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# Year-beginnings in the Neronian Books of Tacitus' *Annals*

By Salvador Bartera, Knoxville

*Abstract:* In this article, I discuss Tacitus' narrative technique in the beginning-of-year sections of *Annals* 13–16, the books of Nero. Tacitus introduces a new year with various formulae in *Annals* 1–6, but in the later books his desire for *variatio* seems to cease: in fact, all extant year-beginnings, except for two, are introduced by a standard ablative absolute of the type *x y consulibus*. The standard formula, I argue, reflects the political irrelevance of the consuls, who become, so to speak, 'sclerotic' dating devices. The two exceptions to the ablative absolute formula, on the other hand, are not chance occurrences. Tacitus purportedly wished to draw attention to two years: the year 58, whose consuls were the descendants of the consuls of 31 B.C., and the year 65, the longest narrative of the extant *Annals*, disproportionately devoted to one event, the Pisonian Conspiracy.

## I. Introduction

The extant portion of *Annals* 11–16 differs greatly from the mostly extant Books 1–6<sup>1</sup>, in structure, language and style<sup>2</sup>. Tacitus' motives for characterizing so markedly these two sections of the *Annals* remain obscure. Perhaps the historian

- \* R. Ash, B.J. Gibson, C.S. Kraus, and A.J. Woodman have read various drafts of my paper at different stages, and provided helpful feedback for which I am extremely grateful. I would also like to thank the anonymous referees for some valuable observations. I am, however, solely responsible for the ideas here expressed.
- 1 On the original length of the *Annals* (sixteen or eighteen books), their probable stopping point (the death of Nero or the end of the year 68), and the possibility that they were never completed, which are all controversial issues, see e.g. R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford 1958) 686–687; F.R.D. Goodyear, *Tacitus. G&R New Surveys in the Classics* No. 4 (Oxford 1970) 18–19; R.P. Oliver, 'Did Tacitus Finish the *Annales*?', *ICS* 2 (1977) 289–314; H. Y. McCulloch, Jr., *Narrative Cause in the Annals of Tacitus* (Königstein 1984) 169–175; R.H. Martin, *Tacitus* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 1981) 162–163. F.G. Moore, 'Annalistic Method as Related to the Book Divisions in Tacitus', *TAPA* 54 (1923) 5–20, is still useful. There is a helpful bibliographical survey in M.M. Sage, 'Tacitus' Historical Works: A Survey and Appraisal', *ANRW* II.33.2 (1990) 851–1030 (esp. 984–997).
  - 2 The bibliography is extremely large. Beside the standard commentaries of Furneaux (1896–1907), Koestermann (1963–1968), Goodyear (1972, 1981), and Woodman/Martin (1989, 1996), Syme's chapter on 'The structure of the *Annales*' remains fundamental (1958, 253–270). For my study, I found most useful J. Ginsburg, *Tradition and Theme in the Annals of Tacitus* (New York 1981); G. Wille, *Der Aufbau der Werke des Tacitus* (Amsterdam 1983), with bibliographical survey at 342–357; R.H. Martin, 'Structure and Interpretation in the 'Annals' of Tacitus', *ANRW* II.33.2 (1990) 1500–1581, at 1578. For Tacitus' language and style, see S.P. Oakley, 'Style and Language', in A.J. Woodman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Tacitus* (Cambridge 2009) 195–211, with further bibliography at 211 (and 14).

wished the more annalistic structure of *Annals* 1–6 (and its greater focus on senatorial material) to reflect the fact that Tiberius' government was more republican (at least in appearance), while the looser nature of *Annals* 11–16 (and above all of the Neronian books), centered more on personalities and events<sup>3</sup>, would reflect the even more tyrannical turn that the government had taken<sup>4</sup>. Tacitus, however, is often a deceptive and difficult writer to pin down, and, though the different character of *Annals* 11–16 is undeniable, the reasons or purposes behind it will necessarily continue to provoke scholarly debate.

For *Annals* 1–6, Ginsburg (1981) provides an excellent analysis of the overall structure, concluding that their more annalistic nature is a matter of form rather than of substance. The portion of the surviving Claudian books is too small to allow any realistic assessment.<sup>5</sup> Books 13–16, which cover Nero's reign from A.D. 54 through the middle of 66, therefore offer the best comparison. Regrettably, a detailed study of these books does not exist<sup>6</sup>. Following Ginsburg's discussion of the beginning-of-year narrative in the Tiberian books, in this paper I shall examine Tacitus' treatment of the beginning-of-year narrative in the Neronian books<sup>7</sup>. First, I shall analyze the formula that Tacitus employs most often to date the year, namely the names of the *consules ordinarii* expressed in the ablative absolute (*x y consulibus*), and show that in Tacitus this formula becomes, as it were, a-temporal<sup>8</sup>. Indeed Tacitus often rearranges the natural chronology of the events to suit his narrative strategy, placing first an event to which the historian *decides* to assign a special significance<sup>9</sup>. Thus the two consuls simply identify the year and the formula *x y consulibus* becomes 'sclerotic', a stylistic device which

- 3 C. Pelling ('Biographical History? Cassius Dio on the Early Principate', in M.J. Edwards/ S. Swain (edd.), *Portraits: Biographical Representation in the Greek and Latin Literature of the Roman Empire* (Oxford 1997) 117–44, at 118), in reference to Cassius Dio's *History* of the early principate, coined the term 'biostructure' for a "narrative, which frequently organizes its material around a dominating individual".
- 4 Syme (1958) 269–270; McCulloch (1984) 17–19, 157–158; M. Morford, 'Tacitus' Historical Methods in the Neronian Books of the 'Annals'', *ANRW* II.33.2 (1990) 1582–1627, at 1597.
- 5 On the Claudian books, see e.g. A. Mehl, *Tacitus über Kaiser Claudius: die Ereignisse am Hof* (München 1974); Martin (1990) 1578–1581; S.J.V. Malloch, 'Hamlet the Prince? The Claudian *Annals*', in Woodman (2009) 116–126.
- 6 See most recently E. Keitel, "Is Dying so very Terrible? The Neronian *Annals*", in Woodman (2009) 127–143. J. Tresch, *Die Nerobücher in den Annalen des Tacitus* (Heidelberg, 1965), is outdated; J.M. Morris, *Compositional Techniques in Annales XIII–XVI* (Diss., Yale University 1969), though helpful, treats briefly only a select number of episodes. The analyses of Wille (1983), esp. 527–600, 634–637, Martin (1990), esp. 1550–1578, and Morford (1990) are more focused. A book such as Ginsburg's still needs to be written on the Neronian books, and it is my plan to fill this gap.
- 7 It will be obvious that I agree with Ginsburg's approach and conclusions.
- 8 Moore (1923) was one of the first to draw attention to this.
- 9 Year-beginnings are Tacitus' favorite for rearranging natural chronology of events (cf. e.g. the trial of Piso at the beginning of Book 3, for which see Woodman/Martin (1996) 67–75); but there are other cases as well, e.g. the death of Arminius at *Ann.* 2.88 (Ginsburg (1981) 37–38), or the concentration of the praetorian cohorts into a single camp (*Ann.* 4.2.1, with Martin/Woodman).



carries no weight – and may indeed reflect Tacitus' own view on the current nature of that magistracy. Second, I shall examine those cases in which Tacitus departs from that formula, showing how the historian, by a minimal variation of a grammatical construction, subtly alerts readers to the 'exceptional' content of the material that *he* selects for the narrative of that year.

## II. Year-beginnings

Of the twelve extant year-beginnings in Books 13–16<sup>10</sup>, ten are introduced by the formula *x y consulibus*.<sup>11</sup> Although other formulae were available to historians to date the year (Livy, e.g., uses it along with other constructions: 25% of the total in Books 21–45), Tacitus clearly favors the ablative absolute throughout the *Annals*, as the formula “which would allow him great flexibility in the selection of material”<sup>12</sup>. Since Tacitus' style is characterized by an extensive use of *variatio*, the repetition of this formula appears especially significant.<sup>13</sup> Tacitus, moreover, uses the consuls simply to date the year, and immediately focuses on something (or someone) else<sup>14</sup>. In this way, as has been noted especially with regard to the Tiberian books, Tacitus wishes to underline “the limitation of the consuls' role under the principate and the anachronism of their use for dating purposes.”<sup>15</sup>

10 In Books 1–6 there are twenty extant year-beginnings (Ginsburg (1981) 10–30), not including the year 20 (for whose 'delayed' beginning, see Woodman/Martin on 3.2.3) and assuming that the year 32 coincides with the beginning of Book 6, which is in fact a controversial issue (see C. Ando, 'Tacitus, *Annales* VI: Beginning and End', *AJP* 118 (1997) 285–303). The ablative absolute is used in 14 cases (70%).

