

## **Between Narrative and Interpretation: Writing History in the Ancient World**

### **Unit 10: Tacitus**

#### **Introduction**

Cornelius Tacitus is arguably the greatest Roman historian whose work has survived to us. His influence on modern readers was very profound: his work became one of the great centres of interest in antiquity during the Renaissance, both because of the original take on politics and power that it offers, and for the originality of his style – a very different Latin from that conveyed by the Ciceronian tradition. We know quite a lot about the position that Tacitus had in his own time, and about the main stages of his political career, but some other important aspects of the biography of the great man remain obscure.

His date of birth, for instance, may only be guessed: it must have been around AD 55, as his friend Pliny the Younger refers to him as slightly more senior than him. The hometown of the historian is unclear too: it has long been argued that it was the city of Interamna Nahars, modern Terni in Umbria, but a provincial origin seems more likely. He was probably from Gaul, either Narbonese or Belgica. His father-in-law, the prominent politician Gnaeus Julius Agricola, was from Narbonese, and we can expect him to have encouraged his daughter to marry a young man from the same province. But this is just speculation. We move on much firmer ground if we turn to the education of young Tacitus. He certainly received excellent tuition in the field of rhetoric: it was customary practice for the young members of the imperial elite, and it is apparent that it was an important part in Tacitus' background from the very texture of his literary works, and the outstanding stylistic awareness and ability of the writer.

With Sallust – an historian who has much in common with Tacitus, and to an extent was one of his models – we had an historian who embraced literature when his political career failed. Tacitus was of a different breed. He was a prominent and

successful politician, who reached the consulship and played a very significant role at the beginning of Trajan's reign. For him, historiography coexisted with high-profile political and administrative involvement. As a provincial, he was fortunate enough to start his political career under the Flavian dynasty, which looked with favour to the involvement of the provincial elites in the administration of the empire. Tacitus made his way through the *cursus honorum* under the emperor Domitian: between the late Seventies and the early Eighties, he reached the quaestorship, and eventually, in 88, the praetorship. Such a successful career would not have possibly taken shape without the favour, or at least the non-hostility of the emperor Domitian: despite the negative judgement of the emperor that he expressed in his historical works, Tacitus did, to some extent, compromise with a ruler that he deemed unjust and incompetent. We cannot say much more about Tacitus' political positions in this period, because the evidence is quite scarce and elusive. It is possible that Tacitus' father-in-law, Agricola, fell into disgrace with the emperor, as his death in 93 was rumoured to have been caused by poison; his death may have brought about a change in Tacitus' positions. What is certain is that Tacitus found himself in the forefront of the Roman political scene after Domitian's demise in 96: he was, in fact, one of the consuls for the year 97.

The death of Domitian was not simply the end of a tyrannical regime, or the disappearance of an influential dynasty. It was also the event that marked an historic transition in the history of the Principate. With the rise to the throne of the old senator Nerva, the senatorial elite regained a position of prominence that it had not hold since the beginning of the Principate. With the designation of the Spanish army official Trajan, a new principle was put in place: the emperor was not to be chosen within the imperial family, but he was meant to be chosen by the ruling emperor and the circle of his advisors, which included a significant number of senators, and was expected to prepare himself for the senior task, working in collaboration with the emperor. The new regime – usually labelled by historians as 'principate by adoption' – ensured considerably more freedom to those who were involved in the literary and intellectual activity. The persecution of Domitian, often fuelled by gratuitous suspicion and paranoid reactions, did not occur under the rule of Nerva and Trajan.

