



AMBIGUITIES IN LIVY

WORKSHOP AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ROSTOCK, 13-15 NOVEMBER 2025

In many instances, parts of Livy's multi-layered narrative seem to point to conflicting interpretations of the whole work of the author. Multiple plotlines run parallel to one another, turning the main plot into one among several options, each with their own overarching offers of interpretation. Recurring patterns of annalistic writing, episodes and examples overlap or are told intermittently, giving ample opportunity for cross-references and interpretation. The characterization of important personalities is usually multi-faceted, sometimes ambiguous. Even entire systems of values, philosophy or religion can stand next to each other with no definitive judgement on their relative pertinence to a situation.

Therefore, Livy's narrative strategy and the general intention of *ab urbe condita* has often been up for debate. Do his histories reflect Republican or Augustan values? Is Livy's take on religion pious or sceptic? Does he strive to educate, admonish or rather to entertain? Does the text purposefully veil its intentions, and if so, why?

This international workshop aims to shed light on these apparent ambiguities with a special focus on what makes them ambiguous, why would an ambiguous text be specifically adapted to its contemporary audience, and what can we deduce from these ambiguities for wider topics, such as (Roman, late Republican, early Principate) historiography in general and other aspects of Greco-Roman culture.

These endeavors connect with the following subfields and questions:

Narratology: How is ambiguity created?/How does it come to be?

How do different plotlines in the *histories* interact? Are they structured hierarchically with one or more main-plot(s) being supported/contrasted/accompanied by (a) sub-plot(s)? Or is the hierarchy less compulsory with different plots appearing alongside each other, being privileged only by the varying preferences of the readers? What role do other structural layers of the text (yearly cycles, thematic order, episodes, examples, speeches, ...) play in this?

What role do phenomena observable with a narratological toolkit (focalization, time, ...) play? Does the text give its readers implicit hints to specify or to blur possible interpretation?

Is it possible to identify the position of the narrator? Is the narrator trustworthy or is the stance of the narrator themselves ambiguous?

Contemporary Context/Reader-Response: What effect do ambiguities in Livy's narrative strategy have on our understanding of the readers and the *Sitz im Leben* of Livy's histories in the first century BC?

Does the text make different offers to different groups of readers at the same time? And if so, how and why? Are the *histories* an effort at integrating conflicting sets of norms between late Republic and early Principate? Or an emanation of ideological uncertainty during the Civil War? Or neither of the two, *ab urbe condita* being much less politically minded than a modern concept of history would have us expect? How do single instances of ambiguity compare in the knowledge culture of the first century BC and specifically in historiography?

Study of Sources/Intertextuality: Can other texts of antiquity explain certain ambiguities in Livy?



Do Livy's Latin and Greek sources, extant or reconstructed, give indications why certain ambiguities might have been necessary in the (re)telling of a story? Can later texts shed a light on aspects of the tradition represented in Livy that remain otherwise unknown? Can we make general statements on Livy's strategies in dealing with received ambiguities from his sources?

Cultural Studies: Do ambiguities in Livy effect our understanding of fields of culture? Can one understand the ambiguities better through cultural aspects?

Can close readings with a view to aspects of Roman culture help to harmonize seeming ambiguities or bring them to light more clearly? Such aspects could be the Roman family, gender roles, religion and ritual, the relationship between the classes, characterizations of *gentes* and personalities, characterizations of cities, peoples and nations, and others. Does an understanding of the ambiguities in Livy help to understand better the specifics of any of these cultural aspects that are otherwise unclear?

The workshop is open for case studies that touch on any of these aspects, and for studies with a wider frame that scrutinize (aspects of) ambiguity in (longer portions of) the entire *ab urbe condita*.



ABSTRACTS OF THE LECTURES AND PAPERS

LUCA BELTRAMINI, UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PADOVA

MARCUS MANLIUS CAPITOLINUS AND THE LIMITS OF EXEMPLARITY

For several years now, scholars have recognized exemplarity as not only a hallmark of Livy's historiography, but also one of the domains where the complexity of his view of history is most evident. Livy does not provide his readers with ready-made moral lessons; rather, he urges them to actively derive meaning from events, constructing a layered and polyphonic narrative with which they must engage to grasp the significance of the *exempla*. At the same time, by showing how events are received and re-narrated by characters within the story, he offers a live representation of the processes underlying exemplarity, often exposing the fundamental instability of historical meaning.

