

Tacitus and the restoration of Rome

Just as the analysis of Livy's religious material required some awareness of his broader aims and methods, so too with Tacitus it is essential to acknowledge the way in which he undertook his project and what that was. Of course society had changed profoundly with the transition to empire and we should not expect that the eminently political act of writing history had not also adapted. Nonetheless we shall see that if circumstances and methods had changed, many similarities remain. Like his predecessor, Tacitus constructed a representation of Roman state religion from the events of the past: he 'made sense' of what had gone before and produced an account that reflect his idealised religious system while organising his coverage of events to argue a case. His was not the only possible version of events, even if we find it plausible historically: the historian/emperor Claudius, for instance, might have left us a very different version, given the chance. We shall therefore not only explore the way that religious institutions are represented, but also explore the agenda that helped to 'inform' the facts at Tacitus' disposal.

What emerges is a coherent programme, shaped by selectivity, powerful timing and presentation, with typically Tacitean vigour. He knew his own mind on religion, though this has not generally been the accepted viewpoint. Though many of the religious notices are apparently neutral, once we appreciate Tacitus' techniques of juxtaposing contradictory information, it will be clear that there is no such thing as 'mere' inclusion: virtually all 'religious' notices are pertinent and combine to create a picture of what is usually best described as incompetence. We shall deal exclusively with Tacitus' *construction* – Tacitus' Rome, Tacitus' Roman religion: the fact that the agents and events are more or less historical does nothing to undermine the rhetorical programme in his historical analysis, though the greater detail means we can track individual characters in far more detail. We find not a grudging and reluctant string of isolated notices, with occasional pithy asides, but a powerful and efficient analysis of Rome's religious conduct, her increasing failures and the inevitable consequences. Tacitus' religious

narrative is sophisticated, discriminating and, most of all, *coherent* to a very high degree.

Posterity has perhaps been kinder to Tacitus than to Livy.¹ By the time that Tacitus wrote, the principate, which had barely begun at the time when Livy composed his extant books, had become the established political choice of the city of Rome. It had survived assassinations, the end of two hereditary dynasties and civil war that saw the institution survive intact, despite a rapid turnover of personnel. The solution to these crises saw a new development: for the first time the emperor could be made (*feri*) outside Rome.² Religion has rarely been treated as a significant part of the narrative of events, more as an occasional and erratic ornament that has little or no bearing on any explanation of history. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth.

4.1 Religious categories

As with Livy, we begin by establishing the traditional categories, such as prodigies: a comparable pattern emerges, whereby our historian takes exception to mistaken interpretations on the understanding that the reader will see the refinement of details rather than the dismissal of any category. But we must also take account of the changed circumstances: thus the new dynamics of reporting are also explored. The deployment of *fors*, *fortuna* and *fatum* also bears witness to the dynamics of contemporary interpretation. In addition, Tacitus is as concerned as Livy to demarcate appropriate practices: *superstitio* and other methods of recommendation feature throughout his historical accounts.

Once the religious 'furniture' of the account has been examined, we move on to examine the practice of the *cultus deorum*, beginning with imperial cult, which, rather than being isolated as one particular feature, is located as part of a system of honouring the emperors (including lesser honours and lesser members of the family) within a political arena – the only place where it makes sense, whether that sense is Tacitean or more generally historical. In fact, 'politics' emerges as the appropriate context in which to explain a great deal of the religious narrative: the operation of the *cultus deorum* is fundamentally shaped by the contemporary political and social situation. As the integrity of politics 'declined', so too did religious appointments and the authority of the senate: this process, like most of the others, runs across relatively unbroken from the *Annals* into the *Histories*, or, more correctly, is projected back in time from the start of the *Histories*

¹ Woodman (1985) 3 applauds Martin's (1981) 10 description of Tacitus as 'the greatest Roman historian'. Syme's *The Roman Revolution* opens with the same praise.

² H. 1.4.2.

into the period of the *Annals*. In fact 'religion' and 'politics' make better sense taken as a unity than separately.

As the emperors appropriated authority over religion, so too did interpretation become rather hit and miss: and *all* the emperors fail to provide the kind of expertise that Livy's Republican senate could collectively muster. Tacitus has the intrinsic failure of the aristocracy to address Rome's religious concerns finally culminate in the manifestation of the *ira deum* that dominates the opening of the *Histories*, in the form of civil war and the firing of the Capitoline Temple. Finally, we examine the way that the history of the entire period, especially the success of the Flavians, is contextualised in Tacitus' account by the deployment of *fatum*: there is no surrender to the authority of any individuals, even the 'good' emperors. We are reading of the history of *Rome*, not her rulers, and the religious categories are deployed accordingly.

Throughout both accounts, Tacitus is concerned with finding a formulation of Roman religion that will suit the new Rome with her unpredictable and often damaging emperors. This is not to say that he has an intrinsic problem with the institution of empire itself: Rome had declined morally to the point where imperial rule was a necessity.³ Where once it was the people, now it was the emperor who had to be understood (A. 4.33.1-2). The essentially exemplary nature of historiography therefore adapted to new circumstances while retaining its claims to guidance.⁴

³ There is much bibliography on the issue; the usual interpretation is that Tacitus accepts the empire but is deeply interested in having the political system work, whatever its shortcomings. Scott's (1968) formulation of the issue, which stresses Tacitus' grasp of a variety of different historical constitutions and deeper interest in morality than any political system, is still a good corrective to the usual bipolar approach ('monarchist or republican labels are not particularly relevant to him' (50 n.15)). See also André (1982) 41-43 who argues that, for Tacitus, there is no realistic alternative to monarchy; Shotter (1978) and (1991b) argues that he is more interested in having the co-operation of senate and emperor than any constitutional change as do Wistrand (1979), Percival (1980) and Sage (1991); Classen (1988) allows for a change in behaviour and ideals since the Republic; Havas (1991) argues for a 'conception biologique' of the state in the historian's thinking. If he accepts empire, however, Tacitus does not necessarily spare individual emperors; see e.g. Boesche (1987) for the destruction of the social and political fabric by the hypocrisy and isolation of the emperor. Cogitore (1991) 2 sees the use of different terms for power as an implicit attack on the institution, but the terms could equally be complaints about the use of power in individual cases. Cf. Béranger (1990) and Benario (1992).

⁴ Aubrion (1991). Note Sinclair's (1995) expansion of the theme: 'in fact, the most valuable lesson a Roman historian provides when it comes to models of explanation and behaviour for what was felt to be transient in society is furnished by his own example in explicating the causes and motives for events' (38). Plass (1988) 103 also stresses the way that political issues are still treated 'in terms of *moral* incoherence' (my emphasis). For explicit mention of an exemplary programme, see *H.* 1.3.1, 3.51.2 and *A.* 4.33.2; for the use of *exempla* in public life within the account, see (selectively) *A.* 3.31.3-4, 3.50.2, 3.66.1-2, 6.32.4, 11.6.1, 11.23.22-3, 11.24 (esp. 11.24.7), 12.20.2, 13.4.1, 15.20.3, 15.23.2, 15.44.5, *H.* 1.50.2, 2.91.3, 4.8.1 and 4.42.6. For the difficulties of using *exempla* in changed times, see (e.g.) *H.* 4.58.2; Ginsburg (1993); Luce (1986); McCulloch (1984) 189. For further debate see also Luce (1991), esp. 2907-2914 and Woodman (1997) 109 which seem to argue against exemplarity, unconvincingly to my mind.

Tacitus' disposition to provide *exempla* raises a fundamental problem: his supposed 'pessimism'. It is taken for granted that he can be fairly described thus, and there is little incentive for someone to provide correctives if he expects the future to be worse than the present. The impression gains support from the sheer number of times that he castigates the actions of agents in his texts, who seem to many commentators to be involved unknowingly in a retrospective game of 'you can't win' with the historian. This, I shall argue, is a misunderstanding. Tacitus, it is true, acknowledges errors in abundance, but this does not mean that he considers all courses of action to be pointless. For a start, he himself tells us that he will catalogue the worst moments of the period: one should not expect a 'balanced' account.⁵

It will become clear that he had certain expectations, and that when these are met, his agents meet with his satisfaction. His precise sense of what was appropriate may be pedantic, and his verdicts of even minor deviations from the ideal, damning: but just because most of the first century was a catalogue of errors for him does not mean that he is pessimistic. He had lived through the savage reign of Domitian, as commentators rarely fail to point out, and we therefore assume that this experience colours his own account, like an obsession: as we shall, however, see, Tacitus is not only or even primarily interested in emperors – it is with the City of Rome that he deals.

Can we not instead read the account of a man who knows only too well what happens when delicate balances of power are upset, when the worst in human nature runs wild? A man who has known both success and failure in the difficult act of Roman politics, and knows (to his own satisfaction at least) that anything short of the precisely considered response can lead to disaster? The remorseless string of mistakes is balanced by the occasional praise or satisfaction where an agent successfully navigates the nightmare of early imperial politics. All too often we cannot see what a criticised agent 'should' have done but that does not mean that there was not a more expeditious course of action open to them: we will be partly occupied with elucidating the better response, and what Tacitus otherwise expected his reader to know.

This kind of account does not deserve the description of pessimism, however exacting, even exasperating, his high standards might be. The account, with its internal logic intact, shows how misjudgements led to terror, exile and death for many of its (often innocent) participants. Who would *not* wish to highlight the consequences of past political error when dealing with such a period? Failure had a high price in his reconstructed reality. The

⁵ A. 14.64.6. This does not mean his account is not 'truthful' (16.16, 6.38.1).

admittedly depressing series of disasters is perfect material from which to learn: there was no need to repeat past mistakes. What better material for an exemplary historian?

It will, then, be (at times) argued and (elsewhere) assumed that Tacitus saw hope for the future in the bloodbaths and inquisitions of the past. Just occasionally hope could be glimpsed as he himself reports at intervals. This brings us to the second aspect of his ‘pessimism’, namely the assumption that things had not improved much by the time that he wrote.

Tacitus explicitly tells us that the times in which he lived, under Nerva and Trajan, had improved greatly: it was a ‘golden age’ when the senate and emperor worked together as colleagues and one could think freely and speak one’s thoughts (*principatum diui Neruae et imperium Traiani, uberiorem securioremque materiam, senectuti seposui, rara temporum felicitate, ubi sentire quae uelis et quae sentias dicere licet*, *H.* 1.1.4). Textually then, even despite the loss of large parts of the texts, Rome has improved to an astonishing degree. Unfortunately, the conviction, gained impressionistically from reading his savage indictment of his predecessors’ actions, is frequently compounded by the dismissal of favourable comments about the times in which he wrote, with a logic that amounts to ‘well, he would say that, wouldn’t he?’ This textual contentment has therefore met with little acceptance from modern commentators.⁶

Even if we could prove a dissonance between contemporary reality and Tacitus’ descriptions of it, there is no reason to proceed to the conclusion of hypocrisy. Consider Thrasea Paetus’ praise of Rome and Nero, and severe castigation of Antistius, at 14.48.5. The Stoic inspires the senate and forces Nero to comply with the philosopher’s blatantly untrue depiction of a merciful and mature Rome in agreeing to a comparatively lenient sentence of exile. Even if Tacitus’ audience were not ‘actually’ living in an ideal climate, they might take the hint. The facts of the future might be shaped by the lead of those willing to take on the challenge of his recommendations, and any gap between his theory and the practice of real life is thereby politely occluded. At its worst then, the praise of Trajan’s reign could be treated as an invitation. More importantly, whatever our speculations, it cannot be denied that Rome is constructed *within the historical narrative* to have emerged from the darkness that dominates the extant accounts. To work with anything else makes us unforgivably selective. We do

⁶ Cf. *Agr.* 1.2-3. Perhaps most eloquent is Woodman (1997) 92–93 who is rather unwilling to commit himself either way: ‘Tacitus’ repeated retreat from his own age carries the suggestion (which may of course be as false as it is intentional) that the reigns of Nerva and Trajan did not justify [the claim made] . . . for free speech and thought.’

not consider Livy a pessimist, or do not emphasise it as a possibility, even though his preface tells us that Rome's woes are incurable: but we do describe Tacitus in this way, even though he tells us that Rome's problems are firmly in her past. I say this not in order to argue that we should simplistically take the texts at 'face value' but rather that we should not take them automatically at its *opposite*.

It is perhaps not surprising that Tacitus' 'opinions' prove so elusive when we discount the admittedly rare categorical statements that he makes. Tacitus' 'sincerity' is often questioned, particularly in connection with his claim to write *sine ira et studio* (A. 1.1.3) or that *neque amore . . . et sine odio dicendus est* (H. 1.1.4). It would not be a gross exaggeration to say that commentators feel obliged to comment on this theme. Most scholars find his claim unfounded,⁷ but assessment by more appropriate criteria tends to exonerate him from hypocrisy.⁸ The search for the 'real' Tacitus is misplaced, I think. We are dealing with a pair of texts that constructed a century of Rome in a particular historiographical way: we cannot hope to 'glimpse the real man' or, as Henderson memorably put it: 'we will not catch Tacitus with his rhetorical trousers down'.⁹ If we dismiss the notices that times had improved considerably, we fundamentally alter the structure of the texts and the narrative(s): the resultant pessimism, no longer textually checked by the clear statement of an end to terror, can be projected forwards into a future now irrevocably doomed to failure. Whether Tacitus 'believed' that times had improved or not, he undeniably constructed his histories to be capped by a recovery, and we should not emend our texts too hastily to fit our preconceptions. The 'textual' Rome had undeniably improved.

Though Tacitus originally provided a narrative that covered most of the first century, there are two difficulties for us. Firstly, there is the fact that the partial survival of the texts leaves us in the dark about significant periods: we have only parts of the reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, Nero and Vespasian, and nothing of Caligula's, Titus' or Domitian's. Secondly, the *Histories*, covering the years 69–96, were written before the *Annals*, which covered 14–68. Thus, even though the original narrative was unbroken overall, it was not composed as one piece nor in chronological sequence. For instance, the *Annals* and *Histories* would seem to indicate different influences: opinions on the debt to Sallust and Cicero in the *Annals* and the *Histories* respectively have varied. Taken purely as historical sources, these factors are less influential than when they are treated as constructs with their own, possibly

⁷ E.g. Cizek (1979); Whitehead (1979). Further discussion in Miller (1969); Luce (1986).

⁸ See Segal (1973); Woodman (1988).

⁹ Henderson (1987) 68 n.4. 'Memorably' perhaps should not apply: this line appears (regrettably) not to have found its way into the revised version (Henderson (1998a)).

distinct, internal logic and agendas. Since we are examining Tacitus' historical account as a progression, we must consider the relationship of the two with some care.

These stylistic differences do not mean that we cannot treat the accounts together. McCulloch (1984) 173–175 suggests simply that 'modern editors ... have divided what Tacitus may very well have intended to be one long work'. On this basis we might speculate that the stylistic differences could be seen as subordinate to the historical agenda; *Annals* 4–16 are more Sallustian¹⁰ because this is intended to highlight the corruption of Rome; the *Histories* would then be more Ciceronian¹¹ because they deal with the restoration of traditional values. Why Tacitus, rather than fulfilling his declared intention of treating the age of Nerva and Trajan at *Histories* 1.1.5, chose instead to move backwards, can only be a matter of speculation: it may be that he found the period of the *Histories* insufficient to explain just what did happen to Rome under Domitian and that the answers to Rome's sufferings lay further back in the past.

