It is a commonplace in our field of research that imitation of the Roman historian Livy is one of the defining characteristics of humanist historiography in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. In his primordial study of Renaissance historiography, Eduard Fueter stated that “[a]ls Vorbild für den annalistischen Historiker kam, sowohl was Anlage wie Darstellung betraf, nur Livius in Betracht.” In more recent decades, scholars such as Eric Cochrane referred to Livy as “the chief model for histories of cities ab urbe condita”.¹

In contrast with the phenomenon of Tacitism, however, the reception of Livy has not been subject to much systematic investigation.² When it is discussed in case studies, it is usually described as an aesthetic convention prescribing an annalistic mode of presentation and featuring such characteristic devices as speeches and prodigies. Within the modern history of historiography, there is a strong positivist tradition of criticizing this ‘dramatic’ type of historical representation as untruthful. Thus Burckhardt already called Livy “das Procrustesbett so mancher Autoren” and exclaimed: “Wie unablässig plagt den Leser die Ahnung, daß zwischen den livianischen und den cäsarischen Phrasen…die beste individuelle

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und locale Farbe, das Interesse am vollen wirklichen Hergang Noth gelitten habe.”

To my mind, this approach to Livian historiography is far from satisfying. First of all, historiography is not only about reconstructing an authentic past. For me, the cultural significance of a particular means of writing history is more interesting than its capacity to produce a truthful account of the past. Secondly, the idea that imitation of a classical author mars an accurate representation of the “volle wirkliche Hergang” is an oversimplification. Instead, I will approach reception as an active process of selective appropriation that is always accompanied by a transformation of the model. Consequently, there is no necessary relation between imitation and misrepresentation.

In this paper, I will therefore approach Livianism – I will use this word by analogy with ‘Tacitism’ – as a productive mode of thought, a dynamic cultural practice, and a versatile rhetorical device rather than as an aesthetic convention. I will confine myself to political conceptualization along Livian lines, because the problem of misrepresentation as a result of imitation is raised about this aspect of historiography more often than on any other point. In order to make my hypothesis about Livianism more concrete, I will investigate and compare two cases in which Livy’s representation of Roman royal and republican power was adopted and adapted to suit the needs of two completely different political entities with their respective forms of government.

**Marcantonio Sabellico, Rerum Venetarum decades (1487)**

The first case I will investigate is the *Rerum Venetarum ab urbe condita decades IV* by Marcantonio Coccio Sabellico. This work is a history of the independent Republic of Venice, covering the time from the city’s mythical origins up to Sabellico’s own day in thirty-three books. Sabellico had

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5 The *Rerum Venetarum decades* were first published as Marcus Antonius Coccius Sabellius, *Rerum Venetarum ab urbe condita decades IV* (Venice, 1487). In this paper, I will refer to the edition in Marcus Antonius Coccius Sabellius, *Opera omnia ab infinitis*