This paper examines the story that perhaps more than any other encapsulates ambiguity and changeability: the transformation of Marcus Manlius Capitolinus from hero to villain (6.11.1–10; 14.1–20.16). This transformation stems from Capitolinus' desire for recognition as the savior of the Capitol during the Gallic sack—an ambition that initially aims to make him an *exemplum* for the community, but ultimately turns him into one of the opposite kind. Precisely because of its extreme duplicity, Livy uses this story as a “stress test” for exemplarity, developing a reflection on the ambiguity and risks inherent in the processes of memorialization and monumentalization that underpin it.

Capitolinus' motives are obviously flawed—driven by *invidia* toward the more famous Camillus—yet his claim to have saved Rome is true, his aspiration to exemplarity somewhat legitimate and, more importantly, backed by Livy's own account. He exploits his past deed to stir emotion among the plebeians and gain their blind support, yet ancient theorization acknowledges that this is precisely what *exempla* are meant to do: elicit strong emotional reactions in the community. This web of tensions culminates in the story's epilogue: Capitolinus' conviction for *adfectatio regni* becomes possible only through erasing the memory of his heroic act, since any remembrance of him would pose a threat to the community.

ELISA DELLA CALCE, UNIVERSITÀ DI TORINO

BEHAVIOURS AND VALUES BETWEEN SIMULATION AND AMBIGUITY IN LIVY'S *AB URBE CONDITA LIBRI*

The concepts of simulation and ambiguity are often connected with the portrayal of Rome's enemies, particularly the Carthaginians, who are frequently stigmatised as disloyal and deceitful. Yet Livian scholarship has increasingly broadened its horizons by highlighting the ways in which Roman heroes (for example, Fabius Maximus, Marcellus, and Scipio Africanus) show ambiguous attitudes. This implies that the judgement of Roman characters, despite their heroic stature, can also be problematised, so that certain Romans may at times act in ways that recall those of their most dreadful enemies. For instance, Fabius Maximus and Scipio Africanus resort to deceptive strategies to get the better of their



opponents, as emerges from Livy's account of the capture of Tarentum (cf. Liv. 27.16.10 regarding Hannibal's words on Fabius Maximus: "*et Romani suum Hannibalem ... habent; eadem qua ceperamus arte Tarentum amisimus*") and the burning of the camps of Hasdrubal Gisco and Syphax by Scipio Africanus (30.4-6). In addition, the exploration of further layers of ambiguity in Livy's text leads to focus more closely on those passages in which the idea of simulation is expressed by specific lexical choices: the use of *species* and *simulo*, along with the cognates of the latter, enables us to analyse various episodes in both domestic and foreign politics, with special regard to military affairs (e.g. 23.14.12, 26.16.12, 33.31.2, 44.24.4). In light of this, my paper aims to look how certain behaviours and values may be simulated depending on specific circumstances, moral dispositions, ethnic prejudices (as is the case with Livy's portrayals of the Carthaginians), or differing viewpoints, as conveyed through both direct and indirect speech. Particular attention will also be paid to the simulation of value concepts (e.g. *lenitas*, *libertas*, *probitas*), as this offers further insight into how the process of simulation shapes Livy's multifaceted portrayal of his characters.

ENNO FRIEDRICH, UNIVERSITÄT ROSTOCK

VITANDAE NON INFERENDAE FRAUDIS CAUSA – THE CONTINGENCIES OF (CIVIL) WAR IN LIVY'S STORY OF THE CONQUEST OF SYRACUSE AS AN AMBIGUOUS TALE (LIV. 24-25)

Among the stories of defecting, conquered and reconquered Italian and Sicilian cities, the story of Syracuse (Liv. 24-25) stands out with a unique focus on unnecessary civilian death and an almost comedic concentration on mishaps of mutual distrust, affecting all sides but especially the Syracusans. While earlier interpretations of the story have focused on its historical significance and the characterisations of the protagonists as historical figures, or used intertextuality and genre to affirm Livy's Roman narrative, I want to discuss, whether this Livian story has much significance for the characterisation of the Roman war effort during the Second Punic War at all. The actual conquest by infiltration takes up only the briefest portion of the text and feels almost too undeserving for the prize that ownership of Syracuse really is, and the Roman general Marcellus stands out rather for the tears he sheds about the fall of the once great city than for any particular military accomplishment.

Marcellus, it seems, is a well-positioned focaliser for the reader's feelings observing the self-defeating actions of the Syracusans from an outside perspective. What do we cry about, if we shed Marcellus' tears? The cyclical downfall of powerful states, the text proposes, that might also affect us Romans, one day, or something altogether different? I will argue that the omnipresence of unnecessary civilian death and the contingencies of (civil) war give (additional) unity to the story and thereby elevate the Syracuse story above the narrative needs of Livy's Second Punic War. It seems that in this case we are looking at the suffering of the Syracusans from a human angle, which makes for an ambiguous tale of war and suffering – both in the Second Punic War and some years after the Civil War.