But to make Domitian the focus of Tacitus' interest may be to underestimate the historian: we have a great deal of evidence that he set his sights wider than assuaging a guilty conscience for his supposed compliance with a vicious régime. The contrast between the political failures of the early part of the century and the avowedly improved contemporary situation provides probably the greatest tension with the longest perspective – but *only* if we resist the temptation to dismiss his description of the times of Nerva and Trajan on the grounds that they do not match the rest of his account and are 'inevitably' sycophantic, a position which, as I have said, has a long pedigree but no textual support. From what remains of the text, our best assumption is that he wished to explain how Rome had 're-emerged' from the dark days of the Julio-Claudians into the golden age in which he was writing. Since we lack any remnants of Tacitus' account of Domitian's reign, little can be said for certain: but narratological continuity strongly implies that the *Annals* were intended to support, rather than rival, the analyses presented in the *Histories*. This is generally assumed in the following account: an arbitrary choice, to be sure, but no more arbitrary than assuming otherwise.

While Tacitus did not write annalistic history in the way that Livy did,¹² it will be argued that amongst the differences lies a rich vein of continuity,

¹⁰ Woodman (1988) 160–169 and (1992b); Ducroix (1978), with further bibliography.

¹¹ Woodman (1985) and (1988) 160–196.

¹² On the (mis)use of the annalistic format, see Henderson (1998a) 258, 286–260; also Woodman (1997) 93–94. For discussion of the structure of the *Annals* in hexads (or not) see most recently Martin (1990); Woodman and Martin (1989) 14–19 (who virtually abandon the idea of consensus); McCulloch (1984) 137–176. Goodyear (1970b) 17–18 succinctly disposes of Syme's position on hexads.

especially in terms of religion. In fact, what is remarkable is the lengths to which Tacitus goes to preserve a traditional framework of interpretation.

The continuing interest in Tacitus' works is amply demonstrated by the number of entries in Benario's bibliographies,¹³ no few of which centre on 'deciphering' Tacitus. The difficulties of reading this ingenious author are well illustrated by the way that Luce's discussion of 'historical change' finds its summation in the issue of 'the difficulties of discovering the historian's opinions'.¹⁴ The plethora of publications on issues of detail has not always led to any broader consensus, least of all in connection with religion.¹⁵ Though interpretations can vary enormously, there are some relatively consistent themes to be found in scholars' descriptions of our author; pessimism and savagery, bias, reasonable historicity, inappropriate distortion and, rather confusingly, indecisiveness.

The religious material has had a similarly mixed reception. Only one monograph (and that dealing purely with the *Histories*) argues that Tacitus was 'traditional' in his 'beliefs'.¹⁶ It is more common to find that the apparent contradictions hold sway, forcing an interpretation that has Tacitus sceptical about traditional Roman religion but still 'religious' in a broad sense, usually fatalistically.¹⁷ While it is true that fate occupies a more prominent role in the narrative, and is apparently more easily invoked by Tacitus when compared with Livy, this does not simply reflect some 'personal preference', as we shall see. Adoption of the principles applied to

¹³ The most recent, *CW* 89.2 (1995), contains 672 entries.

¹⁴ Luce (1986) makes useful comments about the difficulties of 'discovering the historian's opinions', discounting as he goes a traditional technique of removing 'troublesome' elements to 'uncover' Tacitus' 'true' ideas.

¹⁵ This chapter claims only to be representative; exhaustive cross-referencing to related topics is no longer a realistic possibility. The most recent and/or significant items on a particular issue are included, not least to provide fuller relevant bibliography.

¹⁶ Scott (1968). A number of briefer articles imply this, but do not deal with the difficulties that have led other authors to conclude that Tacitus is untraditional. Liebeschuetz (1979) 194 is closest to the position argued here when he concludes '[Tacitus' rationalism] is ... that of a man who believes in the science in which he is an expert' but I take issue with his comment that 'the gods did communicate with the Roman state through portents, but the signals should not be taken to be more than vague warnings' (*ibid.* 197) and that 'Tacitus would not have been troubled by problems of free will and predestination if he had not lived in an age dominated by Stoic ideas' (199). The latter statement seems to be putting the cart before the horse. Tacitus has no particular love of philosophers *per se* – see his ridicule of the Stoic Musonius Rufus at *H.* 3.81.1. Though Tacitus does acknowledge the existence of Stoic ideas in Roman society, he cannot be said to privilege them: his categories are traditional.

¹⁷ 'Tacitus' belief in prophecy and portents was never more than hesitant and spasmodic' (Walker (1952) 246); 'it is at least arguable that he never indicates more than the normal human disposition to see, when depressed, omens everywhere' (Miller (1977) 14); Syme (1958a), like many others, seems to consider that religious material features only insofar as the genre 'demanded' it, and then in a rather erratic and spasmodic way. But he does offer a disclaimer – 'Tacitus does not have to worry about consistency' (522). He also refers to 'the scepticism appropriate to that governing order' (523).

Livy's narrative yields a very different picture. In particular we will find that sustained criticism and sarcastic irony are not necessarily tantamount to scepticism, pessimism, bias or indecision.

The first difficulty that the reader of Tacitus encounters is his style. Commentaries include a compulsory notice of the difficulties of his diction,¹⁸ and it is this as much as anything that has made the commentator's task so difficult. Time and again, students with good Latin earnestly ask to know 'what he really meant'. There are, however, reasons to think that 'style' is not just the 'wrapping' of an account that can be usefully removed with perseverance; rather it is integral to the work and its purpose. 'Irrationality ... comes out with special clarity in the *form* of the narrative'.¹⁹ The frequent violation of expectation in Tacitus' historical works evokes the political chaos and *dissimulatio* of the principate. Such considerations begin to address enormous questions such as the difference between the two exemplificatory accounts: Livy, with his 'full-scale working model' of Rome is set against Tacitus, who seems more interested in cataloguing errors than explicitly offering any alternative.

Furthermore, the decipherment of a religious structure in the narrative goes some way towards restoring these markers of improvement by supporting a reading that has a more 'optimistic' Tacitus: in the reading that follows, Rome has good prospects for improvement that will blossom under Nerva and Trajan when our text of the *Histories* breaks off. And rather than seeing Vespasian and Titus as interruptions of an otherwise deepening gloom, we could consider Domitian an aberration in an otherwise steady trend of improvement that ran from Vespasian and Titus through to Nerva and Trajan – just as the author tells us to.²⁰ A model of recovery under the Flavians, one way or another, fits these textual notices better than our (preferred) image of pessimism.

These trends must be reconstructed from apparently minor notices: our author is not generally given to simplifying the plot. He expects the reader to know what he is talking about and refrains from making bland explicit statements: after all 'Tacitus sets the highest premium on displaying his

¹⁸ Irony: Plass (1988); O'Gorman (2000); on syntax see Furneaux (1896) 38–74; for *uariatio* see especially Plass (1992); Woodcock (1959) 11–14; Woodman (1997) 111; Syme (1958a) 342–243.

¹⁹ Plass (1988) 102, original emphasis. See also Plass (1992); Sinclair (1991a) and (1995); Henderson (1987) and (1998) as the foremost proponents of this kind of interpretation. See also Woodman (1985) 18; Williams (1990) 3–10. Further bibliography in Benario (1986), items 126–160 and (1995) items 123–149.

²⁰ This will be developed further in due course, but even without the argument to follow, we can note from A. 3.55 that luxury declined under Vespasian decline because of his example, and under Domitian because of the deterrent of imperial appropriation (on this difficult passage, see Woodman in Woodman and Martin (1996) *ad loc.*).

personal mastery over his material. He constantly varies his technique, adjusts his diction, and shifts his points of reference – at all costs he must remain the one person in his narrative who cannot be categorised' (Sinclair (1995) 8).

Sinclair's penetrating analysis of the way that 'narrative in the *Annales* often proceeds through palpable silences' (*ibid.* 164) does not, however, permit us to attempt to fill in the gaps by inference. The silences do more than protect Tacitus' 'real opinions' from possible criticism:

One aim of irony is precisely to leave uncertain what is ironic ... the effect of such writing on a large scale is to create an atmosphere of dry wit and ruthless penetration into a political and moral reality that is often irrational if not idiotic. The tone is at once amusing and dismaying. Both those who make history and those who write it are caught up in pervasive cynicism, though one of quite different sorts – the former an alarming moral cynicism that suggests disorder in high places, the latter an intellectual cynicism gratifying because it exposes the former. (Plass (1988) 4–5)²¹

Under the principate, a carefully placed silence became more than just protective, and traditional motifs, such as juxtaposition within the narrative, were exploited to their fullest potential, as we shall see. They became a tool for political comment. The dangers of speech, probably more than any other factor, led to a sophistication in the use of language.²² We should be wary of 'deciphering' Tacitus, lest we lose the 'real' message. It is the dissonance in the text that speaks volumes. Traditional materials found in a new guise are the poet's medium for generating experience in the reader, and this is no less true of Tacitus than any other writer.²³ The violation of the traditional

²¹ See also Baldwin (1977) who amply demonstrates the farcical nature of *Annals* 14, though he does not place the humour in any broader context.

²² Apart from Henderson (1987), Plass (1988) and Sinclair (1995), Rudich (1985), (1993) and (1997) (esp. his Introduction 'The Rhetorized Mentality', 1–16), deal with this theme admirably. See also Ahl (1984).

²³ Conté (1994) 111–125, writing chiefly on poetry. For use of poetic motifs and the similarities of historiography and poetry, see Feeney (1991) 42–45, 250–264; Martin (1992); Kenney (1983) 14 calls him 'the arch-poet of ancient historians'; Aubrion (1991) stresses the epic and tragic overtones of the *Histories*; Lossau (1992) finds the 'contamination' of an epic and tragic model; Henry (1991) suggests that a 'sense of tragic doom, together with the assertion of a positive national identity that the sense of doom contradicts, that is the most truly Virgilian element in Tacitus' (2992); for other Virgilian overtones see also Segal (1973); Boyle (1984); Miller (1986); Henry (1991). For historiography as entertainment, Woodman (1979) and (1985).

Roman way of life is reflected in the violation of genre,²⁴ language²⁵ and historical record.²⁶

This is perhaps most evocatively represented by Henderson's deliberately chaotic 'World in Pieces'.²⁷ The newer readings of Tacitus have far-reaching consequences for our reception of the religious material that has appeared contradictory and incomplete for so long. Though the categories of interpretation and classification show a large degree of consistency, it is the overall tenor of the religious system that shows change in response to different needs. It is after all *application* that shapes such interpretative systems. The discussion begins by confirming sufficient continuity in the phenomena and categories associated with religion in Livy to allow comparison. By drawing on the religious frames of reference as well as other recent general interpretations, it is possible to question the suggestions that Tacitus is so thoroughly pessimistic and a(anti)traditional, and to assert rather that he is radically conservative in his politics and religion.

4.2 Tacitus: a man of distinctions

4.2.1 Establishing religious categories

Tacitus' *persona* differs markedly, on the surface at least, from Livy's. Whereas Livy established his authority under the aegis of deference, Tacitus, the former proconsul and *quindecemvir*,²⁸ appears at least to be most confident in his scathing remarks (though we shall find no shortage of more subtle rhetorical strategies); unfortunately, taken at 'face' value, these confident remarks appear to us to undermine traditional practices. In addition his habitual silence following criticism often leaves us emphatically clear as to where an error was made, but apparently does little to advise on a better course of action.

Thus McCulloch ((1991) 2939) complains that 'what, in fact, makes Tacitus so exasperating for many of his readers is that he himself is not concerned about his failure to account for all historical phenomena in the

²⁴ See e.g. Woodman and Martin (1989) on 4.1.

²⁵ Plass (1988). Also, amongst others, Cizek (1991).

²⁶ Where Tacitus can be compared with inscriptions, the results are interesting. While recording a great number of similarities, it is apparent that Tacitus has skilfully placed a different interpretation on the facts: Woodman (1997) 99–100 (on the *Tabula Siarensis* and the decree on the elder Piso); McCulloch (1991) 2941–2944 (on Claudius' speech). Williams (1989a) argues for Tacitus' desire to indicate faithfully the complexities of the historical context. Shotter (1988) argues that Tacitus follows the historical record closely while endeavouring to accommodate the enigma that was the emperor Tiberius. Others are more critical of Tacitus' use of sources, e.g. Develin (1983).

²⁷ Henderson (1987), rewritten (some would say sanitised) as Henderson (1998a) 257–300.

²⁸ A. 11.11.1.

same way [as those he scorns, such as astrologers]'. The traditional interpretative categories of 'belief' or 'scepticism' lead commentators to conclude that we are usually encountering the latter. More complex are those moments where Tacitus appears to be hesitant or contradictory; the conclusion is usually indecision or, where 'contradiction' is noted, a change of heart. In contrast, the following analysis assumes that Tacitus is the master of his material at all times; as the Foucauldian scholarly analyses accumulate, the coherency of his account and programme is increasingly hard to avoid. The competitive arena is, as with Livy, that of interpretation and propriety rather than scepticism and belief.

We cannot, however, simply transpose the interpretative tools honed on Livy's account. The material, while recognisable in many ways, can also be markedly different. This may represent a deliberate violation of tradition reflected in the text; it might, on the other hand, owe more to the changed political and social context – in other words, to happen to conform to contemporary expectations. To begin with, the traditional categories must be established.

4.2.1.1 *Prodigies and omens*

As with Livy, it is Tacitus' comments, rather than the prodigies themselves, that require our careful interpretation. Because these comments have been interpreted as cynical or critical, the vast majority of commentators are unwilling to take these phenomena as meaningful 'in reality'. McCulloch, for instance, is sympathetic in general but still prefers to limit himself to textual relevance, in an implied opposition to the constructed reality in which the audience lived. '[T]he issue is not whether Tacitus did or did not believe that such prodigies had an influence on the operation of the natural world. Instead, *within his narrative* they have a portentous significance'.²⁹ Elsewhere he reasserts Tacitus' scepticism, before speaking of the concepts of *deum ira* and *hominum rabies* as a 'psychological rather than a metaphysical metaphor'.³⁰ Most of these commentators are highly sensitive to the aestheticised text, but they show a relative lack of sympathy for religious phenomena as events based in reality and depend on a dichotomy between

²⁹ McCulloch (1984) 208 (my emphasis).

³⁰ McCulloch (1991) 2938, 2941. Plass is extremely sensitive to the function of prodigies in the narrative but draws the line at making a traditionalist of Tacitus: 'portents . . . can be taken seriously as a historiographical category without being taken literally as a religious or historical category' (Plass (1988) 71–78; quote from 76). The list could be extended (e.g. Segal (1973) 110f.) and the trend continues: see Ash (1999) 129–136, especially 130–131; Martin and Woodman (1989) 84 (citing Goodyear's (1972) comments on 1.39). Grimal (1989 and 1989–90) seems more willing to accept a genuine 'belief' in such things, suggesting that Tacitus is rejecting *superstitio* not prodigies and omens *per se*.

literature and ‘reality’. Thus, at least judging from discussion in print, it seems that some establishment of the category of prodigies (and by implication, other ‘supernatural’ events) is necessary before any discussion of details can be pursued.³¹

4.2.1.2 *Prodigies as harbingers of doom*

If Tacitus were assuming without question that prodigies indicated the wrath of the gods, then he would not need to say so; after all, ‘for all Tacitus’s domineering, opinionated sententiousness, there are few Latin authors who make greater demands on the reader’s ability to understand what is not said’.³² For instance, when he comments that an ox had spoken in Etruria and that there had been unusual births, and many other things that in more simple times (*rudibus saeculis*) had been noted even in times of peace, but which are now only heeded at times of fear (*H.* 1.86.1), we should not understand him to be dismissing the report by the comparison with earlier, less sophisticated times: Tacitus typically uses *rudis* in two ways. Firstly of specific characters – the naive or the inexperienced; many young adults, with responsibility thrust upon them too young, are called *rudis*.³³ Secondly, he uses it of groups of people who are simple-minded. This might be the gullible (*A.* 6.3.2) country folk who are duly corrupted by the decadent city dwellers (*A.* 1.31.4) or the sort of people who did not require laws – before the gradual encroachment of the need for legislation, in the face of a decadent and immoral society (*A.* 3.26.3).³⁴ To be *rudi animo* is not a particularly *useful* state in the maelstrom of Roman politics, where shrewdness and wit were required to navigate the complexities of cruelty and obsequiousness; nonetheless it was not necessarily an undesirable faculty in itself.³⁵ At worst it implies error in interpretation but it seems preferable to understand a lost innocence before the distortions of corruption had taken their toll rather than a naivety that has been ‘rightly’ outgrown. Very often, therefore, we are left to navigate the assumptions that contextualise these comments by further comparison with his more general position: Tacitus is no more concerned to educate a wholly ignorant readership about religion than Livy was.

