Shaping the (Hi)story of Innovation. Livius Andronicus as the First Poet of Latin Literature

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According to Cicero’s Brutus,¹ Roman Drama began in 240 BC, when Livius (sc. Livius Andronicus) produced the first Latin fabula:

hic Livius (sc. Livius Andronicus) [qui] primus fabulam
docuit anno ipso ante, quam natus est Ennius
post Romam conditam […]
quartodecimo et quingentesimo

(Cic. Brut. 72:) Livius was the first one to write a fabula (sc. a play), in the year, when Gaius Claudius, son of Caecus, and Marcus Tuditanus held the consulship, one year before Ennius was born and five hundred fourteen years after the founding of Rome.

Cicero is extremely precise. He doesn’t restrict himself to one single piece of evidence. Rather, he confirms the date three times – a technique, which is, of course, highly suspicious of veiling uncertainty. And, indeed: Here is the rest of the sentence:

¹ My thanks to John Hamilton, Bettina Full, the ‘Anchoring Innovation’-group and the participants of my Research Master Seminar on (Per-)Forming Comedy, Leiden 2015.
² Cicero’s Brutus, published in 46 BC, is not just a history of Roman oratory. The chronological survey, which starts from Lucius Junius Brutus and finally culminates into Cicero’s own biography as a rhetor, rather aims at a defense of Cicero’s own vision on rhetoric art.
... ut hic ait, quem nos sequimur. est enim inter scriptores de numero annorum controversia.

...according to the authority, whom I follow. For there is a dispute among writers about the precise number of years.

As we learn from the subsequent passage, the dispute that Cicero refers to was due to two competitive sources for dating Livius’s performance: on the one hand, the evidence given by the authorities, Cicero was relying on (presumably: Atticus and Varro in his work on poets, De poetis); and, on the other hand, the evidence provided by the Roman playwright and scholar Accius and some other documents not further specified (commentarii antiquii). According to Accius, the source, Cicero wants to dismiss, Livius came to Rome only in 209 BC, when he was brought there after the fall of Tarentum, and performed his first drama eleven years thereafter, in 197 BC at the ludi Iuventatis.

The two sources definitely contradict each other: if both were right, the Accius-group and the Cicero-group, Livius Andronicus would have been brought to Rome thirty-one years after his first performance of a drama at the ludi Romani. However, whoever may have supplied the correct data (in his article on „Accius, Porcius

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2 Cic. Brut. 72-73: Accius autem a Q. Maximo quintum consule captum Tarento scripsit Livium, annis xxx post quam eum fabulam docuisse et Atticus scribit et nos in antiquis commentaris invenimus, (73) docuisse autem fabulam annis post xi C. Cornelio Q. Minucio consulibus ludis Iuventatis, quos Salinator Senensi proelio voverat. In quo tantus error Acci fuit, ut his consulibus xi annos natus Ennius fuerit; quo aequalis fuerit Livii: minor fuit aliquanto is, qui primus fabulam dedit, quam ei, qui multas docuerat ante hos consules, et Plautus et Naevius. („Accius however stated that Livius was taken captive from Tarentum by Quintus Maximus in his fifth consulship, thirty years after Livius had produced his first play, according to Atticus, whose statement I find confirmed by early records. Accius goes [73] on to say that Livius produced his first play eleven years after the date (of his capture) in the consulship of Gaius Cornelius and Quintus Minucius at the Ludi Iuventatis, which Livius Salinator had vowed at the battle of Sena. In this the error of Accius is so great that in the consulship of these men Ennius was already forty years of age. But suppose that Livius was his contemporary: it will appear then that the first one to produce a play at Rome was somewhat younger than the two who had already produced many plays before this date, Plautus and Naevius.“, trans. J. Henderson, Cambridge/ Mass. 1939, p. 69)
5 Accius frg. 18 Funaioli (Cic. Brut. 72).
7 The Ludi Romani took place at the Ides of September and included the ludi scaenici and the ludi circenses at the Circus Maximus.
Licinious and the Beginning of Latin Literature” Jarret Welsh has argued that Accius’ chronology must be mistaken, and that the testimonies that Cicero relies on are more plausible than the data given by Accius), the reconstruction of the precise year is not Cicero’s main concern:

Cicero doesn’t use his triple approach in order to draw more specified conclusions – if you present a date three times (instead of once), the date itself won’t be any more precise than before. When he repeats the date, he first of all addresses three different contexts and perspectives: Roman history (Claudio et Tuditano consulibus), Roman Literature (anno ... ante quam natus est Ennius), and Roman myth (post Romam conditam quartodecimo et quingentesimo). The first and third attestations are certainly meant to inspire confidence. The crucial information, however, the main concern of the whole passage, is embedded in between: When Livius performed his drama (that is 240 BC, as it is claimed by Cicero), Ennius, the famous author of the Annales and the author of at least 22 tragedies, 2 praetextae and 2 comedies – Ennius, who otherwise could be suspected of being the first Roman poet –, was not even born!