**The *Agricola*: between biography and history**

It is apparently in this context that Tacitus realised that there was the opportunity for an active engagement in literature. His first work shows the scars of the age of Domitian: it was a biography of Agricola, the father of Tacitus' wife who had served under the Flavians and had probably been killed by Domitian. Like Sallust, Tacitus started with a monograph, with a strong, unapologetic biographical outlook. Some scholars have likened it to a funerary speech. Talking about the life of a remarkable man could be a powerful political statement. Celebrating the virtues of Agricola was not just a tribute to a relative who had supported Tacitus' rise. It was, more importantly, a way to contrast the talent and resilience of Agricola to the lives of some outspoken opponents of Domitian, like Trasea Paetus and Helvidius Priscus, who had committed suicide because they refused to live under an unjust ruler (2-3, transl. A. J. Church-W. J. Brodribb):

We have only to read that the panegyrics pronounced by Arulenus Rusticus on Paetus Thrasea, and by Herennius Senecio on Priscus Helvidius, were made capital crimes, that not only their persons but their very books were objects of rage, and that the triumvirs were commissioned to burn in the forum those works of splendid genius. They fancied, forsooth, that in that fire the voice of the Roman people, the freedom of the Senate, and the conscience of the human race were perishing, while at the same time they banished the teachers of philosophy, and exiled every noble pursuit, that nothing good might anywhere confront them. Certainly we showed a magnificent example of patience; as a former age had witnessed the extreme of liberty, so we witnessed the extreme of servitude, when the informer robbed us of the interchanges of speech, and hearing. We should have lost memory as well as voice, had it been as easy to forget as to keep silence.

Now at last our spirit is returning. And yet, though at the dawn of a most happy age Nerva Caesar blended things once irreconcilable, sovereignty and freedom; though Nerva Trajan is now daily augmenting the prosperity of the time, and though the public safety has not only our hopes and good wishes, but has also the certain pledge of their fulfillment: still, from the necessary condition of human frailty, the remedy works less quickly than the disease. As our bodies grow but slowly, perish in a moment, so it is easier to crush than to revive genius and its pursuits. Besides, the charm of indolence steals over us, and the idleness which at first we loathed we afterwards love. What if during those fifteen years, a large portion of human life, many were cut off by ordinary casualties, and the ablest fell victim to the Emperor's rage, if a few of us survive, though there have been taken from the midst of life those many years which brought the young in dumb silence to old age, and the old almost to

the very verge and end of existence! Yet we shall not regret that we have told, though in language unskilful and unadorned, the story of past servitude, and borne our testimony to present happiness. Meanwhile this book, intended to do honour to Agricola, my father-in-law, will, as an expression of filial regard, be commended, or at least excused.

Agricola's most remarkable achievement was to live under an unjust ruler, and yet to keep serving the State as long as he was allowed to do so. His attitude was much more helpful than that of the intransigent Stoic opponents. Agricola served on the important provincial of Britain, and led the repression of a revolt of natives, whose narrative takes up a significant part of the work. Like in the *commentarii de bello Gallico*, the narrative of the war is preceded by a careful discussion of the ethnography of the island (11, transl. A. J. Church-W. J. Brodribb):

Who were the original inhabitants of Britain, whether they were indigenous or foreign, is as usual among barbarians, little known. Their physical characteristics are various, and from these conclusions may be drawn. The red hair and large limbs of the inhabitants of Caledonia point clearly to a German origin. The dark complexion of the Silures, their usually curly hair, and the fact that Spain is the opposite shore to them, are an evidence that Iberians of a former date crossed over and occupied these parts. Those who are nearest to the Gauls are also like them, either from the permanent influence of original descent, or, because in countries which run out so far to meet each other, climate has produced similar physical qualities. But a general survey inclines me to believe that the Gauls established themselves in an island so near to them. Their religious belief may be traced in the strongly-marked British superstition. The language differs but little; there is the same boldness in challenging danger, and, when it is near, the same timidity in shrinking from it. The Britons, however, exhibit more spirit, as being a people whom a long peace has not yet enervated. Indeed we have understood that even the Gauls were once renowned in war; but, after a while, sloth following on ease crept over them, and they lost their courage along with their freedom. This too has happened to the long-conquered tribes of Britain; the rest are still what the Gauls once were.