³¹ Much of the following discussion implicitly draws on the framework established in connection with Livy, viz. the assumption that the readership would accept the intervention of the gods and that to explain it would be superfluous and possibly insulting except where details of interpretation (i.e. possible controversy) were concerned.

³² Sinclair (1995) 164.

³³ Agrippa Postumus is *rudem sane bonarum artium* (*A.* 1.3.4); Drusus is *rudis dicendi* (*A.* 1.29.1).

³⁴ For the beginning of the decline of Rome with the introduction of laws see Scott (1968) 64.

³⁵ See McCulloch (1984) 196–199 on the virtues of simplicity and the corruption of laws and *dominatio* (‘The administration of justice among the simpler, less civilised Germans (*Germania* 12) stands in contrast to the corruption of the legal system at Rome’, 199).

But occasionally Tacitus *is* compelled to spell out the obvious. Consider his comments on the Jews and their folly during the war in Judaea. Among their errors are religious mistakes on a scale that only foreigners could make: the Jews did not think it right (*fas habet*) to resolve prodigies with sacrifices or vows since they were so contrary (*H.* 5.13.1). The implication is that the Jews should have known better and expiated the (very Roman-sounding) prodigies that follow. Where Livy was never put in the position of needing to point out the utility of prodigy expiation, the Jews in their incompetence offer the opportunity for profound scorn from the imperial historian. They can be measured against the fundamental assumptions of 'proper' religious practice. The passage is a series of errors, both institutional and interpretative, that virtually guarantee the failure of their rebellion.

The range of comments that assume the traditional meaning of prodigies as harbingers of doom is further evidence that there has been no major change in the understanding of signs taken to be adverse. One example comes at 12.64.1: *mutationem rerum in deterius portendi cognitum est crebris prodigiis*.³⁶ The majority of the remaining problematic references are easily susceptible to the kind of analysis pursued in connection with Livy's account: there is a premium on interpretation, of the distinction between genuine prodigies and mistaken ones. In other words our imperial historian is still working with the kind of discrimination (not dismissal) that was seen in Livy.

Deduction from visible signs is still the order of the day: *uelut* is, as was found in Livy, politely indicative of the proprieties of interpretation. This process of 'appearance' or 'initial assessment' being confirmed can be seen when Nero 'seemed' to have polluted a sacred spring by bathing there: the subsequent illness confirmed that he had upset the gods.³⁷ Tacitus has a preference for a more down-to-earth explanation than divine wrath of the legend dealing with the destruction of what seems to be Sodom and Gomorrah at *H.* 5.7. But this is a genre-specific preference for a discerning interpretation which should always at least *attempt* a 'natural' explanation.³⁸ That the gods *can* be involved in the destruction of cities, but via human

³⁶ Further examples of traditional interpretation are to be found at *A.* 15.47.1 (*prodigia imminentium malorum*), and in the opening to the *Histories* (*prodigia et fulminum monitus et futurorum praesagia*, *H.* 1.3.2). Similarly, Paetus suffers when he proceeds into Armenia *spretis ominibus* (*A.* 15.8.1), on which see Meulder (1993).

³⁷ *A.* 14.22.6: [*Nero*] *uidebaturque potus sacros et caerimoniam loci corpore loto polluisse. secutaque anceps ualetudo iram deum adfirmavit*.

³⁸ Cf. the disclaimer when he includes the sign connected to Otho's death at *H.* 2.50.2 (*ut conquirere fabulosa et fictis oblectare legentium animos procul grauitate coepti operis crediderim, ita uulgatis traditisque demere fidem non ausim*).

means, is evident from the omen and the interpretation put on it during the siege of Artaxata where *adicitur miraculum uelut numine oblatum*.³⁹ Twice in the *Histories* we are told of a particular variation of moral panic, whereby inexperienced interpreters took the lack of water to be a prodigy. He adds that things that were taken to be chance or natural occurrences in peace were then called *fatum* and the *ira deum* (*H.* 4.26.2).⁴⁰ In the *Annals*, on the other hand, when lightning struck a table at which Nero was dining shortly after the appearance of a comet ‘about which the common opinion is that it portends some kind of change of ruler (*rex*)’, it strengthened the belief that Nero’s days were numbered. But both deductions were errors *pari unitate . . . interpretatio* (*A.* 14.22.2).⁴¹ The priestly interpretation of the birth of a calf by the roadside with its head attached to its leg that another ‘head’ of state (*rerum humanarum*) was being prepared, but that it would be neither healthy nor secret (*A.* 15.47.3), just underlines the stupidity of those who immediately (in the text) begin plotting to overthrow Nero. Tacitus’ superior knowledge textually crushes the conspiracy even before it appears.⁴²

Two prodigy notices in particular, one in the *Annals* and another in the *Histories*, do however require more analysis at this point. In the chaotic opening to the *Histories*, Tacitus concludes his account of the dislocation of Roman life with the note that:

Besides the complex of disasters in human affairs, there were prodigies in the sky and on the earth, both warnings of thunder and signs of the future, auspicious and ill-omened, difficult to interpret and unambiguous; for never was it proven by more terrible nightmares that befell the citizens of Rome or by

³⁹ The passage in full reads: *adicitur miraculum uelut numine oblatum. Nam cuncta [extra tectis] hactenus sole inlustrata fuere; repente quod moenibus cingebatur ita atra nube coopertum fulgoribusque discretum est, ut quasi infensantibus deis exitio tradi crederetur* (*A.* 13.41.3).

⁴⁰ There is also the note at *H.* 1.86.3 that *a fortuitis uel naturalibus causis in prodigium et omen imminentiū cladium uertebatur*.

⁴¹ It is possible that the error with the comet was the equation of a *princeps* with a *rex* rather than the utter vacuity of the interpretation. However, as we shall see (below, 215), there is another possible correction implied here, whereby it is the timing that is at fault (*quasi iam depulso Nerone, A.* 14.22.1).

⁴² The conspiracy includes religious error too: Scaevinus’ ‘lucky dagger’, from either the Temple of *Salus* or *Fortuna* in Ferentum (*A.* 15.53.3), is central to the downfall of the plot (15.54 and 55). Neither ‘safety’ nor ‘success’ comes their way, though one can understand that they would require the support of at least one of these two. It is possible to speculate on the dynamics of this association: *Salus* and *Fortuna* do abandon Nero in due course (perhaps, we might say, when they get the opportunity). The dagger also gains an association with *Vindex*, since Nero chooses to dedicate it to Jupiter Vindex at *A.* 15.74.2, which is taken to be prophetic after the struggle with Julius Vindex. This may imply that the dagger’s divine patronage, unbestowed on the conspirators, did have some potency, if insufficient to their particular task.

more conclusive signs that the gods were not concerned with our well-being, but preferred vengeance.

praeter multiplicis rerum humanarum casus caelo terraque prodigia et fulminum monitus et futurorum praesagia, laeta tristia, ambigua manifesta; nec enim unquam atrocioribus populi Romani cladibus magisue iustis indiciis adprobatum est non esse curae deis securitatem nostram, esse ultionem.
(H. 1.3.2)

Syme commented on this (amongst others), labelling it ‘a striking and ominous phrase, but no confession of a creed’,⁴³ but Tacitus is not so vague. He exploits the ambiguity of the present infinitive *esse* to leave the reader with two possible readings. Firstly that, *at that point*, Rome’s gods nursed nothing but malice – such a statement being entirely orthodox (and the one given in the translation above). Thus Rome had failed, apparently spectacularly, to propitiate her gods. Secondly, however, the text also admits of the understanding that this is not a particular, but a general, state of affairs: ‘the gods *are* not concerned with our well-being, but prefer vengeance’. This more polemical reading is in stark contrast to the *benignitas deum* that we found in Livy. And Tacitus is hardly immune to the possibilities of language; we should respond to both possible meanings. It is the latter sense that has been exploited by those who would have a disenchanted Tacitus ‘losing his faith’; yet a literal reading of one possible interpretation distorts the deliberate violation of expectation that seeks to convey the horror of an imperial civil war. Tacitus is ‘exaggerating’ (if that simple term can do him justice):⁴⁴ to say that the gods were malicious towards Rome is, in Plass’ terms, a joke. Only by violating reality (the gods cannot ‘really’ be so set against Rome) can the violation of social and political norms be represented.⁴⁵ Nor is there any room for doubt on this – Tacitus’ interpretation of events is beyond negotiation, since he does not equip the reader with sufficient detail to draw a different conclusion: the wrath of the gods is a given fact on a huge scale.

⁴³ Syme (1958a) 521. For all Syme’s Tacitean and persuasive prose, exactly what a ‘creed’ might have looked like to him is not clear.

⁴⁴ Compare the way that he generalises from particulars in a way that does not seem to be supportable: Baldwin (1974); Walker (1952) 33–66 and 82–157 is a good survey of the material. There is also a tradition of commenting on his use of innuendo. Most recently and fully, Develin (1983); also Miller (1969); Shatzman (1974); Sullivan (1975); Whitehead (1979).

⁴⁵ I am reminded of a comment made by a rescue worker after the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York on September 11th: ‘even gravity’s got it in for us today’.

At *Annals* 14.12.3, Tacitus offers that ‘prodigies also intervened, frequently and without effect . . . they occurred with such a lack of the *cura deum* that Nero continued his reign and crimes for many years’ (*prodigia quoque crebra et irrita intercessere . . . quae adeo sine cura deum eueniebant ut multos post annos Nero imperium et scelera continuauerit*).

Even for Tacitus, this is a densely packed set of words. The implication in the use of *crebra* that there were many prodigies is characteristically emphatic.⁴⁶ This notice in particular has attracted much comment:⁴⁷ however the problem is not with the prodigies but with our understanding of the polemical statement. *Cura deum* has consistently been taken to be subjective (i.e. ‘the gods did not care about Rome’). However, there is no grammatical reason not to take it to be objective; ‘we did not care about the gods’. Comparison in Tacitus’ language does not necessarily prove anything, but may advise us. The phrase *sine cura* occurs elsewhere in his works objectively three times.⁴⁸ *Cura deum* (or *deorum*), on the other hand, occurs nowhere else in Tacitus’ extant texts but does occur elsewhere. External comparisons permit either an objective or a subjective genitive.⁴⁹ Since prodigies function in Tacitus’ narrative as warnings, ‘caring’ about the gods must translate into taking action on the warnings. We know that prodigies, as warnings, can be interpreted very specifically. Thus events that were genuinely prodigial presumed intention and meaningfulness, as seems to happen when the *haruspices* interpret the misformed calf that predicts Piso’s conspiracy (A. 15.47.3).⁵⁰ Intelligibility of signs (however obscure many of the prodigies are to us) was tentatively argued for earlier (above, 97)

⁴⁶ At least it was in Livy: the phrase *multa prodigia* occurs there to indicate the acuteness of a crisis. Whenever he uses it, special expiations are required (5.15.1, where they are not heeded but Rome ends up sending to Delphi), 10.23.1, 21.62.1 (where the numbers lead Livy to question whether the checking procedures had been heeded), 24.10.6, 27.4.11, 28.11.1, and 40.19.1. *Quoque* is also significant since it aligns Paetus’ immediately preceding actions with the gods’.

⁴⁷ E.g. ‘[this] suggests that the gods were intervening, as a tribune might, to protest against injustice, but in an ineffective fashion which seems to accord them only limited powers’ (Walker (1952) 250); Liebeschuetz suggests that Tacitus is being ironic and contrasts the explicit complaints of Lucan (‘frequently’) and Silius (6.84) against the gods for not intervening: ‘in Tacitus the attack is not explicit but implied’ (Liebeschuetz (1979) 194). See however Segal (1973) 112–113 to whom I am closer (although he is nervous of the broader problems, 110).

⁴⁸ A. 2.14.3 (*sine cura ducum*; objective), H. 1.79.1 (without a genitive; but apparently objectively); *sine cura* also used of total indifference at A. 11.8.1 (objective).

⁴⁹ Objective: Quintilian *Minor Declamations*. 274.12; Martial 1.111; Silius Italicus 7.75; Livy 24.8.10. Subjective: Ovid *Metamorphoses* 8.724; Lucan 5.340; Statius *Siluae* 4.2.15; Ovid *Ars Amatoria* 3.405 and Statius *Thebaid* 5.456. Ovid *Metamorphoses* equates the *cura* of the gods with wrath (4.574).

⁵⁰ For the appearance of *haruspices* in the texts, see Briquel (1995), for whom they are uniformly correct and appropriate, with the caution that Briquel is mistaken to connect the description *superstitio* with them at H. 2.78.1: [*Vespasianus*] . . . *responsa uatum et siderum motum referre. nec erat intactus tali superstitione* . . .). Tacitus is surely referring to astrology.

and there are good reasons to see continuity into the imperial period.⁵¹ We also know from Cicero's *On the Haruspical Response* that (at that time, at least) prodigies could be interpreted as a warning of strife amongst the nobility: we also hear in Tacitus (and, for the record, Livy) that the *ira deum* can manifest in a cluster of aristocratic deaths.⁵² Since Nero is emphatically linked with the slaughter of Rome's more eminent populace as the narrative proceeds, it does not seem overly problematic to conclude that Tacitus understood the prodigies to indicate trouble for the ruling classes. Nero has become such a liability to Rome that his removal would effectively equate with expiation. Put differently, there is no point addressing the warnings without first removing a major cause – the emperor. The hendiadactic link of Nero's *imperium* with his *scelera* seems to mark what was perhaps Rome's last chance to end the decline: later prodigy notices suppress any hint of successful expiation. The gods' intercession was in vain because no one was listening.

For completeness' sake, we should consider here another favourite of the sceptic. A corporate sense of responsibility (rather than cynicism) is behind the polemical assertion at A. 16.33.1 of the 'indifference of the gods towards good and bad deeds' (*aequitate deum erga bona malaque documenta*). It is not enough to call on the gods when men are standing by watching.⁵³ We should probably infer a 'naive' attitude that someone can be responsible for his own behaviour and expect to escape the wider consequences of a more chronic moral and religious failure (many of Tacitus' victims, especially those that curse their enemies, are innocent). Tacitus knows better: in a corrupt Rome, it rained on the just and the unjust alike.

Modern scepticism is not a factor in Tacitus' texts: prodigies retained their traditional meaning. What is more pertinent is Tacitus' handling of them within his narrative.

One fact that has attracted attention is the relative scarcity of prodigies in the *Annals* and *Histories*, when compared with Livy. In addition, Tacitus lists fewer signs than Suetonius. There would seem to be two issues here: not just his selectivity, for which there are reasons, but also an actual decrease in the number of reports that he might have included. If we consider that prodigies, notoriously reported in far greater numbers at times of stress,⁵⁴ represented a means for communities to indicate their concerns

⁵¹ For instance it seems to be important in the understanding of the omen at A. 15.7.2 that *pila militum arsere, magis insigni prodigio quia Parthus hostis missilibus telis decertat*.

