

LEARNING TO BE DECADENT: ROMAN IDENTITY AND THE LUXURIES OF OTHERS

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Luxury and moral decline are intimately linked in elite Roman thought, and more often than not, it is the importation of luxury from elsewhere which is blamed by Roman moralists. Livy consistently attributes luxurious living to non-Romans, and sums up the dangers of contact with these cultures when he claims that in 187 BCE, after Gnaeus Manlius Volso's conquest of Asia, alien luxury entered Rome in specific, material form, along with the seeds of a general decline in attitudes and behaviour:

luxuriae enim peregrinae origo ab exercitu Asiatico invecta in urbem est. ii primum lectos aeratos, vestem stragulam pretiosam, plagulas et alia textilia, et quae tum magnificae suppellectilis habebantur, monopodia et abacos Romam advexerunt. tunc psaltriae sambucistriaeque et convivalia alia ludorum oblectamenta addita epulis; epulae quoque ipsae et cura et sumptu maiore apparari coeptae. tum coquus, vilissimum antiquis mancipium et aestimatione et usu, in pretio esse, et quod ministerium fuerat, ars haberi coepta. vix tamen illa quae tum conspiciebantur, semina erant futurae luxuriae.

For the beginnings of foreign luxury were introduced into the city by the army from Asia. They for the first time imported into Rome couches of bronze, valuable robes for coverlets, tapestries and other products of the loom, and what at that time was considered luxurious furniture —tables with one pedestal and sideboards. Then female players of the lute and the harp and other festal delights of entertainments were made adjuncts to banquets; the banquets themselves, moreover, began to be planned with both greater care and greater expense. At that time the cook, to the ancient Romans the most worthless of slaves, both in their judgment of values and in the use they made of him, became valuable, and what had been merely a necessary service came to be regarded as an art. Yet those things which were then looked upon as remarkable were hardly even the germs of the luxury to come. (Livy 39.6.6-9)

Livy conflates time to imply that change followed hard upon Volso's victory; yet he also suggests three distinct periods of time: the time before the invasion of Asian luxuries, the immediate aftermath of the 187 battle, and the horrors of contemporary Rome.¹ Livy maps a consistent and inexorable picture of decline, suggesting that his - and Rome's - present situation, and in particular their morally suspect attitudes, derive from this moment, in the use of phrases such as *tum* and *tunc*. The corruption starts with the army, whose behaviour in Asia was suspect, and then infiltrates into Rome itself. Livy is not alone here, and other historians of the Republic set Rome's descent into decline immediately after a specific military victory. Others, however, would place the juncture slightly later, although still in the second century. Aemilius Paulus' victory over Perseus of Macedon at the Battle of Pydna (168 BCE) is the turning point for Polybius (31.25.3) and Diodorus Siculus (31.20); while the aftermath of war with Perseus (154 BCE) is found in a fragment of Lucius Piso (fr. 38 = Plin. *HN* 17.244). However, the most popular date is 146 BCE, the year of the destruction of both Corinth and Carthage (Sall. *Cat.* 9-10, *Iug.* 41, *Hist.* fr. 1.11, Vell. Pat. 2.1.1, Plin. *HN* 33.150, August. *De civ.D.* 1.30, Oros. 5.8.2), after which Rome's status as *the* Mediterranean superpower was assured, at least from the point of view of late first century BCE writers, who knew that further challenges to Rome's supremacy would largely fail, while the importation of foreign goods would increase.

¹ Such a layered view of time is reminiscent of Hesiod's myth of the Races in *Works and Days*, which recounts a gradual fall from gold to iron, and further forecasts a yet grimmer future (Hes. *Op.* 106-201).

Although Livy states that there was only worse to come, his checklist of dangerous foreign luxuries and slipshod morality to Asian imports is fairly typical of those condemned by other writers. It is also conventional that the danger comes from the East: luxury and laxity had been attributed to the Persians and other Easterners in Greek ethnic taxonomies (e.g. Aesch. *Persae*, Hdt. 1.171,9.122, Xen. *Cyr* 8.8.15). Roman stereotypes move the centre of gravity west, so that dangerous goods and practices now also come from the Greek world: thus Horace² demonstrates the Roman woman's misbehaviour by her practice of 'Ionic dances':

motus doceri gaudet Ionicos
matura virgo et fingitur artibus,
iam nunc et incestos amores
de tenero meditatur ungui.