Tacitus' interest in the subjects of Rome that lived in such a remote part of the empire goes even further than Caesar's. The *Agricola* contains one of the most open denunciations of Roman imperialism that survive from ancient literature: the remarkable speech by Calgacus, a leader of the Britons, before their final battle against Agricola's troops. We must not assume that Tacitus agreed with any of the

points made by Calgacus, or that he was a critic of the empire. This speech, however, is evidence that questions were being asked on the motives and aims of the Roman military endeavours, and that an ambitious author like Tacitus could afford to give the word to the enemies of Rome and include their viewpoint in his narrative (30, transl. A. J. Church-W. J. Brodribb):

Whenever I consider the origin of this war and the necessities of our position, I have a sure confidence that this day, and this union of yours, will be the beginning of freedom to the whole of Britain. To all of us slavery is a thing unknown; there are no lands beyond us, and even the sea is not safe, menaced as we are by a Roman fleet. And thus in war and battle, in which the brave find glory, even the coward will find safety. Former contests, in which, with varying fortune, the Romans were resisted, still left in us a last hope of succour, inasmuch as being the most renowned nation of Britain, dwelling in the very heart of the country, and out of sight of the shores of the conquered, we could keep even our eyes unpolluted by the contagion of slavery. To us who dwell on the uttermost confines of the earth and of freedom, this remote sanctuary of Britain's glory has up to this time been a defence. Now, however, the furthest limits of Britain are thrown open, and the unknown always passes for the marvellous. But there are no tribes beyond us, nothing indeed but waves and rocks, and the yet more terrible Romans, from whose oppression escape is vainly sought by obedience and submission. Robbers of the world, having by their universal plunder exhausted the land, they rifle the deep. If the enemy be rich, they are rapacious; if he be poor, they lust for dominion; neither the east nor the west has been able to satisfy them. Alone among men they covet with equal eagerness poverty and riches. To robbery, slaughter, plunder, they give the lying name of empire; they make a solitude and call it peace.

Agricola's tenure in Britain was very distinguished, but this did not prevent Domitian from taking him into dislike, and to actively sabotage his political career. His return to Rome was followed by isolation and open hostility on the emperor's part. Tacitus clearly suggests the involvement of the emperor in his murder; yet, he portrays Agricola trying to exempt the emperor from any responsibility. Even in his last moments he was an example of service and loyalty to the State, regardless of who was in charge.

### **Mapping the empire: the *Germania***

One of Agricola's great merits was his substantial contribution to the development of the Empire, especially with his campaign to Britain. It is not surprising that, as he was working on the *Agricola*, Tacitus started to work on the

Germania, a treatise devoted to an ethnographical and cultural account of the Germani. The interest in the 'other', in the populations that are still often labelled as 'barbaric' was quite widespread among the Roman elite, and not simply in the age of Tacitus: the emphasis that Caesar put on the cultural understanding of the Gauls was part of a certain attitude to the making of the empire, which could not be limited to the military control of the territories under Roman rule. Tacitus's interest in the Germanic populations had specific political reasons – that region was of great strategic importance for the empire, and Trajan himself campaigned there shortly before his adoption by Nerva. Tacitus was aware of the potential danger that those populations could pose to the stability of the empire, if they had ever reached a considerable degree of political unit. The whole work would deserve close attention, not least because of the significant influence that it had on German culture, including some ideologues of the Nazi regimes, who were fascinated by Tacitus' emphasis on the original character of the Germanic populations. Let us focus on what Tacitus has to say about the political organisation (14, transl. T. Gordon):