SIMON GRUND, EBERHARD KARLS UNIVERSITÄT TÜBINGEN

BORDERS OF FICTION. LIVY'S *AB URBE CONDITA* AND THE AMBIGUITY OF EARLY ROMAN HISTORY

Ab urbe condita opens with Livy's programmatic remark on the truth-status of Rome's earliest stories (praef. 6–7): he will neither affirm nor refute the myths surrounding the city's foundation. Alongside the didactic value of *exempla*, the search for truth is thus declared as a core historiographical aim. Yet by beginning with Rome's mythical prehistory, Livy moves into a domain where fact and fiction inevitably intermingle (*miscendo humana divinis*, 7). In Thomas Pavel's terms, he touches on the "borders of fiction", the fluid zone in which traditional narratives – part myth, part memory – are transformed into historical discourse.

This paper approaches the resulting ambiguity as a fundamental structural feature of Livy's early books. Rather than treating it as a mere by-product of deficient evidence or historiographical convention, it adopts a theoretical perspective, asking how such ambiguity can be identified, classified, and analysed. Drawing on both recent theoretical work on ambiguity and diachronic narratology, the paper outlines a multi-level approach that considers *macro-level* structures such as overarching narrative frames, *meso-level* features like episode construction, focalisation, and the characterisation of ambiguous (mythical-historical) hero-figures, as well as *micro-level* phenomena including linguistic cues, ambiguous expressions, and shifts in narrative voice that signal epistemic uncertainty.

Combining an emphasis on ambiguity modelling with a reading of selected examples – primarily from the first pentad of *Ab urbe condita* – this paper seeks to show how Livy's narrative techniques both acknowledge the instability of the early record and, integrate it into a historiographical narrative. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a more precise account of how ancient historiography negotiates the "borders of fiction" – between myth and history.

DAVID LEVENE, NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

NARRATIVE AMBIGUITY AND MORAL LUCK: LIVY BOOK 37 AND THE BATTLE OF MAGNESIA

This paper centres on a series of misdirections offered by Livy, specifically with regard to the greatness of Scipio Africanus and the qualities that enabled him to achieve his victory over Hannibal, but which left his later career stranded with no comparable successes. In Book 37 Livy describes the Roman victory over the Seleucid Empire, culminating with Scipio Asiaticus' defeat of Antiochus III at the Battle of Magnesia. However, Livy constantly confounds the expectations of the reader with regard to the role of Scipio Africanus in that victory. He keeps him in front of the readers' eyes, while at the same time drawing attention to the presence of Hannibal as a military adviser at Antiochus' court, encouraging us to expect that we will once again see the two greatest generals of their day facing off against each other. But in the event, those expectations are dashed: through a series of chances neither Africanus nor Hannibal plays any role in the battle, in which the commanders are the future Scipio Asiaticus and Antiochus himself. But Africanus, despite his absence, is not irrelevant: Livy rewrites the battle of Magnesia as an imitation of Zama, allowing Asiaticus to replay his brother's victory to even greater effect. Ultimately, our assessment of Asiaticus' victory and Africanus' failure depends on a deeper ambiguity in Livy's narrative: the question of whether achievements can be assessed solely on their outcomes, which (on Livy's account) depend to a large degree on chance. Drawing on Bernard Williams's famous idea of "moral luck", I shall suggest that Livy's careful establishment of the parallels between the brothers offers a challenge to the reader: he leaves it open



whether Africanus and Asiaticus are in fact of comparable greatness, despite at the same time allowing us to see that Asiaticus is the lesser figure in almost every respect – except his success.

PATRYCJA MATUSIAK, UNIWERSYTET ŚLĄSKI W KATOWICACH

LOVE, POLITICS, AND MADNESS IN THE SOPHONISBA EPISODE IN LIVY

The widely discussed episode of Sophonisba in *Ab Urbe condita* serves multiple functions. Primarily, it represents a narrative of the Other—portrayed both as a woman and as a Carthaginian. The motif of suicide echoes the stories of other notable Carthaginian women such as Dido and the wife of Hasdrubal, and may also have been interpreted by Livy's contemporaries through the lens of Cleopatra as—according to Marta García Morcillo's phrasing—an “exotic erotic heroic” female figure. Furthermore, the tale of Massinissa's passionate infatuation, amplified through the stereotype of the Numidian and the “rhetoric of otherness,” highlights Livy's contrasting narrative of Roman virtues, exemplified by *continentia Scipionis* (Scipio's self-restraint). This virtue, elaborated upon by later authors into *pudicitia* and even *sanctitas*, also secured a lasting presence in iconography as “The Continence of Scipio.”

