's emphasis on this factor. As was noted, its prominence in his son's description of the work is strong evidence for the tracing of the decline of *veritas* and its subsequent revival as a unifying thread of continuity for the work. Because of its focus, therefore, we can conclude that the work belonged more to the monographical tradition typified by Seneca's much-

---

<sup>225</sup> See now Sussman (1971); (1972); (1977). In view of the elder Seneca's concern for careful transition, it is not surprising to learn of his great admiration for the master of that art, Ovid (*contr.* 2.2.8–12). He is not blind to Ovid's faults, however; e.g., *contr.* 9.5.17: ... *et Ovidius nescit quod bene cessit relinquere ... Aiebat autem Scaurus rem veram: non minus magnam virtutem esse scire dicere quam scire desinere.*



admired Sallust, with his prevalent moralistic tone, than to the universal and patriotic historical tradition of Livy. Seneca's fascination with the style of Sallust and his apparently Caesarian sympathies might well indicate a continuity of political alliance and historical style. For these reasons we could assign the elder Seneca to the politico-historiographical tradition of the Caesarians; perhaps in style (a tendency towards Atticism) and more surely in plan (the predominance of the monograph).

Although the decline of *veritas* is an important theme, the elder Seneca no doubt found it necessary to weave in other themes and events that may have been peripheral to his scheme. Hence the younger Seneca also describes the content of the *Histories* with the term *res Romanas* where the *De Vita Patris* breaks off.

There is no direct evidence to indicate how the elder Seneca divided the books of the *Histories* and the complicated, onrushing stream of events. Hahn, however, has developed a very strong argument that both Appian and Florus used the elder Seneca's *Histories* as a major source for their respective histories of the period.<sup>226</sup> Indirectly, then, it may be possible to form some idea of how the elder Seneca divided his work by looking at the respective plans of the two later writers.

One notices immediately that both men begin their account of the period of civil war with the Gracchan unrest, although there is a disagreement between them about the factors responsible.<sup>227</sup> Yet there is an essential difference between the two works. Florus was writing an epitome of Roman wars in a volume of two books, while Appian was writing a more leisurely work, an account of Rome's civil wars in the more traditional and lengthy book-by-book arrangement. In an obviously more specialized and brief work Florus can deal only cursorily with the political machinations that were so vital an element to this period of civil discord and the many great men who played so important a role. Thus, Florus begins Book 2 with an account of the Gracchan Laws (*epit.* 2.1), the *Seditio T. Gracchi* (*epit.* 2.2), *Seditio C. Gracchi* (*epit.* 2.3), *Seditio Apuleiana* (*epit.* 2.4), *Seditio Drusiana* (*epit.* 2.5), *Bellum adversus socios* (*epit.* 2.6), and so on through to the Parthian peace and the deification of Augustus. In the beginning, Florus primarily chronicles the civil wars. There is an interruption of two chapters on the Parthian wars (under Ventidius and later Antony, *epit.* 2.19–20), followed by an account of the war against Antony and Cleopatra. From there, until the end, Florus narrates the

---

<sup>226</sup> Cf. Hahn (1964) 169–206 *passim*.

<sup>227</sup> Florus sees a degeneration in morals caused by the new wealth pouring into Rome and the dispersal of the *metus Punicus* as the basic factors, *epit.* 1.47.12; cf. *epit.* 1.34.19. Appian passes over these in silence; see Hahn (1964) 203–206.

various border campaigns carried on by Octavian–Augustus and his generals. The very nature of Florus’ work therefore makes it difficult to discern what the book divisions may have been in the elder Seneca. For both range of subject matter and book divisions we must turn to Appian in order to form a possible conception of those in the elder Seneca’s work:

1. From the Gracchi to the defeat of Spartacus and the reconciliation of Pompey and Crassus.
2. Pompey’s war against the pirates, Catilinarian conspiracy, events to the death of Julius Caesar (who is compared to Alexander), and events immediately thereafter.
3. Aftermath of Julius Caesar’s funeral, rise of Antony and then Octavian, the flight and killing of Decimus Brutus.
4. From the reconciliation of Antony and Octavian at Mutina, the formation of the second triumvirate and the proscriptions, to the end of the battle at Philippi.
5. Aftermath of Philippi, Antony’s trip to Egypt, his affair with Cleopatra, his expedition against Armenia and Octavian’s against Illyria, the death of Sextus Pompey.

The books after V are lacking; if these divisions reflect the elder Seneca’s, perhaps he may originally have divided the remaining books as follows:

- a. Growth of hostilities between Octavian and Antony, various political maneuvers between the two, the battle of Actium, deaths of Antony and Cleopatra.
- b. Reform measures taken by Octavian, to 27 BC and the conferral of the title Augustus.
- c. 27 BC until the death of Augustus.
- d. Tiberius, the “good” years, Sejanus.
- e. Tiberius, the declining years, the demise of Sejanus, the death of Tiberius (perhaps a rhetorical amplification of the death scene, similar to Suet. *Tib.* 73), the inception of the reign of Gaius.

