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“A Pointless Enthusiasm for Learning Useless Things:” The *De Brevitate Vitae* on the Value

of the Past

1. *Brev.* 7.3 and 14.1: Life is at stake

nihil minus est hominis occupati quam vivere: nullius rei difficilior scientia est. (7.3)

Nothing is less characteristic of the preoccupied man than living: there is no knowledge that is more difficult to acquire.

soli omnium otiose sunt qui sapientiae vacant, soli vivunt. (14.1)

They alone of all people who make time for wisdom are at leisure – they alone are alive.

2. *Brev.* 13.3-4: *inane studium superuacua discendi*

(3) **(a)** Ecce Romanos quoque inuasit inane studium superuacua discendi. His diebus audiui quondam referentem quae primus quisque ex Romanis ducibus fecisset: primus nauali proelio Duilius uicit, primus Curius Dentatus in triumpho duxit elephantos. **(b)** Etiamnunc ista, etsi ad ueram gloriam non tendunt, circa ciuilium tamen operum exempla uersantur; non est profutura talis scientia, est tamen quae nos speciosa rerum uanitate detineat.

(3) **(a)** And now this pointless enthusiasm for learning useless things has infected the Romans as well. Only a few days ago I heard someone mentioning which Roman general had been the first to do what: Duilius was the first to win a battle at sea, Curius Dentatus the first to parade elephants in a triumph. **(b)** So far, even if such items as these hardly steer us toward true glory, they still involve models of service to the state; such knowledge isn’t going to profit us, but it’s nevertheless of the sort to hold our interest because its subject matter, though empty, is appealing.

(4) **(c)** Hoc quoque quaerentibus remittamus, quis Romanis primus persuaserit nauem conscendere (Claudius is fuit, Caudex ob hoc ipsum appellatus quia plurium tabularum contextus caudex apud antiquos uocabatur, unde publicae tabulae codices dicuntur et naues nunc quoque ex antiqua consuetudine, quae commeatus per Tiberim subuehunt, codicariae uocantur)…

(4) **(c)** We may also excuse investigators who ask who first persuaded the Romans to deploy a naval force (it was Claudius, who was called Caudex for this reason, because the ancients termed the composite structure of several planks a caudex; hence the public records are called *codices*, and the barges which carry provisions up the Tiber are still called *codicariae* in accordance with ancient practice).

3. *Brev.* 13.2: *non doctior videaris sed molestior*

…alia deinceps huius notae, quae siue contineas, nihil tacitam conscientiam iuuant, siue proferas, **non doctior uidearis sed molestior.**

and other questions of the same stamp, which if you keep them to yourself, do nothing to improve your private knowledge; and if you divulge them you’re made to appear not more learned but more annoying.

4. *Brev.* 13.6-7: The exemplum of Pompey

Et hoc sane remittatur: num et Pompeium primum in circo elephantorum duodeuiginti pugnam edidisse, commissis more proeli innoxiis hominibus, ad ullam rem bonam pertinet? Princeps ciuitatis et inter antiquos principes, ut fama tradidit, bonitatis eximiae memorabile putauit spectaculi genus nouo more perdere homines. Depugnant? parum est. Lancinantur? parum est: ingenti mole animalium exterantur. (7) Satius erat ista in obliuionem ire, ne quis postea potens disceret inuideretque rei minime humanae*. O quantum caliginis mentibus nostris obicit magna felicitas! Ille se supra rerum naturam esse tunc credidit, cum tot miserorum hominum cateruas sub alio caelo natis beluis obiceret, cum bellum inter tam disparia animalia committeret, cum in conspectu populi Romani multum sanguinis funderet, mox plus ipsum fundere coacturus. At idem postea Alexandrina perfidia deceptus ultimo mancipio transfodiendum se praebuit, tum demum intellecta inani iactatione cognominis sui.*