11 The two exceptions are the years 58 and 65. In the extant Claudian books, the seven year-beginnings (48–54) are all introduced by the *x y consulibus* formula. Thus the figure for Books 11–16 is approximately 90%.

12 Ginsburg (1981) 11.

13 A lack of variation which is in itself a type of *variatio*.

14 In Livy the formula still retains its full 'vitality'. Thus Livy often adds specific temporal phrases to place the events within the year, and the following narrative relates to consular activities (Ginsburg (1981) 13–14). Ginsburg's analysis of the Livian year-narrative, however, has been challenged by J. Rich, 'Structuring Roman History: The Consular Year and the Roman Historical Tradition', in J.D. Chaplin/C.S. Kraus (edd.), *Oxford Readings in Classical Studies: Livy* (Oxford 2009) 118–147. Rich distinguishes between the early (Books 2–10) and the middle republican period (Books 21–45) of Livy's history. He concludes that Livy treats his material much more freely than is generally thought. Rich (esp. at 122–123, 132–133) reassesses also the traditional view that Livy's work was structured in fixed patterns. His conclusions are very interesting, and his analysis of Livy's manipulation of material in order to serve his own narrative purposes is in line with what I shall argue in this paper.

15 Martin/Woodman on 4.1.1. See also D. Feeney, *Caesar's Calendar* (Berkeley/Los Angeles 2007) 191–192; D. Feeney, 'Time', in A. Feldherr (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Historians* (Cambridge 2009) 139–51, esp. 145–150.

Following are the instances in Books 13–16 in which Tacitus employs this formula<sup>16</sup>:

1. [13.11.1–2, A.D. 55] *Claudio Nerone L. Antistio consulibus cum in acta principum iurarent magistratus, in sua acta collegam Antistium iurare prohibuit, magnis patrum laudibus, ut iuvenilis animus levium quoque rerum gloria sublatus maiores continuaret. secutaque lenitas in Plautium Lateranum, quem ob adulterium Messalinae ordine demotum reddidit senatui, clementiam suam obstringens crebris orationibus, quas Seneca testificando, quam honesta praeciperet, vel iactandi ingenii voce principis vulgabat*<sup>17</sup>.

With Claudius Nero and L. Antistius as consuls, when the magistrates were swearing the oath on the emperors' acts,<sup>18</sup> Nero prohibited his colleague Antistius from swearing the oath on his own acts, with great praise from the senators, so that his young mind, lifted by the glory of even light matters, might continue to greater ones. And there followed leniency toward Plautius Lateranus, whom Nero restored to the senate after he had been removed from his rank because of adultery with Messalina. He pledged his clemency in frequent speeches which Seneca was publicizing in the voice of the princeps, in order to testify to his own honorable teachings, or else to vaunt his own talents.

Book 13 does not begin with a new year. Tacitus, instead, chooses to devote the beginning of the book to introducing themes and characters that he will further develop in the subsequent narrative. Thus the opening chapters of Book 13 function, so to speak, as the 'preface' to the Neronian Books<sup>19</sup>. Since the opening event of the book, the murder of Silanus, obviously alludes to the beginning

16 In my analysis, I will not take into consideration the years 57 (13.31.1) and 61 (14.29.1). In 57, nothing important happens (*pauca memoria digna evenere*), and the year is mostly filled with annalistic material; in 61, the focus is on foreign affairs (the revolt of Boudicca). For the year 57, Martin (1990) 1555–1556, pointed out that the 'irrelevance' of the year is probably to be connected with the 'relevance' of the following year. Tacitus, in other words, purposely downplayed the year 57 in order to enhance the dramatic narrative of 58. Nowhere else more than here do the consuls serve as a mere date.

17 The Latin text printed here follows H. Heubner, *P. Cornelii Taciti libri qui supersunt. Tom. I. Ab excessu Divi Augusti* (Stuttgart/Leipzig 1994), with minimal variations in the punctuation. All numerical references, unless stated otherwise, are to the *Annals*. Translations are generally my own. In some debated passages, however, I have followed A.J. Woodman, *Tacitus: The Annals* (Indianapolis 2008).

18 The beginning of the year 55 is one of the two cases in Books 13–16 for which the events narrated can certainly be placed at the beginning of the calendar year since the *acta* were sworn on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January. The other case is the year 63 (15.23.1; below).

19 The first two words of the book, *prima novo*, clearly point to a 'new beginning' (the juxtaposition of the two adjectives is rather common, both in poetry, e.g. Verg. *Aen.* 9.459, Ov., *Am.* 1.1.17, and prose). Since Nero had been hailed as emperor in October (12.69.1), the beginning of Book 13 belongs, chronologically, to the end of the year 54. Tacitus' technique of anticipating a topic to which he will return later (a technique employed also by Sallust and Livy), is analogous to that which has been called, esp. in reference to the poets, "suspension of thought". See A.J. Woodman, *Rhetoric in Classical Historiography: Four Studies* (London 1988), at 122, 147 n. 13.



of Tiberius' reign (13.1.1 *prima novo principatu mors* ~ 1.6.1 *primum facinus novi principatus*)<sup>20</sup>, Tacitus purposely construes a narrative link between the two reigns, and thus suggests, for both emperors, the malevolent influence of their respective mothers. Tacitus gives a careful description of Nero's first decisions, stressing both his young age and inexperience, and the role of his *magistri* Seneca and Burrus. While the first (bad) acts are executed without Nero's knowledge or approval (1.1 *ignaro Nerone* ~ 1.3 *invito principe*), both his (good) military decisions concerning the east and the positive reception of his first speech in the senate are attributed to the influence of Burrus and Seneca. This 'good' beginning of Nero, as has been generally interpreted<sup>21</sup>, focuses however on characters and events that will suffer a reversal of fortune in the following narrative<sup>22</sup>. When Nero enters his first consulship, his decisions are consistent with his previous 'good' acts, probably following Seneca's advice, for *clementia* is the virtue Tacitus singles out, with clear allusion to Seneca's homonymous treatise, which was published shortly after. Nero's first act as consul is to forbid his colleague Antistius from swearing allegiance to his own acts. The oath to uphold the *acta* of a *princeps*, which had originated with Caesar, was implemented by both Augustus and Tiberius. Tiberius, however, while implementing the swearing of the oath to his predecessors' enactments, forbade it to his own acts, perhaps in an attempt to preserve an appearance of the republic<sup>23</sup>. In Nero's case, his prohibition for Antistius could seem, *prima facie*, to prove Nero's respect for the collegiality of the republican magistracy. In fact, the emperor's decision, enclosed as it is between the other magistrates' swearing of the oath and the senators' praise for Nero,

20 On the two beginnings, see R.H. Martin, 'Tacitus and the Death of Augustus', *CQ* n.s. 5 (1955) 123–128; Syme (1958) 261; Morford (1990) 1582. At 13.1.1, however, Tacitus clearly excludes Nero's guilt (*ignaro Nerone*), thus characterizing the emperor, from the start, as a passive 'puppet'. What emerges, instead, is Agrippina's power (Martin (1990) 1551–1552). It should also be noted that 13.1.1 recalls, but does not contrast with, 1.6.1. Since in both cases the emperors are unaware of their mothers' machinations (see A.J. Woodman, *Tacitus Reviewed* (Oxford 1998) 35; cf. also 26), the parallelism between the two 'first murders' is even more marked.

21 On Nero's early 'good' years, see M.T. Griffin, *Nero: The End of a Dynasty* (New Haven/London 1984) esp. 37–66.

22 Seneca's and Burrus' influence (13.2.1) foreshadows their fall; Nero's respect for his mother (2.3) her murder; his devotion to the senate and plans for the future (4.1–2) his disrespect for the senate's authority; his appointment of Corbulo (8.1) the general's demise. The end of the year is likewise a masterpiece of Tacitean irony (10.1–2): Nero's honoring of his father C. Domitius and guardian Labeo contrasts with the fact that he had become emperor through the murder of his adoptive father and will later demand the death of his current 'guardian' Seneca (15.59.2ff.); his refusal of celebratory silver and golden statues contrasts with his famous colossal statue (Suet., *Nero* 31); his decline of the special honor that the senators wished to give to the month of his birth contrasts with the later renaming of two months (15.74.1, 16.12.2); his denial of admitting a slave's accusation against a senator contrasts with the role of *delatores* at 16.10.2. In general, for end-of-year narrative in the *Annals*, see Ginsburg (1981) 31–52.