In the day of battle, it is scandalous to the prince to be surpassed in feats of bravery, scandalous to his followers to fail in matching the bravery of the Prince. But it is infamy during life, and indelible reproach, to return alive from a battle where their Prince was slain. To preserve their Prince, to defend him, and to ascribe to his glory all their own valorous deeds, is the sum and most sacred part of their oath. The princes fight for victory; for the prince his followers fight. Many of the young nobility, when their own community comes to languish in its vigour by long peace and inactivity, betake themselves through impatience to other States which then prove to be in war. For, besides that this people cannot brook repose, besides that by perilous adventures they more quickly blazon their fame, they cannot otherwise than by violence and war support their huge train of retainers. For from the liberality of their prince, they demand and enjoy that war-horse of theirs, with that victorious javelin dyed in the blood of their enemies. In the place of pay, they are supplied with a daily table and repasts; though grossly prepared, yet very profuse. For maintaining such liberality and munificence, a fund is furnished by continual wars and plunder. Nor could you so easily persuade them to cultivate the ground, or to await the return of the seasons and produce of the year, as to provoke the foe and to risk wounds and death: since stupid and spiritless they account it, to acquire by their sweat what they can gain by their blood.

It appears that Tacitus was posted to Gallia Belgica after his praetorship, but it is striking to see that his first-hand knowledge of that part of the empire does not have

any significant influence on the structure of his account. On the contrary, Tacitus seems to have used a number of literary sources that dealt with the Germans, their culture and history: the Stoic philosopher and historian Posidonius, the great historical work on the German Wars by Pliny the Elder, possibly even Livy. By showing his debts to these sources, Tacitus could prove that he was a learned historian, who read and knew his sources well: the concept of originality in ancient historiography is quite different from the concept that is used in modern scholarship.

### **Oratory and freedom: the *dialogus de oratoribus***

We have already mentioned the important role that the rhetorical education played in Tacitus' education. We have evidence that his rhetorical ability was an asset to his political rise, as shown by his role in the successful prosecution of Marius Priscus, a corrupt governor of Proconsular Africa, who was put on trial between 99 and 100. It is probably to these years that we can date the composition of the *Dialogus de oratoribus*, a fictional dialogue between several learned men on the function and scope of oratory and rhetorical education. The authenticity of this work has long been debated, but it seems quite clear now that it is indeed to be numbered among Tacitus' works. Although the *Dialogus* does not belong in the historiographical genre, it makes several important points, which will come back in Tacitus' great historical works. In fact, the central question of the dialogue is a typically Tacitean one: how can oratory (and free speech) survive under a monarchic regime? The conclusion of the dialogue, voiced by a character called Curiatius Maternus, is pessimistic: oratory is an art that becomes useful in difficult times. It does not really belong under the Principate (41, transl. A. J. Church-W. J. Brodribb):

Could a community be found in which no one did wrong, an orator would be as superfluous among its innocent people as a physician among the healthy. As the healing art is of very little use and makes very little progress in nations which enjoy particularly robust constitutions and vigorous frames, so the orator gets an inferior and less splendid renown where a sound morality and willing obedience to authority prevail. What need there of long speeches in the senate, when the best men are soon of one mind, or of endless harangues to the people, when political questions are decided not by an ignorant multitude, but by one man of pre-eminent wisdom? What need of voluntary prosecutions, when crimes are so rare and slight, or of defences full

of spiteful insinuation and exceeding proper bounds, when the clemency of the judge offers itself to the accused in his peril?

There is more than a touch of irony here. The dialogue is set in the age of Domitian, and the contrast between what we know of Tacitus' views on that emperor and the reference to 'one man of pre-eminent wisdom' (*sapientissimus et unus*) could not be more obvious. There is also, however, a bitter awareness of the inevitability of the imperial regime. One of the leading themes of Tacitus' work is the investigation of how to survive, or indeed make a meaningful political contribution under a regime that is in no way desirable, and is often unjust. The *Dialogus*, like the earlier historical monographs, set the background and the ideological premises for the more serious effort of the great works, the *Historiae* and the *Annales*, which would address those questions more directly.