The grown-up girl loves to be taught Ionic
dances and is artfully groomed,
and now thrills to tips of her fingers
at the thought of unchaste love.
(Hor. *Carm.* 3.6.21-24)

The strong implication is that the foreign dances have led her directly into adultery, which is equated with prostitution, as it soon would be under the Augustan marriage laws. Roman poetry uses images of contamination, and particularly of influx, to describe the arrival of alien luxury: a few lines earlier, Horace had written of disaster flowing in on a stream (*hoc fonteclades /...fluxit. Carm.*3.6.18-9); and Juvenal, as often, is much more graphic, claiming *iam pridem Syrus in Tiberim defluxit Oronte s/ et linguam et mores ... vexit* (Juv. 3.62-5 'for a long time now the Syrian (river) Orontes has flowed down into [sometimes translated as 'polluted']³ the Tiber, and carried in its language and moral values'). But it is in his satire condemning marriage that Juvenal lays out most clearly the connection between foreign conquests and the moral decay which, he claims, has nurtured the inevitable outcome that wives will be adulterous:

luxuria incubuit victumque ulciscitur orbem.
nullum crimen abest facinusque libidinis ex quo
paupertas Romana perit. hinc fluxit ad istos
et Sybaris colles, hinc et Rhodos et Miletos
atque coronatum et petulans madidumque Tarentum.

Luxury has settled down on us, avenging the world we've conquered. From the moment Roman poverty disappeared, no crime or act of lust has been missing: Corinth and Sybaris and Rhodes and Miletus have poured into Rome, along with Tarentum, garlanded, insolent and drunk. (Juv. 6.294-7)

In addition, many expressions of antipathy to luxury make a connection between the acquisition of extravagant, foreign objects and both literal and metaphorical weakness at Rome. For, ironically, the army that has defeated and despoiled other cultures, is in turn enervated by contact with foreign debauchery. As Lucan explicitly says, it is booty from the enemy which caused Roman decline:

hae ducibus causae; suberant sed publica belli
semina, quae populos semper mersere potentis.
namque, ut opes nimias mundo fortuna subacto
intulit et rebus mores cessere secundis

² Horace also maintains the association of Persians with decadence in the *Odes* (*Persicos odi ... apparatus* 1.38.1).

³ E.g., by S.M. Braund in the Loeb edition (2004).

praedaque et hostiles luxum suasere rapinae,
 non auro tectisve modus, mensasque priores
 aspernata fames; cultus gestare decoros
 vix nuribus rapuere mares; fecunda virorum
 paupertas fugitur totoque accersitur orbe
 quo gens quaeque perit;

But in the state the seeds of war had taken hold, which have always engulfed the powerful. For indeed, Rome subdued the world, and when Fortune poured excessive wealth and morals gave way to prosperity, and spoils and enemy plunder urged luxury, there was no limit to the gold and houses, and hunger rejected the meals of former times; men seized clothes hardly decent for young women; poverty, which gives forth warriors, is shunned, and from the whole world comes that which ruins all peoples. (Luc. 1.158-67)⁴

Thus Roman poets and moralists write a narrative of military strength that auto-destructs, as Rome's failure springs from its own fantastic success. Yet, the paradox found in Lucan (and elsewhere) suggests an inexorableness, an inevitability, a fate which cannot be thwarted: *populos semper mersere potentis*.

The rationale behind this inevitability is clear: in the Romans' own accounts of their history, Rome cannot be passive. Even when the past was tied to agricultural simplicity,⁵ it was combined with militarism and conquest. The result is that Romans must come into contact with the perceived excesses of foreign cultures, and this is even the case from their early interactions with other Italians. Campania is most infamously decadent and dangerous, as least as retrojected by Livy, who claims that Capua was a hotbed of corruption, even in the fourth century:

iam tum minime salubris militari disciplinae Capua instrumento omnium voluptatum delentis militum animos avertit a memoria patriae.