23 Cf. 1.72.1 *neque in acta sua iurari, quamquam censente senatu, permisit* [sc. Tiberius]. It is unclear whether Tiberius sustained this prohibition throughout his reign or, at some point, changed his mind (Goodyear ad loc.).

emphasizes both the passive role of the senate and Nero's superior authority as consul over his colleague Antistius. Tacitus' text does not make clear whether the other magistrates swore the oath also to Nero's acts, but the juxtaposition *in sua acta ~ collegam Antistius* emphasizes the 'qualitative' difference between the two consuls Nero and Antistius. At the same time, Tacitus' wording seems to imply that, had Nero not prohibited it, Antistius would have been ready to swear the oath<sup>24</sup>.

Tacitus' use of the 'monotonous' ablative absolute formula to record Nero's first consulship is pointed and deceptive. While the material of this year-beginning relates to consular and senatorial activities, as was typical of annalistic histories, the narrative focus on the annual magistrates serves only to point out the lack of true collegiality, and to emphasize the absolute power of the *princeps*. Tacitus' narrative seems to adhere to the general picture of Nero's 'good beginning', and to the senate's renewed importance. In fact, Tacitus alerts readers that Nero's 'good' deeds were only apparent and temporary, and the senate consistently adulatory. Tacitus does not undermine Nero's enactments openly, but through a manipulative use of form and content, and through the use of subtle allusions to characters and events which were familiar to his readers. Indeed both Nero's initial attitude towards Antistius and his leniency towards Plautius Lateranus contribute to building up the Tacitean narrative which will characterize the dramatic deaths of these two illustrious victims of Nero<sup>25</sup>.

2. [13.25.1–2, A.D. 56] *Q. Volusio P. Scipione consulibus otium foris, foeda domi lascivia, qua Nero itinera urbis et lupanaria et deverticula veste servili in dissimulationem sui compositus pererrabat, comitantibus qui raperent venditioni exposita et obviis vulnera inferrent, adversus ignaros adeo ut ipse quoque exciperet ictus et ore praeferret. deinde ubi Caesarem esse qui grassaretur pernotuit augebanturque iniuriae adversus viros feminasque insignes, et quidam permissa semel licentia sub nomine Neronis inulti propriis cum globis eadem exercebant, in modum captivitatis nox agebatur ...*

With Q. Volusius and P. Scipio as consuls, there was peace abroad, at home shameful recklessness. Nero wandered through the streets, brothels and bars of the city in disguise, dressed like a slave, accompanied by men who would seize things for sale and inflict wounds on whomever they happened to meet, against adversaries that were so unaware that even he himself would receive blows and show them on his face. Then, when it became known that it was Caesar who was prowling, and injuries against distinguished men and women were increasing, and some, once this license was permitted under Nero's name, were doing similar things with their own gangs without being punished, the night was passed in a state of captivity [...]

24 Just as for Tiberius (n. above), there is no evidence that Nero continued to uphold this prohibition.

25 See 15.60.1 for Plautius Lateranus; 16.10.1ff. for Antistius Vetus.



The phrase *otium foris* ('peace abroad'), immediately following the ablative absolute, belonged to traditional annalistic language and characterized the standard division of external and internal affairs<sup>26</sup>. It was typical beginning-of-year language<sup>27</sup>. Tacitus, whose annalistic history is anything but traditional, here employs the phrase *otium foris* as a foil, thus leading his readers to expect traditional, annalistic material. What corresponds to the phrase *otium foris*, however, is not an account of internal disturbances, at least not the kind of struggle that was typical in annalistic historiography<sup>28</sup>. *foris* is contrasted with and enhanced by the chiasmic (and alliterative) juxtaposition of Nero's *foeda domi lascivia* ('shameful recklessness at home'), where *lascivia* provides the most improbable annalistic material, but which Tacitus portrays as equal to the effects of civil strife. Thus Tacitus characterizes the recklessness of Nero in terms of a hostile assault on the city of Rome, which the emperor keeps in a state of captivity (25.2 *in modum captivitatis nox agebatur*).<sup>29</sup> Capture of cities was a traditional and popular theme of republican historiography, whose absence in his history Tacitus disingenuously lamented (4.32.1). In this instance, by giving the names of the consuls at year-beginning and adopting the antithesis *foris* ~ *domi*, Tacitus records untraditional material (Nero's licentiousness) in terms of a traditional motif (the capture of cities).

3. [14.1.1, A.D. 59] *Gaio Vips(t)ano (C.) Fonteio consulibus diu meditatatum scelus non ultra Nero distulit, vetustate imperii coalita audacia et flagrantior in dies amore Poppaeae, quae sibi matrimonium et discidium Octaviae incolumi Agrippina haud sperans crebris criminationibus, aliquando per facetias incusare principem et pupillum vocare, qui iussis alienis obnoxius non modo imperii, sed libertatis etiam indigeret.*

- 26 *otium* (less commonly *pax*) *foris domi* ..., not necessarily in this order, but always to record foreign and/or domestic events, is "a standard Livian description" (S.P. Oakley, *A Commentary on Livy Books VI–X* (Oxford 1997–2005) on 7.27.1; see also Martin (1990) 1505–1506) in the first decade (3.30.2, 31.1, 65.2, 4.7.12, 25.9, 7.27.3); cf. esp. 3.30.1–2 *sequuntur consules Q. Minucius M. Horatius Puhillus. cuius initio anni cum foris otium esset, domi seditiones iidem tribuni, eadem lex faciebat.*
- 27 Oakley (1997–2005) 1.57–62.
- 28 For the literary *topos* of *urbs capta/direpta*, a common element in Roman historiography, see Martin/Woodman on 4.32–33; A. Ziolkowski, 'Urbs direpta, or how the Romans sacked cities', in J. Rich/G. Shipley (edd.), *War and Society in the Roman World* (London/New York 1993) 69–91; G.M. Paul, 'Urbs capta: Sketch of an Ancient Literary Motif', *Phoenix* 36 (1982) 144–155. For the related 'disaster narrative' *topos* in Tacitus, see E. Keitel, 'The Art of Losing: Tacitus and the Disaster Narrative', in C.S. Kraus/J. Marincola/C. Pelling (edd.), *Ancient Historiography and Its Contexts: Studies in Honour of A.J. Woodman* (Oxford 2010) 331–352.
- 29 Cf. 4.58.3 *moenia urbis adsidens* [sc. Tiberius], with Martin-Woodman. See also Woodman (1998) 184–185. Note, however, that Nero is disguised as a slave: he is thus playing a role, one of the many roles he played. On Nero's disguises, see R. Cowan, 'Starring Nero as Nero: Poetry, Role-Playing and Identity in Juvenal 8.215–221', *Mnemosyne* 62 (2009) 76–89. On the theatricality of Nero's reign, see in general S. Bartsch, *Actors in the Audience: Theatricality and Doublespeak from Nero to Hadrian* (Cambridge, MA 1994); Woodman (1998) 190–217.



With C. Vipstanus and C. Fonteius as consuls, Nero did not delay further the crime he had been planning for a long time. By his protracted experience of command he had become bolder, and was more and more burning with love for Poppaea, who, despairing of marriage for herself and of his divorce from Octavia, as long as Agrippina was alive, with frequent reproaches and at times wittily censured the princeps and called him “the ward”, one who was subservient to the orders of another, and lacking not only command but also freedom.

The year 59 brings forth the murder of Agrippina<sup>30</sup>. The fact that Tacitus chose, uniquely in the extant portion of *Annals* 12–16, to open the new book with a new year, gives special – almost exemplary – meaning to this event.<sup>31</sup> The names of the consuls are just a date, for the narrative shifts at once on the premeditation and planning of Agrippina’s murder (*diu meditatatum scelus*)<sup>32</sup>. The placement of this event at year-beginning contributes to making it, in annalistic terms, *the* event of the year. In terms of narrative design, Tacitus has carefully built up this moment by making Agrippina disappear from the *Annals* for the past three years<sup>33</sup>. When she reappears, it is only to die<sup>34</sup>. Tacitus identifies two factors as determinant in Agrippina’s murder: Nero’s reinforced boldness (*coalita audacia*)<sup>35</sup>, and his infatuation with Poppaea Sabina (*flagrantior in dies amore Poppaeae*)<sup>36</sup>, who was by this time his mistress. Of the two factors, Nero’s love for Poppaea surely carries the most weight for the subsequent narrative: indeed the rest of the sentence emphatically glosses on the nature of this ‘love story’. The other factor, Nero’s increasing *audacia*, is explained in terms of *uetustas imperii*. This seems hardly the appropriate expression to use of a twenty-one-year-old boy, who had occupied the position of *princeps* for a mere five years, who had spent his first years

30 As has been pointed out (Koestermann ad loc.; McCulloch (1984) 162–163), Agrippina’s fall is metaphorically foreshadowed by the fire that destroyed the colony bearing her name (13.57.3). On the omens at the end of Book 13, see J.P. Davies, *Rome’s Religious History: Livy, Tacitus, and Ammianus on their Gods* (Cambridge 2004) 213, 216, with further bibliography. The death of Agrippina, which is one of the most famous passages of Tacitus, has generated a large bibliography: see e.g. H.W. Benario, ‘Recent Work on Tacitus: 1994–2003’, *CW* 98 (2005) 251–336, at 318.

