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Discovering Sources by Discerning Methods: Evidence for Tacitus' *Annals I-VI*

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Abstract: *Tacitus' Annals begins with an allusion to Sallust's Bellum Catilinae that makes manifest the Sallustian disposition of the historian. Tacitus declares, "Urbem Romam a principio reges habuere," and Sallust prefaces his monograph by stating, "Urbem Romam, sicuti ego accepi, condidere atque habuere initio Troiani." Yet, what is the role of facts, if Tacitus' delineation of a tyrant comports to Sallust's delineation of a conspirator? The purpose of this paper is to explore Tacitus' sources by interrogating his narrative technique.*

“But since truth grows strong with examination and delay, falsehood with haste and uncertainties, he was forsaking the story or arriving before it.”

Annals II.39

Tacitus admonishes the mass hysteria in the aftermath of a political assassination, but to what extent does Tacitus suspend his own preconceptions about the events of *Annals I-VI*? Surely, Tacitus resembles Sallust in terms of narrative structure, when he introduces the first hexad with a clear reference to *The War of Catiline*: “Kings held the Roman city from the beginning.”¹ Sallust prefaces that work with a similar phrase: “The Trojans held and founded the Roman city from the beginning.”² Yet, even subtler allusions pervade *Annals*: “Hence, the plan for me is to treat a small and final part of Augustus’ reign, then the Principate of Tiberius and the rest, without anger and zeal, motives of which I hold far removed.”³ Here, Tacitus’ “*procul habeo*” (“I hold far removed”) echoes Sallust’s “*procul habendam*,”⁴ inasmuch as A. J. Woodman argues that this metaphor is unique to Sallust.⁵ Yet, the consequences of Tacitus’ narrative structure do not only impact his diction; they also imperil his reliability as a narrator, as seen, for example, from the extent to which Tacitus manipulates the truth to malign Tiberius as a superhuman criminal like Catiline. The Curia housed a repository of reports from consuls and proconsuls, and certainly, Tacitus’ reliance upon these documents deserves credit due to his panoply of obscure details (e.g. regarding battle arrangements in Africa, “Thus, the legion was placed in the middle, light cohorts and two squadrons of cavalry were placed in the wings”).⁶ Moreover, there must have been some miscellaneous aggregate of work—perhaps, the annals of Aufidius Bassus or Sevilius Nonianus—that Tacitus referenced.⁷ Nevertheless, if Tacitus intended to portray the emperor as a conspirator or evoke the same Sallustian nostalgia for the bygone Republic, how did this preoccupation distort the facts? Omissions such as at the end of the first hexad challenge Tacitus’ authority over the *acta*, when he writes “I have not discovered the origin” about the birthplace of Seius Quadratus; according to several modern historians,

¹ *Ann.* I.1

² *B.C.* VI.1

³ *Ann.* I.1

⁴ *B.C.* IV.1

⁵ Woodman, 567

⁶ *Ann.* II.52

⁷ Syme, 279

Tacitus only needed to consult the *acta* to learn the answer.⁸ Similarly, Tacitus' persistent attention to obscure dissidents throughout the Empire, notably, the African raider, Tacfarinas, reads as hyperbolic. Thus, Tacitus' methods must be scrutinized in order to understand the precise role of evidence in *Annals*, as his elements of prose style ultimately betray an aim to provide personal insight on the delineation of a tyrant.

The first pillar of Tacitus' methods is drama, which affects the distribution of events and evolution of characters. *Annals* begins with the death of Augustus, and the earliest manuscript, entitled *Ab excessu divi Augusti*, distinguishes Tacitus' annals from those of his contemporaries by conferring dramatic overtures akin to Livy, whose chief work was *Ab urbe condita*.⁹ Moreover, Tacitus initially notes: "If it were not my intent to recall each event in its year, my soul was longing to anticipate and record at once their endings."¹⁰ Still, his departures from the annalistic chronology are frequent, and such deviations occur with distracting military campaigns and minor characters' development (e.g. Mardobuus and Arminius). The result is that lesser episodes do not appear to be peripheral in *Annals* and, in fact, sync with larger themes through suspension, although the rule is not universally steadfast. Alternatively, what is relevant to Tacitus' agenda remains annalistic in his treatise.

