Livy’s Historiographical Aims and Methods

I. Livy’s Aims in Writing History
   A. The Glory that was Rome
      nulla umquam res publica nec maior nec sanctior nec bonis exemplis ditior fuit,
      nec in quam civitatem tam serae avaritia luxuriaque immigraverint, nec ubi tantus
      ac tam diu paupertati ac parsimoniae honos fuerit. (Praefatio 11)

      “Never was there a republic either greater or more hallowed or more richly
      endowed with good examples, or into which state avarice and luxury migrated so
      late, or where there was so great and so long-lasting honor for humble
      circumstances and thrift.”

   B. The Glory that Could Be Rome
      1. donec ad haec tempora quibus nec vitia nostra nec remedia pati possumus
         perventum est (Praefatio 9)

      “… until it has come to these times in which we are able to endure neither our
      vices nor remedies.”

      2. Hoc illud est praecipue in cognitione rerum salubre ac frugiferum, omnis te
         exempli documenta in inlustri posita monumento intueri; inde tibi tuaeque rei
         publicae quod imitere capias, inde foedum inceptu foedum exitu quod vites.
         (Praefatio 10)

      “This is the thing especially salubrious and advantageous in the contemplation of
      history, that you examine the proofs of every example placed in a brilliant
      memoir; from there you may seize what to imitate for you and your republic, from
      there what to avoid that is shameful in the beginning and shameful in the end.”

   C. Additional Working Aims
      1. To construct a historical narrative for the “engagement of the reader in the
         historiographical project” (Kraus 1994: 13)
      2. To work swiftly and steadily

II. The General Stages of Livy’s Work
   A. Stage One: Review of Sources
      -Read over sources to get idea of the amount and kind of material they presented,
        how they could be placed in planned sections of five books (pentads)

      -Main sources were fullest and most detailed = no need for large amounts of
        supplementary sources, though these were mostly read beforehand as well
Paid attention to which sections would allow for reorganization and addition of further elements for narrative effect. Wanted sections which had a clear plotline: a beginning, a middle, and an end.

B. Stage Two: In-depth Look Year by Year
- To determine how he could mesh yearly accounts together, reorganize, and skip over material
  ex. for Book 40, switched between two of Polybius’s books to create them of the “Fall of Macedon”

C. Stage Three: From the Alpha to the Omega
- Wrote history from the beginning to the end by translating/reading sections of his sources, committing them to memory, then drawing from his memory as he wrote, infrequently referring back to sources to save time

- In case of variants he would: (1) adjust details to reconcile them, (2) give both variants, (3) choose one or the other. In this case he would choose the one more favorable to Rome
  ex. he vehemently denied Numa Pompilius’s Pythagorean influence (1.18.2-4) and rejected that Servius Tullius was a slave (1.39.5-6)

- Three main methods when writing (as exhibited with Polybius and most likely his other sources):
  1. Translated unaltered all the major data in the order given
     - In instances of detailed information such as ceremonial formulas (ex. Scipio’s prayer before arriving in Africa 29.27.1-4) and treaties (formula for making a treaty at 1.24.4-9)
  2. Extensive condensing
     - To create a smooth flowing narrative. He will leave out or shorten significant steps in an action, ex. Polybius writes how the inhabitants of Ambracia used the vibrations from thin metal sheets to detect the enemy constructing an underground passageway, while Livy writes (38.7.8):

     Cuius ubi ad tantum altitudinem, quantae esse solum infimum cuniculi poterat, pervenerunt, silentio facto pluribus locis aure admoda sonitum fodientium captabant.

     “When they approached its so great height, as great as only the lowest part of the underground passage was able to be, after silence had been made, with their ears moved close to several places, they were picking up the sound of the diggers.”

- Sometimes used brief mention of dates, men, places, deeds to mimic the antique style of the Annales Maximi, records of the pontifex maximus
3. Keeping the main facts but reorganizing, omitting, adding, and elaborating some points

-Done with “passages involving rhetoric, high drama, and ethical questions” (Luce 1977: 206)

-Addition of dramatic speech for the characterization of people and events; Livy drafted more stylistic versions to suit his aims even if he had records of written speech and often organized speech around a climax, ex. Tullia urging Tarquinius Superbus to kill Servius Tullius (1.47.3), Romulus’s prophecy for the Romans (1.16.7)

-“Boring” accounts as spacers, ex. Servius Tullius’s census of the people (1.43) between the killing of Tarquinius Priscus and account of how Romans tricked the Sabines out of fulfilling a prophecy

-“Patriotic falsifications,” (Walsh 1961: 144) ex. Manlius Torquatus faces a Gaul (7.9)
   (a) Livy describes him as decked out in colorful armor and so tall that Manlius only comes up to his stomach
   (b) Claudius writes ubi eum evertit, caput praecidit, while Livy writes Iacentis inde corpus ab omni alia vexatione intactum

Bibliography