Capua was by no means conducive to military discipline; having pleasures of every kind at their command, the troops became enervated and their patriotism was undermined. (Livy 7.38.5)

We might expect the link to be made between southern Italy's Greek population and the region's reputation for debauchery. But here it seems enough that Campania is distinct from Latin culture in this time period (that is the fourth century); and Campania's status as a location which drains the energies of its inhabitants and its conquerors seems more dependent on its landscape, and the area's ability to over-produce, with multiple and fantastical harvests. Campania is also interesting as an area of potential development: the Bay of Naples, and particularly the resort town of Baiae, maintained the early reputation for opulence and pleasure.⁶ But, while earlier sources, such as Polybius, are negative in their assessment of the region, others note an improvement. Cicero, in the *in Pisonem*, and Strabo both claim that Campania has changed from the time when it submitted to Hannibal, and then ironically feminised the victorious army (Polyb. 7.1.1, Cic. *Pis.* 25). Typically, Cicero has it both ways though, and in the *de Lege Agraria* concentrates on the way that Campania continues to corrupt (Cic. *Agr.* 1.20, 2.91, 2.96). Strabo, however, comments that it is contact with Rome, and specifically Roman power, which has sobered up the Campani. Thus it seems that, within Italy, and perhaps particularly within Strabo's largely positive model of Roman *imperium* (see discussion at Clarke, 1999: 220-23) non-Roman luxury can be neutralised by the 'right' form of conquest. The instance of the Campani is instructive: they posed a danger to both Carthaginians and Romans. The

⁴ Lucan goes on to bemoan the neglect of agriculture; see also 10.63-4, 10.110, 10.156, 10.488, on baneful influence of Egyptian luxury.

⁵ This is the case in much of Livy's early books, e.g. 3.26.

⁶ See d'Arms (1970) 51-52.

threat was clearly warded off, and then apparently negated. Rome is not in serious peril from luxury, at least for the next two centuries, until, as Roman historians more or less agree, sometime in the second century Rome's acquisitive reach is such that real decline arrives at Rome. At this point, however, the conqueror suddenly falls prey to the invasion of material goods.

Much of the literature on the influx of foreign decadence is fairly abstract: the rhetoric is basically that 'elaborate objects came back with the army, and now Rome has fallen into depravity'. Like many rhetorical stances, the logic is not necessarily transparent. But there are more specific instances when individuals are singled out for criticism, and for betraying what should be correct Roman behaviour. In one of his many diatribes against luxury, the Elder Pliny complains of the Hymettian marble columns from Attica which were used in Lucius Crassus' Palatine house (Plin. *HN* 36.8). Pliny takes an entirely negative view and claims that the extravagant decoration of his home earned Crassus the name 'Palatine Venus', implying that the adoption of such luxurious, foreign ornamentation brought into question Crassus' masculinity and personal morality. In addition, this nickname also indicates a certain arrogance - that he was displaying ostentation worthy only of the gods; and, by extension, it is a nod towards the perception that expensive, imported marbles should be used in temples rather than private residences. 'Palatine Venus' suggests temple nomenclature: *aedes Veneris Palatinae*. Pliny uses this story as an excuse to condemn the idea that public magnificence might be forgivable; for, in a parallel, and slightly later, act of extravagance, Scaurus had put 360 columns of Lucullan marble, from the Greek island of Teos, into his temporary theatre, which he had erected for less than a month in 58 BCE. He had then transferred the longest ones, which were over 12 metres long, into the atrium of his own home. Pliny insists that you cannot condone luxury just because it is in a public space, for that is just the way that decadent, foreign wares infiltrate into every space:

sed publicis nimirum indulgentes voluptatibus. id ipsum cur? aut qua magis via inrepunt vitia quam publica? quo enim alio modo in privatos usus venere ebora, aurum, gemmae? aut quid omnino diis reliquimus?

But, it was the official pleasures of the community for which some allowance was being made by our laws. But why should this, of all excuses, have been made? Or what route is more commonly taken by vices in their surreptitious approach than the official one? How else have ivory, gold and precious stones come to be used in private life? Or what have we left entirely to the gods?