31 In *Annals* 1–6 book- and year-beginning coincide in Book 2, 4, 5, and 6 (but see n. 10 above); for 7–11, no book-beginning is extant.

32 Cf. 4.57.1, Cic., *Phil.* 2.85. Nero’s premeditation of course casts some doubts on Nero’s allegedly early ‘good’ period.

33 Her last appearance is at 13.21, where she delivers a speech in *oratio recta*, a most rare occurrence for a female character in the *Annals* (see R. Syme, ‘Princesses and Others in Tacitus’, in *Roman Papers III* (ed. A.R. Birley) (Oxford 1984) 1364–1375, at 1364). Similar ‘weighed appearances’ characterize also Poppaea and Thrasea Paetus. See Martin (1990) 1557, 1560–1561, 1572.

34 See also Syme (1958) 308.

35 The following *et*, beside introducing *variatio*, sets the second motive emphatically apart, with a crescendo that culminates in the mention of Poppaea, the subject of the rest of the sentence. Notice also the heavily chiasmic structure of the whole period: *sibi matrimonium ~ discidium Octaviae, incusare principem ~ pupillum vocare*.

36 Cf. 4.66.1, 15.33.1 *acriore in dies cupidine adigebatur Nero* (below).

practicing his hobbies, and whose inexperience in the art of government Tacitus had already emphasized<sup>37</sup>. But the expression is ironically focalized through Nero himself, whose pretensions are almost immediately ridiculed by Poppaea: she calls him a mere *pupillus* and accuses him of a lack of *imperium*<sup>38</sup>.

After the unusual beginning of the year 58 (see below), Tacitus returns to the ablative absolute formula for the year 59 to mark the ineffectiveness and irrelevance of the magistrates, who disappear as soon as they are mentioned. Instead it is Agrippina's reappearance which monopolizes the narrative. Since Tacitus makes Poppaea's influence on Nero the key element of Agrippina's murder (and Octavia's removal), the episode also reinforces Tacitus' general characterization of Nero as a puppet maneuvered by powerful counselors (first Seneca, then Tigellinus) or fatal women. Thus Nero shifts from being his mother's to his second wife's *pupillus*<sup>39</sup>.

4. [14.20.1–2, A.D. 60] *Nerone quartum Cornelio Cossio consulibus quinquennale ludicrum Romae institutum est ad morem Graeci certaminis, varia fama, ut cuncta ferme nova. quippe erant qui Cn. quoque Pompeium incusatum a senioribus ferrent, quod mansuram theatri sedem posuisset: nam antea subitariis gradibus et scaena in tempus structa ludos edi solitos, vel si vetustiora repetas, stantem populum spectavisse, (ne), si consideret theatro, dies totos ignavia continuaret.*

With Nero for the fourth time and Cornelius Cossus as consuls, quinquennial games were established in Rome in the manner of a Greek-style competition. The response was varied, as almost always with new things. For there were those who transmitted that even Cn. Pompeius had been censured by the elders because he had built a permanent place for the theater. For previously, they said, games had been usually produced with hastily arranged tiers and on a temporary stage. If one should look further back in time, the people had watched standing, lest, if they sat down at the theater, they should pass entire days in laziness.

In the year 60, with Nero consul for the fourth time, Tacitus artfully uses the consular formula to introduce Nero's Greek-style games, the 'Neronia'<sup>40</sup>. There follows a senatorial debate on the appropriateness of games, which Tacitus records in unusual detail. On the one hand, the quintessential Roman magistracy contrasts with the un-Romanness of Nero's new institution, the games being

37 Tacitus alludes to Burrus' and Seneca's attempt of keeping Nero under control (13.2.1), to Nero's youthful hobbies (13.3.3), and to the people's concern for Nero's young age (13.6.2).

38 *pupillus* here is used metaphorically in the sense of 'immature' (*TLL* 10.2.2665.19–22); the term, however, has a strong legal flavor and often characterizes a child who has lost his father (or both parents) and is *in tutela* of someone else (*TLL* 10.2.2662.28ff., 2663.37ff.).

39 Poppaea accuses Nero of being "subservient to the orders of another" (*iussis alienis obnoxius*). Tacitus will use the same expression to describe the emperor's relationship to Poppaea (cf. 16.6.1 *amori uxoris obnoxius erat*). Cf. also n. above.

40 The 'monotony' of Nero's fourth consulship is further enhanced by the 'novelty' (*nova*) of the games.



*more Graeco*; on the other hand, the lengthy debate, which could theoretically be suitable annalistic material, in fact underlines the debauchery of Nero's reign, the uselessness of the senate, and the inappropriate love for games that the plebs and even many noble Romans displayed. The narrative structure of the year is short and simple: domestic events (20.1–22.4), foreign events (23.1–26.2), end-of-year material (27.1–28.2). Corbulo's military successes in the east (23.1–26.2) are obviously to be read as an element of comparison with Nero and the useless senatorial activities. Ironically enough, the crown which Corbulo receives with honor (24.4 *hospitale donum, coronam auream ... accepit ... cum honore*) recalls the crown which Nero receives for his non-participation – and for eloquence, an art in which the emperor was notoriously lacking<sup>41</sup>.

Tacitus' placing of the first 'Neronia' at the beginning of the year is striking, especially since the games do not belong, chronologically, at year-beginning. The mention of the comet during the games (14.22.1), if Tacitus is to be trusted, dates the *ludi* to the second half of the year<sup>42</sup>. Tacitus, therefore, chose to emphasize this event because, like the murder of Agrippina (above), it suited his characterization of Nero. The Greek-style element of the games contributes to Nero's 'eastern transformation' and prepares for the next stages of the emperor's 'metamorphosis'. Indeed Nero will first perform publicly in a Greek city (cf. 15.33.1–2; below) and eventually will appear for the first time on the stage in Rome during the second 'Neronia' (cf. 16.4–5).

5. [14.48.1, A.D. 62] *P. Mario L. Afinio consulibus Antistius praetor, quem in tribunatu plebis licenter egisse memoravi, probrosa adversus principem carmina fecitavit vulgavitque celebri convivio, dum apud Ostorium Scapulam epulatur. exim a Cossutiano Capitone, qui nuper senatorium ordinem precibus Tigellini socii sui receperat, maiestatis delatus est.*

With P. Marius and L. Afinius as consuls, the praetor Antistius, who, as I recalled, behaved licentiously while he was tribune of the plebs, composed scurrilous poems against the princeps and advertised them at a crowded dinner-party at the house of Ostorius Scapula. Thereafter he was denounced for treason by Cossutianus Capito, who had recently recovered his senatorial rank thanks to the intercession of his father-in-law Tigellinus.

- 41 21.4 *eloquentiae primas nemo tulit, sed victorem esse Caesarem pronuntiatum*. There is no doubt that a crown was the prize alluded to here: cf. 15.33.2 *sacras coronas*, 16.4.1 *facundiae coronam*, Suet., *Nero* 12. For Nero's notorious lack of rhetorical skills cf. 13.3.2 *adnotabant seniores ... primum ex eis qui rerum potiti essent Neronem alienae facundiae eguisse*. R. Ash, 'Following in the Footsteps of Lucullus? Tacitus' characterisation of Corbulo', in R. Ash/M. Malamud (edd.), *Ingens Eloquentiae Materia: Rhetoric and Empire in Tacitus*, 355–375, *Arethusa* 39.2 (2006), at 369, stresses that Corbulo's crown was given to him although no real battle was fought.
- 42 The comet seems to have been visible between August and December. See R.S. Rogers, 'The Neronian Comets', *TAPA* 84 (1953) 237–249, at 240; P.J. Bicknell, 'Neronian Comets and Novae', *Latomus* 28 (1969) 1074–1075; J.T. Ramsey, *A Descriptive Catalogue of Greco-Roman Comets from 500 B.C. to A.D. 400*, *Syllecta Classica* 17 (2006), at 140–146.