### **The move to full-scale history: the *Historiae* and the *Annales***

The urgency of the questions that Tacitus busied himself with is confirmed by what we know of the early stages of his major projects. In around 100, he started to write a full-scale history of the recent history of Rome and her empire: his initial ambition was to start from the reign of Galba and to conclude with the death of Domitian, thus providing a comprehensive account of the Flavian period. He also envisaged dealing with the events of contemporary history, namely with the reigns of Nerva and Trajan, but at a later stage. The project is set out at the very beginning of the *Historiae* (1.2, transl. A. J. Church-W. J. Brodribb):

I begin my work with the time when Servius Galba was consul for the second time with Titus Vinius for his colleague. Of the former period, the 820 years dating from the founding of the city, many authors have treated; and while they had to record the transactions of the Roman people, they wrote with equal eloquence and freedom. After the conflict at Actium, and when it became essential to peace, that all power should be centered in one man, these great intellects passed away. Then too the truthfulness of history was impaired in many ways; at first, through men's ignorance of public affairs, which were now wholly strange to them, then, through their passion for flattery, or, on the other hand, their hatred of their masters. And so between the

enmity of the one and the servility of the other, neither had any regard for posterity. But while we instinctively shrink from a writer's adulation, we lend a ready ear to detraction and spite, because flattery involves the shameful imputation of servility, whereas malignity wears the false appearance of honesty. I myself knew nothing of Galba, of Otho, or of Vitellius, either from benefits or from injuries. I would not deny that my elevation was begun by Vespasian, augmented by Titus, and still further advanced by Domitian; but those who profess inviolable truthfulness must speak of all without partiality and without hatred. I have reserved as an employment for my old age, should my life be long enough, a subject at once more fruitful and less anxious in the reign of the Divine Nerva and the empire of Trajan, enjoying the rare happiness of times, when we may think what we please, and express what we think.

When he alluded to the project on Nerva and Trajan as an occupation for his old age, Tacitus was echoing an old commonplace, which many ancient historians made use of; in fact, the period that he spent working on his great historical works was a very lively one for him. We know, for instance, that Trajan assigned him the governorship of the key province of Asia in 112-113 – hardly the task that would be assigned to a political non-entity. Tacitus was perfectly accurate, though, when he mentioned his debt to the Flavian emperors, including Domitian: he does not deny his debt to them, despite the reservations on their rule that he voices at various stages of his narratives. It is precisely his previous involvement with the Flavian dynasty that enables him to make his most famous claim: he is a truthful historian, because he can afford to speak without any partisan spirit, and any open hostility towards any of the characters he mentioned. The complex political history of Tacitus is the best guarantee of his accuracy and reliability: since he knew most of the leading characters of his narrative, he is in the position to express an informed judgement; the complexity of his career and his political position ensure that his work has no hidden agenda.

It would be impossible to do justice to the complexity of the *Historiae* within the limits of this unit. We need to bear in mind that what we have of this work is only a small fraction of the whole project: four whole books, and a part of the fifth one, out of a total of twelve or fourteen books. The section that has survived to us covers the years 69 and (in part) 70, and it is devoted the long and complex civil war that followed the collapse of the Julio-Claudian dynasty. AD 69 was the so-called year of

restless spin of self-proclamations, conspiracies, with parts of the Roman army pledging their allegiance to different emperors (or would-be emperors). The rapid succession of Galba, Otho, Vitellius, and finally Vespasian is mirrored by Tacitus' characteristically quick-paced narrative, based on an admirable mastery of the potential of the Latin language, on a deliberate use of brevity, and on a bold use of transitions from one scene to another. The opening chapter is a good example, with the brief, but remarkably lucid account of Roman history after Actium. The most impressive example, however, is probably in the second book, when Tacitus deals with the events that persuaded Vespasian to seek power (2.76-79, transl. A. J. Church-W. J. Brodribb):