(Plin. *HN* 36.5)

A similar view is found in Velleius Paterculus (Vell. Pat. 1.11.3-5, 2.1.1-2) indicating that public and private were not so distinct in the minds of moralists. What has, perhaps, encouraged the idea that public luxury is acceptable, is the Augustan response to perceived excess in the private sphere: Scaurus' columns were returned to the theatre (the Theatre of Marcellus, Asc. *Scaur.* 45). The doctrine of domestic simplicity was combined with enormous munificence in public building projects, a near monopoly of the Augustan dynasty. But Vitruvius' comments on the decoration of elite houses is instructive:

igitur is, qui communi sunt fortuna, non necessaria magna vestibula nec tabulina neque atria ... nobilibus vero, qui honores magistratusque gerendo praestare debent officia civibus, faciunda sunt vestibula regalia alta, atria et peristylia amplissima, silvae ambulationesque laxiores ad decorem maiestatis perfectae; praeterea bybliothechas, basilicas non dissimili modo quam publicorum operum magnificentia comparatas, quod in domibus eorum saepius et publica consilia et privata iudicia arbitriaque conficiuntur.

For a person of middling condition in life, magnificent vestibules are not necessary ... But for nobles, who, bearing honours, and discharging the duties of the magistracy, must have much

contact with citizens, princely vestibules must be provided, lofty atria, and spacious peristyles, groves, and extensive walks, finished in a magnificent style. In addition to these, libraries, pinacothecæ, and basilicæ, of similar form to those which are made for public use, are to be provided; for in the houses of the noble, the affairs of the public, and the decision and judgment of private causes are often determined. (Vitr. 6.5.1-2)

Vitruvius, who dedicated his work on architecture to Augustus, provides an apology for ostentatious and luxurious decoration among the Roman elite, on the principle that their homes are quasi-public spaces: they, like the magnificent basilicas and imperial fora, must project a strong sense of grandeur and power. But this seems like a particularly Republican argument, as, on Vitruvius' rationale, during the Augustan era, private extravagance becomes unnecessary, as the consolidation of political decision making within the sphere of the princeps means that private houses are less and less likely to take on the roles referred to by Vitruvius. Paradoxically, the private sphere is now the only space in which the elite can display their riches through extravagant ornament, which plays directly against the regime's alleged intentions.⁷

Moreover, *every* complaint of foreign contamination is also a celebration of Rome's triumph and its rapidly burgeoning empire. Indeed the wealth and material artefacts transferred to Rome stand as reminders of that imperial reach. The presence of Greek marble in their homes was a clear sign both of Crassus' and Scaurus' personal wealth and of Rome's powers of acquisition. In the competitive environment of Republican Rome, such displays of foreign luxury embodied the confidence and authority of individuals; and, arguably, in the imperial period, ostentation in the domestic sphere became even more significant, as one of the few outlets for display available to the senatorial class, after many of their roles had been usurped by the imperial family.

In addition, many Roman authors, particularly those of the imperial period, muse on the alternatives to their comfortable material existence, made pleasurable by the many luxuries to which they have become accustomed. It is true that Romans are inclined to fantasise about a simpler (usually rustic) existence, and such laments for a supposedly uncomplicated past could themselves be read as a key component of elite Roman identity. But there are also texts which portray such austerity as both undesirable and barbarous, such as Juvenal's parody of the Golden Age, where the women were chaste, but pretty unattractive, and life was tough:

Credo Pudicitiam Saturno rege moratam
 in terris visamque diu, cum frigida parvas
 praeberet spelunca domos ignemque laremque
 et pecus et dominos communi clauderet umbra,
 silvestrem montana torum cum sterneret uxor
 frondibus et culmo vicinarumque ferarum
 pellibus, haut similis tibi, Cynthia, nec tibi, cuius
 turbavit nitidos extinctus passer ocellos,
 sed potanda ferens infantibus ubera magnis
 et saepe horridior glandem ructante marito.