The implication of this dramatic styling is that Tacitus may dilute history into historical fiction. Again, from the very beginning of *Annals*, the tenor of the prologue conveys the nature of the work, in that Tacitus does not write history in the modern sense but, rather, provides his own meditation on the Principate. Thus, the character of Tiberius, the abuse of *lex maiestatis*, and the issue of imperial succession become dominant themes in the first half of the first hexad. Accordingly, Tiberius' impending accession is harangued by premonition: "Thus, it was in the altered state of the country, and there was nothing ever of the old and full custom."¹¹ The emperor's abuses by delators are further portended: "and many indications of cruelty, although they were repressed, broke out."¹² The imperial factions within the house of Tiberius even emerge: "[Tiberius] must, it seemed, be subject to a female and in addition to two youngsters, who meanwhile would burden and at some point tear apart the state."¹³ The confluence of such dangers so early in the history emphasizes the shortcomings of Tacitus' historiography, because similar to the moral decline that Sallust portrays in his prologue of *The War of Catiline*, *Annals'* prologue, which posits the moral decline of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, belies the didactic (and literary) quality of this historical tract. Indeed, tragic elements of the first hexad strike of a Greek provenance, and Tacitus' dramatic effects ring with their own prominence (e.g. the dramatic irony conveyed by Drusus publicly speaking of the wife to become his murderer: "my dearest wife and very much a parent of our shared children").¹⁴ Intrinsicly, the decorative speech is based in reality; however, Tacitus' predilection for dramatization presupposes plausibility over veracity, casting aspersions on his sources.

Tacitus' rhetoric also contributes to the fictive aspects of his work, and allusion in this category patently dominates, as might be expected given the external pressures from imperial politics. A prominent example of this evasive mechanism of innuendo occurs at the deathbed of Germanicus, when the prince insinuates Tiberius' foul play in his last words to his wife,

⁸ Ibid 280

⁹ Walker, 13

¹⁰ *Ann.* IV.71

¹¹ I.4

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ III.34

Agrippina: “never upset stronger men in the city with a competition for power.”¹⁵ Given the fictional background that Tacitus provides about Germanicus’ military exploits as well as the rumors circulating about the prince’s revolutionary machinations, the allusion to “*validiores*” (“stronger men”) is overtly suspicious of the emperor. Still, Tacitus employs a variety of rhetorical devices within his ten major monologues of Books I, II, and III, and these constructions affirm how Tacitus arranges his facts. For instance, Tacitus manipulates parallelism at the tribunal of Germanicus to further heighten the animosities between Piso and Germanicus and, more broadly, the administration and the imperial family. Here, Piso bemoans that his feast was not given for the scion of a Parthian king but a Roman king by contrasting *principis* and *regis* and necessarily obliterating the translation of the former (i.e. “*principis Romani, non Parthi regis filio*”).¹⁶ Furthermore, Tacitus notes in this episode that “[Piso’s] voice was heard in the banquet,” underscoring the allusiveness of these colorful accounts by placing their insights on unsubstantiated grounds, wherein persuasion is preferred to impersonality.¹⁷ The tone assumed by Tacitus confers rectitude for this universe, and the indignation felt by characters, such as the usurper, Piso, entails Tacitus’ conscious artistry. Whether his personification of the German campaigns (e.g. “night...removed the legions of the hostile fight” or “light returned the land”),¹⁸ oratorical chiasmi (e.g. “but for myself, it is neither honorable to be silent, nor easy to be outspoken” or “and they frightened, unless they are afraid; when they have been thoroughly frightened, they can be safely despised”),¹⁹ or recurring anaphora (e.g. “toward the gods, toward the effigy of Augustus, toward his own knees” or “they were immediately believed, they were immediately disseminated”),²⁰ the variety and frequency of rhetorical devices are inapposite to the scientific manipulation of evidence. Thus, Tacitus seems to embrace verisimilitude over hard-and-fast truth, inasmuch as his highly variegated vocabulary and florid display of rhetorical technique enhance the literary quality of *Annals* but detract from its precision, disavowing strict fidelity to the sources by modern estimations.