The aim of my paper is to identify discrepancies among various renditions of this story, to assess Livy's contribution to cultural memory that influenced later creators such as Petrarch and visual artists, and to reflect on the conceptual vocabulary within *Ab Urbe condita*, its reception among Livy's contemporaries, and its role in shaping his narrative strategy.

MARINE MIQUEL, UNIVERSITÉ DE TOURS

EA LIBERA CONIECTURA EST (AUC, 4, 20, 10): PLURALITY OF THE CONSTRUCTIONS OF AMBIGUITY, FROM INSIDIOUS SUSPICION TO THE READER'S SUPERVISED FREEDOM, IN THE FIRST PENTAD

In the first five books, which are shaped by the formation of Roman institutions through the legendary kingship and the conflict between patricians and plebeians, we can find characters who are developed as non-ambiguous examples (Cincinnatus) or counterexamples (Appius Claudius) of Roman and Augustan values. Other characters also coexist with them, for whom Livy offers several possible interpretations, thanks to various processes: anecdotes or statements from enemies that contradict the assertions of the narrative (for the servile origin of the king Servius Tullius); traits or words of a character which do not fit well with his exemplification (hybris of Camillus); metanarrative passage featuring the first-person perspective of the investigative historian (on Cornelius Cossus' title). This diversity of narrative techniques can be seen as a reflection of choices made within a long and complex republican historiographical tradition, in which Livy did not invent but rather rewrote in accordance with his time, various intertexts, and the expectations of a readership to whom he left the pleasure and perhaps even the responsibility of conducting and deciding on historical investigations.



DENNIS PAUSCH, PHILIPPS-UNIVERSITÄT MARBURG

HORATIUS, AN AMBIGUOUS HERO: WHOSE JUDGMENT SHOULD WE FOLLOW?

During the reign of Tullus Hostilius, Rome's war against Alba Longa is decided by the triple duel of the Horatii against the Curiatii brothers. Already in this early stage of his work, Livy has not rendered the straightforward story of the hero delivering together with his victory a clear-cut example of Roman *virtus*, ready to be re-used by further generations. Instead, he presents us Horatius, the only survivor of the fight, a rather ambiguous hero, already due to the way he achieved his triumph, but even more due to subsequent events, above all the killing of his sister on his return to the city. In the following chapters, he is brought to justice and his deeds are consequently evaluated by several audiences and/or juries, varying from the crowd that had gathered at the city-gate, witnessing the murdering of the sister (being shocked by the atrocity of his deed), to the two judges that had been appointed by the king (who found him guilty) and finally to the assembly of the people, moved in the end by the speech and the tears of his father to acquit him, although, as we are told explicitly, the *ius causae* stood against it. This is, then, a good example of how ambiguity can be constructed in a narration, offering us several different perspectives without privileging one or the other: As readers, we are invited to deal with these discrepancies and to form our own opinion: How would he have decided? But perhaps even more important is a more general point about the reliability of every version of the past: There are always several perspectives and not just the one version that powerful people like Augustus would have us believe in.

RAFFAEL SCHMIDT, FRIEDRICH-SCHILLER-UNIVERSITÄT JENA

THE LIVIAN POMPEIUS MAGNUS – A FALLEN ALEXANDER?

The ambiguity of Livy's portrayal of important individuals has been increasingly and rightly emphasised over the past two decades. Through a concentrated examination of our sources, this Livian tendency can also be demonstrated in the lost books of *Ab urbe condita*. Pompeius Magnus is a suitable example of this. On the one hand, Pompey was active at a time when Livy's monumental work came close to its author's lifetime, making the loss of the text all the more painful. On the other hand, Livy's portrayal of Pompey has already attracted considerable research interest due to the well-known dictum of Augustus (Tac. *ann.* IV 34.3), according to which Livy is said to have been a Pompeian (e.g. HAYNE 1990, MINEO 2010, FEZZI 2021). The following paper will show, contrary to some of these earlier voices, that the postulation of such a positive portrayal of Pompey by Livy does not do justice to the ambiguous complexity of this portrait. The method for an approximate reconstruction of Livy's image of Pompey must be based on three pillars: The first pillar consists of the authors of the Livian tradition. The analysis is based on findings (from my dissertation, which is currently awaiting defence) regarding their relationship to *Ab urbe condita*, as well as findings regarding their literary and ideologically motivated, autonomous strategies of selection, reduction and transformation of Livy's historical narrative. The second pillar is the exploration of 'annalistic' traditional origins and tendencies, which are known to have had a significant influence on Livy's historical work. The third pillar consists of intratextual references in the surviving Livian text, which can usefully support the reconstruction and understanding of the lost material. The traces thus reveal a vivid picture of Livy's Pompey, who is less a heroic figure than a tragic *exemplum* of the ambiguity of 'greatness.' Livy connects him – especially in his counterfactual Alexander excursus (Liv. IX 16–19) – with Alexander the Great: unlike Alexander, Pompey survived his great victories in the East and later encountered a superior opponent.