Though staggered by these apprehensions, he was confirmed in his purpose by others among the legates and among his own friends, and particularly by Mucianus, who, after many conversations with him in private, now publicly addressed him in the following terms: 'All who enter upon schemes involving great interests, should consider whether what they are attempting be for the advantage of the State, for their own credit, easy of accomplishment, or at any rate free from serious difficulty. They must also weigh the circumstances of their adviser, must see whether he will follow up his advice by imperilling himself, and must know who, should fortune prosper the undertaking, is to have the highest honours. I invite you, Vespasian, to a dignity which will be as beneficial to the State, as it will be honourable to yourself. Under heaven this dignity lies within your reach. And do not dread what may present the semblance of flattery. To be chosen successor to Vitellius would be more of an insult than a compliment. It is not against the vigorous intellect of the Divine Augustus, it is not against the profound subtlety of the aged Tiberius, it is not even against the house of Caius, Claudius, or Nero, established by a long possession of the Empire, that we are rising in revolt. You have already yielded to the prestige even of Galba's family. To persist in inaction, and to leave the State to degradation and ruin, would look like indolence and cowardice, even supposing that servitude were as safe for you as it would be infamous. The time has gone by and passed away when you might have endured the suspicion of having coveted Imperial power. That power is now your only refuge. Have you forgotten how Corbulo was murdered? His origin, I grant, was more illustrious than ours; yet in nobility of birth Nero surpassed Vitellius. The man who is afraid sees distinction enough in any one whom he fears. That an Emperor can be created by the army, Vitellius is himself a proof, who, though he had seen no service and had no military reputation, was raised to the throne by the unpopularity of Galba. Otho, who was overcome, not indeed by skilful generalship, or by a powerful enemy, but by his own premature despair, this man has made into a great and deservedly regretted Emperor, and all the while he is disbanding his legions, disarming his auxiliaries, and sowing every day fresh seeds of civil war. All the energy and high spirit which once belonged to his army is wasted in the revelry of taverns and in aping the debaucheries of their chief. You have from Judæa, Syria, and Egypt, nine fresh legions, unexhausted by battle, uncorrupted by dissension; you have a soldiery hardened by habits of warfare and victorious over foreign foes; you have strong fleets,

auxiliaries both horse and foot, kings most faithful to your cause, and an experience in which you excel all other men.

‘For myself I will claim nothing more than not to be reckoned inferior to Valens and Cæcina. But do not spurn Mucianus as an associate, because you do not find in him a rival. I count myself better than Vitellius; I count you better than myself. Your house is ennobled by the glories of a triumph; it has two youthful scions, one of whom is already equal to the cares of Empire, and in the earliest years of his military career won renown with these very armies of Germany. It would be ridiculous in me not to waive my claims to Empire in favour of the man whose son I should adopt, were I myself Emperor. Between us, however, there will not be an equal distribution of the fruits of success or failure. If we are victorious, I shall have whatever honour you think fit to bestow on me; the danger and the peril we shall share alike; nay, I would rather have you, as is the better policy, direct your armies, and leave to me the conduct of the war and the hazards of battle. At this very moment a stricter discipline prevails among the conquered than among the conquerors. The conquered are fired to valour by anger, by hatred, by the desire of vengeance, while the conquerors are losing their energy in pride and insolence. War will of itself discover and lay open the hidden and rankling wounds of the victorious party. And, indeed, your vigilance, economy, and wisdom, do not inspire me with greater confidence of success than do the indolence, ignorance, and cruelty of Vitellius. Once at war, we have a better cause than we can have in peace, for those who deliberate on revolt have revolted already.’

After this speech from Mucianus, the other officers crowded round Vespasian with fresh confidence, encouraging him, and reminding him of the responses of prophets and the movements of the heavenly bodies. Nor was Vespasian proof against this superstition, for afterwards, when master of the world, he openly retained one Seleucus, an astrologer, to direct his counsels, and to foretell the future. Old omens now recurred to his thoughts. A cypress-tree of remarkable height on his estate had suddenly fallen, and rising again the following day on the very same spot, had flourished with majestic beauty and even broader shade. This, as the Haruspices agreed, was an omen of brilliant success, and the highest distinction seemed prophesied to Vespasian in early youth. At first, however, the honours of a triumph, his consulate, and the glory of his victories in Judæa, appeared to have justified the truth of the omen. When he had won these distinctions, he began to believe that it portended the Imperial power. Between Judæa and Syria is Mount Carmel; this is the name both of the mountain and the Deity. They have no image of the god nor any temple; the tradition of antiquity recognises only an altar and its sacred association. While Vespasian was there offering sacrifice and pondering his secret hopes, Basilides the priest, after repeated inspections of the entrails, said to him, ‘Whatever be your purposes, Vespasian, whether you think of building a house, of enlarging your estate, or augmenting the number of your slaves, there is given you a vast habitation, boundless territory, a multitude of men.’ These obscure intimations popular rumour had at once caught up, and now began to interpret. Nothing was more talked about by the common people. In Vespasian's presence the topic was more frequently discussed, because to the aspirant himself men have more to say.