Yet, while Tacitus’ allusiveness is pervasive, the search for his sources may be further advanced by cross-referencing Tacitus’ account with other extant authors of the period. After all, only two authors are directly referenced in *Annals*: “Pliny the Elder, writer of the German Wars” is cited by Tacitus for a detail concerning the Elder Agrippina;²¹ furthermore, the Younger Agrippina’s *commentarii* are quoted as the authority on Nero’s mother, although they have been omitted by “*scriptores annalium*.”²² Ostensibly, the “writers of annals” implies that Tacitus was actively reading the histories of other writers and cross-referencing those documents with his own outside material. Tacitus glosses over “*quidam tradunt*” nearly a dozen times in *Annals I-VI*, and his mention that “Concerning the consular elections, which were the first then down to the last of the reign, I should hardly dare to confirm anything” bolsters the rigor of his research due to the statement’s academic skepticism.²³ Additionally, Tacitus seems to acknowledge many prominent authors with details not dissimilar to his contemporaries’ works. When Tacitus compares the premature death of Germanicus to Alexander the Great, he may very well borrow

¹⁵ II.72

¹⁶ II.57

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ I.64; I.70

¹⁹ III.53; I.29

²⁰ I.11; II.82

²¹ I.69

²² Martin, 200

²³ *Ann.* I.81

from Plutarch (i.e. “*haud multum triginta annos egressum*”).²⁴ Moreover, the aftermath of Germanicus' passing witnesses civil unrest characterized by Tacitus as “They charged through the city, they damaged the doors of the temples,”²⁵ which is corroborated by Suetonius who writes: “everywhere there was a concourse into the Capitol with torches and victims, and the gates of the temple were almost torn off.”²⁶ Furthermore, discussing the funeral of Germanicus, Tacitus introduces the *acta diurna*: “I do not find either in the authors of these things or the daily journals written of their deeds that the prince's mother, Antonia, was a part of any important (funerary) office.”²⁷ Ultimately, this varied denotation of facts fundamentally supports the notion that Tacitus consulted other records outside of the *acta senatus*.²⁸

Hence, Tacitus' sources are largely invisible in *Annals*, but as omission places so highly among the historian's literary devices, favoring compressed diction and its ensuing implications, it follows that the historical basis for the reign of Tiberius would inevitably become obscured. As aforementioned, this ambiguity does not necessarily portend fallacy: in the closing years of *Annals*' first hexad, Tacitus matches Dio on the appearance of the phoenix in Egypt, suicides of Pomponius Labeo and Mamercus Scaurus, Eastern affairs pertaining to Parthia, the suicide of Fulcinus Trio, and the death of Poppaeus Sabinus, whereas Dio substantially distances himself from Tacitus on the details elsewhere.²⁹ However, Tacitus' vagueness does reveal his biases, and differences between the two authors in this capacity indicate that Dio does not blindly accept Tacitus' word. Indubitably, the *acta senatus* were a major component of Tacitus' greater research project; however, after the fall of Sejanus in 31 AD, the emperor's prolonged absence likely strained their utility.³⁰ Personally, Tacitus was ambitious and at age 26, quite possibly, Rome's youngest senator at the time of Domitian's accession.³¹ His Republican persuasions and *prisca virtus* from his father-in-law likely made him feel frustrated and old-fashioned,³² and as viewed in his short and somber dismissal of Drusus' murder, when tyranny prevails, Tacitus is hard-pressed to linger with his *stilus*, whereas Sejanus' fall from grace is detailed with an effusive righteousness. These penchants consistently shape the course of history in *Annals*, animating episodes, inasmuch as their moral lessons are *dulce et utile*. Yet, without any substantive bibliography, what is sweet and useful must be surmised from what is technical and stylistic, and so the deconstruction of Tacitus' methods (with reference to his own unique historical upbringing) inadvertently illuminates the real Tiberius, abuses of power, and imperial infighting of the Julio-Claudians.

²⁴ II.73

²⁵ II.82

²⁶ *Cal.* 6

²⁷ *Ann.* III.3

²⁸ Martin, 205

²⁹ *Ibid*

³⁰ *Ibid* 206

³¹ Walker, 172

³² *Ibid* 203

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