The names of the consuls at the opening of the year 62 are just a date, and Tacitus marks their political irrelevance by shifting the narrative's focus to the *praetor* Antistius, whose career, carefully recorded by Tacitus, is given special significance. In spite of his licentious tribunate (13.28.1), and his no less discreditable praetorship, Antistius' career continues to advance, at least until Nero becomes the victim of Antistius' license<sup>43</sup>. Antistius is accused of treason by Capito, a *delator*. This episode, therefore, marks a significant point in the Tacitean narrative of Nero's reign: (1) it introduces Tigellinus, who makes his first appearance here; (2) it symbolizes a shift in the role of *delatores*, who had so far not found favor with the emperor<sup>44</sup>; (3) it features the reintroduction of the *lex maiestatis*, for the first time since Claudius (48.2 *tum primum revocata ea lex*)<sup>45</sup>; (4) it underlines the independence of Thrasea Paetus, whose intervention saves Antistius. The character of Antistius, though of secondary importance, receives disproportionate attention because of his links to events and characters which will have important consequences for the following narrative<sup>46</sup>. If we can trust Tacitus, Nero never intended to punish Antistius, but Thrasea's speech kept Nero from showing off his clemency in this sham trial and contributed to the emperor's resentment (14.48–9). Antistius had recited his scurrilous verses at the house of Scapula (evidently in a context of an anti-Neronian environment), who had also given testimony in his favor (48.2). The roles of both Scapula and Thrasea suggest that Antistius may have been connected to the circle of the so-called Stoic opposition. If some form of *amicitia* existed between Antistius and these men, Antistius' role in Scapula's demise is the more striking (cf. 16.14ff.)<sup>47</sup>.

Antistius' career mirrors the gradual deterioration of Nero's reign: tribune when there was still an appearance of republic (13.48.1 *manebat nihilo minus quaedam imago rei publicae*), praetor, victim of a *delator*, himself turned *dela-*

43 Antistius Sosianus had been tribune in 56 (*RE* 21.1258 'Antistius' (42); *PIR*<sup>2</sup> A 766, *NP* [= *Brill's New Pauly* (2002–2010), vols. 1–15. Leiden/Boston] 1.790 [II 5]; S.H. Rutledge, *Imperial Inquisitions* (London 2001) *passim*, esp. 113–114, 170–171, 190–191, with further bibliography). On his relevance in Tacitus, see B. Baldwin, 'Executions, Trials, and Punishment in the Reign of Nero', *PP* 22 (1967) 425–439, at 435–436; K.R. Bradley, 'Tum Primum Revocata Ea Lex', *AJP* 94 (1973) 172–181; and Griffin (1984) 49, who sees in this year an important turning-point in the reign of Nero.

44 *Delatores* are usually seen as informants, and are traditionally given a negative connotation. A different approach has been proposed by J.G.F. Powell ('Juvenal and the *Delatores*', in Kraus/Marincola/Pelling (2010) 224–244), who suggests that these men were in fact just (leading) prosecutors.

45 Why was the treason law brought back for a secondary character like Sosianus? Bradley (1973) thinks that this whole episode is a Tacitean exaggeration, and that Nero's reaction is a Tacitean invention.

46 Cf. 16.14, 21.2, and below.

47 This episode, as has been noticed, mirrors the accusation against Clutorius Priscus at 3.49–51 (e.g. J. Ginsburg, 'Speech and Allusion in Tacitus, *Annals* 3.49–51 and 14.48–49', *AJP* 107 (1986) 525–41). One of the main differences between the two trials is that, in the case of Antistius, his accuser is named.



tor (and so rewarded for his services), and finally exiled again with the advent of a new era (*Hist.* 4.44.2–3). The beginning-of-year narrative thus sums up the degeneration of a government which, though formally based upon traditional – that is, republican – magistrates, was in effect falling into the hands of people like Tigellinus and Capito, whose influence depended on *maiestas* and *delatio*.

6. [15.23.1–2, A.D. 63] *Memmio Regulo et Verginio Rufo consulibus natam sibi ex Poppaea filiam Nero ultra mortale gaudium accepit appellavitque Augustam, dato et Poppaeae eodem cognomento. locus puerperio colonia Antium fuit, ubi ipse generatus erat. iam senatus uterum Poppaeae commendaverat dis votaue publice susceperat, quae multiplicata exsolutaque.*

With Memmius Regulus and Verginius Rufus as consuls Nero welcomed with immoderate joy the birth of the daughter Poppaea had borne to him, and named her Augusta, the same title having been given also to Poppaea. The place of childbirth was the colony of Antium, where he himself had been born. The senate had already commended Poppaea's womb to the gods and had publicly undertaken vows, which were multiplied and discharged.

At the beginning of 63, precisely on January 21, a daughter was born to Nero and Poppaea<sup>48</sup>. After the consular formula, the narrative shifts to the baby's birth, to which Tacitus assigns exceptional prominence. The shortness of the baby's life (23.3 *quantum intra mensem defuncta infante*) contrasts with Nero's "immoderate joy" for her birth, and her death, for she is the last of the Julio-Claudians to be born, foreshadows the end of the dynasty. The consular formula, also in this case, simply dates the birth of Nero's daughter. The birth of the emperor's offspring was surely worth recording in annals, but no other childbirth is given such emphasis in the extant *Annals*. Clearly it was Tacitus' choice to emphasize this episode, who carefully constructs his narrative in such a way that Nero's decisions, guided by his high hopes, can instead be ironically interpreted as signs of his future doom. (1) Nero not only honored the baby and her mother as 'Augustae', but he also decreed a contest and circus games modeled on the Actian festivals and on those at Bovillae, respectively (23.2). Since these games were associated with Augustus and the Julian family, it is obvious that Nero wished to be perceived as a direct descendant of Augustus and hoped, through his daughter, to continue the dynasty<sup>49</sup>. What happened, however, was the exact opposite. (2) The baby was born at Antium, probably not coincidentally, so as to have the same birthplace of her father. This would have been a good omen, but her untimely death instead will

48 The date is certain: see E.M. Smallwood, *Documents Illustrating the Principates of Gaius, Claudius and Nero* (Cambridge 1967) no. 24. This is the only other case in which, with certainty, natural chronology coincides with Tacitus' narrative (cf. n. 18 above).

49 Indeed Augustus himself had always been very concerned with his heirs, and, just like Nero, had only one daughter, Nero's great-grandmother.

foreshadow her father's<sup>50</sup>. (3) Special thanks were given to the gods for Poppaea. The vows taken for her *uterus*, however, the temple to Fertility and the golden likenesses of the Fortunes (23.2) may look forward to her next pregnancy, during which Nero killed her (16.6.1), after *fortuna* had shifted (16.1.1).

7. [15.33.1, A.D. 64] *C. Laecanio M. Licinio consulibus acriore in dies cupidine adigebatur Nero promiscas scaenas frequentandi. nam adhuc per domum aut hortos cecinerat Iuvenalibus ludis, quos ut parum celebres et tantae voci angustos spernebat. non tamen Romae incipere ausus Neapolim quasi Graecam urbem delegit; inde initium fore, ut transgressus in Achaïam insignesque et antiquitus sacras coronas adeptus maiore fama studia civium eliceret.*

With C. Laecanius and M. Licinius as consuls, day by day Nero was being driven by an ever sharper desire to appear on the public stage. For so far he had sung through the palace or in his gardens at the Iuvenalia, games which he spurned as being too little crowded or small for such a great voice. Nevertheless, not daring a debut in Rome, he chose Naples, as being a Greek city; from there, crossing to Greece and obtaining the distinguished and antique sacred crowns, he would entice his citizens' enthusiasm by a greater reputation.

The year 64 was especially notorious for the Great Fire that destroyed Rome (15.38ff.). The Roman formula of the two consuls is therefore ominously ironical in introducing a year which saw the quasi-annihilation of Rome itself. Although Tacitus is the only ancient source to doubt Nero's responsibility for the fire<sup>51</sup>, his characterization of Nero is artfully and rhetorically built to portray a deranged man who *could* have been capable of setting the city on fire. For the beginning of the year Tacitus does not select a proper event, but chooses instead to shape his portrait of Nero by focusing on the emperor's *cupido scaenae* (14.20.1), thus 'setting the stage' for the Great Fire. In Tacitus' narrative, Nero gradually distances himself from the city of Rome, even physically, and also when he returns to the city, his mind is elsewhere<sup>52</sup>. He does not yet dare to appear on the stage in Rome, and Naples, being a Greek city, seems a better choice for his public debut, his ultimate goal being competitions in Greece. Although both his plans to cross first into Greece and then Egypt are abandoned, Nero's 'metamorphosis' into an oriental ruler takes a decisive turn, and Tacitus' description of Tigellinus' banquet only reinforces this reading (37.1–4)<sup>53</sup>. If this line of interpretation is

50 The ancients were especially fond of coincidences of this kind (see Feeney (2007) 231 nn. 6–7, with bibliography), e.g. Augustus dying in the same bedroom in which his father had died (Suet., *Aug.* 100.1).

51 Suet. (*Nero* 38.1), Plin. (*N.H.* 27.5) and Dio (62.16.1ff.) blame Nero without hesitation.

52 36.1 *urbem revisit* [sc. Nero], *provincias Orientis, maxime Aegyptum, secretis imaginationibus agitans*.