It is quite clear why Cicero emphasizes the relation to Ennius’ year of birth and why he so urgently wants to dismiss the other source: In 197 (the year, which the Accius-group claims to be the date of Livius’s first performance) Ennius had already become a prominent playwright (he was more than forty years old at the time)! That said: Accius’ chronology would invert the chronological – and presumably symbolic – order of the two poets: the Greek freedman Livius and the Roman author Ennius. Moreover, it would date Livius’s performance in a year, when Plautus, the Roman playwright κατ’ ἑξοχήν, was looking forward to celebrating his sixtieth birthday and looked back on more than fifteen years of staging his own comedies.

Yet, what’s wrong with considering Ennius to be the first Roman poet? And, anyway, why not Plautus – a poet the Romans could really be proud of and who was best

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9 Cf. Wiseman 2015, 46sq.
10 According to Jerome’s chronica Livius was a freedman, Hier. chron. a Abr. 1829/30 (= 188/ 187 BC) Helm 1956, p. 137: Titus (sic!) Liviu, tragodiárum scriptor clarus habetur. qui ob ingenii meritum a Livio Salinatore, cuius libros erudiebat, libertate donatus est.
11 The first comedy was presumably the Asinaria in 212 BC, see also fn. 29.
known for using Greek ‘models’\(^{12}\)? – Why was Livius, a Greek freedman from Tarentum, accorded this honor? Unlike Ennius, who, at least occasionally, would be appreciated as „the wise and valiant, the second Homer“ (Hor. epist. 2, 1, 50: *Ennius et sapiens et fortis et alter Homerus*), unlike Ennius, who would be of great influence on later authors, Livius has never been praised as an author the Romans would appreciate as a model to be seriously imitated. The only merit, for which Livius was actually acknowledged – and the only merit ascribed to him –, was that he brought literature to Rome.\(^{13}\)

Cicero himself compares the *Odusia* (Livius’s Latin translation of the Homeric *Odyssey*) with a statue of Daedalus (Cic. Brut. 71: *nam et Odyssea Latina est sic tamquam opus aliquod Daedali*) – and consequently not only with the first piece of art,\(^ {14}\) but also with a one-to-one-copy of a *living* original in stone\(^ {15}\) – and finally discards Livius’s dramatic works in six prosaic words: (*Livianae fabulae*) *non satis dignae quae iterum legantur* (Cic. Brut. 71), Livius’ *fabulae* are „not worth to be read a second time“.\(^ {16}\)

Apparently, Cicero’s story was not that much on Livius or the year 240, but rather aimed at a *semantization* of the whole event, that is to say: the combination of date, author and object. – And when we look at the literary (and scholarly) account of the history of Roman literature, we actually see that Cicero’s invitation to *semantisizing*

\(^{12}\) On Plautus’ techniques of anchoring see the contribution of Andrea de March (Novom aliquid inventum (*Plautus, Pseud.* 569) *An unsurprising innovation*?), and below, fn. 29.

\(^{13}\) In his famous passage on imitation, written at the very end of the first cent. AD, the rhetorician Quintilian – when pleading for a technique of productive and creative imitation – admits that Livius had introduced something. However, he, too, disqualifies him from being a good poet: „Once again, what would have happened if no one had achieved more than the man he was following? We should have nothing in poetry better than Livius Andronicus“ (Quint. Inst. 10, 2. 7: *quid erat futurum si nemo plus efficisset eo quem sequebatur? Nihil in poetis supra Livium Andronicum [...] haberemus*).

\(^{14}\) Daedalus (apparently, a speaking name, to be associated with the Greek word for wooden statues: δαίδαλος, cf. Paus. 9, 3) was considered to be the first artist, the πρῶτος εὐρέτης of art works, cf. Apollod. 3, 14, 8.