With purposes no longer doubtful they parted, Mucianus for Antioch, Vespasian for Cæsarea. These cities are the capitals of Syria and Judæa respectively. The initiative

in transferring the Empire to Vespasian was taken at Alexandria under the prompt direction of Tiberius Alexander, who on the 1st of July made the legions swear allegiance to him. That day was ever after celebrated as the first of his reign, though the army of Judæa on July 3rd took the oath to Vespasian in person with such eager alacrity that they would not wait for the return of his son Titus, who was then on his way back from Syria, acting as the medium between Mucianus and his father for the communication of their plans. All this was done by the impulsive action of the soldiers without the preliminary of a formal harangue or any concentration of the legions.

### **The role of speeches in the *Annales***

Speeches play a very prominent role in Tacitus' narrative, as in the case in Thucydides and Sallust, and Mucianus' intervention is not simply a decisive factor in Vespasian's decision, but a survey of the political and military situation at the time. What follows is even more remarkable: the focus switches to the soldiers who give Vespasian their encouragement, then to the prodigies which foretold his rise to power, and finally to the main thread of the narrative, with the beginning of Vespasian's campaign. If Tacitus had wanted to concentrate exclusively on 'facts' – Vespasian is persuaded by his friends and associates to start a campaign; some favourable prodigies are reported; the campaign starts soon – he could have gone for a much briefer account. The point of constructing a long speech by Mucianus (which may well not have been pronounced in reality) was to provide a clearer context to Vespasian's rise; the emphasis on the role of the soldiers and on the prodigies was invaluable for the definition of Vespasian as a character of Tacitus' narrative. We are as far as we can possibly be from the old framework of annalistic history: while Tacitus is still very interested in facts, his aim is to build a complex narrative, where a number of interwoven motives can emerge as forcefully as possible, and an account of the complexity of reality can be constructed. At the same time, as we can see, Tacitus is ruthless enough to provide the sort of harsh transitions that are necessary in a wide-ranging narrative like his.

We have already referred in passing to Tacitus' debt to Sallust. It is apparent in his style, in the constant search for brevity and symmetry, in the taste for archaisms. It is even more apparent in the same moralistic tendencies that inform Tacitus' narrative. Like Sallust, Tacitus viewed himself as the historian of a world

that was declining, or any way seriously at risk of declining. Unlike Sallust, Tacitus did not convey his moral views in lengthy digressions; he was rather keener on briefer statements, in which he would enunciate a morale principle: the so-called *sententiae*.

His dislike for lengthy moralising statements is confirmed by this passage, which is an exception that confirms the rule, a brief digression on Roman Republican history (2.38, transl. A. J. Church-W. J. Brodribb):

That old passion for power which has been ever innate in man increased and broke out as the Empire grew in greatness. In a state of moderate dimensions equality was easily preserved; but when the world had been subdued, when all rival kings and cities had been destroyed, and men had leisure to covet wealth which they might enjoy in security, the early conflicts between the patricians and the people were kindled into flame. At one time the tribunes were factious, at another the consuls had unconstitutional power; it was in the capital and the forum that we first essayed civil wars. Then rose C. Marius, sprung from the very dregs of the populace, and L. Sulla, the most ruthless of the patricians, who perverted into absolute dominion the liberty which had yielded to their arms. After them came Cn. Pompeius, with a character more disguised but no way better. Henceforth men's sole object was supreme power. Legions formed of Roman citizens did not lay down their arms at Pharsalia and Philippi, much less were the armies of Otho and Vitellius likely of their own accord to abandon their strife. They were driven into civil war by the same wrath from heaven, the same madness among men, the same incentives to crime. That these wars were terminated by what we may call single blows, was owing to want of energy in the chiefs. But these reflections on the character of ancient and modern times have carried me too far from my subject. I now return to the course of events.

