

Livy's History of Rome: Book 39.

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[39.8] During the following year the consuls Sp. Postumius Albinus and Q. Marcius Philippus had their attention diverted from the army and the wars, and the administration of provinces, by the necessity of putting down a domestic conspiracy. The provinces were allotted to the praetors as follows: the civic jurisdiction to T. Maenius, the alien to M. Licinius Lucullus, Sardinia to C. Aurelius Scaurus, Sicily to P. Cornelius Sulla, Hither Spain to L. Q. Crispinus, and Further Spain to C. Calpurnius Piso. Both the consuls were charged with the investigation into the secret conspiracies. A low-born Greek went into Etruria first of all, but did not bring with him any of the numerous arts which that most accomplished of all nations has introduced amongst us for the cultivation of mind and body. He was a hedge-priest and wizard, not one of those who imbue men's minds with error by professing to teach their superstitions openly for money, but a hierophant of secret nocturnal mysteries. At first these were divulged to only a few; then they began to spread amongst both men and women, and the attractions of wine and feasting increased the number of his followers. When they were heated with wine and the nightly commingling of men and women, those of tender age with their seniors, had extinguished all sense of modesty, debaucheries of every kind commenced; each had pleasures at hand to satisfy the

lust he was most prone to. Nor was the mischief confined to the promiscuous intercourse of men and women; false witness, the forging of seals and testaments, and false informations, all proceeded from the same source, as also poisonings and murders of families where the bodies could not even be found for burial. Many crimes were committed by treachery; most by violence, which was kept secret, because the cries of those who were being violated or murdered could not be heard owing to the noise of drums and cymbals.

[39.9] This pestilential evil penetrated from Etruria to Rome like a contagious disease. At first, the size and extent of the City allowing more scope and impunity for such mischiefs, served to conceal them, but information at length reached the consul, mainly through the following channel. P. Aebutius, whose father had served in the cavalry and was dead, had been left under guardians. On their death he had been brought up under the care of his mother Duronia and his stepfather T. Sempronius Rutilus. The mother was completely in her husband's hands; and as the stepfather had so exercised his guardianship that he was not in a position to give a proper account for it, he was anxious that his ward should either be put out of the way or placed at his mercy through his getting some hold upon him. One way of corrupting the youth's morals was through the Bacchanalia. The mother told the youth that she had made a vow on his behalf during an illness, namely, that as soon as he recovered she would initiate him into the Bacchic mysteries, and in that way would through the kindness of the gods discharge the vow by which she was bound. He must preserve his chastity for ten days, then after supper on the tenth day she would take him to a place set apart for the rite of initiation.

There was a freedwoman named Hispala Fecenia who, though she was a courtesan, was worthy of better things than the gains to which she had been accustomed from her girlhood, and by which she supported herself even after she had been manumitted. As their

houses were near one another, an intimacy had sprung up between her and Aebutius, which was in no way injurious to either his reputation or his purse. She sought his company and his love unsolicited, and as his parents kept him close in every way, he was maintained by the girl's generosity. Her passion for him had gone so far that after her guardian had died, and she was no longer a ward, she begged the tribunes and the praetor to appoint a guardian for her. Then she could make a will and she constituted Aebutius her sole heir.

[39.10] With these proofs of her love they had no secrets from each other, and the youth told her in a jocular tone not to be surprised if he absented himself from her for some nights; he had a religious duty to perform, the discharge of a vow made while he was ill, and he intended therefore to be initiated into the Bacchic mysteries. On hearing this she was terribly upset and exclaimed, "Heaven forbid. Better for us both to die than that you should do this," and then invoked deadly curses on the heads of those who had advised him to take this course. The youth, astonished at her outburst and excitement, bade her spare her curses; it was his mother who had given him this command with the consent of his stepfather. "Your stepfather, then," she replied, "for, perhaps, it is not right to charge your mother with it, is by this act hurrying on the ruin of your modesty, your reputation, your hopes and your life." Still more astonished, he asked her what she meant. With a prayer to the gods and goddesses to forgive her if, constrained by her affection, she disclosed what she ought to be silent about, she explained that when she was in service she had accompanied her mistress into that place of initiation, but had never gone near it when once she was free. She knew it to be a sink of every form of corruption, and it was a matter of common knowledge that no one had been initiated for the last two years above the age of twenty. As each person was brought in, he was handed over to the priests like a victim and taken into a place which resounded with yells and songs, and the jangling of cymbals and drums, so that no cry from