⁵² A. 12.64.1, Livy 40.37.1.

⁵³ Cf. Manlius' appeal to the plebs at Livy A. 6.18.9. See also above, 103.

⁵⁴ Livy 29.14.2, 21.62.1, 24.10.6; Tacitus *H.* 1.86.1, 4.26.2.

to Rome,⁵⁵ then the historical⁵⁶ question of the drop in reports can be answered by reference to the change in the political situation.⁵⁷

Livy's Roman Republic depended on its ability to solve religious crises. It had a range of priesthoods equipped to deal with religious difficulties. At times of the *pax deum* they were therefore relatively redundant. As was outlined above in connection with Livy's prodigy notices, the advent of empire led to an increasing focus on the emperor as eminently and continuously pious, and in permanent favour with the gods. The corollary was a gradual change of emphasis in interpreting any signs that were taken to be adverse. The imperative in the Republic would have been to *regain* lost divine favour, even if repeated sacrifice was required. In contrast, the ideal under the Empire was to *retain* it. The majority of potentially prodigious or ominous material was now interpreted either positively or in connection with a change of ruler, as we see in Suetonius: 'all Suetonius' lists of signs revolve around two issues, and two only. The rise to imperial power and the fall from it.'⁵⁸ And there would be no shortage of potential signs, given the obsessive interest documented in Tacitus' Rome. The abundance of (often, but not always, flawed) interpretations is a recurrent theme throughout Tacitus' works.⁵⁹ But the divide between public discussion and formal reporting had grown much wider: whereas republican Rome had, according to Livy, been

⁵⁵ Or for Romans themselves; MacBain (1982) 35–42. Compare the way that Tacitus juxtaposes a prodigy report with other attempts by the plebs to indicate their displeasure to Claudius, *multa eo anno prodigia euenere ... frugum quoque egestas et orta ex eo fames ... in prodigium accipiebatur. nec occulti tantum questus, sed iura reddentem Claudium circumuasere clamoribus turbidis, pulsamque in extremam fori partem ui urgebant* (A. 12.43.1).

⁵⁶ It should be stressed that for the time being, we are dealing with the historical record of prodigies from which Tacitus chose items. His *deployment* of these prodigies is however dealt with below. Obviously, there is a danger of a circular argument here, since Tacitus is a key source for these events. The best control we have on this is the account of Suetonius, who tends to conflate state-related prodigies with signs attached to individuals, often without any clear distinction between what was historically accepted by the state as requiring expiation.

⁵⁷ Rosenberger (1998) 244 comes to the same conclusion.

⁵⁸ Wallace-Hadrill (1983) 191.

⁵⁹ E.g. at Augustus' death, A. 1.9.1; when the Caelian Hill burns down at A. 4.64.1; in connection with Claudius' incest at A. 12.8.2; a private dream becomes common property at A. 11.4.1–5; Nero was supposedly protected by snake(s) in the crib, A. 11.5.6; interpretations at Britannicus' funeral, A. 13.17.2; a comet appears and a bolt of lightning strikes Nero's table at A. 14.22.1–4; the Romans in Britain interpret prodigies fearfully at 14.31–32; the populace disagrees with Nero about the collapse of a theatre at A. 15.34.1–2, probably rightly; a whole spate of prodigies and adverse events (not, apparently, the same thing) receive public attention at *H.* 1.86 under Otho; we are told that Rome was a city 'where the populace took everything as an adverse sign' (... *apud ciuitatem cuncta interpretantem funestis ominis loco acceptum est*) at *H.* 2.91.1; public pressure persuades Vitellius to adopt the name Caesar at *H.* 3.58.3. More specifically linked to the end of a reign (i.e. the death of an emperor): the collapse of the distinction between *fatum* and *ira deum* at *H.* 4.26.2 seems to allude to the emperor's embodiment of divine favour or disfavour, since *fatum* is more likely to refer to the rise or fall of an emperor. Likewise the dream at A. 11.4.3 is taken adversely for Claudius, as are the signs of 14.22 under Nero.

actively interested in prodigies, no one in their right mind would report one to an imperial senate. Though this factor was never redundant, the extent to which this shaped the perception of events varied according to the emperor of the time. This historical situation is however far from being the only factor in play: though the state of the Tacitean texts makes firm conclusions impossible, comparison with Suetonius suggests that Tacitus is also deliberately omitting signs that were connected with individuals rather than the state.⁶⁰ Those remaining are not included at random and their handling in the text is far from a simple reflection of the historical record.

The thorough reshaping of interpretations means that we should be surprised that there were any prodigy reports at all, since one was in danger of implying that the current régime was under threat, a proposition which, one suspects, not many of Tacitus' emperors would have received with equanimity. Those that we do have seem to owe their presence in the historical record to the fact that they were either local and/or unavoidably well known, and Tacitus rarely fails to bring this factor to our attention. Thus the prodigy reports that are available to us are almost exclusively from within Rome itself: they were difficult to ignore. The interpretation of lightning strikes on specific buildings would be too established to redefine (e.g. as expiated by Nero at *A.* 13.24.2) as would the death of men of each magistracy within a few months (*A.* 12.64.1).⁶¹ Reports of events on a large scale, such as lightning striking all fourteen districts of Rome (*A.* 14.12.2), or a comet (*A.* 14.22.1) also appear.⁶² Where notices appear from outside Rome, they are highly dramatic and usually what we would call a 'natural' disaster on an extraordinary scale – unmistakable prodigial material in other words.⁶³

⁶⁰ The best example of this is *Otho* 8, in comparison with *H.* 1.86 where Tacitus also discriminates between prodigies and 'natural' adverse conditions. Ash (1999) 131–132 notes the greater number of signs for Vespasian and points out how trenchant his selections can be. As she argues, the choice of the cypress tree as the key omen that promises greatness for Vespasian is deliberately made for its multiple allusions. Apart from the fact that the cypress is associated with death, it is likely that there is a deliberate allusion to the withering of the same tree under Domitian, recorded by Suetonius (*Domitian* 15). Other omissions: the signs listed at *Tiberius* 14; *Nero* 46 has a list that seems to include events historically subsequent to the death of Agrippina (i.e., within the scope of the extant text); *Vespasian* 5 contains a whole array of signs, only a few of which appear in the extant Tacitus.

⁶¹ For this phenomenon as a prodigy, see also Livy 40.37.1.

⁶² Note also the wording at *A.* 15.47.2, where Tacitus indicates how public signs were – *bicipites hominum aliorumue animalium partus abiecti in publicum aut in sacrificiis quibus grauidas hostias immolare mos est, reperti*.

⁶³ A massive earthquake in Campania destroyed a large part of Pompei (*A.* 15.22.2); the same area later suffered a divinely sent hurricane which almost reached Rome. The city did not, however, escape from the mysterious plague that swept through the entire population (*non sexus, non aetas periculo uacua*, *A.* 16.13.2). Though the events of 16.13 are not technically said to be *prodigia*, Tacitus is in no doubt that the gods were responsible (*foedum annum etiam dii tempestatibus et morbis insigniuere*). In addition, a specific adverse sign is noted when violent storms occur during

Ignoring these events would have been extremely difficult, not least because confirmation would have been abundant. Prodigies are also noted when the soldiers in Britain are sufficiently frightened to note them (A. 14.31-2). The *Histories* are not dissimilar. When we get what sound rather more like old-fashioned reports, Tacitus himself notes that the time was one of exceptional worry (H. 1.86.1). Whereas many of Livy's notices betray an interest, even diligence, in making reports, it appears that in imperial Rome and its environs signs were noted only when they could not be ignored. Such was the historical position, as far as we can tell. What is more, Tacitus was perfectly aware of it, and even accounts for it: his 'lament' on the decline of prodigies is implied in his narrative by the emphasis he places on the intense publicity that they received when they were noted.

McCulloch suggested that Tacitus, in 'omitting' prodigies from the early books of the *Annals*, reflected 'Tiberius' dislike of superstition' (*sic*).⁶⁴ His example, of Tiberius's refusal to consult the Sibylline Books at A. 1.76.2, can be complemented. Suetonius notes the emperor's attempts to control means of prediction, including his confiscation of the lots of Praeneste (*Tiberius* 63).⁶⁵ But Tacitus did more than restrict his own record, if he did that at all: he was well aware that Tiberius' policies would diminish prodigy reports and, by criticising the emperor's responses, implies that this did nothing to help matters. He pithily informs us that the emperor always gave events a positive interpretation (*nam cuncta, etiam fortuita, ad gloriam uertebat*, A. 2.84.3). But the emperor's strategy was not always limited to propagating positive interpretations where none was warranted: situations that were being interpreted adversely were quickly defused by relief operations. Thus, when the Mons Caelius was ravaged by fire and a religious interpretation was beginning to gain momentum, Tiberius acted on a material level to improve conditions, thereby redirecting attention to his munificence and away from the diagnosis of the *ira deum*.⁶⁶

A similar material response at A. 2.47.1-3 after severe earthquakes in Asia may have headed off talk of the *ira deum*: Tacitus, however, presents the episode with the kinds of inversions that were characteristic of prodigies

Britannicus' funeral (A. 13.17.2). Obviously Nero was unlikely to treat it as a prodigy, whatever the public said, so this particular event receives no official sanction.

⁶⁴ McCulloch (1984) 158 also argues that Nero had an 'interest' in prodigies, and that this is reflected in the later books. It is true that Tacitus structures the Neronian years increasingly by use of prodigies, as his material shows, but it is unproven that this reflects a reflected personal 'interest'. We shall be offering other possible reasons for the increased number of prodigies which are more in keeping with the interpretation that the gods were increasingly 'angry' with Rome.

⁶⁵ On Tiberius' reputed aversion to traditional religious diagnoses and his preference for the apparently more 'fatalistic' astrology, see also Syme (1958a) 523 for an older, more cynical reading.

⁶⁶ The process is made explicit at A. 4.64.1.

and may well thereby be hinting that recourse to the gods would not have been inappropriate. 'Vast mountains, it is said, collapsed; what had been level ground seemed to be raised aloft.'⁶⁷ In contrast, though their location obviously made a difference to their relevance to the City, the explicitly prodigious earthquakes at A. 12.43.1 in Rome are far less destructive and receive less emphasis in the text. Clearly the potential was there for a religious interpretation, which might well have been made if Rome had itself suffered such a disaster.⁶⁸

Thus imperial generosity was an established response to disaster by the time that Tiberius allays the fears of Rome after the fire at A. 4.64.1. If sustained as a practice, inevitably the habits of interpretation would change as victims became accustomed to thinking in terms of imperial largesse rather than the *ira deum* as the appropriate and altogether *practical* response to such a crisis. This seems to be what happens at 6.45 – a fire occurred, which Tacitus implies was exploited by Tiberius to buttress his reputation (*quod damnum Caesar ad gloriam uertit exolutis domuum et insularum pretiis*). This time his (unusual) largesse was appreciated without any hint of ominous interpretation.⁶⁹ Thus prodigy reporting in Tacitus' Rome was simultaneously undermined on a variety of fronts: not only was it actively discouraged (more will be said on this later) or radically reinterpreted, but Tiberius' largesse actively undermined the very process of categorising such phenomena as religious *at all*.

Here then is Tacitus on the 'decline of prodigy reports': rather than a general lament of neglect like Livy's, we have an acute depiction of the forces that led to the decline in a given period. It is a testament to his powers of observation and analysis that his account remains highly plausible, though it is not our concern here to test this analysis more widely. We shall see

⁶⁷ *sedisse inmensos montis, uisa in arduo quae plana fuerint*. Furneaux (1896) *ad loc* notes other sources on this earthquake. Pliny not only testifies to the magnitude of the earthquake but also makes a link to the prodigious: at *NH* 2.86 (200) he calls this 'the greatest (*maximus*) earthquake in human memory' and goes on to add that 'the city of Rome was never shaken without this being a premonition of something about to happen: *nec uero simplex malum aut in ipso tantum motu periculum est, sed par aut maius ostento: nunquam urbs Roma tremuit ut non futuri euentus alicuius id praenuntium esset*.

⁶⁸ The question of whether the earthquakes were prodigious for Rome, for the cities where they occurred, or both, is complex. Livy's Rome *could* reject their responsibility for a prodigy that did not occur on state land (MacBain (1982) 30): Tacitus assigns the responsibility for local prodigies to the Jews (*H.* 5.13.1-3). On the other hand, Rome had been collecting prodigy accounts from further and further afield for some time (e.g. Syracuse (Livy 41.13.2)). After all, Tiberius took responsibility for the practicalities of recovery but that could be taken to be generous rather than necessary. The politics of taking responsibility for such a foreign portent would obviously have been complex. Earthquakes in Cibra and Aegium similarly led to a remission of tax at A. 4.13.1. Tacitus paints a consistent picture in which the emperor acted to forestall negative religious publicity that, initially at least, was being related to the gods' displeasure.

⁶⁹ See also A. 12.58.2 and 14.27.1.

later that this is not the only aspect of Tiberius' contribution to the decline of traditional (i.e. functional) religion in Rome. Though we have touched only lightly thus far on the narratological implications of prodigies in the text, we can at least proceed in the knowledge that prodigies are still to be understood as an index of the *ira deum*, and predictions of disaster for the Roman state within Tacitus' text. Other categories seem also to retain their identity and uses within the society and the text.

4.2.2 The boundaries of Roman religion

4.2.2.1 *Superstitio at home: credulity, astrology and dreams*

A key function of Livy's religious model was propriety. Rome's religion was not just a disparate collection of anything that seemed to work: it was a construction of suitable institutions and desirable relationships. The same is true of Tacitus' account: the mutinous soldiers in Pannonia were, in their ignorance, frightened by an eclipse⁷⁰ and lost their nerve: 'once knocked off-balance, men's minds are predisposed to religious error' (*sunt mobiles ad superstitionem percussae semel mentes*, A. 1.28.2).⁷¹ This made them more malleable to Drusus' shrewd exploitation of their fear *dum superstitio urgeat* (A. 1.29.3).⁷² *Superstitio* is an appropriate indictment of the emotional response (panic) as the moon disappears behind the clouds. It was not always commoners whose response was flawed: Vitellius was similarly frightened, and superstitious, enough to think that being called Caesar would make a difference to his situation (*superstitioe nominis*, H. 3.58.3).

Superstitio is also used of magical practices (e.g. *magicas superstitiones*, A. 12.59.1). The problem with magic was not that it was ineffective, but that it was unregulated.⁷³ Tacitus does not explicitly condemn the art, though his

⁷⁰ A phenomenon that had been incorporated into the *pax deum* for centuries by this time, though we have no way of knowing whether this understanding was generally accepted or not. The notoriety of Gallus' explanation implies the former.

⁷¹ Cf. the stories told by men who had been shipwrecked. They reported many strange things *uisa siue ex metu credita* (A. 2.24.4).

⁷² O'Gorman (2000) 31–33 argues that, though Tacitus speaks of *superstitio* and says that *miles rationis ignarus omen praesentium accepit*, the soldier's interpretation has much to commend it: 'it is arguable that Tacitus stacks the cards against his explicit judgement of the soldier as ignorant by the semantic subtlety with which the "ignorant" interpretation is represented'. However, her (rhetorical) question 'Why does Tacitus tell us that the soldier is ignorant while demonstrating the range and complexity of his interpretation?' does not do justice to the sophistication of religious interpretation, even by 'commoners'. Compare, for instance, the 'ranking' of anonymous interpretations at A. 6.37.2, the complex correlations made about the circumstances of Augustus' death, or the sophisticated interpretations of the fire. Even in his sophistication the soldier could be wrong, in any number of ways. Gallus' rationalisation of eclipses is as good a reason as any.

