

Poison, Plague, and Panic: The *Veneficia* Investigations of the 180s B.C.

Between 184 and 179 B.C., Livy records several major investigations into poisonings (*veneficia*) in Rome and Italy. In 184, the praetor Q. Naevius condemned two thousand people for poisoning (Liv. 39.41.5); in 180, C. Maenius condemned a further three thousand (40.43.3). Further *quaestiones*, for which no conviction totals are given, occurred in 180 and 179 (40.37.4, 44.6). The repeated investigations and mass convictions suggest that a major panic had erupted in those years. Much of the Italian peninsula must have been gripped by fear, either of the mysterious ‘poisoners’ or of the magistrates sent to control them. Curiously, though, Livy makes little of these events, and so the *veneficia* panic has not yet been satisfactorily explored. This paper aims to explain the events within the wider context of Roman social concerns in this period.

The paper first presents the Livian evidence in full, noting that there was a chronological and administrative separation between poisoning investigations in the city of Rome and in provincial Italy. It then discusses the theories that have been advanced in modern scholarship. Walsh (1996) links the panic to the Bacchanalian conspiracy of 186 and argues that the *quaestiones* formed part of the ongoing investigations into Bacchic rites in Italy (see Gruen 1990). While Livy does list *venena* as one of the many crimes of the Bacchants (39.8.7), this is not enough to tie the *veneficia* investigations to the Bacchanalian affair. The praetorian *quaestiones de Bacchanalibus* were limited to the far south of Italy, which appears to have been perceived as a Bacchic stronghold (Bauman 1990). In contrast, the *quaestiones de veneficiis* took place in Rome and, as far as we can tell, throughout the peninsula. Additionally, in 184 both types of *quaestiones* were held simultaneously, but they were administered by different praetors

and Livy gives no indication of a connection. The *veneficia* investigations therefore cannot have been understood purely as an anti-Bacchanalian measure; poisoning loomed as a separate threat.

Cilliers and Retief (2000) imply that the panic was linked to fears about women poisoning their husbands, a motif which recurs a number of times in Livy. It is true that this idea is present in his account of the death of the consul C. Calpurnius at the hands of his wife, said to trigger the *quaestiones* of 180 (40.37). This story, however, reflects Livy's method of personalizing major events using dramatic family anecdotes, and should not govern our interpretation of the rest of the *veneficia* panic. Beyond this self-contained story, Livy makes no suggestion that the events of 184-179 were particularly associated with women. If even a relatively small proportion of the more than five thousand people convicted by the praetors had been female, this would represent an extraordinary, indeed unprecedented, moment in Roman history, and would surely have attracted specific comment.

As an alternative to these two explanations, the paper advances an explanation based on the place of poisoning in the Roman cultural imagination. While Romans did often associate the poisonous arts with women (Currie 1998, Hallissy 1987), the practice had other connotations too. The poison-seller was a foreign and ambiguous figure inhabiting the fringes of Roman society (Nutton 1985), and poison itself appears, at least in the later work of Pliny the Elder, as an uncanny and deceptive substance (Currie 1998). It is not a coincidence that a practice with such associations became prominent in the late 180s. In this period, Roman society felt itself to be under attack from shadowy external forces, as exemplified by the Bacchanalian affair and the incident of the 'Books of Numa'. A plague recorded by Livy in the period 182-180 would also have contributed to this feeling. In such a febrile atmosphere, it is easy to imagine a panic arising over fears of widespread poisoning. The *quaestiones de veneficiis*, then, were an attempt by the

senatorial aristocracy to put down the threat, utilizing traditional Roman institutions to assert authority over these foreign and mysterious forces.

Bibliography

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