those who were suffering violation could be heard. She then begged and implored him to get out of the affair in whatever way he could, and not to rush blindly into a place where he would first have to endure, and then to commit, every conceivable outrage. Until he had given his word to keep clear of these rites she would not let him go.

[39.11] After he reached home his mother brought up the subject of the initiation and told him what he had to do in connection with it on that day, and what on the following days. He informed her that he would do nothing of the kind; he had no intention of being initiated. His stepfather was present. The mother at once exclaimed, "He cannot pass ten nights away from Hispala's embraces; he is so intoxicated with the fascinations of that venomous serpent, that he has no respect for either his parent or his stepfather or the gods." Amid the objurgations of his mother on the one side and his stepfather on the other, he was finally, with the assistance of four slaves, driven out of the house. The youth betook himself to his aunt Aebutia, and explained why he had been expelled from his home, and at her suggestion laid the matter privately before the consul the following day. Postumius told him to come again in three days' time, and in the meantime inquired of Sulpicia, his mother-in-law, a grave and judicious woman, whether she knew an old woman called Aebutia living in the Aventine quarter. She replied that she knew her to be a woman of respectable and strictly moral character; on which the consul said that it was important that he should have an interview with her, and Sulpicia must send for her to see her. Aebutia came to Sulpicia, and the consul coming in as though by accident turned the conversation on to her brother's son. The woman burst into tears and began to lament the youth's misfortunes, robbed as he had been of his fortune by those who ought to have been the very last to do so. He was, she said, at her house at the time, "he had been driven away by his mother because the honest and respectable youth refused - may the gods forgive me - to be initiated into what

were commonly believed to be impure and obscene mysteries."

[39.12]As the consul considered that he had ascertained all that was necessary about Aebutius, and that the evidence was trustworthy, he dismissed Aebutia and asked his mother-in-law to send for Hispala, a freedwoman, who was well known round the Aventine, as there were some questions he wished to put to her. Hispala was alarmed at the message, and at being summoned into the presence of a woman of such high rank and character, without knowing the reason, and when she saw the lictors and the consul's attendants in the vestibule, she nearly fainted. She was conducted into an inner apartment where the consul and his mother-in-law were present, and the consul told her that there was nothing to be afraid of if she could make up her mind to speak the truth; she might trust the pledged word of such a woman as Sulpicia and his own promise of safety, but she must give him a description of what usually went on at the nocturnal Bacchic rites in the grove of Simila. On hearing this, the woman was seized with such a fright and a trembling in all her limbs that she could not open her lips. At last she recovered her nerves, and said that when quite a girl she had been initiated, together with her mistress, but since she had been manumitted, now some years ago, she knew nothing of what went on there. The consul commended her for having confessed that she had been initiated and begged her to be equally truthful in the rest of her story. She avowed that she knew nothing further, on which the consul warned her that she would not receive the same consideration and forbearance if she were confuted by some one else, as she would if she made a free confession, for the person who had heard these things from her had disclosed everything to him.

[39.13]The woman being convinced, and quite rightly, that Aebutius was the informer, flung herself at Sulpicia's feet and implored her not to let a conversation between a freedwoman and her lover be treated so seriously as to amount to treason. What she

had told him was for the purpose of frightening, not because she really knew anything. Postumius was very angry, and told her that she must be imagining that she was joking with her lover, and not speaking in the house of a grave and august lady and in the presence of the consul. Sulpicia raised the terrified woman from the floor, spoke soothingly to her and tried to quiet her. At length she became calm, and after bitterly reproaching Aebutius for the return he had made after all she had done for him, and declared that while she stood in great fear of the gods, whose occult mysteries she was revealing, she stood in much greater fear of men who would tear her to pieces if she turned informer. So she begged Sulpicia and the consul to remove her to some place outside the borders of Italy where she could pass the rest of her days in safety. The consul bade her be under no apprehension; he would see to it that she found a safe home in Rome. Then Hispala gave an account of the origin of these rites.