⁷³ Or could not be regulated. See Phillips (1991b) on the difficulties of deciding which was 'good' and which was 'bad', as well as the difficulties of enforcement of this distinction. Of the numerous discussions of the definition of magic see especially J. Z. Smith (1995).

depiction of the death-scene of Germanicus vividly creates an atmosphere of dread (A. 2.69.3). It does not seem that the readership particularly needed to be told since 'the use of the term *superstitio* seems to have widened over the first century AD ... the most striking development, however, was that the concept of magic emerged as the ultimate *superstitio*' (Beard North and Price (1998) I 218). Indeed, for Tacitus' period, fear of magical practices seems to have pervaded the nobility and this is documented as part of the climate of fear.⁷⁴ Thus magicians were expelled from Italy in 16 (A. 2.32.3) and again in 69 (H. 2.62.2); astrologers were expelled along with them in 16 and again in 52 by a *senatus consultum atrox et inritum* (A. 12.52.3).⁷⁵ A major obstacle to ridding Italy of astrologers in particular would have been the fact that it was often the emperor who employed their services, or even, in the case of Tiberius, practised the art.⁷⁶

Tacitus' handling of astrology is highly polemical. Though every single prediction made by an astrologer in his accounts comes true,⁷⁷ the art of prediction is skilfully shown to be fraught with difficulties. When Tiberius left Rome (A. 4.58.2-3) the popular interpretation of the predictions that he would never return was that his death was imminent but it soon became obvious how the 'truth can be obscured' (*uera ... obscuris tegerentur*, A. 4.58.3), since such a fine line exists between the true art and error. Tiberius was indeed never to return, but of course the assumption that this indicated his imminent death was flawed: no one apparently considered that he might live and not return.⁷⁸ Furthermore, if we were working within a framework

⁷⁴ Note in Tacitus the frequent conjunction of the charges of magic and adultery or even incest, e.g. A. 3.22.1 (Aemilia Lepida, wife of Quirinius); 4.52.1 (Claudia Pulchra); 6.29.3-4 (Scaurus) and 16.8.2 (Junia Lepida, wife of Cassius, accused of incest).

⁷⁵ For the discrepancies in the sources on the measures at A. 2.32.3 see Goodyear (1982) *ad loc.* Barton (1994) documents the rise of astrology towards the end of the Republic and into the imperial period, partly at the expense of haruspicy, though this is probably overstated. Haruspicy was less scandalous and therefore received less exposure in our painfully incomplete records which tend to assume the normal state apparatus rather than foreground it. Nonetheless, the introduction and pervasiveness of astrology from the late Republic onwards does seem to be a historical reality. It is not mentioned in the extant Livy, though this proves nothing historically.

⁷⁶ His prediction in Greek at A. 6.20.2 that '*et tu, Galba, quandoque degustabis imperium*' owes its presence to a number of factors. It comes amid a series of executions and therefore alludes to Galba's survival. But the irony of a consul being told that he *will later have imperium, after a consultation about state affairs, should not be missed.*

⁷⁷ Tiberius makes his prediction about Galba's future rule by *scientia Chaldaeorum artis* (A. 6.20.2); Thrasyllus convinces Tiberius of his ability by predicting (and thereby averting) his own impending doom (6.21); Thrasyllus' son predicted Nero's reign (A. 6.22.6); Agrippina was told by *Chaldaei* that Nero would rule but would slaughter his mother (A. 14.9.3) – she (successfully) waited for the *tempus ... prosperum ex montis Chaldaeorum* before revealing the death of Claudius (A. 12.68.3); finally, Ptolemaeus predicted Otho's survival of Nero (H. 1.22.2) – in the circumstances (Poppaea being Otho's wife, before she became Nero's consort) this was rather impressive. Libo's trial revealed *questions* that were ridiculous (A. 2.30.1-2) but the responses are not recorded.

⁷⁸ There are other moments where interpretation is difficult. At 6.28, Tacitus sifts through the legends about the phoenix (*de quibus congruunt et plura ambigua, sed cognitu non absurda promere*

of 'belief/rejection', implicitly based on efficacy, then for Tacitus to accept that astrology could make reliable predictions would be to assume he would advocate its use. Thus it has been common to discuss his 'fatalism', a compound of an apparent respect for astrological predictions and a concurrent disregard for traditional religion.⁷⁹ It is sometimes missed that every astrological prediction that Tacitus mentions turns out to be true: but efficacy is not the point.

Apart from the fact that Tacitus prefers not to have a senate more intent on future success than present concerns, it remains that whatever an individual does with astrology, it cannot serve the state. Though the historian never spells out his reasons, this is the most consistent reason for his marginalisation. Study of the stars has no cohesive tendencies, but instead is divisive as rivals attempt to achieve their promised status or thwart each other's ambitions; nor does it have rites to establish proper communication with the gods.

Astrology cannot possibly have a useful role to play for the *res publica*, which has its own expert interpreters of fate, in the form of the *quindecimviri sacris faciundis*. Thus, astrology is a *superstitio* and there would appear to be censure in the notice that Vespasian kept one 'openly' (*palam*) at court:⁸⁰ in short, *mathematici* are a race of men who are 'unreliable to the powerful, and deceptive to the hopeful' (*genus hominum potentibus infidum, sperantibus fallax*, *H.* 1.22.1). The *fallacitas* is more a question of their use as advisers than their ability to make predictions. Otho was 'betrayed' in the sense that his predicted *imperium* hardly took the form that he expected, and Ptolemaeus seems to have missed, or suppressed, the fact that his client's death would follow on rather more rapidly than one would have liked. The slipperiness of predictions makes astrologers poor guides.⁸¹ More speculatively, astrologers who predicted a mediocre future for their clients might

libet); there are competing interpretations at *A.* 6.37.1-2; a possible 'chance' prophecy at 11.31, depending on your interpretation; see also *A.* 15.74.2; and the reply of Basilides to Vespasian at *H.* 2.78.4 is said to be ambiguous. This list is not exhaustive.

⁷⁹ It is not uncommon to assert that Tacitus became gradually more depressed and pessimistic as he wrote, changing his opinions as he plumbed the depths of the Julio-Claudians in his writing of the *Annals*. We even have a suggested date for his 'conversion' to 'astral fatalism' in Brakman (1928) 73-74.

⁸⁰ *H.* 2.78.1 (both references). For the argument that Vespasian has gone too far in resembling his soldiers, see Ash (1999) 130. However she does not differentiate between the *superstitio* of the common soldiery (displayed for instance at *H.* 1.28.2) and astrology, the imperial *superstitio*, which is mostly practised by (foolish, and usually doomed) aristocrats and emperors in Tacitus' works.

⁸¹ Or they might even find their clients being betrayed by informers who watch their movements, as at 16.14. Barton (1994) 71-94 has case studies that illustrate how complex and improvisory horoscopic interpretation could be.

well have found their services required less often than those who foretold greatness.

Astrology is not the only predictive art that should be avoided by the Roman aristocracy. When detailing the entrapment of Libo, the first to die for charges concerning magic and predictions (A. 2.27f.), Tacitus tells us that he was 'prone to dabbling in the ridiculous' (*facilis inanibus*) and it was therefore all the easier to press upon him interpretation of dreams along with astrology and magic. We have already seen that, for Livy, reliance on dreams was as disreputable as any other *superstitio*, not because they were *always* misleading, but because they were unreliable and therefore an inappropriate means of divination. The generally exemplary⁸² Germanicus is more proper, keeping his auspicious dream in its place by double-checking with the auspices and preserving a sense of perspective. When he addresses his men he restricts himself to saying only what he understood to be relevant and appropriate (*quae sapientia prouisa aptaque imminenti pugnae disserit*, A. 2.14.1). The two knights, both named Petra, found to their cost that ambiguities in dream interpretation could be costly at A. 11.4 when a relatively innocuous and impersonal interpretation (famine) was recast as a prediction of Claudius' death by less traditional-sounding interpretations.

Though Tacitus specifically says it was merely a pretext for their destruction, they might have been better off keeping it to themselves.⁸³ Just to underline their untrustworthy status, the somewhat disturbed (*mente turbida*) Caesellius Bassus was foolish enough to trust a dream about buried treasure (A. 16.1.1) and Nero was stupid and greedy enough to believe him.⁸⁴

The only exception to the rule in Tacitus is the sending of dreams by Hercules to his priests in an organised ritual format (A. 12.13.3) where the validity of the dreams, guaranteed by the god, is assumed. Tacitus is not concerned here with questions of belief or scepticism, efficacy and prediction: his interest lies in policing the boundaries of *superstitio*.

Superstitio abroad Livy was not averse to dismissing the rites of Rome's enemies but reserved most of his criticism for Rome and Romans: Tacitus,

⁸² Formerly considered to be a Tacitean hero, Germanicus' reputation has suffered in recent years: Rutland (1987); McCulloch (1984) 177f.; Pelling (1993).

⁸³ This is less a problem with dream interpretation than with the political context. The context implies that it is the corrupt imperial court that is 'to blame', since they seize on the dream and change its meaning. Nonetheless, Tacitus' closing comment that it was the consequence of some dream that they were destroyed emphasises how fluid and dangerous dream interpretation could be.

⁸⁴ Caecina's terrifying dream, while on campaign in Germany, of the ghost of Varus appears to have no predictive power either, though it was understandable in the circumstances (A. 1.65.2). See further on some of these Pelling (1997).

however, is more likely to emphasise the foreign nature of religious practices with reference to *superstitio*,⁸⁵ which is liberally applied to a whole range of foreign religions. The Jews are thoroughly dismissed⁸⁶ and the Druids reveal their incompetence at every opportunity.⁸⁷ The Germans are given to religious error in their considering women divine (*H.* 4.61.2) and the altars on which Roman officers were sacrificed after the defeat of Varus were, rather inevitably, *barbarae* (*A.* 1.61.3).⁸⁸ The Egyptians are generally unstable and uncivilised, not least for their *superstitio* (*H.* 1.11.1) and their rites, along with those of the Jews, are again described as *superstitio* when those ‘infected’ by them are expelled from Rome (*A.* 2.85.4). When Nero instigated a persecution of the Christians with their *superstitio*, it was not their lack of guilt that made people pity them, but his motives (*A.* 15.44.5).

This is not to say that all foreign practices are flawed; Tacitus is ultimately operating within the same framework as Livy, since a number of foreign sites and practices receive a dignified exposition, especially those that advised Vespasian and Titus of their destiny to empire.⁸⁹ When the Third Legion salute the rising sun, *ut mos*, they are not castigated for it, though it amusingly leads to a rumour that Mucianus had arrived at the battle-scene and the two armies had greeted one another (*H.* 3.2.4-5).

⁸⁵ The term is not necessarily dismissive. When a number of cities were questioned by the senate regarding the abuse of sanctuary rights, they relied on *uetustis superstitionibus aut meritis in populum Romanum* to argue their case (*A.* 3.60.2). From this it might seem that Tacitus was dismissive of the various claims that follow which are mostly mythical; but such scorn for apparently well-authenticated claims would be extremely unusual. It may be that the term is not so pejorative in itself, but reflects the assumption that most foreign religions are inferior to the Roman: Tacitus elsewhere has Ptolemy ask Timotheus which god he had dreamed of and what his rites (*superstitio*) were (*H.* 4.83.2). The term cannot represent a paraphrase of the Pharaoh’s words if there is a pejorative sense. Finally, the worship of Serapis is described as *superstitiones* but in a context that validates Vespasian’s ‘miraculous’ healings. We should remember that, however valid such rites and cults might be abroad, they do not belong in Rome.

⁸⁶ Tacitus speaks of their *peruicaciam superstitionis* at *H.* 2.4.3. *H.* 5.2-13 is an extended condemnation, e.g. *profana illic omnia quae apud nos sacra, rursus concessa apud illos quae nobis incesta*, *H.* 5.2.1; their religion is called *superstitio* again at *H.* 5.8.2 and 3.

⁸⁷ Mistaken interpretation of the burning of the Capitol, *H.* 4.54.2; their rites are *saeuae superstitiones* at *A.* 14.30.3 *nam cruore captiuo adolere aras et hominum fibris consulere deos fas habebant*.

⁸⁸ Civilis exacts an oath that, although traditional, is also barbarous (*H.* 4.15.1).

⁸⁹ *H.* 2.2.2-4 sees Titus visit the shrine of Paphian Venus, and earns the shrine a history with full credentials; he receives a positive prediction from the goddess. Vespasian is also promised success at Carmel, *H.* 2.78.3; when the emperor heals a cripple and a blind man in Alexandria, it is at the instigation of the god Serapis (*H.* 4.81.1). There follows a lengthy excursus on the origin of the god’s cult, which legitimises it on several counts. Firstly the dream that bade Ptolemy fetch the god is interpreted not by the (presumably unreliable) Egyptian priests, but by the next best thing to a Roman, the Athenian Timotheus, and his conclusions are based on good investigative work rather than any disreputable charismatic inspiration. The story includes a whole array of proofs, such as the repeated dreams of the god both by Ptolemy and by the king of the territory where Serapis was currently housed, Scydrothemis of Sinope. Serapis himself is then linked with Aesculapius, Osiris, Jupiter and (probably preferably) Pluto (*H.* 4.83-4).

But Tacitus does not only credit foreign cults for which there was a political imperative. A few learned, and uncritical, notices appear elsewhere on foreign customs.⁹⁰ For the most part, a grudging respect for venerated traditions is to be found even where the nation is found to be generally wanting. The Jews' heritage is acknowledged, for all the good it did them, and we should note that the Egyptian priests, along with their Greek counterparts, are capable of *some* insight in their documentation of the phoenix at 6.28: Tacitus offers that he is including an edited version of their somewhat, but not entirely, erroneous lore. Similarly, the Egyptians' history of letters is used, apparently unproblematically, as historical evidence at 11.14 when Claudius makes changes to the Latin alphabet. Their reliability is guaranteed by their visibility on stone. Christianity is, on the other hand, a new phenomenon and therefore all the less desirable.⁹¹ The frequency of *superstitio*, allied with his systematic undermining of astrology and dream interpretation, is representative of his deliberate judgement of 'religious' activities: such things might be appropriate to foreigners, or in ritualised contexts, but they are far from being appropriate conduct for a Roman.

Fors Inappropriateness does not exhaust the range of possible errors: a number of interpretations contrast 'chance' or 'nature' with genuine religious phenomena and in this Tacitus is more caustic and explicitly discriminating than Livy: *fors* continues to designate the conjunction of details without intention,⁹² often defying expectation.⁹³ As we found with Livy, the use of *fors* as a category owes nothing to any intent to undermine the category of the gods' intervention, though this has often been assumed.⁹⁴ It is a shorthand for refusing to assign that significance to particular items at a specific moment. Thus, just as natural events could be mistaken for prodigies (as, for instance, at *H.* 1.86.1 and *H.* 4.26.2), Tiberius is mistaken in attributing to the benevolence of the gods what the historian says was the *fortuitus* birth of twins to Drusus.⁹⁵ Tacitus' mention of the error should be taken as local diagnosis of the specific events rather than exclusive and sweeping dismissals of the categories of 'heaven-sent' phenomena. The in-

⁹⁰ The origins of the Iberians and Albanians who claim descent from Phrixus includes the note that they do not sacrifice rams, without any caustic asides, *A.* 6.34.2; when Gotarzes offers prayers to Hercules on Mt Sunbulah, there is information, again without disparaging comment, about the way that the god instructs his priests, *A.* 12.13.4.

⁹¹ Certainly Tacitus has nothing positive to say about it whatsoever and its novelty is stressed at *A.* 15.44.3-6.

⁹² E.g. *seu dolo seu forte*, *H.* 2.42.1; *forte an dolo principis incertum*, *A.* 15.38.1; cf. also *H.* 3.21.2.