In the days of Saturn, I believe, Chastity still lingered on the earth, and was to be seen for a time – days when men were poorly housed in chilly caves, which under one common shelter enclosed hearth and household gods, herds and their owners; when the hill-bred wife spread her forest bed with leaves and straw and the skins of her neighbours, the wild beasts; a wife not like you, Cynthia, nor you, Lesbia, whose bright eyes were clouded by a sparrow's death, but one whose breasts gave suck to lusty babies, often more unkempt herself than her acorn-belching husband. (Juv. 6.1-10)

⁷ Edwards (1993) 160-72 discusses this phenomenon particularly in the post-Augustan era.

Would it really be worth going back to the idyllic past, if you had to deal with such a repellent lifestyle? Trade and contact with others may well be morally dubious, but Tacitus questions the idea that isolation could ever be a tempting idea in his portrayal of the Fenni, towards the end of the *Germania*, when he depicts them as deliberately excluding themselves from any social and material development, and choosing an excessively rough life:

sed beatius arbitrantur quam ingemere agris, inlaborare domibus, suas alienasque fortunas spe metuque versare, securi adversus homines securi adversus deos rem difficilliamam adsecuti sunt, ut illis ne voto quidem opus esset.

But they think [this life] happier than to groan over fields, to work at building houses, to think with hope and fear, about one's own and other people's money; safe from men and safe from gods, they have achieved that most difficult thing, that they have no need even of prayer. (Tac. *Germ.* 46.5)

Although they seem to have reached a point of mental equilibrium, the Fenni are repulsive – they have absolutely nothing: is this what it takes to be supposedly happy?

Fennis mira feritas, foeda paupertas: non arma, non equi, non penates; victui herba, vestitui pelles, cubile humus: solae in sagittis spes, quas inopia ferri ossibus asperant.

The Fenni are amazing in their ferocity, disgusting in their poverty: they have no weapons, no horses, no household gods; their food is grass, their clothes are skins, their bed is the earth: their only protection is their arrows, which they make with sharpened bones, because of the lack of iron. (Tac. *Germ.* 46.3)

It seems to me here that Tacitus takes the rhetoric of simplicity and anti-luxury to its logical conclusion, in a work which many have seen as producing a morally-superior role-model for a Rome-gone-wrong.⁸ The Germani can only remain morally pure by the exclusion of other peoples, seeing any concession to trade or luxury as a weakness. Their warfare is constructed as a way of intimidating others and gathering plunder, so that they can avoid agriculture, rather than as an empire-building enterprise. All of these traits ultimately make the Germani very far from ideal Romans. By this period, the idea of rejecting foreign luxury is near impossible: Romans are not prepared for the consequences of going back to the severe, ascetic past (if it ever existed). And, as Tacitus says in one of his most rhetorical flourishes elsewhere, Romans are the promoters of luxury now:

ut homines dispersi ac rudes eoque in bella faciles quieti et otio per voluptates adsuescerent, hortari privatim, adiuvare publice, ut templa fora domos extruerent, laudando promptos, castigando segnis: ita honoris aemulatio pro necessitate erat ... paulatimque discessum ad delenimenta vitiorum, porticus et balinea et conviviorum elegantiam. idque apud imperitos humanitas vocabatur, cum pars servitutis esset.

In order, by a taste of pleasures, to reclaim the natives from that rude and unsettled state which prompted them to war, and reconcile them to quiet and tranquility, he incited them, by private instigations and public encouragements, to erect temples, courts of justice, and dwelling-houses ... At length they gradually deviated into a taste for those luxuries which stimulate to vice: porticos, and baths, and the elegancies of the table; and this, from their inexperience, they termed civilisation, whilst, in reality, it constituted a part of their slavery. (Tac. *Agr.* 21)

The Britons here are the victims, and what Agricola has done is to embrace luxury and use it as a weapon of imperial conquest. A similar automatic process linking material culture, behavior and moral decline is identified, although here the weakness created by luxurious living has a more catastrophic effect, as it is a constituent element of *servitus* ('slavery'). At this point, luxury is no longer something that can

⁸ Lovejoy and Boas (1997) 287; O'Gorman (1993) 146.

enervate Rome – rather it has become a correlative to warfare, and as such it has become something essentially Roman.

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