

A Historiographical Approach to Reading Illicit Religious Practices in Roman Histories in  
Conversation with *Senatus Consultum*

The historians Livy and Tacitus both present accounts of the Roman Senate's dealings with illicit religious practices which also survive in *senatus consultum*, and can provide insight into the study of historiography. Livy recounts the Bacchanalia scandal, and subsequent regulations on the Bacchic cult (*Ab Urbe* 39.8-19), including a summary of the contents of the *Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus*. Similarly, Tacitus recounts the actions and trial of Piso, notorious for using witchcraft to kill Germanicus (*Annales* 2.69.3), a charge absent from the *Senatus Consultum de Cn. Piso Patre*. A comparison of these two historiographical texts and the corresponding *senatus consultum*, in tandem with an analysis of their historical context, will provide insight into reading historiography within the framework of the Roman government and political language.

These practices were tied to religion, complicating their position in Rome. Religion and politics were closely entwined in Rome, and are equally as entwined in Roman historiography. Tacitus describes a tripartite system in which *fortuna* (the gods), humanity, and *fatum* all play an equally significant role (Davies 2009). Livy, meanwhile, acknowledges the importance of religious ritual in the success of Roman political and military endeavors (Linderski 1993). However, these practices were not a part of the mainstream, acceptable way of practicing religion in antiquity. Therefore, the language and tropes used to discuss these practices differ from those commonly used in the narration of religious practices. As this paper will analyze, in both Tacitus and Livy, the diction has a negative connotation, and includes various subjective adjectives.

Additionally, these illicit religious practices adopt an inherently political nature, adding a further dimension to their historiographical portrayal. Accusations of witchcraft, specifically in Tacitus, served a very political purpose (Pollard 2014), and accusations of involvement in the Bacchic cult served a similar function. In Tacitus' *Annales*, the nine women accused of witchcraft were all noble women of some importance, and all of the accusations were made by political rivals who would benefit from their downfall (Pollard 2014). Likewise, Livy reports that there were rewards for those who provided information about the practitioners of the cult of Bacchus, creating an environment in which accusations could fulfil political and personal vendettas (*Ab Urbe* 39.17). The political nature of these practices is evident from the official action taken by the Senate, and the resulting *senatus consultum*. It is precisely this political nature which must be taken into account when reading the historiographies, as a comparison with the *senatus consultum* shows that the language is, in fact, quite similar.

These comparisons, placed in the social and political context, demonstrates the need to read historiographical accounts as closely tied to political language and sentiments. Through a synthesis of the historiographic accounts, the *senatus consultum*, and historical context, this paper will conclude with a postulation of how to approach historiographical texts. In conversation with the work on historiography done by Lendon (2009) and Marincola (2010), this paper will comment on the larger field of historiography, and demonstrate how a close reading of these specific examples provide larger takeaways for the practice as a whole.

## Bibliography

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