⁹³ E.g. *fors cuncta turbare et ignauorum saepe telis fortissimi cadere* (*H.* 4.29.2).

⁹⁴ E.g. Kajanto (1981) 544-546.

⁹⁵ *nam cuncta, etiam fortuita, ad gloriam uertebat* (*A.* 2.84.3).

tervention of the gods can come unexpectedly, ‘by chance’, as it does at A. 4.27.1, when *belli semina fors oppressit* ... because *uelut munere deum*, three biremes put in at Brindisi.⁹⁶ Conversely, it is possible to assign to chance what pertains to the gods or fate: Galba, typically for him, makes the wrong choice at H. 1.18.1 when he decides that well-established signs of the *ira deum* are in fact due to chance.

The distinction *is* more often used than was found in Livy and with a more heightened sense of contrast: but we cannot assume that this reflects a wider change. It is more likely a consequence of their different approaches. Livy represents a Rome that is rarely in error, while Tacitus does virtually the opposite, parading mistake after mistake before the hapless reader. Either way, the *co*-existence of the categories of ‘chance’ and ‘divine’ should not surprise us. As before, they do not exclude one another. Drusus’ twins were just part of a normal pattern of human existence; as a detail, they did not mark out any special divine favour. One dies soon after (A. 4.15.1) and the other, Tiberius Gemellus, died at the hands of his co-heir Caligula (Suetonius *Gaius* 23) as Tiberius had predicted (A. 6.46.4). If they had featured more impressively in Roman politics, then perhaps the hand of the gods would have been a more accurate diagnosis.

Fatum It is striking that while Livy’s relatively vast extant text has the word *fatum* only thirty-six times and *fatalis* twenty times (and eight of those are in the phrase *libri fatales*, i.e. the Sibylline Books), it occurs as many as thirty-one times (*fatalis* or *fataliter* nine times) in the significantly shorter combination of the *Annals* and *Histories*. These figures could be explained away by the observation that *fatum* is simply used as a synonym for ‘death’ – which is a considerably more prominent theme in Tacitus’ account.⁹⁷ However, this would be simplistic.

As in Livy, *fatum* refers in particular and often rhetorically to *natural* death. A death that was both natural and eminent enough to be worth recording was unusual in those days, as Tacitus pithily remarks at A. 6.10.3. When Scipio is asked by Claudius, *adeo ignaro* of Messalina’s machinations in forcing the suicide of his wife Poppaea, why he is dining without her, he replies that she had died *fato* (A. 11.2.5); the compounding of disingenuous sarcasm and political tact is far from neutral. *Fatum* as a natural death is contrasted with suicide (*fnem uitae sponte an fato impleuit*, A. 2.42.3) and

⁹⁶ *Velut* is susceptible to the same analysis as in Livy (above, 59), though it seems likely that he would have reversed the order: the revolt would have been crushed by the help of the gods after the ships arrived ‘by chance’. Cf. ... *seu forte lapsa uox in praesagium uertit* (A. 11.31.6).

⁹⁷ E.g. A. 1.3.3, 1.55.3, 6.10.3, 14.12.4, 14.14.4 *et al.*

Cestius Gallus is even said to have died either naturally or of weariness *fato aut taedio* (H. 5.10.1) fighting the Jews. Since he was succeeded by Vespasian as a prelude to imperial usurpation, it might well be that he, like Marcellus in Livy, was 'accidentally' caught up in events of a greater destiny that necessitated his removal. It is also still possible for Tacitus to exploit *fatum* to condemn murder as Livy did in highlighting Perseus' hypocrisy: even a simple notice that death occurred *fato* can carry the implication that the person in question escaped Nero's purges.⁹⁸

In dealing with aspects other than the timing and manner of death, there is an irony in Tacitus' dealing with *fatum*. He is never so diffident as when discussing the inevitable.⁹⁹ When dealing with individuals, there are aspects within *fatum* relating to careers and social position. One such notice appears in conjunction with an assessment of the exemplary¹⁰⁰ senator Marcus Lepidus, who moderated a great deal of savage political activity without antagonising Tiberius:

Because of this [Lepidus' success], I doubt whether the liking of emperors for some, and their hostility towards others, is determined by the fate and lot we receive at birth, as are other things, or whether it is, to an extent, a question of our own plans so that it is possible to find a way between defiant obstinacy or degrading slavishness.¹⁰¹

There is another excursus at A. 6.22.1-3 after the story of the predictions of Thrasyllus, Tiberius' court astrologer:

When I hear of these and similar events, I suspend my judgement as to whether it is fate and inevitable necessity or chance which determines the outcomes of human affairs. Indeed, among the wisest of the ancients and those who follow their

⁹⁸ This rather grim idea is grotesquely articulated at A. 16.13.2 during a severe plague: *interitus quamuis promisci minus flebiles erant, tamquam communi mortalitate saevitiam principis praeuenirent*.

⁹⁹ Although, according to Hellegouarc'h (1991), Tacitus is normally given to 'dogmatic assertions' in comparison with Caesar, Sallust and Livy.

¹⁰⁰ Sinclair (1995) 163-178 is essential reading on Lepidus and the limits of his exemplary role. Compare the *pontifex* Piso, of whom Tacitus says *nullius seruilis sententiae sponte auctor et quotiens necessitas ingrueret sapienter moderans* (A. 6.10.3). For Tacitus' interest in *uirtus*, see von Albrecht (1987). For the use of obituaries in general to frame the account and make historical and political points (in this case, the end of *libertas*), see Gingras (1991-2). *Libertas* is central to his political viewpoint (Shotter (1978); Roberts (1988); Morford (1990) and (1991); Sinclair (1995) esp. 163-169).

¹⁰¹ *unde dubitare cogor, fato et sorte nascendi, ut cetera, ita principum inclinatio in hos, offensio in illos, an sit aliquid in nostris consiliis liceatque inter abruptam contumaciam et deforme obsequium pergere iter ambitione ac periculis uacuum* (A. 4.20.2-4).

teachings you will find conflicting theories, many being convinced that the gods do not concern themselves with the beginning or the end of our life, or with mankind at all in the final analysis. Therefore suffering is repeatedly the lot of the good, and happiness of the evil. There are, on the other hand, others who believe that though there is a correlation between fate and events, it does not depend on the movement of stars, but on primary elements, and on a combination of natural causes. Still, they leave us the choice of what sort of life we will have. Once the choice is made, a sequence of events is fixed. Good and bad are not what people commonly think; many who can be seen to be struggling with difficulties are happy but for the most part, there are very many who, although they are endowed with great riches, are completely miserable. This depends on the former tolerating their difficult lot with patience, and the latter make poor use of their wealth. Most men, however, cannot give up the belief that each person's future is fixed right from birth, but that some things happen differently from what has been foretold because of the fake claims of those who speak about things which they do not know about, and that this destroys the credibility of a skill, for which both the past and our own age have provided unambiguous examples of proof.¹⁰²

The passages have often prompted mention of Tacitus' 'indecision' or 'agnosticism' and it has generally been concluded that the concepts are vague or devoid of significance.¹⁰³ But there are better reasons for Tacitus' 'hesitation': Martin and Woodman are in no doubt as to the true relevance of 4.20 – it is possible to be a great (states)man even under bad emperors.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² *Sed mihi haec ac talia audienti in incerto iudicium est, fatone res mortalium et necessitate immutabili an forte uoluantur, quippe sapientissimos ueterum qui que sectam eorum aemulantur diuersos reperies, ac multis insitam opinionem non initia nostri, non finem, non denique homines dis curae; ideo creberrime tristia in bonos, laeta apud deteriores esse. contra alii fatum quidem congruere rebus putant, sed non e uagis stellis, uerum apud principia et nexus naturalium causarum; ac tamen electionem uitae nobis relinquunt, quam ubi elegeris, certum imminetium ordinem. neque mala uel bona quae uulgius putet. Multos qui conflictari aduersis uideantur, beatos, at plerosque, quamquam magnas per opes, miserrimos, si illi grauem fortunam constanter tolerent, hi prospera inconsulte utantur. ceterum plurimis mortalium non eximitur, quin primo cuiusque ortu uentura destinentur, sed quaedam secus quam dicta sint cadere fallacis ignara dicentium. Ita corrumpi fidem artis, cuius clara documenta et antiqua aetas et nostra tulerit.*

¹⁰³ Probably most succinctly put by Syme (1958a) 527: 'the notions of "fatum" and "fortuna" continue to be discussed . . . not much emerges. The words belong to literature rather than dogma.'

¹⁰⁴ 'Tacitus is no more seriously concerned with fate and astrological determinism here than at A. 6.22.1-3, but uses these concepts as a convenient foil for the characteristic point that *posse etiam sub malis principibus magnos uiros esse*' (Agr. 42.2).

We might go further, and reappropriate this material into Tacitus' particular religious stand. One could not discuss fate without raising the question of *imperial* destiny. Though Tacitus appears to admit the difficulties of interpreting predictions of fate, this is not straightforward 'intellectual doubt'. To experiment with the dictates of fate in imperial Rome was not only improper but extremely dangerous. By studiously failing to endorse any particular interpretative standpoint Tacitus declares his disinterest in the decrees of destiny – just about the only sensible position left on the subject for an aristocrat. Knowledge was power, and absolute knowledge was to be left to those with absolute power *already*.¹⁰⁵

Given the fascination for signs that inevitably developed in imperial Rome, and the speculation that could mark out a man against his will and best interests,¹⁰⁶ we would expect the expert statesman to be doing more than just avoiding committing himself. It is in fact Vespasian, the old-fashioned general who was hardly different from the common soldiery in terms of appearance and dress (*H.* 1.5.1), and the first emperor to change for the better (*H.* 1.50.4), who embodies Tacitus' exemplary procedure for dealing with omens.¹⁰⁷ Though he kept an astrologer at court, his attitude to fate is textually modest. The prophecies made about him as a young man, which he only remembered when prompted (*recursabant animo uetera omina*), he had considered fulfilled by his eminence under Nero.¹⁰⁸ He is also suitably modest when asked to heal the sick: reluctant to act, he takes professional medical advice first (*H.* 4.81.4). On seeing Basilides in the temple of Serapis in Alexandria, he performs his own extensive inquiries into the location of the man before accepting his appearance as an omen on the strength of his friend's name (*H.* 4.81.2). Finally, even with the indications of divine support, Tacitus emphasises that Vespasian's decision to attempt usurpation is a choice that the founder of the Flavian dynasty makes after proper consideration (*H.* 2.74.2) and it is *fortuna* that he (appropriately) considers, not *fatum*.¹⁰⁹ Rather than placing his hope in predictions, he takes full responsibility for his choice of action, irrespective of omens, unlike Otho, who is swept along by the assurances of his supporters when they urge astrological

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Sinclair (1995), who offers that 'at first sight it may appear that Tacitus generalises on the human condition, but in both cases his attention is actually very narrowly focussed upon the question of the political survival of members of the senatorial class' (54–55).

¹⁰⁶ Rubellius Plautus, for instance, was promoted as a rival to Nero after the appearance of a comet (*A.* 14.22.1). The interpretation was flawed.

¹⁰⁷ *Contra* Ash (1999) 128–136, who sees continuity in the treatments of Vespasian and Otho, and entrenched criticism of the Flavian in his handling of religious items.

¹⁰⁸ *sed primo triumphalia et consulatus et Iudaicae uictoriae decus implesse fidem ominis uidebatur* (*H.* 2.78.2).

¹⁰⁹ In Tacitus' text, Vespasian's choice is only sensible: the historian has just informed us that his card is already marked by Vitellius (*H.* 2.73.2).

predictions on him (*H.* 1.22.1-2). Thus Tacitus, somewhat paradoxically, circumscribes the power of destiny and puts it in its place. Just as Livy's better statesmen thought, whatever one's future, there is also a present (*fortuna*) to attend to.

The only non-imperial destiny treated in the texts is that of Curtius Rufus, whose *fatale* vision at 11.21 and its subsequent fulfilment are recorded with textual and historical impunity. The story is framed within his unexpected rise to prominence, from being the son of a gladiator to the height of senatorial authority. However he can form no precedent for those who sought to know the future, since the man's response to a sign that he did not (textually) seek was to get on with his career in typical contemporary fashion – reprehensibly.¹¹⁰ He conspicuously let fate take care of itself, as did even the arch-interpreter Tiberius – ultimately.¹¹¹

Thus when he mildly notes in the opening to the *Histories* that 'we only took on board the predictions and signs connected with Vespasian after the event',¹¹² Tacitus is not exercising a cynicism that these signs were 'really' meaningless or fabricated: he is signalling what was probably the only sensible position that could be taken at the time. Even Vespasian did not associate the various signs with empire (*H.* 2.78.2) and, after all, Galba and Otho *also* had imperial destinies to fulfil.¹¹³ When three of four candidates are fated to win the throne, how are we to decide in which order they will do so? Or for how long? Galba, though told by Tiberius that he was destined to rule decades previously, had subsequently lived through the reigns of Caligula, Claudius and Nero. And signs could easily be misunderstood: Vespasian himself thought the signs had already been fulfilled. Why should the senate think otherwise? Galba and Otho are both testaments to the wildly unnavigable outcomes of *fata* when enacted in their human context. Would-be emperors would do well to remember how *uera . . . obscuris tegeantur* (*A.* 4.58.3) – not just an intellectual position, but a traditional, and eminently practical one.

The treatment of emperors, the individuals of the time *par excellence*, is very distinctive: it forms a marked contrast with Tacitus' contemporary Suetonius, for whom all signs were linked to the rise and fall of an emperor. As we have seen already, this was part of a more general historical trend.

¹¹⁰ *aduersus superiores tristi adulatione, adrogans minoribus, inter pares difficilis.*

¹¹¹ At *A.* 6.46.3 he leaves the succession to fate even though he has foreseen much of the remaining century (*A.* 6.20.2, 6.46) as well as some of what is to come after his death. The irony of his impotence in the face of such knowledge should not be missed.

¹¹² *occulta fati et ostentis ac responsis destinatum Vespasiano liberisque eius imperium post fortunam credidimus* (*H.* 1.10). *nos* refers to the senatorial order (Sinclair (1995) 50–58).

¹¹³ Vitellius is the only emperor in the *Histories* not to have astrological predictions assigned to him.

In effect, these signs can only be treated as *fatum* rather than the *pax* or the *ira deum*, since there is apparently no room for manoeuvre.¹¹⁴ Thus, *fatum* would become an overly deployed analysis. Tacitus in fact notes the collapse of the distinction between fate and the *ira deum* at *H.* 4.26.2 (*at quod in pace fors seu natura, tunc fatum et ira dei uocabantur*) but distances himself from the diagnosis of fate by his problematisation of accurate interpretation of destiny (thereby inviting the rehabilitation of the category of the *ira deum*). Though the emperors in the *Annals* receive little in the way of divine validation of their rules, those in the *Histories* are more conspicuously contextualised by fate, as we shall see below. The senatorial and the equestrian historians therefore seem to tend towards different ends of the interpretative spectrum. While Tacitus notes the tendency in a city that 'interpreted almost everything in religious terms' (*H.* 2.91.1), he does not always indulge it. There was an interpretative context even for the *fatum* of an individual, namely the destiny of Rome, and Tacitus does not lose sight of this larger perspective, as we shall see, in discussing his broader deployment of religious items.

4.2.2.2 *The cultus deorum*

For the basic categories of religious interpretation, we find therefore that from Livy to Tacitus it is a case of '*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*'. It is still the historians' business to review interpretation and to establish the Roman way within a welter of practices and styles of worship. What remains to be explored is the institutional operation of the *cultus deorum* and Tacitus' religious narrative, in that order.

