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A Sacrifice in Vain

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2019 Topic

Fake News and True Report: Telling Lies and Telling the Truth in the History, Politics, Poetry, and Mythology of Ancient Greece and Rome.

We hear a lot about fake news in the media, from politicians, and on social media. What would fake news look like in the ancient world? Fake news could occur in a number of types of literature: public reports (think about possible fallacies or exaggerations in Julius Caesar's Commentaries on the Gallic War), and historical narratives (think about legends in Livy's early history of Rome - even Livy admits that he had to mix truth with fiction). But fiction-based narratives like poetry can also represent things in a way that favors one side or another: think of the way Vergil's *Aeneid* could be seen to promote Augustus and his regime. Was there perhaps an alternative viewpoint that was not represented in that famous epic? What about the way that Pandora, the first woman in Greek mythology, is represented - might there have been other ways to represent the role and value of women in Greek society?

There are many other ways that "fake news" could be found in the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. For this paper topic, write a document that **identifies the fake news** in some ancient Greek or Roman source, and **provide your own creative perspective on that**. As seen below in the guidelines, this may take the form of a short story, poem, essay, or dialogue. Your project will be judged holistically, based on how successfully you address the given topic, how imaginative and creative your idea is, and how well you use language to engage your reader.

The National Association of Secondary School Principals has placed this program on the 2019-2020 NASSP List of Approved Contests, Programs, and Activities for Students.

A Sacrifice in Vain

by Daniel Berk, The Roxbury Latin School

Roxbury, MA

Teacher: Darian Reid

“Aut cum scuto aut in scuto.”

These words resounded in my head as I donned my armor. As my hands fumbled for the straps, I could only think about what this precept meant for me that day, as we were about to set out for the closest winter quarters. I, Commius Parsus, centurion of the fifth cohort of Caesar’s tenth legion, was going to die. The orders from our general Quintus Titurius Sabinus were to leave from our camp as quickly as possible, since an attack from the Eburonian savages was imminent. I planned to march under the standard of Cotta.

Lucius Aurunculeius Cotta was a man whom I, along with the entire legion, admired. Unlike Sabinus, Cotta was a fighter. There was a reason he did not wear the gold-plated armor of a general. He saw too much action for things like that. In every battle I had ever fought, he was there beside the grunt soldiers. We all knew Sabinus’ plan was not how Cotta liked to do things, but he nevertheless supported it.

As we trudged out of camp, the sun’s rays were beginning to lash out against the sky. Alongside my aquilifer Petrosidius, I led my century into a steep ravine. As our sandals dragged through the clods of dirt, my fears were confirmed. I saw the glint of an iron javelin fly by my face and bury itself in the leg of Titus Balventius, one of my fellow centurions. The following minutes of battle were short-lived. I heard the fateful command fly from Cotta’s mouth: *“Consistete in orbem!”* We locked shields and joined together into a circle, one of the legion’s most feared formations. At this point, we were on the defensive and could suffer losses until reinforcements came, or until we were all dead. Our numbers, as well as our morale, slowly dwindled as Ambiorix, chief of the Eburones, and his group of warriors slowly advanced.

I raised my javelin, ready to face death and take my stand for the legion and for Caesar. But, my battle cry was cut short by the blast of a trumpet, signaling a parley. I saw Sabinus and the rest of the high command, save for Cotta, drop their weapons. Then, a nightmare unfolded before my eyes. The Gauls had slowly surrounded the high command, now unarmed, and they rushed in for the kill. With Sabinus and the rest of the high-ranking centurions killed, the Gauls converged on Cotta, who was now fighting desperately, and they sent his soul to Elysium.

Without a leader, the rest of us took flight. I took my men through the woods in search of the closest camp. It was a long, dangerous journey, but at last I made it to the

camp of Titus Labienus. The Fates looked down kindly upon me, and I was discharged before I had to experience anymore of Mars' atrocities.

Postea

I walked through the Forum, anxiously wringing my hands. Today, there would be a reading of Caesar's memoirs at the *Campus Martius*. When I arrived at the rolling field, where I had been mustered years before, the memories came flooding back: the bloodstained breastplate of my aquilifer, the bloodthirsty fire in every Gaul's eyes as they cut down my men, and the gaping pit in my stomach. The troubadour was greeted with wild applause as he began his tale. He began, announcing, "I will sing of the heroic deeds of Titus Pullo and Lucius Vorenus, two rival centurions, who in the fifth year of the Gallic War were able to reconcile their differences and save their camp from certain destruction." As I listened to the sickly-sweet story, I was filled with unbearable anger. How could Caesar speak of such victory, while I had seen so much death? There was neither victory nor virtue in the war I fought, only suffering and death. Caesar's fanciful propaganda was nothing like it. I stumbled away from the crowd, knowing that no one else would realize Caesar's trickery. And now, Caesar was in Rome itself, with the adoration of the people, and with the city under his thumb...what would be his next move?