But is it any useful purpose really served by knowing that Pompey was the first to put on a fight in the circus involving eighteen elephants, with noncriminals arrayed against them in mock battle? A leader of the state and a man of outstanding kindliness, as his reputation has it, among leaders of old, he thought it a memorable spectacle to destroy human beings in unheard-of fasion. “They fight to the death? That’s not enough. They’re torn to pieces? Not enough: let them be utterly crushed by animals of massive bulk!” (7) It would certainly be preferable for such stuff to be forgotten, for fear that some future strongman might learn of it and be envious of an utterly inhuman episode*. O what darkness great prosperity casts on our minds! He thought he was above the laws of nature when he was throwing so many hordes of human wretches to beasts born under a different sky, when he was arranging a war between such disparate creatures, when he was shedding so much blood before the eyes of the Roman people – people he’d later force to shed still more blood themselves. But this same man was later taken in by Alexandrian treachery and offered himself to be run through by the meanest of his chattels; then at last he recognized the empty boast that was his own surname.*

5. *Brev.* 13.8: Back to the point about the pointlessness of historical information

Sed ut illo reuertar unde decessi et in eadem materia ostendam superuacuam quorundam diligentiam, idem narrabat Metellum uictis in Sicilia Poenis triumphantem unum omnium Romanorum ante currum centum et uiginti captiuos elephantos duxisse.

But to return to the point from which I digressed, and to demonstrate the futility of the pains that some people take in these same matters: the same source reports that Metellus, in his triumph after conquering the Carthaginians in Sicily, was alone of all Romans in having 120 captured elephants led in procession before his chariot.

6.  *Brev.* 13.8: Back to the question of utility

Hoc scire magis prodest quam Auentinum montem extra pomerium esse, ut ille adfirmabat, propter alteram ex duabus causis, aut quod plebs eo secessisset, aut quod Remo auspicante illo loco aues non addixissent, alia deinceps innumerabilia quae aut falsa sunt aut mendaciis similia?

*Is there any more benefit in knowing this than to know that* the Aventine Hill is outside the *pomerium*, according to him, for two reasons: either because that was the rallying point for the plebeians in secession from Rome, or because the birds had not been propitious when Remus took the auspices there; and to know countless other items besides that are either crammed with lies or improbable?

7. *Brev.* 13.9: How does this information make a difference?

**(a)** Nam ut concedas omnia eos fide bona dicere, ut ad praestationem scribant, tamen cuius ista errores minuent? Cuius cupiditates prement? quem fortiorem, quem iustiorem, quem liberaliorem facient? **(b)** Dubitare se interim Fabianus noster aiebat an satius esset nullis studiis admoueri quam his inplicari.

**(a)** For even if you grant that people say all these things in good faith, and even if they guarantee the truthfulness of their writing, *whose mistakes will such items of information make fewer? Whose passions will they hold in check? Whom will they make braver, or more just, or more generous of spirit?* **(b)** My friend Fabianus used to say that he sometimes wondered whether it was better to apply oneself to no researches at all than to be enmeshed in these.

8.  *Brev.* 14.1: The *sapiens* makes all time productive

Soli omnium otiosi sunt qui sapientiae uacant, soli uiuunt*; nec enim suam tantum aetatem bene tuentur: omne aeuum suo adiciunt; quidquid annorum ante illos actum est, illis adquisitum est.*

They alone of all people who make time for wisdom are at leisure – they alone are alive. *For it’s not just their own lifetime that they watch over carefully, but they annex every age to their own; all the years that have gone before are added to their own.*

9. *Brev.* 14.1: Access to the past

Ad res pulcherrimas ex tenebris ad lucem erutas alieno labore deducimur; nullo nobis saeculo inter dictum est, in omnia admittimur, et si magnitudine animi egredi humanae inbecillitatis angustias libet, multum per quod spatiemur temporis est.

We are led by the work of others into the presence of the most beautiful treasure, which have been pulled form darkness and brought to light. From no age are we barred, we have access to all; and if we want to transcend the narrow limitations of human weakness by our expansiveness of mind, there is a greater span of time for use to range over.

10. *Brev.* 10.2: The Time over which fortune has no power

In tria tempora uita diuiditur: quod fuit, quod est, quod futurum est. Ex iis quod agimus breue est, quod acturi sumus dubium, quod egimus certum; hoc est enim in quod fortuna ius perdidit, quod in nullius arbitrium reduci potest. Hoc amittunt occupati…

Life is divided into three parts: past, present, and future. Of these, the present is brief, the future doubtful, the past certain. For the last is the category over which fortune no longer has control, and which cannot be brought back under anyone’s power. Preoccupied people lose this part….

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