Imperial cult Probably the greatest innovation in Roman state cult since the days of which Livy wrote was the introduction of imperial cult, beginning with the cult of Julius Caesar in the late republic. The format of imperial cult is normally summarised along the lines that in the provinces, the living emperor was worshipped, along with his predecessors, while in Rome and Italy, it was the already deified *diui* who received cult worship rather than the incumbent emperor.¹¹⁵ Until fairly recently, it was common to interpret imperial cult as an aspect of religious decline. However, Price

¹¹⁴ Suetonius is not the only one. At *A.* 13.47.3, the freedman Graptus attributes Nero's escape from a fictitious plot to *fatum*.

¹¹⁵ 'Official public cults in the capital were restricted to deceased emperors . . . for the living emperor vows were offered on his behalf . . . Dio further distinguishes between the cults offered by subjects of Rome . . . and those to be performed by Roman citizens resident in the provinces. Whereas the subjects of Rome had cults of the living emperor, Roman citizens had cults of the Roman type' (Beard North and Price (1998) I 349).

(1984), which has dominated discussion since publication, offers a more appropriate approach. For him ‘the emperor stood at the focal point between human and divine’.¹¹⁶ Thus we should expect Tacitus’ rendering of imperial cult to reflect this negotiation of power, rather than any broad criticism of whether the cult had any validity.

Tacitus had obviously read his Price.¹¹⁷ He contextualises religious honours as an important part of the general negotiation of power with the emperor, and those around him. Thus the adoption of an emperor as a *diuus* was a senatorial process. In theory they had a choice, though they might come under pressure to adopt a predecessor in order to validate the present emperor. In other words, when it came to the adoption of a new god, there would not be a marked difference from the introduction of a foreign god; the new deity would have qualities and powers of which Rome wished to avail herself. Since the criterion for selection was the desire to associate the new régime and Rome on goingly with the deceased *princeps* and all the values and achievements that made up his identity, its opposite would therefore be *damnatio memoriae*, obliteration rather than celebration.

As usual, discrimination has often been taken to be dismissal. Comments about the German prophetess Veleda, for instance, have attracted attention as a backhanded criticism of imperial cult.¹¹⁸ At *H.* 4.61.3, Tacitus says that ‘Veleda, a maiden of the tribe of the Bructeri, possessed extensive authority; for by ancient custom the Germans attributed to many of their women prophetic powers and, as the *superstitio* grew in strength, even actual divinity’;¹¹⁹ and at *H.* 4.65.6 that ‘she dwelt in a tower, and one of her relatives was chosen to convey the questions and answer like the messenger of a god’.¹²⁰ More specifically, at *Germania* 8, we read that ‘in Vespasian’s days we saw Veleda, long regarded by many as a divinity. In former times, too, they venerated Aurinia, and many other women, but not like sycophants, nor treating them like gods.’¹²¹ But these passages have no bearing on imperial cult. Tacitus is objecting, not to the notion of deification, but to the excessive reverence for a living woman (*adulatio*, and treating her as a goddess) though he does not seem to consider *ueneratio* for such women inappropriate. These passages are a discussion of criteria, not of the practice

¹¹⁶ Price (1984) 233. See also Price (1987) and Beard North and Price (1998) I 360–361. For documentary studies, see also Fishwick (1978 and 1987).

¹¹⁷ As well as his Gradel (2002), too late to receive full integration into this discussion.

¹¹⁸ E.g. Walker (1952) 252. On the following, see also Rives (1999a).

¹¹⁹ *ea uirgo nationis Bructerae late imperitabat, ueterae apud Germanos more, quo plerasque feminarum fatidicas et augescente superstitione arbitrantur deas.*

¹²⁰ *ipsa edita in turre; delectus e propinquis consulta responsaque ut internuntius numinis portabat.*

¹²¹ *uidimus sub diuo Vespasiano Veledam diu apud plerosque numinis loco habitam; sed et olim Auriniam et complures alias uenerati sunt, non adulatione nec tamquam facerent deas.*

of deification *in toto*. Deifying living prophetesses is an entirely different affair from the deification of departed *principes*.

There are also comments in the aftermath of Augustus' death that have been linked to imperial cult. Various anonymous voices offer their thoughts on the departed emperor and it has been argued that the latter, more acerbic, comments are to be taken as closer to Tacitus' own position (Miller (1969)). Among these are to be found opinions that appear to touch on imperial cult: 'No honour was left for the gods, when Augustus wanted himself to be worshipped with temples and statues with divine attributes, like those of the gods, and with flamens and priests' (A. 1.10.6).¹²² This has nothing to do with imperial cult in our normal sense, of the emperor receiving direct worship as a deity when living (abroad) or dead (in Rome, and subject to deification). Even if we take the line that this is a reference to imperial cult of a living emperor, there are many hazards. There is no reason to assume that Tacitus is offering these positions for unfiltered digestion by the reader – he is, after all, perfectly capable of stating a position unequivocally without textual intermediaries. Once again, the hope of finding Tacitus' 'true opinions' has misled us: the opinions are not the vehicle of his message, they are the object of his (historical) interest.

McCulloch (1984) documents the way that Tacitus treats rumour as a potent historical force in itself and religious interpretations, a common subject of gossip, are ultimately no different. Like rumours, they can themselves give rise to historical action, but this has no bearing on whether they are true or correct. For Tacitus, as we have noted, Rome is a city peopled by religious interpreters, and this is part of his documentation of life there. The interpretations are typically in error, or exaggerate: Augustus was not voted *flamines et sacerdotes*; he was voted a single priest, and that came after death; and these criticisms are ill-targeted if they are a closet attack on imperial cult – they are aimed at his career while alive, not his cult when dead. Moreover, the critics are inconsistent: Tiberius is criticised in precisely the *opposite* manner – for the refusal of honours at 4.37: some consider his refusal an example of how disregarding one's reputation undermines good practices (*nam contemptu famae contemni uirtutes*, A. 4.38.6).¹²³ It was not just prodigies that were discussed and debated by the general population of Rome. All plausibly 'religious' matters were fair game and we get the impression that just about every possible position was probably articulated

¹²² *nihil deorum honoribus relictum cum se templis et effigie numinum per flamines et sacerdotes coli uellet*. See Furneaux (1896) *ad loc* for the translation of *effigie numinum*.

¹²³ See Martin and Woodman (1989) for the 'wilful distortion of Tiberius's views'. And of course he was also criticised by anonymous speakers when he gave permission for such a request (*arguebatur in ambitionem flexisse*, A. 4.37.2).

by *someone*. Documenting the ‘you-can’t-win’ factor in Roman ‘celebrity gossip’ is not the same as criticising fundamental aspects of religion.

In fact, imperial cult may well be a mark of *civilisation*. Tacitus says of the Britons that ‘a temple also erected to the deified Claudius was ever before their eyes, a citadel, as it seemed, of unending overlordship. Men chosen as priests had to squander their whole fortunes under the pretence of religious practice.’¹²⁴ He is not speaking *sua uoce*, but ironically, reporting (supposedly) common perceptions (*aspiciebatur*) among the Britons, or at least the rebels. These semi-barbarians had no idea how to have a proper priesthood, or why.

The *diui*, supposedly such a bone of contention, are actually of less interest to Tacitus than the senate that deified them: the immediate aftermath of both extant imperial deifications re-enacts Rome’s relationship with the deceased but not departed *diuus*. When Augustus is deified, the act itself is hardly the centre of attention (*uersae inde ad Tiberium preces*, A. 1.11.1) but the senate, along with the heir, is plunged into, not so much the régime of Tiberius, as the overweening and still potent legacy of Augustus. Rome’s political masters are a spineless senate and a reluctant emperor who together struggle to pick up where the first *princeps* left off. The senate attempts the recreation of Tiberius in the mould of Augustus, while the new emperor starts as he means to go on: endeavouring to work within Augustan precedents in an attempt to constitutionalise the principate rather than assuming the authority that allowed Augustus to set those precedents. Augustus, uniquely among the *diui* in Tacitus, receives cult honour and the attention befitting a god at various moments in the earlier books of the *Annals*.¹²⁵ When Julia Augusta dedicates a statue to *diuus Augustus*, Tiberius is annoyed that his name is placed below hers but there is no perceived problem with the statue itself (A. 3.64.3). This emphasis on the first *princeps* is not accidental: it is part of Tacitus’ argument that in religious and political terms, Rome struggled and failed to come to terms with the realities of his legacy. In many ways they were still his subjects.¹²⁶ Tacitus’ unique criticism of the first *princeps* is not a matter of deliberately unorthodox opinion¹²⁷ but rather unprecedented textual authority: in these minor notices resides a political assertion. The most persistent focus of attention is

¹²⁴ *ad hoc templum diuo Claudio constitutum quasi arx aeternae dominationis aspiciebatur, delectique sacerdotes specie religionis omnis fortunas effundebant* (A. 14.31.6).

¹²⁵ Germanicus dedicates a mound to Mars, Jupiter and Augustus at A. 2.22.1; a *sacrarium* to the Julian family, and statue of Augustus at Bovillae are voted by the senate (A. 2.41.1); A. 4.36.2 sees the people of Cyzicus stripped of privileges after neglecting the worship of Augustus.

¹²⁶ See e.g. A. 4.42.3 for another example.

¹²⁷ According to Ceausescu (1974) Tacitus’ is the only negative assessment of Augustus in antiquity: for example, he criticises the *princeps*’ handling of legislation on adultery at A. 3.24.3.

the dynamic between senate and emperor, not the validity of institutions, religious or otherwise.

Thus in the deification of Claudius, the emphasis is on the living and their conduct. Deification re-enacts the relationship of Claudius to his court while alive – theoretically honoured, actually marginalised or even ridiculed. He may have been deified, but mention of his foresight and wisdom provoked laughter (A. 13.3.2) and the appointment of his murderer Agrippina as *flaminica* adds insult to injury (A. 13.2.6).

Imperial cult is often singled out as if it was problematic for its practitioners. Historically it seems to have been much less of a problem than we often assume.¹²⁸ Thus emperors are not the only ones to receive these honours. At *Annals* A. 6.18.2, there is an allegation that Pompeia Macrina's ancestor Theophanes had been a friend of Pompey and after his death had worshipped him as a god with *caelestis honores*, an example of *Graeca adulatio*; this rebounded on her father and brother years later. Doubtless, if Theophanes had rendered cult honours to Caesar instead, there would have been less of a (historical) problem. Nero's short-lived daughter, (Claudia) Augusta, is also deified (A. 15.23.4-5). Both the thanksgivings after her birth and the deification are linked explicitly to flattery. Tacitus does nothing to undermine state imperial cult in this: overkill of honours may be part of the terminal decline of the senate but ruler worship receives no special treatment. The posthumous honours are excessive, as usual, but the type of honour is not undermined in itself any more than superfluous thanksgivings and the obsequious voting of temples and statues ever stood for an end to those institutions and practices. There would come a time when all these perfectly appropriate types of honour, including imperial cult, would once again be deployed, with more care, as a useful part of the *cultus deorum*.

More speculatively, there seems little to be gained by the association of Rome with a dead infant. The association would, in effect, be more with her progenitor than herself, since her only achievement was to end the immediate prospects of the dynasty. None of this is to say that the deification was not valid in itself. A poor arrangement is still an arrangement, until it is rescinded or abandoned. A scholar would not argue that a dreadful choice of consul, explicitly criticised in the sources, invalidates the magistracy: there seems no reason to problematise the particular institution in question in the absence of any indications in the text to this effect.

That is not to say that complex situations of assent or denial could not appear in connection with deification and subsequent cult: Poppaea, killed

¹²⁸ Gradel (2002) appeared too late to receive full attention here but vigorously argues the case that imperial cult was fully integrated into the religious system even at an early stage.

after the proud father kicked her in her pregnant belly, was also deified. Though her rites were foreign, we are told that she received cult honour after her death.¹²⁹ Thrasea Paetus acts as a (highly problematic) reference point for propriety in this: he did not attend her funeral, according to his accuser Capito Cossutianus. But as we shall see, Thrasea is not Tacitus' unalloyed mouthpiece and Capito is not a neutral witness. As the narrative has it, Nero observes that Paetus deliberately refused to attend Poppaea's deification (A. 16.21.3). However, the Stoic's accuser then adds that his enemy has refused to attend *any* meetings of the senate for three years by this point, nor even those of the *quindecimviri*; he has not taken part in prayers for the imperial family or other traditional vows for senators and/or priests (16.22).

Despite Capito's and Nero's polemical isolation of Poppaea's case, Paetus has not apparently turned his back on this rite in particular; rather, he has abandoned any attempts at discrimination or ameliorations in the public affairs of Rome as hopeless. He would therefore seem to be refusing to endorse *any* religious or political activity, presumably on the grounds that it was inescapably corrupt. It is not he but his opponents who single out his refusal to accept Poppaea's divinity. But even if we accepted, for the sake of argument, that Poppaea's deification did attract his particular scorn, it does not by any means indicate a rejection of the institution: we do not hear of Paetus' opposition to cult practice concerning Augustus or Claudius, for instance. Nero's musings might as well be an example of his vanity as of any evidence that Paetus particularly scorned the status of the emperor's departed wife: and Tacitus' image shows how trivial and petty is Nero's attitude. The deification of the woman he murdered and her continuing influence shows just how bad things have got.

Apart from these, there are the 'failed' deifications, two in the *Annals*, and the other in the *Histories*.¹³⁰ Tacitus notes that Cerialis Anicius, consul-elect, proposed a motion that a temple should as soon as possible be built at the public expense to the Divine Nero and adds that 'some interpreted it as an omen of his death, seeing as such honours were linked to the dead' (A. 15.74.3-4). Nothing apparently came of it. Nero had another (posthumous) near-miss: Vitellius sacrificed to him, possibly as a prelude to planned deification, at H. 2.95.2. Again, nothing further came of it, except that Vitellius was discredited in discerning circles.

¹²⁹ Though the notice of her funeral and burial at A. 16.6.2-3 does not explicitly indicate her deification, at A. 16.21.2 we hear that *deum honores Poppaeae decernuntur* and she is referred to as *Poppaea diua* at A. 16.22.5. Furneaux (1896) notes coins and inscriptions of the title *Diua Poppaea Augusta*; see also Dio 63.26.5.

¹³⁰ Whose impact we should not exaggerate: they gain a somewhat distorted prominence in the absence of the deifications of Vespasian and Titus especially.

More pertinently, the suggestion that Livia be deified was refused by Tiberius on the grounds that she would not have wanted it.¹³¹ Her case in particular is a useful one in contextualising imperial cult as one part of a spectrum of honours aimed at the imperial family, both living and deceased. For instance, at 1.14 the senate attempted to honour the Augusta but Tiberius vetoed the suggestions, not even permitting them to vote her a lictor or raise an altar commemorating her adoption into the Julian family. His explicit reasons included that women should not be so honoured, which would have been fine except for the fact that her power and influence already pervaded Roman politics. Tiberius' annoyance and jealousy thus set the senate even further back in their attempt to acknowledge, and therefore negotiate, her power.¹³²

Tacitus' notices on these serve as more than historical material, and surprisingly credible material given his reputation for 'distorting' the facts: he evokes a system with which he assumes the reader is familiar and selects those aspects that constitute a very narrow set of evidence – the subservience and administrative incompetence of the senate and its emperors. Each religious notice is embedded in the narrative as part of a broader programme to highlight 'moral' decay. Religion is part of the senate's responsibility, and they fail in this as they fail in more overtly 'political' situations. The risk that the Tacitean senate absolutely refused to take, even in the face of Tiberius' persistent irritation, was under-acknowledgement of the imperial family. Here they fell into precisely the same traps as they did in politics, of allowing sycophancy and fear to govern their decisions. Their willing reduction of their role to one of voting honours at every opportunity was not a solution but a problem in itself. Honours accumulated faster than they were forgotten.¹³³ The only area in which the senate were willing to exercise any initiative was, apparently, in sycophancy (*adulatio*), which

¹³¹ *addito ne caelestis religio decerneretur. sic ipsam maluisse* (A. 5.2.1). But she was deified under Claudius (Dio A. 60.5.2). Furneaux (1896) 172 notes unofficial use of titles such as *Livia Augusta Dea* outside Rome. Suetonius records that she had specifically requested deification (*Tiberius* 51).