At first they were confined to women; no male was admitted, and they had three stated days in the year on which persons were initiated during the daytime, and matrons were chosen to act as priestesses. Paculla Annia, a Campanian, when she was priestess, made a complete change, as though by divine monition, for she was the first to admit men, and she initiated her own sons, Minius Cerinnus and Herennius Cerinnus. At the same time she made the rite a nocturnal one, and instead of three days in the year celebrated it five times a month. When once the mysteries had assumed this promiscuous character, and men were mingled with women with all the licence of nocturnal orgies, there was no crime, no deed of shame, wanting. More uncleanness was wrought by men with men than with women. Whoever would not submit to defilement, or shrank from violating others, was sacrificed as a victim. To regard nothing as impious or criminal was the very sum of their religion. The men, as though seized with madness and with frenzied distortions of their bodies, shrieked out prophecies; the matrons, dressed as Bacchae, their hair dishevelled, rushed down

to the Tiber with burning torches, plunged them into the water, and drew them out again, the flame undiminished, as they were made of sulphur mixed with lime. Men were fastened to a machine and hurried off to hidden caves, and they were said to have been rapt away by the gods; these were the men who refused to join their conspiracy or take a part in their crimes or submit to pollution. They formed an immense multitude, almost equal to the population of Rome; amongst them were members of noble families both men and women. It had been made a rule for the last two years that no one more than twenty years old should be initiated; they captured those to be deceived and polluted.

[39.14]When she had finished giving her evidence, she fell on her knees and again begged the consul to send her abroad. He asked his mother-in-law to set apart some portion of her house where she could take up her abode. An upper room was assigned to her which was approached by a flight of steps from the street; these were blocked up and an entrance made from inside the house. All Fecenia's effects were at once transferred, and her household slaves brought in, and Aebutius was ordered to take up his quarters with a client of the consul's. As both his informants were now in his hands, Postumius reported the affair to the senate. Everything was explained as it occurred, the information which he had first received, and then that which he had obtained in answer to his questions. The senate were greatly alarmed for the public safety; these secret conspiracies and nocturnal gatherings were a danger to the State; and they were alarmed for themselves, lest their own relations and friends might be involved. They passed a vote of thanks to the consul for having conducted his investigations so carefully and without creating any public disturbance. Then, arming the consuls with extraordinary powers, they placed in their hands the inquiry into the proceedings at the Bacchanalia and the nocturnal rites. They were to take care that Aebutius and Fecenia suffered no injury for the information they had given, and they were to offer rewards to induce other informers to come forward.

Those who presided over these mysteries were to be sought out not only in Rome, but everywhere where people were in the habit of assembling, so that they might be delivered up to the consuls. Edicts were published in Rome and throughout Italy forbidding any who had been initiated from meeting together to celebrate their mysteries or performing any rites of a similar character, and above all, strict inquiry was to be made in the case of those who attended gatherings in which crime and debauchery had occurred. These were the measures which the senate decreed. The consuls sent orders to the curule aediles to search out all the priests of those rites and, when they were arrested, to keep them in such custody as they thought best until their trial. The plebeian aediles were to see that no rites were performed in open day; the police commissioners were instructed to post watches throughout the City and take care that no nocturnal gatherings took place; and as a precaution against fires, five men were appointed to assist the commissioners and take charge of the buildings assigned to them on this side the Tiber.