\(^{16}\) A similar assessment of Livius’s poetic quality can be found e.g. in Hor. epist. 2, 1, 61-75 (further testimonia on Livius Andronicus are given by M. Schauer in: TRF 1, 21-27).
the event was gratefully accepted by later authors. The year 240 BC\textsuperscript{17} provided perfect space for further interpretation and specification. In the second century AD, Aulus Gellius, the author of the \textit{Noctes Atticae}, spells out what had been inherent in Cicero’s story already (Gell. 17, 21.42sq.):

\begin{quote}
pace cum Poenis factis consulibus <C> Claudio Centhone, Appii Caeci filio, et M. Sempronio Tuditanus primus omnium L. Livius poeta fabulas docere Romae coepit post Sophoclis et Euripidis mortem annis plus fere centum et sexaginta, post Menandri annis circiter quint’quaginta duobus.
\end{quote}

[...] when peace had been made with the Carthaginians and when the consuls were C. Claudius Centho, son of Appius the Blind, and Marcus Sempronius Tuditanus, the poet Lucius Livius was the very first to put plays upon the stage at Rome, more than a hundred and sixty years after the death of Sophocles and Euripides and about fifty-two years after the death of Menander.

If we count correctly, \textit{post Sophoclis et Euripidis mortem annis plus fere centum et sexaginta} is certainly quite imprecise, for it just means „somewhere after 246“ without specifying the number of years. However, Gellius translates the implied idea of Cicero’s dating into a clear and explicit story, which makes the \textit{semantic relevance} of his dating all the more visible:

For 240 BC was not only one year before Ennius was born; it was also the year right \textit{after} the end of the First Punic War (264-241 BC), the first year of peace (\textit{pace cum Poenis factis}), after the Romans had conquered major parts of ‘Magna Graecia’ in Sicily. In this context (when drawing this connection, Gellius is following Porcius Licinus\textsuperscript{18}), 240 is also a symbol for Roman political superiority and for the paradoxical relation with the Greeks, who, though being conquered, still were

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\textsuperscript{17} Even though the dating has never ended to be an issue of scholarly debate – in antiquity as well as modern times –, Cicero’s perspective was widely adopted by ancient scholars, and even today, in modern histories of Latin literature, it is broadly accepted.

\textsuperscript{18} Porcius Licinus (2\textsuperscript{nd} cent. BC) draws a connection with the introduction of poetry and the Second(!) Punic War (218–201 BC), cf. Gell. NA 17, 21, 45: \textit{M. Varro in libro de poetis primo stipendia fecisse ait bello Poenico primo idque ipsum Naevium dicere in eo carmine, quod de eodem bello scriptis. Porcius autem Licinus serius poeticam Romae coepisse dicit in his versibus:

\begin{quote}
Poenico bello secundo Musa pinnato gradu
intulit se bellicosam in Romuli gentem feram.
\end{quote}

(„Marcus Varro says in the first book of his work \textit{On Poets} that Naevius served in the first Punic war and that the poet himself makes that statement in the poem which he wrote on that same war. But Porcius Licinus says in the following verses that Rome was later in taking up the poetic art:

\begin{quote}
‘In the second Punic war with winged flight
The Muse to Romulus’ warrior nation came.’\textquotedblright). See further Mattingly 1993, 166-168.\textsuperscript{)}
superior as to literary culture (a paradox best known from Horace’s Letter to Augustus, Hor. epist. 2, 1 156sq.: *Graecia capta ferum uicientem cepit et artes \ intulit agresti Latio*, „Greece, the captive, made her savage victor captive, and brought the arts into rustic Latium“). That said, the year 240 is a symbol for a new era, the era of peace, or, negatively formulated, the era of a vacuum, which calls for a new beginning.19

In his account, Gellius emphasizes both, the political context (*pace cum Poenis factis*) and the Romans’ reaction to it. Unlike Cicero who restricted himself to *Livius primus fabulam docuit* („Livius was the first one to stage a drama“), Gellius emphasizes the link between Roman and Greek culture („Livius performed the fabulae hundred and sixty years after the death of Sophocles and Euripides, fifty-two years after Menander“). By relating Livius to Greek authors – not only to Attic Tragedy, but also to Hellenistic Comedy20 – Gellius implies that there is a continuous line between the two cultures and that Roman Drama is in the tradition of Greek tragedy and comedy.

Yet, what is all the more ignored, what is entirely blanked out and glossed over, is the indigenous, Italic tradition: Phlyax, Mimus, Atellana, all the improvisational dramatic forms, present in South Italy from the fourth century BC on and still extremely popular at the time, when Livius performed the first *fabula*.21 The entire tradition of Italic theater is dismissed – cut off! – in order to exhibit the proposed line of tradition, starting from Sophocles, Euripides, Menander, and finally leading to Livius.