NILS STEFFENSEN, EUROPA-UNIVERSITÄT FLENSBURG

THE PREFACE AND THE NARRATIVE. AMBIVALENCES IN HISTORICAL JUDGEMENT?

In recent years, the long-established view of Livy's interpretation of Roman history has been increasingly challenged. Traditionally, Livy was seen as an apologist for Rome, a kind of Roman Herodotus, less concerned with rigorous analysis than with glorifying the past in the service of Augustus' political and cultural renewal. More recent approaches, however, emphasize Livy's attention to the darker aspects of Rome's history. On this reading, Livy is not a conciliator offering a romanticized vision of early Rome, but rather a historian who underscores the persistent role of conflict. The stability of Rome's political order and social fabric, he suggests, depended above all on the *metus hostilis*; once the external threat vanished, internal discord prevailed. Rome's rise to world power, in this perspective, was driven less by virtue than by necessity.

This interpretation, however, stands in tension with the programmatic *Praefatio*. There, Livy sketches a bipartite scheme of Roman history—an ascent followed by decline—and praises early Rome as a model of moral virtue, to be emulated by a present in search of renewal.

The paper will explore how the ambiguity between preface and narrative shapes Livy's historiographical project. By relating the *Praefatio* to the wider narrative, it aims to refine our understanding of Livy's construction of Roman history, to shed light on his authorial persona, and to assess his political mission under the conditions of the early Principate. In pursuing this line of inquiry, it seeks to raise the question of coherence within the *Ab urbe condita* as a whole and to contribute to larger issues in the intellectual history of the period—namely, how Livy's work functioned within the Augustan project and how it was embedded in the broader intellectual and political climate of his age.

GIOVANNA TODARO, UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI PADOVA

DUX, STULTITIA ET TEMERITATE CENTENIO PAR, ANIMO HAUDQUAQUAM COMPARANDUS. CENTENIO PENULA AND FULVIUS FLACCUS IN LIVY XXV 19–21.

My presentation aims to analyze a military episode reported in book XXV of *Ab urbe condita*, a paradoxical event in itself and entirely unusual within the Roman tradition. It concerns a defeat suffered in 212 BCE in the central Italian theater of war at the hands of an improvised army, led by a centurion named Centenio Penula. Convinced that he could become a “Roman Hannibal,” he persuaded the Senate to grant him an army, boasting of his strategic expertise with traits reminiscent of Plautus' braggart soldier, Pyrgopolynices.

This Livian chapter contains several ambiguities. First and foremost is the Senate's carelessness, heavily emphasized by Livy himself, who interrupts the narrative to express his censure (perhaps this is the only direct invective against the Senate in the entire work: § 10 *id non promissum magis stolide quam stolide creditum tamquam eadem militares et imperatoriae artes essent*). Furthermore, the episode shares many features with another defeat that occurred in the same region shortly after the Battle of Trasimene, in which the protagonists are the praetor Gaius Centenio and, once again, Hannibal. A third ambiguous element lies in the cognomen *Penula*, unattested elsewhere.

To these uncertainties must be added a clear connection between this episode and the concurrent, historically documented, defeat of the praetor Fulvius Flaccus at Herdonea. The two events, in fact, present evident points of contact—both structural (the chapters are contiguous) and lexical—yet the



behavior of the two commanders in battle is opposite: Centenio Penula hurls himself heroically into the fray, while Fulvius Flaccus flees alone, abandoning his soldiers.

Therefore, Livy may have artificially introduced the figure of Centenio (perhaps by duplicating the namesake magistrate of 217 BCE) to lend greater emphasis to the unjustifiable conduct of the praetor, who would later face charges of *perduellio* in 211.