[39.15]When the various officials had been told off to their duties, the consuls convened the Assembly and mounted the Rostra. After the usual prayers with which proceedings are opened before the magistrates address the people, the consul began thus: "In no meeting of the Assembly has this solemn appeal to the gods been so appropriate and, I would add, so necessary. For it reminds you that it is these gods whom your ancestors ordained that we should worship, reverence, and pray to; not those who have driven the minds of people enslaved by foul and foreign superstitions, as though by goading furies, into every form of crime and every kind of lust. I am at a loss to know how far I ought to keep silence, and how far I ought to go, in what I have to say. I fear, if you remain in ignorance of anything, that I may leave an opening for neglect, whilst, if I disclose everything, I may create too much alarm. Whatever I say, you may be certain that it does not come up to the enormity and horror of the thing. We shall make it our business to say enough to put you on your guard. That the Bacchanalia have

for some time been going on throughout Italy and are now practiced in many parts of the City you have, I am sure, learnt not only by report, but also by the nightly noises and yells which resound all over the City; but I do not think you know what it all means. Some of you fancy that it is a particular form of worship; others think that it is some permissible kind of sport and dalliance; its real nature is understood by few. As to their numbers, you would inevitably be very much alarmed if I were to say that there are many thousands of them, unless I went on to explain who and what sort of people they are.

"In the first place, then, women form the great majority, and this was the source of all the mischief. Then there are the males, the very counterparts of the women, committing and submitting to the foulest uncleanness, frantic and frenzied, driven out of their senses by sleepless nights, by wine, by nocturnal shouting and uproar. The conspiracy does not so far possess any strength, but its numbers are rapidly increasing day by day, and its strength is growing. Your ancestors would not have even your Assembly meet in an irregular and haphazard way, but only when the standard was hoisted on the citadel and the centuries in their array marched out, or when the tribunes had given notice of a meeting of the plebs, or the Assembly had been duly convened by one of the magistrates. Whenever the people met together there was bound to be a lawful authority to preside over it. Have you any idea what these nocturnal gatherings, these promiscuous associations of men and women are? If you knew at what age those of the male sex are initiated, you would feel not only compassion for them, but shame as well. Do you consider, Quirites, that young men who have taken this unhallowed oath are to be made into soldiers? That after the training they have received in that shrine of obscenity they are to be entrusted with arms? Shall these men, reeking with their impurity and that of those round them, wield their swords in defence of the chastity of your wives and children?

[39.16]"The mischief would not be serious, if they had only lost their manhood through their debauchery - the disgrace would fall mainly upon themselves - and had kept from open outrage and secret treason. Never has there been such a gigantic evil in the commonwealth, or one which has affected greater numbers or caused more numerous crimes. Whatever instances of lust, treachery, or crime have occurred during these last years, have originated, you may be perfectly certain, in that shrine of unhallowed rites. They have not yet disclosed all the criminal objects of their conspiracy. So far, their impious association confines itself to individual crimes; it has not yet strength enough to destroy the commonwealth. But the evil is creeping stealthily on, and growing day by day; it is already too great to limit its action to individual citizens; it looks to be supreme in the State. Unless, Quirites, you take precautions, this Assembly legally convened by a consul in the daylight will be confronted by another assembly gathered together in the darkness of the night. Now they, disunited, fear you, a united Assembly, but when you are dispersed to your homes and your farms they will hold their assembly and plot their own safety and your ruin. It will then be your turn, scattered as you will be, to fear them in their united strength.

"You ought, therefore, every one of you, to pray that your friends may have preserved their good sense. If unbridled and maddening lust has swept any one away into that whirlpool, you must judge him as belonging not to you but to those whom he has joined as fellow-conspirators in every kind of wickedness. I do not feel sure that even some of you may not have been misled. For there is nothing which wears a more deceptive appearance than a depraved superstition. Where crimes are sheltered under the name of religion, there is fear lest in punishing the hypocrisy of men we are doing violence to something holy which is mixed up with it. From these scruples you are delivered by numberless decisions of the pontiffs, resolutions of the senate and responses of the augurs. How often in the times of your fathers and grandfathers has the

