

Never Trust a Historian

On literary sources and why we should enjoy them but not necessarily believe them...



Tacitus, *Agricola* 39

- Of this series of events, though not exaggerated in the despatches of Agricola by any boastfulness of language, Domitian heard, as was his wont, with joy in his face but anxiety in his heart. He felt conscious that all men laughed at his late mock triumph over Germany, for which there had been purchased from traders people whose dress and hair might be made to resemble those of captives, whereas now a real and splendid victory, with the destruction of thousands of the enemy, was being celebrated with just applause. It was, he thought, a very alarming thing for him that the name of a subject should be raised above that of the Emperor; it was to no purpose that he had driven into obscurity the pursuit of forensic eloquence and the graceful accomplishments of civil life, if another were to forestall the distinctions of war. To other glories he could more easily shut his eyes, but the greatness of a good general was a truly imperial quality. Harassed by these anxieties, and absorbed in an incommunicable trouble, a sure prognostic of some cruel purpose, he decided that it was best for the present to suspend his hatred until the freshness of Agricola's renown and his popularity with the army should begin to pass away.

- So what actually happened? What are the **events** reported here?
- What, then, are the standards by which Tacitus' readers judge his work?
- What are the implications for our reading of Roman history?



SEPTIMIUS
SEVERVS

ANTONINVS
PIVS

HADRIANVS
LO LIVS

AGRICOLA
TACITVS

CALGACVS

BRONZE AGE

STONE AGE

Cicero, *De Oratore* 2: on writing history

- Indeed, all rules respecting it are obvious to common view; for who is ignorant that it is the first law in writing history, that the historian must not dare to tell any falsehood, and the next, that he must be bold enough to tell the whole truth? Also, that there must be no suspicion of partiality in his writings, or of personal animosity? [63] These fundamental rules are doubtless universally known. The superstructure depends on facts and style. The course of facts requires attention to order of time, and descriptions of countries; and since, in great affairs, and such as are worthy of remembrance, first the designs, then the actions, and afterwards the results, are expected, it demands also that it should be shown, in regard to the designs, what the writer approves, and that it should be told, in regard to the actions, not only what was done or said, but in what manner; and when the result is stated, that all the causes contributing to it should be set forth, whether arising from accident, wisdom, or temerity; and of the characters concerned, not only their acts, but, at least of those eminent in reputation and dignity, the life and manners of each. [64] The sort of language and character of style to be observed must be regular and continuous, flowing with a kind of equable smoothness, without the roughness of judicial pleadings, and the sharp-pointed sentences used at the bar.

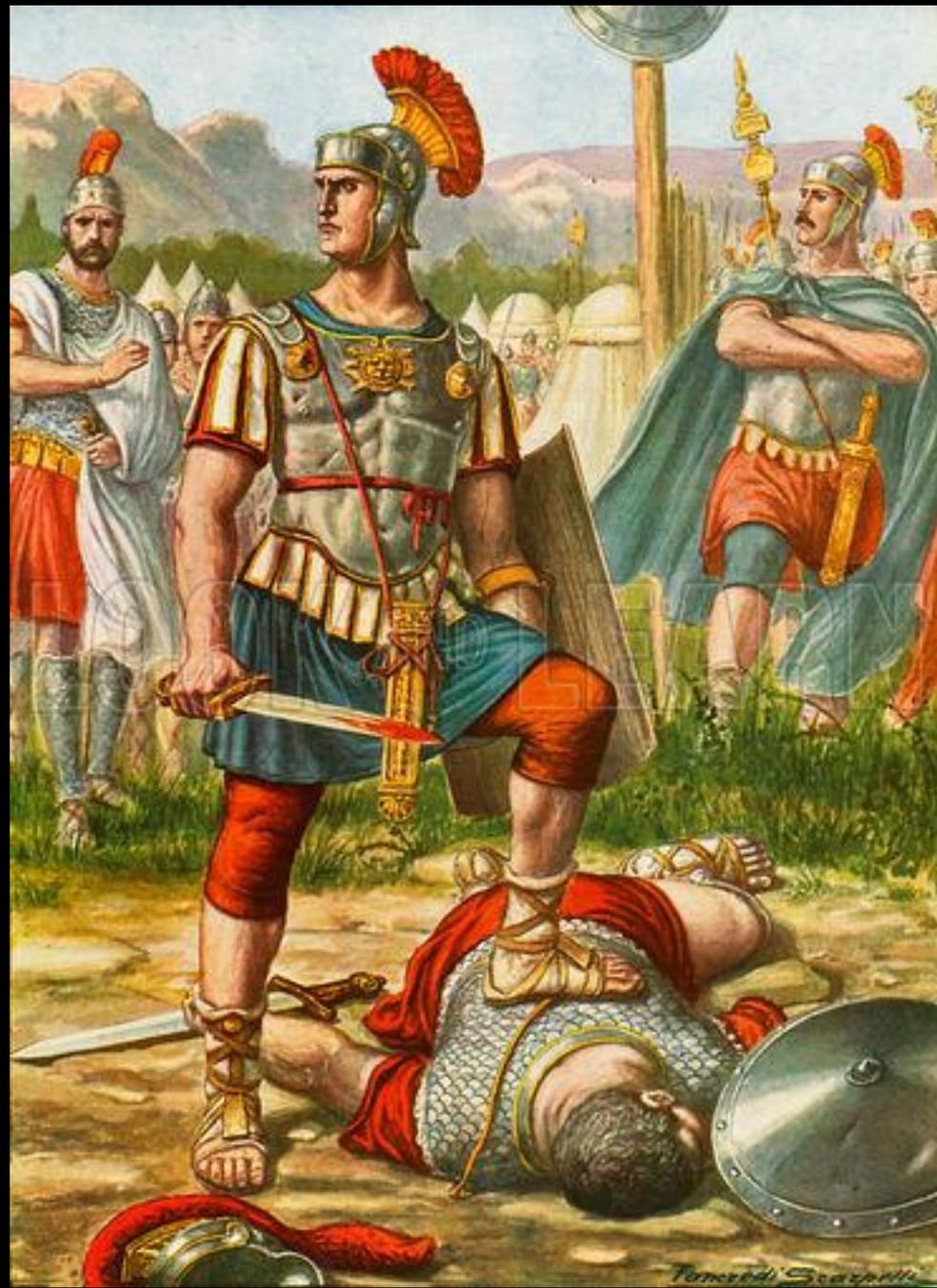
Cicero, *Letter to Lucceius*: to a man writing history about Cicero himself