53 See Woodman (1998) 168–189, at 179–80: "Nero himself turned Rome into a foreign city to compensate for the eastern tour which he had been obliged to call off". Woodman identifies Alexandria as the eastern city which most attracted Nero. On Nero as more and more an eastern



correct, then it naturally follows that Tacitus invites his readers to see the fire as Nero's most extreme attempt to change (not necessarily destroy) a city in which he no longer fitted<sup>54</sup>.

8. [16.14.1, A.D. 66] *C. Suetonio Luc(c)io Telesino consulibus Antistius Sosianus, factitatis in Neronem carminibus probrosis exilio, ut dixi, multatus, postquam id honoris indicibus tamque promptum ad caedes principem accepit, inquires animo et occasionum haud segnis Pammenem, eiusdem loci exulem et Chaldaeorum arte famosum eoque multorum amicitii innexum, similitudine fortunae sibi conciliat, ventitare ad eum nuntios et consultationes non frustra ratus; simul annuam pecuniam a P. Anteio ministrari cognoscit.*

With C. Suetonius and Luccius Telesinus as consuls, Antistius Sosianus, having been fined with exile for composing scurrilous poems against Nero, as I recalled, after he learned that honor was given to informers and that the princeps was so keen to slaughter, being of restless temperament and not sluggish of opportunities, won over to himself, in view of their common fate, Pammenes, who was an exile in that same place, and a famous astrologer, and for that matter well connected in friendship to many, thinking that it was not without purpose that messengers often visited him for consultations; at the same time he learned that a yearly pension was given to him by P. Anteius.

The year 66 is the last year-beginning in the extant *Annals*. It records Antistius Sosianus' successful attempt at changing for the better his misfortunes. Just as in the year 62 (cf. 14.48.1; above), the name of Antistius is immediately juxtaposed to that of the two consuls. He is the only non-imperial figure to overshadow the two consuls at the beginning of a new year in which the *x y consulibus* formula is employed. The fact that in both cases Tacitus cross-refers to the last mention of this character points to the exemplarity that the historian attributed to Antistius (and may also be an indication of Tacitus' alert to his readers that imperial historiography can be read not only as annalistic history but also as 'lives of individuals'). Tacitus had no apparent reason to follow step by step this secondary character, yet he carefully prepares his readers, and constantly reminds them that Sosianus was an already familiar figure. Up to this point, he had been referred to simply as Antistius. His full name appears here for the first time.<sup>55</sup> It cannot be excluded that the earlier omission of his *cognomen*, which has obvious etymological connections to the Greek σώζειν/σωτήρ (= 'to save/savior'), was deliberate so that Tacitus could capitalize on its use at this point, producing the

king, see also McCulloch (1984), esp. 127–128, 134–135. On the significance of Egypt for Tacitus' audience, see B. Kelly, 'Tacitus, Germanicus and the Kings of Egypt (Tac., *Ann.* 2.59–61)', *CQ* 60 (2010) 221–237. See also 14.20.1 (above).

54 Scholars have long recognized that Tacitus, through a series of metaphors, portrays Nero as an aggressor on his own city (Woodman (1998) 184 n. 68; Keitel (2009) 137). See also n. 29 above.

55 Syme (1958) 298, who had noticed this particular case, pointed out that the use of Antistius' full name here might signal Tacitus' use of a different source.

neat and ironical oxymoron of *Sosianus* the *delator*.<sup>56</sup> Indeed Antistius becomes the indirect accuser of, among others, Ostorius Scapula, the man who had previously *saved* Sosianus with his testimony (14.48.2).

### III. 'Unusual' Beginnings

In the twelve extant year-beginnings in Books 13–16, only two are not introduced by the formula *x y consulibus*: the years 58 (13.34.1) and 65 (15.48.1)<sup>57</sup>. This invites reflection and cannot be simply dismissed as Tacitus' desire for *variatio*<sup>58</sup>. The two years are significant: 58 coincides with the end of Book 13 (the only time this happens in Books 11–15)<sup>59</sup>; 65 is the longest year-narrative of the *Annals*, and gives disproportionate attention to a single event.

1. [13.34.1, A.D. 58] *Nerone tertium consule simul iniit consulum Valerius Messala, cuius proavum, oratorem Corvinum, divo Augusto, abavo Neronis, collegam in eo(dem) magistratu fuisse pauci iam senum meminerant. sed nobili familiae honor auctus est oblati in singulos annos quingenis sestertiis, quibus Messala paupertatem innoxiam sustentaret. Aurelio quoque Cottae et Haterio Antonino annuam pecuniam statuit princeps, quamvis per luxum avitas opes dissipassent.*

With Nero consul for the third time, there entered the consulship at the same time Valerius Messalla, whose great-grandfather, the orator Corvinus, a few now old men remembered had been colleague in the same magistracy to the divine Augustus, Nero's great-great-grandfather. But his noble family's honor was increased by the offer of a yearly pension of five hundred thousand sesterces, with which Messalla could support a blameless poverty. The princeps assigned a yearly pension also to Aurelius Cotta and Haterius Antoninus, although they had dissipated their ancestral riches through luxuriousness.

- 56 The fact that the first syllable of *Sosianus* is evidently short does not undermine my point. Tacitus often plays with the names of his characters: cf. e.g. 16.20.1 *Silia ... siluisset*. See A.J. Woodman, 'Community Health: Metaphors in Latin Historiography', *PLLS* 14 (2010) 43–61, at 46 n. 14 (with further bibliography); A.J. Woodman, 'Readers and Reception: A Text Case', in J. Marincola (ed.), *A Companion to Greek and Roman Historiography* (Malden, MA 2007) 1.133–144, at 138–139; V.E. Pagán, *Conspiracy Narratives in Roman History* (Austin 2004) 151 n. 21.
- 57 There are pointed, though brief, observations on these unusual beginnings in Martin (1990) 1556.
- 58 Cf. n. 13 above.
- 59 In the Tiberian narrative, where year- and book-end coincide in 1, 3, and (?) 5, it is Book 3 that offers the best comparison with 13, not so much because of their content, but owing to the fact that they both prepare for the opening of the following book, while at same time marking the end of a 'good period'.



The consuls of 58 are expressed by a carefully and rhetorically arranged formula: the first consul is expressed in the usual ablative absolute (*Nerone tertium consule*)<sup>60</sup>, but for the second Tacitus varies his syntax and by means of chiasmus emphasizes Messalla, on whose name the rest of the narrative is built<sup>61</sup>. This extremely pointed word order, with the second element of the first chiasmus (*Nerone ... consule ~ consulatum ... Messala*) becoming the first element of a second chiasmus (*cuius proavum ... Corvinum ~ Augusto abavo Neronis*), links Messalla and Nero to their illustrious ancestors, Messalla Corvinus and Augustus, respectively. Since also the two ancestors had been colleagues in the consulship, comparison with their descendants was quite natural. From the juxtaposition of the two pairs of consuls, however, the descendants stand out as unmistakably inferior. Messalla Corvinus had been an exceptional figure of the republic, and, even after he had transferred his allegiance to Augustus, had never renounced his independence<sup>62</sup>. His descendants, however, did not live up to their ancestor's prestige, and Tacitus carefully records their progressively worse sycophancy<sup>63</sup>. Of his two sons (perhaps from different wives), the elder, M. Valerius Messalla Messallinus, was consul in 3 B.C.<sup>64</sup>; the younger, M. Aurelius Cotta Maximus Messallinus, in A.D. 20<sup>65</sup>; his grandson, son of the homonymous consul of 3 B.C., was consul in A.D. 20 (with his uncle)<sup>66</sup>. The latter is the father of the consul of 58. The progressive decline of this line of the Valerii exemplifies, in Tacitus' narrative, the

60 The ablative absolute is used for all of Nero's consulships, with Nero always occupying the first place. On Nero's consulships and their duration, see Griffin (1984) 62, 251 n. 68.

61 The fact that Tacitus gives emphasis to the name of Messalla, which is made the grammatical subject, contrasts with his being the lesser consul, especially when compared with the already three times consul Nero.

62 His most notable act of independence was his resignation from the office of *praefectus urbi* (6.11.3; cf. also 4.34.4 *imperatorem suum Cassium praedicabat*), though it was he who proposed the title *pater patriae* for Augustus. For this Messalla, see *RE* 8A, 1.131–157 'Valerius' (261); *PIR*<sup>1</sup> V 91; *NP* 15.187–188 [II 16]; Syme (1958) 322; *The Augustan Aristocracy* (Oxford 1986) 200–226, 502 'Index', Table IX for the family stemma [also at *NP* 15.181–182].

63 Tacitus' attention to the lives and careers of Messalla's descendants was noted by Syme (1958) 322: by pointing out their actions, Tacitus "recalled and evoked" (and contrasted?) their ancestor's. In a later work, Syme was more adamant: "Their behavior illustrates a theme of continuity between the two reigns, not in the better sense" (*History in Ovid* (Oxford 1978) 129; cf. also (1986) 237–238).