task been assigned to the magistrates of forbidding all foreign rites and ceremonies, prohibiting hedge-priests and diviners from entering either the Forum, the Circus, or the City, seeking out and burning all books of pretended prophecies, and abolishing every sacrificial ritual except what was accordant with Roman usage! Those men were masters of all human and divine love, and they believed that nothing tended so much to destroy religion as the performance of sacrificial rites, not after the manner of our fathers, but in fashions imported from abroad. I thought I ought to tell you this beforehand, so that none of you may be distressed by fears on the score of religion when you see us demolishing the seats of the Bacchanalia and dispersing their impious gatherings. All that we shall do will be done with the sanction of the gods and in obedience to their will. To show their displeasure at the insult offered to their majesty by these lusts and crimes they have dragged them out of their dark hiding-places into the light of day, and they have willed that they shall be exposed not to enjoy impunity, but to be punished and put an end to. "The senate has entrusted my colleague and myself with extraordinary powers for conducting an inquiry into this matter. We shall make an energetic use of them, and we have charged the subordinate magistrates with the care of the night-watches throughout the City. It is only right that you should show equal energy in doing your duty in whatever position you may be placed and whatever orders you receive, and also in making it your business to see that no danger or disturbance arise through the secret plots of the criminals."

[39.17] They then ordered the resolutions of the senate to be read, and offered a reward for any one who should bring a guilty person before the consuls, or give in his name if he were not forthcoming. In the case of any one who had been denounced and then taken to flight, they would fix a day for him to answer the charge, and if he failed to appear, he would be condemned in his absence; for any one who was abroad at the time they would extend the date should he wish to make his defence. They then published an edict

forbidding any one to sell or buy anything for the purpose of flight, or to receive, harbour, or in any way assist those who fled. After the Assembly had broken up, the whole of the City was thoroughly alarmed. Nor was the alarm confined within the walls of the City or the frontiers of Rome; there was uneasiness and consternation throughout the whole of Italy when letters began to arrive announcing the resolutions of the senate, the proceedings in the Assembly and the edict of the consuls. During the night following the disclosure of the affair in the Assembly, guards were posted at all the gates, and many who tried to escape were arrested by the police commissioners and brought back. Many names were handed in, and some of these, both men and women, committed suicide. It was asserted that more than 7000 of both sexes were implicated in the conspiracy. The ringleaders were, it appears, the two Atinii, Marcus and Caius, both members of the Roman plebs; L. Opiternius of Falerium, and Minius Cerrinius, a Campanian. They were the authors of all the crime and outrage, the high priests and founders of the cult. Care was taken that they should be arrested as soon as possible, and when brought before the consuls they at once made a complete confession.

[39.18] So great, however, was the number of those who fled from the City that law-suits and rights of property were in numerous cases lost by default, and the praetors were compelled through the intervention of the senate to adjourn their courts for a month, to allow the consuls to complete their investigations. Owing to the fact that those whose names were on the list did not answer to the summons, and were not to be found in Rome, the consuls had to visit the country towns and conduct their inquiries and try the cases there. Those who had simply been initiated, who, that is, had repeated after the priest the prescribed form of imprecation which pledged them to every form of wickedness and impurity, but had not been either active or passive participants in any of the proceedings to which their oath bound them, were detained in prison. Those who had polluted themselves by outrage and murder,

those who had stained themselves by giving false evidence, forging seals and wills and by other fraudulent practices, were sentenced to death. The number of those executed exceeded the number of those sentenced to imprisonment; there was an enormous number of men as well as women in both classes. The women who had been found guilty were handed over to their relatives or guardians to be dealt with privately; if there was no one capable of inflicting punishment, they were executed publicly. The next task awaiting the consuls was the destruction of all the Bacchanalian shrines, beginning with Rome, and then throughout the length and breadth of Italy; those only excepted where there was an ancient altar or a sacred image. The senate decreed that for the future there should be no Bacchanalian rites in Rome or in Italy. If any one considered that this form of worship was a necessary obligation and that he could not dispense with it without incurring the guilt of irreligion, he was to make a declaration before the City praetor and the praetor was to consult the senate. If the senate gave permission, not less than one hundred senators being present, he might observe those rites on condition that not more than five persons took part in the service, that they had no common fund, and that there was no priest or conductor of the ceremonies.