The digression starts off with a motto, a general principle: passion for power is innate in men. The familiar point is developed with an eye to the expansion of the empire; the ensuing judgments on several leading characters of the Republic has a similar concentration of *sententiae*, with its string of very brief judgments on individuals, which pick up on one single aspect, and use it as the exemplary point of reference.

### **Tacitus' change of plan**

Something changed in Tacitus' project at some point during the composition of the *Historiae*. The project of writing a history of the times of Nerva and Trajan: we can only speculate on the factors that led Tacitus to this decision. Possibly he realised

that a project devoted to such recent events was not viable, or even desirable. Whatever his motives may have been, Tacitus decided to turn to the earlier history of the Principate, and to write a history of the Julio-Claudian period, starting from the death of Augustus and ending with the death of Nero: the *Annales ab excessu divi Augusti*. It was a demanding choice, which would cover about fifty years of troubled and complex history. The work consisted of sixteen, or eighteen books; we have the first four one, a fragment of the fifth and the sixth, and the books from 11 to 16. The sixteenth book is unfinished: possibly the death of the author put the project to an abrupt end. The problem is that we do not know when Tacitus died; we do not even know if he managed to witness Hadrian's rise to power, and the plotting that preceded it. This would have some implications on the way we make sense of the pessimistic, often even gloomy tone of the *Annales*: the crisis of the system of the 'principate by adoption' may have influenced Tacitus' views on the nature of the monarchic regime, and perhaps convinced him to devote his attention to the early history of the principate, when plots and conspiracies were an endemic practice.

As a matter of fact, the emphasis of the *Annales* is on the ways in which the imperial power works, is contested, distributed or negotiated. The *Historiae*, on the contrary, are focused (at least in the section that survives) on the ability (or lack thereof) of the Principate to secure peace and stability.

#### Suggested reading

1. R. Syme, *Tacitus*, Oxford 1958 [e-book available through Net Library, [www.netlibrary.com](http://www.netlibrary.com)]
2. A.R. Birley, 'The Life and Death of Cornelius Tacitus', *Historia* vol. 49, No. 2 (2nd Qtr., 2000), 230-247 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4436577>]
3. C. Damon, 'The Trial of Cn. Piso in Tacitus' Annals and the "Senatus Consultum de Cn. Pisone Patre": New Light on Narrative Technique', *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 120 (1999), 143-162 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1561716>]
4. A.J. Woodman, *Tacitus and Tiberius: the Alternative Annals*, Durham 1985.
5. M. G. Morgan, 'Vespasian and the Omens in Tacitus "Histories" 2.78', *Phoenix*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Spring, 1996), pp. 41-55 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1192680>]
6. D. S. Levene, 'Tacitus' "Dialogus" as Literary History', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 134, No. 1 (Spring, 2004), 157-200.

7. C. O. Brink, 'History in the 'Dialogus de Oratoribus' and Tacitus the Historian: A New Approach to an Old Source', *Hermes* vol. 121 (1993) 335-349 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4476967>]
8. G. B. Townend, 'Cluvius Rufus in the Histories of Tacitus', *American Journal of Philology* vol. 85 (1964) 337-377 [JSTOR: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/293018>]

You should also make use, when appropriate, of the commentary on the *Germania* by J. B. Rives (Oxford 1999) and the commentaries of A. J. Woodman on some books of the *Annales* (book 3: Cambridge 1996; book 4: Cambridge 1989)

**Short assignment:** What was Tacitus' intended audience?