- Yet, after all, a man who has once passed the border-line of modesty had better put a bold face on it and be frankly impudent. And so I again and again ask you outright, both to praise those actions of mine in warmer terms than you perhaps feel, and in that respect to neglect the laws of history. I ask you, too, in regard to the personal predilection, on which you wrote in a certain introductory chapter in the most gratifying and explicit terms—and by which you show that you were as incapable of being diverted as Xenophon's Hercules by Pleasure—not to go against it, but to yield to your affection for me a little more than truth shall justify.



Q. Claudius Quadrigarius (an old story, about the origin of the family name Torquatus)

- Then a certain Gaul came forward, unprotected except for a shield and two swords, and adorned with a torque and armbands, who was above all others in strength and size and youth and courage. When the battle was under way, with both sides fighting savagely, he signalled with a wave of his hand that the fighting should stop. There was a pause in the battle. As soon as silence fell, he shouted in a loud voice that if anyone wished to fight with him, they should come forward. No-one dared because of his immense size. Then the Gaul began to laugh and stick out his tongue. This was suddenly taken to heart by a certain Titus Manlius, of noble birth, who could not bear such a disgrace to happen to the Romans, that no-one would come forward from so great an army. He, as I say, stepped forward, and did not allow Roman courage to be stolen so disgracefully by the Gaul.
- Having put on an infantry shield and a Spanish sword, he stood against the Gaul. That meeting was made on the bridge itself, with both armies looking on in great fear. There, as I said before, they stood: the Gaul, true to his training, held out his shield, prepared to wait; Manlius, trusting his heart more than his skill, hit the shield with his shield and threw the Gaul into a state of confusion. While the Gaul tried to regain his position, Manlius again struck shield with shield, and again drove the man from his position; in the same movement his sword went under the Gaul's, and the Spanish sword drained the blood from his chest; then immediately in his withdrawal he opened up the Gaul's right shoulder, and did not give way at all until he had overthrown him, in case the Gaul should get in a lucky blow. When he killed him he cut off his head, removed his torque and placed it, dripping blood, around his own neck. From this deed he and his descendants got the name 'Torquatus'.