64 See *RE* 8A, 1.159–162 'Valerius' (264); *PIR*<sup>1</sup> V 93; *NP* 15.188 [II 18]; Syme (1958), 322–323, 573–574, 749; (1978) 117ff., esp. 129; (1986) 227–243, esp. 230–234. Tacitus mentions him at 1.8.4, 3.18.2 (his identification here is probable but not certain: see Woodman/Martin ad loc., with further bibliography), 34.2. The two brothers are also the addressees of some of Ovid's epistles (the younger appears in Juvenal as well).

65 See *RE* 2.2490–2491 'Aurelius' (111); *PIR*<sup>2</sup> A 1488; *NP* 2.383–384 [II 13]; Syme (1958) 323, 574, 749; (1978) 117ff., esp. 130–131; (1986) 227–243, esp. 235–237. He, too, was "no favourite of T.'s" (Goodyear on 2.32.1). Cf. 3.2.3, 17.4, 4.20.4, 5.3.2, 6.5.1ff. Also in the case of Cotta Messallinus, his identity has been questioned (Woodman/Martin on 3.2.3).

66 "Only an item on the *Fasti*" (Syme (1986) 239; see also Table IX). For him, see *RE* 8A, 1.162 'Valerius' (265); *PIR*<sup>1</sup> V 92; *NP* 15.188 [II 19]. Tacitus mentions him at 3.2.3 and, perhaps, at 3.18.2 (see Woodman/Martin ad loc.).

more general theme of the inevitable degeneration of the old senatorial families<sup>67</sup>, whose latest representatives reach the lowest level and become, so to speak, imperial 'employees'<sup>68</sup>. Nero's 'sustaining' of Messalla's poverty recalls Tiberius' similar provisions in A.D. 17 (2.48.3 *ceterum ut honestam innocentium paupertatem leuauit* [sc. Tiberius], *ita prodigos et ob flagitia egentes ... movit senatu*)<sup>69</sup>; Tiberius, however, had maintained an appearance of decency by punishing those who were *prodigos et ob flagitia egentes*. Nero, on the contrary, assigns a yearly pension to Cotta and Antoninus, in spite of their dissoluteness (*quamuis avitas opes dissipassent*)<sup>70</sup>.

Tacitus chose a hybrid formula for the year 58 because of the evocative force of Messalla's name, whose most eminent representative had been consul with Augustus in 31 B.C. The year of the battle of Actium, whose main actors, Octavian/Augustus and Antony, were both Nero's ancestors, marked the beginning of the empire<sup>71</sup>. The year 58 was not as momentous as 31 B.C., but it did mark the end of the allegedly 'good' years of Nero's reign. Since Tacitus explicitly recalls the consuls of 31 B.C., the reader is invited to compare the two years, and their personalities. At the same time, by tracking the careers of the Valerii and Haterii, Tacitus underlines the decadence of the old senatorial aristocracy and its progressive servility towards the emperor<sup>72</sup>. In a sort of

67 The line of the Valerii Messallae ends with the consul of 58: Syme (1986) 239.

68 "[C]lients of the Caesars" (Syme (1978) 133). Moreover, the Aurelius Cotta mentioned here is probably the son (Syme (1978) 134; (1986) 240) or grandson of Messalla Corvinus' younger son (the *cos.* of A.D. 20). Indeed Tacitus' wording (*per luxum ... dissipassent*) recalls 6.71 *egens ob luxum*. Furthermore, at 6.71 Cotta is mentioned shortly after Haterius Agrippa, the father of the third man recorded here (this link did not escape Syme (1986) 239–40). This person is Q. Haterius Antoninus, *cos. ord.* of 53 (12.58.1; *RE* 7.2514 'Haterius' 5; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> H 26; *NP* 6.1 [4]; Syme (1986) 162–163), son of D. Haterius Agrippa, *cos. ord.* of 22 (*RE* 7.2513–2514 'Haterius' 4; *PIR*<sup>2</sup> H 25; *NP* 6.1 [3]; Goodyear on 1.77.3; Woodman/Martin on 3.49.2; Syme (1986) 485 'Index'), and grandson of Q. Haterius, *cos. suff.* of 5 B.C. (*RE* Suppl. 3.889–890 'Haterius' (3a); *PIR*<sup>2</sup> H 24; *NP* 6.1 [2]; Goodyear on 1.13.4; Woodman/Martin on 3.57.2; Martin/Woodman on 4.61; Syme (1958) 323–324, 580; (1986) 485 'Index'), and coeval of Messalla Corvinus. Since both Antoninus' father and grandfather distinguished themselves for sycophancy (3.57.2, 6.4.4), a progressive degeneration in the descendants can be seen in Tacitus' narrative. Even the Haterii, who were never as good as the Valerii, displayed a gradually worse behavior. The idea of descendants unworthy of illustrious ancestors is famously satirized in Juvenal 8.

69 *paupertatem innoxiam sustentaret* is an uncommon expression: *paupertas innoxia* is unparalleled in Latin; *paupertatem sustentaret* occurs only at Plin., *N.H.* 35.125 (but cf. Cic., *Red. Sen.* 11 *egestatem ... sustentauit*; Phaedr., 4.23.3 *paupertatem sustineret*).

70 But it must be noted that at 6.71 Tacitus uses, for Cotta Messallinus, an expression (*egens ob luxum, per flagitia infamis*) that recalls 2.48.3; the important difference is that Cotta was saved by Tiberius in that case. Cf. also 2.37–38.

71 On the importance of Actium and the issuing of special coins to celebrate its various anniversaries, see e.g. M. Grant, *Roman Anniversary Issues* (Cambridge 1950) 58, 88, 100.

72 It is interesting that E. Champlin ('The Life and Times of Calpurnius Piso', *MH* 46 (1989) 101–124, esp. 123–124), drew similar conclusions in his study of the life of Calpurnius Piso, the namesake of the famous conspirator (see below). He, too, came from a most distinguished family, and his direct ancestors had been eminent men of state under the Caesars. Piso the conspirator, however,



ring-composition, the consuls of 58 exemplify the republican sham which the year 31 B.C. had inaugurated.

2. [15.48.1–2, A.D. 65] *Ineunt deinde consulatum Silius Nerva et Atticus Vestinus, coepta simul et aucta coniuratione, in quam certatim nomina dederant senatores eques miles, feminae etiam, cum odio Neronis, tum favore in C. Pisonem. is Calpurnio genere ortus ac multas insignesque familias paterna nobilitate complexus, claro apud vulgum rumore erat per virtutem aut species virtutibus similes.*

Thereupon Silius Nerva and Atticus Vestinus entered the consulship, a conspiracy having begun and simultaneously been augmented, to which senators, equestrians, soldiers, and even women had competed to give their support, on account of both hatred for Nero and favor toward C. Piso. He, born in the Calpurnian clan and connected to many illustrious families through his father's nobility, enjoyed a distinguished reputation among the populace thanks to his virtue – or to appearances of virtue.

The other year in which Tacitus departs from the ablative absolute formula is the year of the Pisonian conspiracy<sup>73</sup>. Its narrative occupies the remainder of Book 15, and it is the single longest episode of the entire *Annals*; most remarkably, Tacitus is basically our only ancient source for it<sup>74</sup>. It is for this event, however, that Tacitus, contrary to the ancient historians' practice of seldom referring to their sources<sup>75</sup>, mentions literary sources, eye-witnesses, and, for the first and last time, the *acta senatus*<sup>76</sup>. Modern historians deny that the conspiracy had, from a (modern) historical point of view, the relevance that Tacitus grants it in the *Annals*. In fact, already among Tacitus' contemporaries, some even doubted

showed none of his ancestors' qualities, and Tacitus' judgment is utterly unforgiving, especially in contrasting his last display of *adulatio* with a call to his ancestral family prestige (15.59.3–5).