Throughout the civil war period then, probably, literary Republicanism manifested itself in the *Histories*, but also as events progressed, a flavor of Caesarian leanings.<sup>228</sup> Octavian–Augustus as the first *princeps* would be treated fully and with praise for ending chaos and restoring order. Troublesome details of his life

---

**228** Probably reflected in Florus: “The author [Florus] is strikingly free of any political bias, except that in the Civil War he appears to side with Julius Caesar rather than with Pompeius”. (Forster (1929) xi); cf. Florus *epit.* 2.13.37–39; 50; 80–83; 90. See discussion above.

still had to remain suppressed or portrayed in a favorable light. The Julio-Claudians were yet in power and were a proud clan. Tiberius, especially in view of the likely Sejanian connections of the *gens Annaea*, may not have fared so well.<sup>229</sup> The restored moral order of Augustus lapsed under Tiberius – the denunciation of the profligate youth during his reign in *contr. 1 praef. 8–11*, is scathing. *Veritas* began its decline for the first time at the beginning of the civil wars: *cum primum veritas retro abiit (De Vita Patris)*. The use of *primum* implies strongly that it declined, if only briefly, for a second time under Tiberius. But the accession of Gaius promised a new order, a freer, more optimistic atmosphere, and an opportunity to denounce the excesses of Tiberius. It was a good time to write history: *veritas* was restored, if only momentarily.

## 15 Reconstruction and conclusions

The evidence gathered and investigated in this study allows us to form the following tentative reconstruction of the *Histories*. The elder Seneca introduced the work with a preface as literary convention demanded and his own practices in the *Controversiae* suggest. Like the prefaces to the *Controversiae*, the preface to the *Histories* was undoubtedly addressed to his sons, now advancing into the world of politics,<sup>230</sup> and in it a moralistic attitude predominated, not unlike that of his esteemed predecessors, Livy and Sallust. Also in the preface Seneca described Roman history in terms of a cyclical progression, and likened the phases of the cycle to the ages of man, in much the same fashion as Lactantius did.<sup>231</sup> Two topics provided the unifying motif of the preface and excellent material for expansion also in the body of the *Histories*: the downward swing of the cycle, which was caused by the decline of *veritas* and which began with the inception of civil discord in the time of the Gracchi, and the subsequent upturn under Augustus.<sup>232</sup>

Preceding the preface, however, the younger Seneca as publisher appended the *De Vita Patris*, an introductory essay. In it he briefly described the historical

---

**229** One thinks at once of the well-known line of Tacitus: *Tiberii Gaique et Claudii ac Neronis res florentibus ipsis ob metum falsae, postquam occiderant, recentibus odiis compositae sunt* (*ann. 1.1*). Cf. Klingner (1928) 200–201.

**230** See discussion above.

**231** Cf. Hahn (1964) 177. Castiglioni (1928) 460 believes that the Lactantius fragment is a reproduction, with the exception of a few details, of the preface to the *Histories*.

**232** See Hahn (1965) 32–33.

work to follow and gave a more detailed account of the elder Seneca's life, even delving briefly into the family ancestry (*quibus natus esset parentibus ille, qui res Romanas...*).

After the preface, the work itself began briefly with events following the fall of Carthage and the conquests in the East, succeeded by the growth of luxury and avarice. Then he briefly summarized, starting with the Gracchi, the period of *seditiones* (enumerated at the beginning of Florus, Book II) until the Social War. From this point onward, Seneca examined in increasingly fuller detail the *bella civilia*, and to a lesser extent, the other external wars of the period. After Actium, while continuing the account of the various border wars, he no doubt emphasized the restoration of order under Augustus and a rebirth of the state.<sup>233</sup> Next, a momentary setback occurred for the recently reborn *veritas* in the later reign of Tiberius, but it was soon restored when Rome entered into a vigorous, promising *iuventus* under Gaius. A deeply moralistic and didactic tone dominated the *Histories* and it essentially chronicled the history of Roman *veritas*, its decline and revival, from the time of the Gracchi to Gaius.

We can presume that the elder Seneca employed many good secondary sources in a relatively fair and unbiased fashion. His moralistic approach to the writing of history seems conventional enough. Yet his preference for the term *veritas* instead of the more common Republican and Augustan slogan word of *virtus* marks a departure from the practice of previous Roman historians and displays an intentional emphasis on the absolute nature of the moral values which he espoused. From our knowledge of the elder Seneca's moral outlook in the other works, we can conclude that this was not just a conventional pose but a sincere belief. He also differed from the majority of Roman historians up to his time in the use of a biological metaphor to describe and explain the events which he narrated. This, and his concern with *veritas* mark the elder Seneca as an independent thinker for this age and we have good reason to mourn the loss of his *Histories*.

---

233 Cf. Syme (1959) 62–63.