In a similar way, the object of Livius’ production (in Cicero: mere „fabula“) has been spelled out step by step in order to stress the link between Roman and Greek. It remains unclear, even today, what Livius actually had performed (and what he

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19 On the connection between political crisis and techniques of anchoring see Ruurd Nauta’s contribution to the *Anchoring in Antiquity* conference: *Un-Anchoring Innovation. Lucan and Tacitus on the Principate.*

20 Gellius, remarkably enough, is ‘unprecisely precise’ here, when saying „around fifty-two years after Menander“.

actually should be praised for): Did he write one *fabula* [that’s what Cicero implies] or more than one [as e.g. Gell. claims]? Was it

– a comedy (as we learn from a scholion on Horace’s epistle 2,1, 62: *Livius antiquissimus poeta fuit Andronicus, qui primus comoedias scrisit* and as it will be repeated by Diomedes Grammaticus [GL I, 489, 6-8 Keil], see below)?

– a comedy and a tragedy (as we find it in Cassiodorus: Cass. chron. II, p. 609, 316 a.u.c. Mommsen 1861: *C. Manlius et Q. Valerius [239 BC] his conss. luidus Romanis primum tragoedia et comoedia a Lucio Livio ad scenam data.*)

– or even a comedy, a tragedy and a fabula togata, as we read in Donatus (Don. de com. 5, 4 Wessner 1902: *comoediam apud Graecos dubium est quis primus inveniret, apud Romanos certum et comoediam et tragoediam et togatam primus Livius Andronicus reperreit*)?

And, after all, in what respect had Livius been innovative?

– Was he the first one to write a Roman drama (*fabula*), or the first one to provide *dramatic plots*, a dramatic *fabula*, that, unlike *preliteral-improvised* performances, exhibits an *argumentum* (that’s what the other Livius, Titus Livius, ascribes to Livius Andronicus when saying that *Livius ausus est primus argumento fabulam serere* (Liv. 7, 22)?)

– Or did he just *translate* a Greek drama into Latin (as he translated a Greek epic, Homer’s *Odyssey*), as it has been claimed by Diomedes Grammaticus in the fourth century AD (Diom. gramm GL I, 489, 6-8 Keil: *ab iis [sc. Graecis] Romani fabulas transtulerunt, et constat apud illos [sc. Romanos] primum Latino sermone comoediam Livium Andronicum scrisisse*)?

Finally, if we look at Livius’ name, we can observe that here, too, there’s is some development: whereas earlier sources just call him ‘Livius’, *later* sources, such as Gellius and Festus (2nd cent. AD), mostly add the cognomen (or even agnomen?) *Andronicus* – a name which not only indicates a Greek origin (ἀνήρ) and possibly a former status as a slave (ἀνδράποδον), but also addresses Livius’ translation of the *Odyssee* (hom. Od. 1,1: ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε),23 and, in the combination of all *three* names – Lucius Livius Andronicus – exhibits the story of a successful mediation between Greece and Rome: Livius was of Greek origin, however integrated into Roman culture.

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23 I owe this suggestion to Stephen Hind (17 dec 2015).
If we put the testimonia in chronological order (from Accius until ancient scholarship in the fourth cent. AD) it becomes clear that the event, the kind of production and the characteristics of the author have step by step been specified and enforced, in order to promote a story with highly programmatic impact – a story that, almost pictorially, combines its three basic elements (date, author, and production) towards a vision on Roman literature, which aims at being Greek and dismissing Italic culture, a vision, which is still discernible in modern scholarship, as can be shown in Eduard Norden’s statement:

„Da das besondere Kriterium der römischen Literatur ihr Verhältnis zur griechischen ist, so fassen wir die der Aufnahme dieser Literatur vorausgehende Epoche als vorliterarisch auf.“

Based on these findings, three major points emerge:

1. If later sources were right and Livius actually translated a Greek tragedy or comedy into Latin, we may, of course, assume that the (re-)production of Greek elements was meant to provide a ‘common ground’ or basis, which was employed to make the innovation of Roman literature accessible and attractive to its contemporary addressees, that is, to a Roman society primarily familiar with Greek literary culture. However, the story of Livius’ production turns out to be a story that – starting with a dating – has subsequently been shaped and coined by later authors, in order to motivate two specific ideas concerning Roman Literature: a) the suppression of the indigenous, Italic tradition, such as improvisational theatre, and b) the ‘Greekness’ not only of Roman Drama, but, in general, of Roman Literature.