- 73 The bibliography on the Pisonian Conspiracy is large: see e.g. K.R. Bradley, *Suetonius' 'Life of Nero'* (Brussels 1978); Griffin (1984) Index s.v. 'Calpurnius Piso, C.', esp. 166–168; Woodman (1998) 190–217; E. Champlin, *Nero* (Cambridge, MA 2003) esp. 185–186; Pagán (2004) esp. 68–90, with bibliography; E. O'Gorman, 'Alternative Empires: Tacitus's Virtual History of the Pisonian Principate', in Ash/Malamud (2006) 281–301. The man who embodies the Conspiracy, Calpurnius Piso, is the subject of a learned article by Champlin (n. above).
- 74 Suet. (*Nero* 38) mentions it very briefly; the account of Dio, as it survives in the epitome of Book 62 (24.1–27.4), is somewhat different from Tacitus, for Dio never mentions Piso, gives a prominent role to Seneca and, more importantly, compresses into the year of the conspiracy events which Tacitus places in the following year (e.g. the death of Thrasea Paetus). It is debated whether Plut., *Mor.* 505C–D, a strange episode concerning a murder attempt on Nero, is a reference to the Pisonian Conspiracy. Tacitus' account, however, remains unique in both length and detail.
- 75 On ancient historians' use of sources, see J. Marincola, *Authority and Tradition in Ancient Historiography* (Cambridge 1997) 63–127.
- 76 Pliny the Elder at 53.3, Fabius Rusticus at 61.3, eye-witnesses at 73.2, *acta senatus* at 74.3. Inquiry and autopsy were key-elements of ancient history (Marincola (1997) 63–127, esp. 78–81 for Roman historians). It is effective to cite sources (C.S. Kraus, *Livy Ab Urbe Condita Book VI* (Cambridge 1994, repr. 1998) on 6.12.2); the more so in the case of a conspiracy, which presupposes secrecy at all levels (Pagán (2004) *passim*).

that a conspiracy had taken place at all (15.73.2). Tacitus' extensive treatment, however, is in line with the essentially rhetorical nature of ancient historiography. The conspiracy is, so to speak, a Tacitean 'invention', and its character is mainly literary<sup>77</sup>.

The discovery of the conspiracy in April<sup>78</sup> and the exiles that followed are the only events Tacitus records for the first four months of the year<sup>79</sup>. Thus the narrative of 65 appears as a direct consequence of and response to the tragedy of the previous year<sup>80</sup>, the Great Fire, which is in itself another 'literary masterpiece'<sup>81</sup>. The financial crisis caused by the expenses for the building of the *domus aurea* after the fire, along with Nero's political weakness after Seneca's 'retirement' (15.45–46)<sup>82</sup>, may have caused the conspirators to act.

Tacitus alerts readers to the exceptional nature of the conspiracy both by starting the year *in mediis rebus* and by using an unparalleled formula to introduce the two consuls. The proper account of the conspiracy begins only after an explanation of its causes, and the introduction (with Sallustian features) of its main character<sup>83</sup>. The end of the narrative (73.2 *ceterum coeptam adultamque et revictam coniurationem*) recalls the beginning (*coepta simul et aucta coniuratione*), and, through ring-composition, gives unity to the whole episode, which is in turn embellished by smaller narrative units, the death of Seneca being one of the most 'entertaining'<sup>84</sup>.

77 For rhetoric in ancient historiography, see Woodman (1988) esp. 70–116; C.S. Kraus/A.J. Woodman, *Latin Historians. G&R New Surveys in the Classics* No. 27 (Oxford 1997) 6. For *inventio*, see H. Lausberg, *Handbook of Literary Rhetoric* (Leiden 1998) §§ 260–442). On the literary character of Tacitus' narrative of the conspiracy, and the similarities with two illustrious predecessors, namely Sallust's *Catiline* and Livy's account of the Bacchanalian Affair (39.8–19), see Pagán (2004). D.B. Nousek, 'Echoes of Cicero in Livy's Bacchanalian Narrative (39.8–19)', *CQ* 60 (2010) 156–166, makes similar observations to my own. Nousek (at 159) notices that Livy's treatment of the episode is remarkably long, "almost 20 per cent of the text of the book", is characterized by a unique formula "for introducing the consular year", and is "singled out as a suitable place for literary amplification".

78 15.53.1: Tacitus refers to the Festival of Ceres, which was held on April 12–19.

79 The conspiracy may have begun much earlier (cf. 14.65.2). Woodman (1998) 191 and n. 5, suggests that a "portion of Tacitus' subsequent narrative preceded the entry of the consuls into office and thus does not belong strictly to the narrative of A.D. 65 at all". I believe that this interpretation is confirmed both by 14.65.2, where, despite its ambiguity, the reference to the beginning of the conspiracy is unmistakable (*pace* Martin (1990) 1567), and by 15.50.4, whether one retains *ardente domo* or not. It is evident that Tacitus has compressed the narrative for dramatic purposes, and delayed the full treatment of the conspiracy in order to give it more prominence.

80 The bad omens at the end of 64 are an obvious anticipation of the conspiracy (15.47.1–2).

81 On the literary qualities of this episode, see C.S. Kraus, "No Second Troy": Topoi and Refoundation in Livy, Book V', *TAPA* 124 (1994) 267–289, at 286–287.

82 Although Seneca was not directly implicated in the conspiracy (15.60.2), his fall from favor certainly damaged the emperor and created a vacuum of political power. See also McCulloch (1984) 130–132, 166–167, who sees the conspiracy as the result of the concatenation of several events, beginning with Burrus' death.

83 The first word *ineunt* is echoed by *initium* at 49.1.

84 On Seneca in Tacitus, see G.O. Hutchinson, *Latin Literature from Seneca to Juvenal* (Oxford



#### IV. Conclusions

The annalistic structure that Tacitus adopted for his history doubtlessly derived from a well established tradition<sup>85</sup>. Very little, however, has survived of this earlier annalistic tradition, and almost nothing of Tacitus' predecessors and contemporaries<sup>86</sup>. Livy, therefore, is our best text for comparison since his annalistic structure is clearly centered on the year-by-year narrative, "which begins and ends as *Annales* plain and simple"<sup>87</sup>. Unfortunately, we lack Livy's treatment of the later first century, but it is probable that he, too, shifted towards a more personality-centered narrative<sup>88</sup>, thus anticipating Tacitus' treatment of the Tiberian, and, most of all, Neronian reign, in which the annalistic structure is distinctively overshadowed by the book-structure, centered on themes and/or characters<sup>89</sup>. In his new handling of annalistic material, Tacitus confines the *consules ordinarii* to the ablative absolute formula, which, being by its own nature detached from the rest of the sentence, allows the historian to shift the focus at once onto something/someone else.

The supreme magistrates of the republic had already lost a significant portion of their old prestige under Augustus, as the gradual loss of importance of their names in the consular lists, the *fasti*, clearly shows. Thus there is a noticeable difference between the Republican *Fasti*, where the names of the consuls are always placed first, and the so-called *Fasti Capitolini*. In the latter, which were erected by Augustus, the names of the *consules ordinarii* are gradually overshadowed by that of Augustus and his designated successors, and, from A.D. 1, the name of Augustus is placed first, ahead of the *consules ordinarii*<sup>90</sup>. Tacitus, by his idiosyncratic use of the *x y consulibus* formula, adapts to his historical narrative a well perceived political shift, which he exploited in the Tiberian, and, above all, the Neronian books, where the consuls become, as it were, a temporal device<sup>91</sup>.

Tacitus often defies, through his manipulative narrative, his readers' expectations. Thus his use of the *x y consulibus* formula at year-beginning, which was typical of an annalistic history, rarely introduces typical annalistic material. When this seems to happen, the annalistic detail is only one of form; in substance, the

1993) 263–268; Woodman (1998) 205–207; Keitel (2009) 136; A.J. Woodman, 'Aliena Facundia: Seneca in Tacitus', in D.H. Berry and A. Erskine (edd.), *Form and Function in Roman Oratory* (Cambridge 2010) 294–308; all with further bibliography.

85 See Rich (2009) esp. 144.

86 See e.g. R.H. Martin, 'Tacitus and his Predecessors', in T.A. Dorey (ed.), *Tacitus* (New York 1969) 117–147; Kraus/Woodman (1997) 82–87; Marincola (1997) 27; Oakley (1997–2005) esp. 1.21–108, 4.475–492; A.M. Gowing, 'From the annalists to the *Annales*: Latin historiography before Tacitus', in Woodman (2009) 17–30; Rich (2009) esp. 133–140, all with references to earlier bibliography.

87 Kraus (1994) 10; Rich (2009) *passim*.

88 Kraus (1994) 8 n. 30. In other words, there was a move towards 'biostructure' (cf. n. 3 above).

89 See the brief but pointed remarks in M.T. Griffin, 'Tacitus as a Historian', in Woodman (2009) 168–183, at 182–183. Cf. also n. 3 above.

90 Feeney (2007) 172–183.

91 It cannot be excluded that the narrative of the reign of Gaius was already very different from that of Tiberius.

narrative structure, often at the expense of chronology, discards or subverts this traditional element and focuses instead on exemplary people (like Poppaea) or events (like the murder of Agrippina). These episodes, which are Tacitean constructions, contribute to the enhancement of the historian's dramatic narrative and to his rhetorical characterization of Nero, but they also provide *delectatio* for his readers<sup>92</sup>.

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92 On *delectatio lectoris*, see Woodman (1988) *passim*, esp. 72–73.