THE LATIN INFINITIVUS HISTORICUS REVISITED

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Embarking upon yet another examination of the so-called Infinitivus Historicus [IH] (or ‘descriptivus’, ‘adumbrativus’, et sim.) appears not uncalled for: this rather bizarre feature of Latin has been studied most extensively1), yet not altogether satisfactorily, and certainly not exhaustively. We have to do here with a usage deeply rooted in the Latin literary language from Plautus onwards, until eventually becoming a literary convention, at the same time the Historic Infinitive is an almost unique phenomenon in Latin, as it is comparable, amongst the other infinitival constructions, only to the rare infinitivus ‘imperativus’ and ‘prohibitivus’, in that they all constitute non-embedded constructions which involve non-accusatival subjects2)

1 The forms involved

The following outline recapitulates the essentials of the Classical and pre-Classical Historic Infinitive [HI] one encounters the present infinitive alone, of verbs in the active or of deponents, including that of copulaic fieri and uideri, perfect infinitives do not occur before Sallust (who notoriously extended the use of the HI beyond its previous and contemporaneous limits), and there too infrequently and only of perfecta praesentia odisse3), meminisse,

1) Of the long line of major studies devoted to this subject we mention here Lombard 1936, Dressler 1968, Contino 1977, Pinkster 1983, and Viljamaa 1983, which provide further literature on the subject
2) Szantyr 366-367 The ‘infinitivus pro imperativo’ in all likelihood stands in Republican Latin for a generally addressed impersonal directive; note Cato RR 156 7 (addito postea sorbere et esse) and the somewhat obscure passage Varro LL 10.32 The analogy between the historic and the directive infinitives stops at the case-form of their predicative complements (Imperat : NE FORE :: Hist : illa iam fieri fierior Pl Rud 606) and, of course, at the shape of the negative
3) Possibly already Lucilius 11 Marx

(prae)nusse Apart from medial forms, such as *rumpier* ‘burst’ (Afran 127 com Ribbeck) and forms analyzable as predicative perfect participles with *esse*, passive infinitives are hardly attested: none in Old Latin, one in Claudius Quadrigarius (45 Peter *senatus conuenire, demittit*), one in a fragmentary passage of Sisenna (120 Peter *milites cuistate donare*), one instance in Caesar (*Gall* 3 4 3 *superari*, the last of a longer line of historic infinitives), out of a total of ca 10 instances of HI (partly multiple ones), and 5 passive infinitives in two Ciceronian passages: *II Verr* 4 52 (*effert*, *extorquer*, *ecfringi*, *reuello*) and 66 (*referri*), out of a total of ca 50 (likewise partly multiple). These data reveal the passive historic infinitive as a vanishingly rare phenomenon in Republican literary Latin, given the considerably higher percentage of passives observed for finite forms (by any available statistics, see Flobert 1975 512-513, Pinkster 1985 107-109). That the short *Bellum Africum* has two instances (*Caesar neque moueri 39 1, interim naues longae adauger* 1 5) and that Sallust has some more⁵), does not reflect upon this scarcity, since both, each in its own way, are not typical of contemporaneous literary expression. Virgil has an unusually large inventory of passives in the *Georgica* and the *Aeneid* (e.g. *sacra parari, Aen* 2 132, *exaudin gemus 6 557, 7 15*) 10 instances, about a third of the total of his HI’s. This high rate of occurrence of the passive infinitives in Virgil on the one hand marks the HI as one of the linguistic devices at the service of lofty language, and on the other hand places Augustan literature, at any rate Augustan epic poetry, already outside the scope of the naturally functioning HI.

Significantly, even among the rare extant passive infinitives, none is found expanded by an overt true (animate) agent-expression, which would constitute a full equivalent of the active construction. There are no impersonal (viz., passive subjectless) HI’s whatsoever in Republican Latin, whether of intransitive or of transitive verbs, where superficially this appears to be the case, in

4) And in addition *videri* ibid 40
5) All within conglomerates of IH (Schlicher 1914: 385)
6) And following him later Epics, e.g. Lucanus (4 624-625), Statius (*Theb* 11 475)