Call for papers: Tacitus’ Wonders
Conference at Victoria University of Wellington, 27-29 August 2018

“The older the better? Concerning the exempla maiorum in Tacitus’ writings as a model for the historiographical writings in Late Antiquity“

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There is no doubt that Tacitus understands his own time as an epoch of moral-political decline, which requires him as a historian to deal with "trivial events" (Ann. 4.32). He asks the readers of his Annals not to compare his writings "with the writings of the men who portrayed the history of the early days of the Roman people", on the one hand because the historian, writing in the Principate would not be free to express his thoughts (see Hist. 1.1-2), on the other hand, however, since historians of past times were able to report on the supposedly more interesting events, on major wars, conquests and domestic political disputes that would no longer exist in his own time due to the political structure (see Ann. 4.32).

This view on historiography can also be observed in Late Antiquity, for example in the writings of Ammianus Marcellinus who complains about the limitations of a historiography that has to suit the Caesar (see Res gest. 26,1). He, like Tacitus (see Ann. 4.32 and Agr. 1+2) struggles with the decline of virtus, paideia, and philosophy in his times under Constantius II. (see Hist. 14.6) The first Church historian, Eusebios of Caesarea, in comparision shows the moral decline of his time because of the “wrong“ religious attitude of the Caesars (see. HE VIII.11 and HE X.8).

Both of the late ancient historians use the proof of age and the topos of decline as an argument for moral superiority towards the other party. Both of them install a figure of salvation to whom their historiography aims (Iulian as the pagan salvator, Konstantin as the Christian one). Both of them underline that truth and briefness is their ideal for historiography (see Hist. 15.1 + 31.16.9 and HE VIII.2).

In my paper, I would like to examine on the basis of selected passages which historiographical categories Tacitus applies to the moral superiority of the maiores and how he reconciles them with his writings (e.g., how is virtus of the maiores defined? Can greatness be gained again in present times?) in order to show whether and how these categories find their way into the writings of Eusebios and Ammianus in the third and fourth century.