

Prefaces in the Fragmentary Historians of the Roman Republic

The works of twenty-some historians from the Roman Republic (240 to 63 BCE) survive today only in fragments, meager both in quality and quantity. The history by Lucius Cornelius Sisenna, praetor in 78 BCE, provides a typical example. Of his history, once at least twenty-three books long, one hundred and forty-four fragments survive, and fully one hundred and twenty-three of these are preserved by a grammarian (Nonius Marcellinus) for his interest in Sisenna's stylistic and vocabulary choices. What Sisenna's work entailed and treated little concerned Nonius. Nonetheless, despite the paucity of fragments, study of the Roman fragmentary historians remains worthy in many aspects. My paper will concern what these fragments can demonstrate regarding historiographical approaches in the second and first centuries BCE, and thus the intellectual and imagined communities in which these historians participated. Not just the work of amateur historians with time on their hands and families to glorify, though surely not always the work of professional historians, these histories indicate reflection about suitable historiographical form, content, and style. Evidence of this survives in their prefaces.

Very few prefaces or programmatic statements of these earliest Roman historians survive, however, and not one of these is complete and without ambiguity. Missing are the prefaces to most historians, including key historians. Prefaces by historians such as Fabius Pictor or Lucius Calpurnius Piso, for example, would be gladly welcomed.

Thus in his work on Latin prose prefaces, Janson (1964) mentions no preface by a fragmentary historian of the Republic nor cites them in footnotes. Unlike the abundant literature on the prefaces of Sallust, Livy, and Tacitus, no examination of the prefaces of the fragmentary historians of the Republic exists.

Of the twenty-some historians, we can count perhaps only six prefaces or programmatic statements. The prefaces belong to Aulus Postumius Albinus (praetor 155 BCE), Cato (censor 185 BCE), Sempronius Asellio (mid 2nd c. BCE), Caius Fannius (cos. 122 BCE), Lucius Coelius Antipater (mid 2nd c. BCE), and Lucius Cornelius Sisenna (praetor 78 BCE). Their prefaces, though fragmentary and disappointing, consider *topoi* that would later become canonical for Latin historical prefaces. For example, fragments of Postumius Albinus, Fannius and Cato include appeals to a reading audience and offer attempts at justification of their writing (*laudatio historiae*). The prefaces of Sempronius Asellio and Cato (in Book 4) address form and content by attacking the annalistic form. Their comments provide our earliest surviving knowledge about purposeful choice of form for history writing in Rome. Two further prefaces address questions of style, including the preface of L. Coelius Antipater in which he promised his readers a limited and judicious use of hyperbaton. Later praised by Cicero as an *ornator rerum* (*de Oratore* 2.52), Antipater's emphasis on style seems to have served him well.

While these prefaces demonstrate efforts of early stages of Roman historiography, more importantly, they manifest early Roman historians' knowledge of conventions of history writing. In doing so, they anticipate more fully elaborated (and preserved) Roman prefaces to come, and raise questions about the imagined communities in which these mostly amateur historians saw themselves participating.

Select Bibliography

Recent editions of the fragments (Chassignet 1986/2002, 1996/2003, 1999/2003, 2004; Beck and Walter 2001 and 2004) offer no comparative treatment of the prefaces. Further, recent scholarship on the fragmentary historians has produced on the whole biographical results (e.g. Chassignet 1998 and 2001, Forsythe 1994, and Gildenhard 2003), and has been less concerned with comparative study of the historians.

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