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27 For the term „common ground“ see the contribution by Rutger Allan and Lidewij van Gils (Anchoring New Ideas in Common Ground. A Linguistic Approach).
28 It is important to make a distinction between ‘innovation’ and ‘new’. Innovations are related to a reflection on the past, whereas the ‘new’ includes the ‘unexpected’ (τὸ θαυμαστὸν or τὸ παράδοξον).
That said, it becomes clear, why an author, such as Plautus, who consistently maintained crucial elements of improvisational theatre – moreover: who wrote a play called *Poenulus* – would have been ineligible as a protagonist of such a story (cf. Hor. epist. 2, 1. 270-274: „See how Plautus plays the part of the youthful lover, how he plays that of the close father, or of the tricky pander; what a Dossennus he is among his greedy parasites“, *Aspice, Plautus* | quo pacto partis tutetur amantis ephebi, | ut patris attenti, lenonis ut insidiosi, | quantus sit Dossennus edacibus in parasitis, | quam non adstricto percurrat pulpita socco29).

2. Apparently, the technique which has been applied when developing the story of Livius comes closest to what is done within the narrative of aetiology30: In order to legitimate a current impact, program or prospectus, the aetiological story doesn’t build on past events, it rather casts an anchor into the past. Aetiology aims at transforming discontinuity into a model of continuity and constructs an anchor to start with, a fixed point which contains the crucial potential to be developed in the future and marks the current program as a logical consequence of the (constructed) past.

3. Finally, the technique of anchoring innovation is a technique that can be found throughout Roman Literature. For example, we may think of Horace, who concludes

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29 Plautus’ techniques of anchoring his comedies in a Greek tradition (see the contribution from Andrea De March: Novom aliquid inventum (*Plautus, Pseud. 569* An unsurprising innovation?) show that Plautus actually was in need to frame indigenous elements by naming a Greek authority. Apparently, he started with applying this technique from the very beginning of his poetic production. The *Asinaria*, written around 212 BC and presumably Plautus’ first (or one of his first) comedies, claims to be the translation of a comedy *Onagros* (or *Onagos*), written by a „Demophilos“, cf. Plaut. As. 11: *Demophilus scripsit, Maccus vortit barbare* (*Plaut. As. 11)*). However, neither the author nor the title of this comedy has ever been testified by other sources. Apart from that, Demophilus is a speaking name. This evidence may suggest the suspicion that Plautus (here presented by his *nomen* Maccus, which as the same time is one of the stock charaters of the indigenous Atellana, a „clown“) does not refer to a real translation of a real comedy of a real author, but rather aims at presenting a technique of ‘double-anchoring’, i.e. at anchoring Atellanan elements in a Greek ‘tradition’ and vice versa, in order to address different groups of recipients (i.e. those who are looking for Greekness and those who still appreciate indigenous popular drama), see Antje Wessels: „Innovation im Eselskostüm – Zur Technik doppelter Verankerung in Plautus’ Prolog zur *Asinaria*“ (in preparation). Apparently, using Greek models was not necessarily appreciated. Horace’s contemptuous remark on Plautus’ reception of Atellanan elements (Hor. epist. 2, 1. 270-274, see above, p. 7) implies that even at the time of Horace it hasn’t become *communis opinio* to appreciate ‘Greekness’ and that it was still necessary to work on the dismissal of indigene elements.

30 As to aetiology as a technique of anchoring see Annette Harder’s contribution to the *Anchoring in Antiquity* conference: *Anchoring through aetiology*; also Antje Wessels: „Verankerung als Prinzip – Zu einem Narrativ in der griechischen und römischen Antike“ (in preparation).
the third book of his Odes with praising himself to be the first one to have brought Aeolic Lyric to Rome: *princeps Aeolium carmen ad Italos | deduxisse modos* (Hor. c. 3, 30. 13sq.). Unlike in modern culture\(^{31}\), where innovation is identified with something ‘Attractive’, in Roman antiquity it was appreciated to link poetic innovation to the past.\(^{32}\) That said, we may even argue that the story on Livius does not only anchor the Greekness of Roman Literature, but also the technique of anchoring applied by later authors, such as Horace: When Horace anchors his poetic innovations in Greek literature, his technique is now legitimized by a long tradition; for – according to what has been shaped to be the ‘history of Roman literature’ – the first one who has done so, was Livius Andronicus. Livius and the techniques assigned to him have taught the Romans how to promote a story of innovation. Or to use the words of Cicero (while turning *around*, of course, what Cicero *originally* meant): Livius primus fabulam docuit – The case of Livius has demonstrated what story we have to tell in order to promote an innovation successfully.

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\(^{32}\) The possible reasons herefore are many and varied. One of them may be a different understanding of curiosity (*curiositas*), another reason is certainly the historically specific notion of originality (versus copies) as a value.