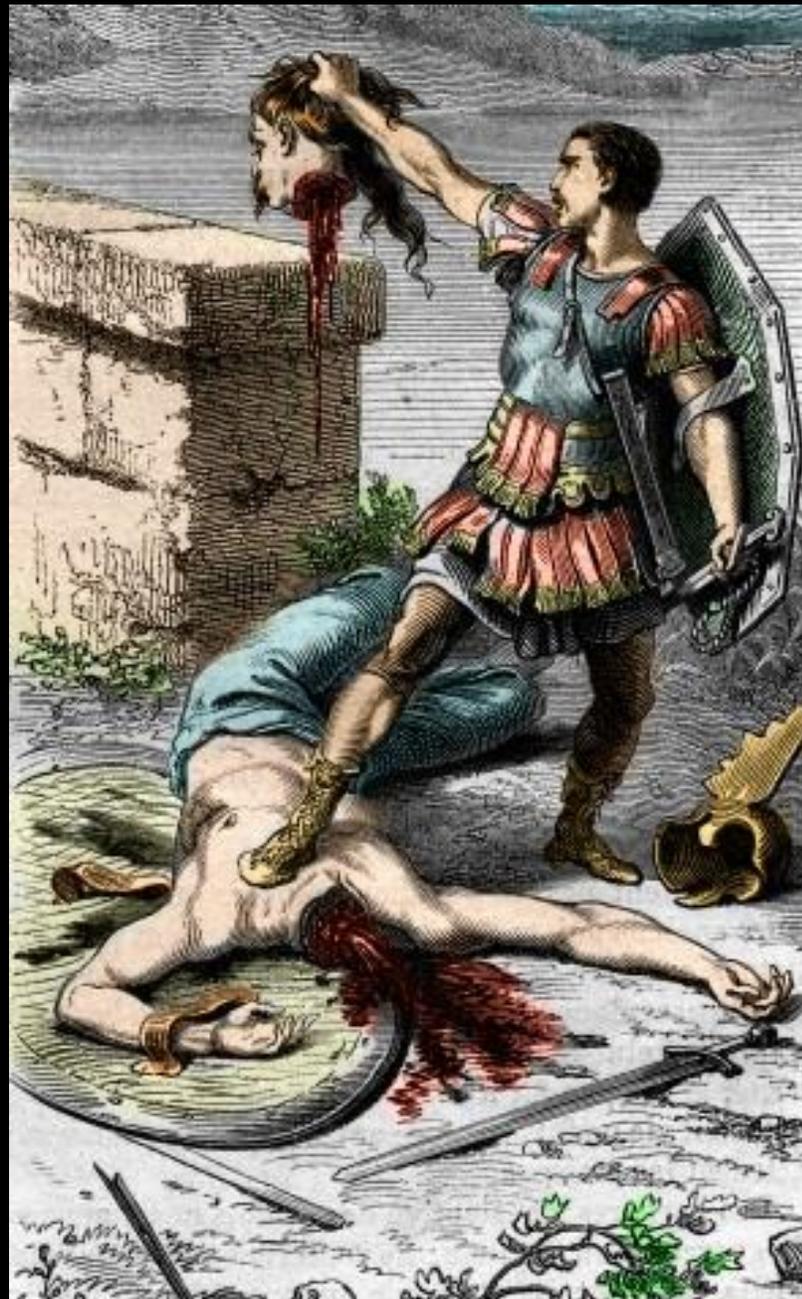
Livy (this story is based on Quadrigarius, but tweaked just a bit!)

- Then a Gaul of enormous size proceeded onto the empty bridge, and in the loudest voice he could, shouted, 'Let the bravest man that Rome can produce come here and fight me, so that the result will show which of our nations is greater in war'. The young Roman nobility were silent for a long time, ashamed to refuse the challenge but unwilling to seek the first post of danger. Then Titus Manlius, son of Lucius, the one who freed his father from the persecution of the tribune, advanced from his station to the dictator and said, 'General, I would on no account leave my post to fight without your orders, even if I should see a certain prospect of victory; but if you permit me, I wish to show that beast, who makes such an insolent parade in the front of the enemy's army, that I come from that family which beat down an army of Gauls from the Tarpeian Rock'.
- The dictator answered, 'Titus Manlius, I honour your bravery and your dutiful regard for your father and your country. Go, and with the help of the gods, show them that Rome is invincible'. The young man was then armed by his companions, took an infantry shield, and buckled on a Spanish sword, suitable for close fighting.
- As soon as they had fitted on his armour, they led him out towards the Gaul, who showed a savage joy and who (the ancients have considered even this worth mentioning) was sticking out his tongue in mockery. They then went back to their posts, and the two champions were left in the middle space, in the manner of a spectacle rather than according to the rules of combat, very unequally matched, in the eyes of those who judged by appearances.

- One had a body of enormous size, glittering in a shirt of various colours, with armour plated and inlaid with gold; the other was of medium height and build, with weapons chosen for ready use more than for show. On his side there was no song of defiance, no exultation or vain waving of weapons, but his heart, full of determination and silent rage, reserved all its fierceness for the contest.
- They took their ground between the two armies, while the minds of such great numbers of men on both sides were suspended between hope and fear. The Gaul, like some huge mass, ready to crush his opponent, stretching forward his shield with his left hand, struck a glancing blow with the edge of his sword on the armour of the approaching Manlius, making a great noise; while the Roman pushing aside the lower part of his opponent's shield with his own, and squeezing himself in between that and his body, closed in with him in such a way as to be in no danger of a wound. Then with one, then another blow, piercing his stomach, the enemy fell, stretched across an enormous area of ground. Without mutilating the body of his fallen enemy, Manlius took one torque which, though spattered with blood, he put around his own neck.
- Astonishment and dismay held the Gauls motionless. The Romans in excitement advanced from their posts to meet their champion, and with congratulations and praises led him to the dictator. Among the rough jokes that they made, according to the custom of soldiers, the name Torquatus was heard joined to his name, and since then the name has done honour to all his descendants. The dictator also presented him with a golden crown and in a public speech praised his actions in the highest possible terms.

What does Livy do to his source?
What does this say about the
principles which govern Roman
history-writing?

How does this relate to Cicero's views on the writing of history, or to Tacitus' reconstruction of Domitian's internal battles? Can we come to any conclusions about the areas in which historians were trustworthy, and the areas in which they were creative?



- Roman historians admitted the importance of values such as objectivity, impartiality and truth.
- They just ignored them sometimes.

- Of course, modern historians wouldn't do that...