

Cato and Sallust: The Narrative of Corruption and the Narrative of Decline

It is commonly claimed, usually in passing, that Roman literati saw the span of history as a decline in morals, and indeed many passages of Rome's most famous writers of prose and poetry seem to make argument on this point superfluous. That this narrative of decline particularly colored historiography from its beginnings is frequently implied or stated, as in Frier (1979 [1999]) and the commentary to *The Fragments of the Roman Historians* (Cornell 2013). The "declensionist" narrative's seeming ubiquity has perhaps made it appear unnecessary to trace or question its origin exhaustively. The principal monograph on the topic remains Gordon Williams' *Change and Decline* (1978), elaborated in some respects by Evans (2008). While these works consider mainly the Julio-Claudian period, Earl (1961) and Lintott (1972) look to the second century B.C. to propose, among others, a "Senatorial" tradition of decline, which they trace to Cato the Elder.

This paper addresses two flaws in the scholarship: the first is the assumption that the narrative of decline permeates Roman historiography from its beginnings. The second is the attempt to trace, as did Earl and Lintott, a genealogy of the declensionist narrative based upon this assumption. This paper argues first that it is an oversimplification to characterize Roman historiography as essentially declensionist, or even as universally pessimistic. It does so by proposing a differentiation between the narrative of decline as usually understood, which first appears in Sallust, and the narrative of corruption, exemplified by Cato. Sallust's pessimism requires little argument. The narrative of corruption, on the other hand, is argued by situating Cato in his literary and historical context, following Kierdorf (1980), Astin (1978), and others. In Cato's probable configuration, a few "bad apples" may spoil the Republic, but the public's

morals may yet be restored through discipline and legislation. The implication may be that the sense of inevitable decline was not universal among Romans, and certainly not at an early date.

Ultimately a proper rebuttal of the declensionist view of Roman history will require a survey of Roman literature. This paper begins this survey by demonstrating its necessity.

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