

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

Midway through his dialogue *De Brevitate Vitae*, Seneca tries to redefine *clientela* for his readers (*Brev.* 8-15). Rather than wasting one’s days hauling oneself from one doorstep to another to greet various uninterested patrons, one should immerse himself in the works of Aristotle or Zeno, men who are always available and who always offer their clients their fullest attention. In other words, make the great philosophical thinkers of the past one’s patrons and friends. Gareth Williams in his commentary on the work applies Martha Nussbaum’s concept of a “counter-society” to the passage (Williams (2003) 23). Seneca advocates abandoning elite Roman cultural values and taking up a set of philosophical values. As he does elsewhere in his philosophical writings, Seneca attempts to shift his addressee and his readers away from their contemporary social and political concerns, and toward a life withdrawn from those concerns and focused instead on attaining wisdom and living in accordance with nature. As prelude to this discussion of philosophical patronage in the *De Brevitate Vitae* Seneca argues that the man seeking wisdom must avail himself of the lessons of all times past as well as present. The past offers a vast body of knowledge and crucially it lies beyond the grasp of fortune. Seneca turns from this discussion about the value of the past to a derisive digression on the contemporary antiquarian rage for historical factoids about Roman history (*Brev.* 13). This paper, a new reading of Seneca’s critique of historiography, argues that understanding Seneca’s humorous attack on pointless historical questions requires first seeing the sequence of thought in these chapters in the dialogue. The paper will then argue that historical study of the traditional sort, the kind that values past political and military deeds for their instructional value, is the ultimate object of Seneca’s attack. One sees that Seneca includes his attack on useless historical

questions because he is actually making a strong case for the value of the past. His broadside on pointless history thus carefully separates productive uses of the past (e.g. engaging with philosophy) from unproductive or even destructive uses of it (studying history). The entire dialogue's theme is that life is not inherently short but made short by people's inability to use their time productively. Using it productively requires entering the patronage of past philosophical thinkers. It also means rejecting the customary definition of patronage, refusing to participate in civic affairs as they are traditionally defined, and intellectually avoiding the commemoration of civic actions in the past, that is to say history traditionally defined. Seneca's attack on the value of the past as traditionally defined puts him at odds not only with Roman culture's respect for the didactic value of historiography but even Stoicism's respect for traditional history. Posidonius, the Greek Stoic philosopher, not only did not disparage history but wrote it himself. This paper will show that Seneca's creates a connection between participation in the customs of the Roman state and the intellectual endeavor of reading historiography. Both are unproductive uses of time and thus render life short.