¹³² The same pattern is seen repeatedly in politics: cf. the closing event of the succession debate (*Annals* 1.11-1.14): twelve candidates were named for the praetorship (as Augustus had done) and when the senate urged Tiberius to increase the number, he bound himself by an oath not to exceed it. On the debate as a whole (and especially the diagnosis of 'pretence'), see Woodman (1998b).

¹³³ And some were forgotten (A. 2.83.4), a rare, possibly unique, acknowledgement of North's suggestion for this method of pruning the *cultus deorum* under the Republic: 'the conservative ethos forbids letting anything drop. But the process of social evolution and the mere passage of time ensure that certain rites will get overlooked, neglected or forgotten' (North (1976) 12). It had not escaped Tacitus' notice, apparently.

meant rivalry and mutual self-destruction¹³⁴ and obeisance, and in this they had both the emperor's contempt and enforcement.¹³⁵

Tacitus has little doubt that what motivates the senate is sycophancy:¹³⁶ thus they repeatedly vote honours that the emperor disliked and/or opposed. Tiberius' exasperation and repeated attempts to limit these honours seems only to stimulate the religious frenzy, which is not surprising. Tacitus' senate is attempting to locate itself in the face of an increasingly powerful *princeps*, and one medium for this definition of roles is through ritual and honours. The more autocratic (and contrary) Tacitus' emperors become (*refusing* the honours that would fix the relationship between senate and *princeps*), the more the situation demands a clear articulation of the relationship. Thus the senate finds itself in a vicious circle that it fails to escape: though the situation demands, ever more urgently, that it express and codify the power of the emperor, his refusal to allow this leaves it in even greater anxiety as we can see from the persistence of the issue. What we call imperial cult is, in this narrative at least, in fact only the apex of a pyramid of potential honours: the *diui* are not the only eminent dead¹³⁷ and their lesser counterparts can be honoured religiously on a lesser scale.¹³⁸ Furthermore, the living can be associated with the gods in a way that emphasises their effective power without crossing the line of religious propriety. Thus, when Tiberius and Sejanus (temporarily an honorary member of the

¹³⁴ A common topic: see e.g. A. 14.64.6. Informers, the scourge of Rome, were often linked with *adulatio* (e.g. A. 2.32.4), which, though needed in moderation during such times (A. 4.17.1), often also undermined the quality of proposals (3.65) and obscured the truth (A. 6.38.3). Tiberius gains credit for checking their activities at A. 3.56.1 but protects them at A. 4.30.5. By A. 4.36.5 they are the only inviolable aristocrats.

¹³⁵ See A. 2.87.2 – 'speech was restricted and perilous under an emperor who feared freedom while he hated sycophancy'; Tiberius hated the senate's compliance ('men fit to be slaves', A. 3.65.3); but he protected the informers, a chief cause of the fear which so often transformed into *adulatio* (as at A. 4.74.2 and 4.30.5).

¹³⁶ For the epidemic of sycophancy and servility see A. 1.7.1 (*at Romae ruere in seruitium consules patres eques. quanto quis inlustrior, tanto magis falsi ac festinantes uultuque composito, ne laeti excessu principis neu tristior<es> primordio, lacrimas gaudium, questus adulatione<m> miscabant*), A. 2.32.2 (*quorum auctoritates adulationesque rettuli, ut sciretur uetus id in re publica malum*), A. 3.65.2 (*ceterum tempora illa adeo infecta et adulatione sordida fuere* ...). See also the comments of Segal (1973) 119. Sejanus enjoys the debasement of the aristocracy (A. 4.74.4), but Tiberius did not (A. 3.65.3); for such epigrammatic contempt, see further Sinclair (1992). *Obsequium* was the appropriate relationship (McCulloch (1984) 181; Morford (1991)).

¹³⁷ Germanicus observes what seems to be a useful distinction between Augustus and his father Drusus ('*tua, diue Auguste, caelo recepta mens, tua pater Druse, imago, tui memoria*', A. 1.43.3). He also invokes Drusus alone at A. 2.8.1.

¹³⁸ When Germanicus dies, *honores ut quis amore in Germanicum aut ingenio ualidis reperti decretique*, A. 2.83.1. Nor are such honours voted exclusively in Rome itself (and these are not exaggerated any further by flattery (A. 3.2.5)); these are not only matched, but outdone, for Drusus at A. 4.9.2; Livia is offered minimal posthumous honours after Tiberius' intervention at A. 5.2.1.

imperial family) set up court outside Rome, the frightened senate use religious honours to appeal to them at *A.* 4.74.2, complete with statues of Tiberius and Sejanus, even though they were asked to address entirely different matters.¹³⁹ They sycophantically vote an altar to Clemency, an altar to Friendship, and statues round them to Caesar and Sejanus: just in case the message is not obvious, both men are begged to appear in public. Tacitus' material and presentation is a deliberate demonstration of the processes that he saw as characterising the dynamics of the period.

These honours might be granted to the living emperor and his associates¹⁴⁰ and emperors can be compared to gods.¹⁴¹ We could of course dismiss this type of language as sycophantic (and therefore, by implication, meaningless) but this would be to miss the point that all the textual agents in the *Annals* and the *Histories* are all caught up in the ongoing attempt to find a stable and workable balance between emperor and his subjects. Imperial cult and honours are one way of negotiating the unprecedented *auctoritas* of Rome's greatest family. Tacitus' treatment frames religious matters within the more general political nightmare. His selection and location of material are trenchant but his interest is particular, even narrow: the frequent errors in interpretation, an evocation of the political forces that, for him, shaped first-century politics and the persistent need to recreate patterns of proper, 'truly' *Roman* conduct, whatever the actuality of the period.

There is no shortage of potential alternative responses to the changes of religious practice in this period: one might, for instance, note with interest, rather than contempt, the shift of interest from the state to the individual in the form of omens (as opposed to prodigies) or astrology; a triumphalist account perhaps, that maximised the power of the emperor who sought to preserve the ancient *cultus deorum* despite the traditional decline of morals. Tacitus' agenda, tied very closely to the historical reality, is no less constructed than any other account: he weaves his narrative together so persuasively that if we are to appreciate its nature as a construction, we must make an effort to see that it could have been framed another way. Religion, as an

¹³⁹ *At pavor internus occupauerat animos cui remedium adulatione quaerebatur. ita quamquam diuersis super rebus consulerentur, aram clementiae, aram amicitiae effigiesque circum Caesaris ac Seiani censuere crebrisque precibus efflagitabant uisendi sui copiam facerent.* For an independent (epigraphic) witness to the senate's desire to have the ruler(s) back in Rome, see Griffin (1997).

¹⁴⁰ Requests to build temples to Tiberius, Livia and the senate: accepted at *A.* 4.15.4; refused at *A.* 4.37.1; honours are suggested for Nero *A.* 13.8.1 and 13.10.1 (refused) where they are also requested for his father and guardian; for him again *A.* 13.41.5, and thanksgivings for his safety at *A.* 14.10.1-4 after his 'lucky escape' from assassination by Agrippina.

¹⁴¹ E.g. *A.* 3.36.2 and 4.39.2 (by Sejanus).

interpretative system and set of institutions, is something that *did* adapt, for Tacitus, often perfectly reasonably: but for the most part, it was drawn into the maelstrom of indecision and fear that characterises Tacitus' first century, just like other areas that required politically laden judgement. What we do *not* see in Tacitus' version of events is a fundamental disdain for religion: his account is rather a strong corrective, and a documentation of a system which was never given an opportunity to function properly.

The debasement of the cultus deorum Thus far we have outlined synchronically the various categories that were deployed in the understanding of Roman religion in the period covered by Tacitus to establish the basic categories of religious experience. But Tacitus' accounts are also progressive and diachronic: what he made of the first imperial dynasty of Rome, and their immediate successors, can only be explored when we examine the (generally worsening) developments. On all fronts, Tacitus' Annalistic Rome inexorably slides into the disasters of the *Histories*. He documents the march of institutional problems and Rome's collapsing relationship with her gods, caused largely by a political and social (i.e. moral) context that made maintenance of appropriate and workable standards impossible. For Tacitus, the very guardians of Roman religion were, ultimately, either powerless or corrupted during the first century.

Priests functioned as guarantors of the tradition – and trusted experts – in the extant Livy; not so in Tacitus. For the time being we are concerned with subjects of emperors rather than the *Pontifices Maximi* themselves since the continuation of traditions depended as much, if not more, on the senate, who made up the body of priestly members. Though some priests retain the kinds of characters that offset the excesses of the principate, and the grasp of lore that preserved the *cultus deorum*, this is not always the case. Since priests were chosen from the leading men of the senate, we would expect that the weaknesses evident in political life would show up in connection with the religious experts also. In the programmatic opening to the *Histories*, Tacitus says that priesthoods, along with magistracies, were among the spoils of factional war (*et sacerdotia et consulatus ut spolia adepti*, *H.* 1.2.3). No such statement is to be found in the *Annals* but we do find its predecessor, the encroachment of political favour on the appointment of priests. Given that the tendency had become serious enough to warrant mention in the *Histories*, we should expect the reader of the *Annals* to notice the gradual erosion of priestly calibre.

As with so many other aspects, Augustus starts the trend (*A.* 1.3.1) and then a poor (but not yet disastrous) development under Tiberius is the prelude to steady degeneration over the years: even Tiberius sees the need to

strengthen the priesthood.¹⁴² The opening books of the *Annals* seem to indicate a mixture of good and bad. The *flamen dialis*, for one, does not acquit himself well when he argues for his right to govern a province (A. 4.16.6). He argues that the restrictions were based on rivalry in the republican senate, and that such problems are irrelevant in the principate. The paradox of his breathtaking sycophancy in attributing previous religious decisions to rivalry in a senate that is busy with competitive self-destruction does him little credit. The debate does, however, bring forward the augur Lentulus and unnamed others in opposition. Though we are not given explicit guidance, there are good signs that if any side is to be taken, it is that of the augur; his opponent is discredited by his own statement, and Lentulus' reasoning is not given. Thus his position is effectively irreproachable and his reasoning, unlike that of his opponent, beyond our reach.¹⁴³ Some approval of Lentulus' position seems warranted, especially as the precedents – and the decision that emerges – take the same position.¹⁴⁴ Whatever Tacitus' preferred solution was, his senate is capable, at this point, of weighing up such a question and resisting deleterious impulses. There are to be few such occasions as time progresses.

Tacitus makes a point of telling us that Tiberius lost good priests such as L. Calpurnius Piso, who refrained from initiating sycophantic measures and intelligently moderated others whenever he could (A. 6.10.3) as well as forcing Ateius Capito, a man well versed in both human and divine lore,¹⁴⁵ out of public life (A. 3.70.3).¹⁴⁶ Cocceius Nerva, similarly knowledgeable and one of the few trusted by Tiberius (he went to Capri with the emperor at A. 4.58.1), starves himself to death at A. 6.27.1. As for their replacements, the problem does not always lie with the choice of men but in the way it is done. They are apparently rewarded for political favours, rather than appointed for their experience and expertise. Nero Caesar is similarly made a *pontifex* at the same time as it is requested that he be allowed to stand for the quaestorship five years early. It seems unlikely he had gained the kind

¹⁴² Already by A. 4.16.4, moves are made to increase the dignity of the priests (*utque glisceret dignatio sacerdotum*).

¹⁴³ We can only speculate on what an augur would have said about the jurisdiction of a *flamen*, but there is unlikely to be significance in the unusual note that he was an augur: this was simply a way to distinguish between various homonymous senators of the time which was so common that it found its way into the *Fasti* (Furneaux (1896) *ad loc.*). Woodman and Martin (1996) identify him as Cn. Cornelius Lentulus, *cos.* 14 BC, and continue 'he is here deputising for the absent *Pontifex Maximus*' though they do not offer their reasoning.

¹⁴⁴ See however Furneaux *ad loc.* who cites Seneca (*de Ben. A.* 2.27.1) to the effect that Lentulus was 'extremely rich, miserly and stupid.' Suetonius (*Tiberius* 49) notes his fearful suicide and that Tiberius was both his heir and the author of his misery.

¹⁴⁵ He is at least credited as such by Macrobius A. 7.13.11.

¹⁴⁶ A difficult passage: see Woodman and Martin (1996) *ad loc.*

of experience and knowledge normally desirable for the role. After the trial of Piso, Tacitus makes the point that his chief accusers Publius Vitellius, Quintus Veranius and Quintus Servaeus were rewarded with priesthoods (A. 3.19).¹⁴⁷ In fact these men seem to be reasonable choices, as their subsequent activities in the text illustrate.¹⁴⁸ But it is perhaps the precedent that is dangerous. More ominously, Tiberius also blocks the promised priesthood of the disgraced Blaesi for political reasons at A. 6.40. All the ingredients for active imperial control of priesthood are therefore present from an early stage: priesthoods are already *spolia* of the ‘civil war’¹⁴⁹ under Tiberius, one of many occasions when the *Annals* lay the basis for trends that had gone much further in the *Histories*.

Priests are less conspicuous in subsequent reigns: Claudius notes the decline of haruspicy, and, typically for an emperor, attributes it to lack of use in times of prosperity (A. 11.15.1). No priestly activity is recorded for his reign apart from the rites performed by the *pontifices* (and ridiculed by the public) to purify Rome of incest at A. 12.8.2-3. Similarly, under Nero, priests rarely figure in the narrative. The emperor expiates lightning strikes under the instruction of the ever-anonymous *haruspices* at A. 13.24.2 and they make an accurate prediction at A. 15.47.3. No question is made of the priests’ performance of their duties, yet it is hard not to come away from the *Annals* with a sense that priests are increasingly *not* in a position to repair the damage that is increasingly caused by the most powerful men in the state.

Moving to the period covered by the *Histories*, Galba is somewhat incompetent himself, as we shall see, and does not always have religious experts to put him straight. His disregard for omens is noted at *H.* 1.18.1-2 and though there is the *haruspex Caesarum* Umbricius¹⁵⁰ on hand to predict

¹⁴⁷ See Martin and Woodman (1996) on 3.19: ‘for other awards to prosecutors see A. 2.32.1 and 4.20.2-3’.

¹⁴⁸ Vitellius, a veteran of Germany and therefore associate and friend of Germanicus (A. 1.70), commits suicide under accusation of offering the Keys of the Treasury and Military Treasury for ‘seditious projects’ (A. 5.8) – he was therefore not evidently an informer who were normally immune from prosecution; Veranius, another old friend of Germanicus, had been governor of Cappadocia (A. 2.56.4) and leaves our narrative at this point without attracting Tacitus’ attention for the best and worst of political actions; Servaeus was prosecuted as a friend of Sejanus, though Tacitus notes specifically that he had not abused this position: at A. 6.7.2-4, he and his fellow accused, a knight by the name of Minucius Thermus, turned informer and brought down Julius Africanus and Seius Quadratus. Even their betrayal is somewhat mitigated: Tacitus comments on the endemic habit of leading figures becoming informers that it happened ‘sometimes in self-defence, often more like a contagion’ (*pars ad subsidium sui, plures infecti quasi ualitudine et contactu*).

¹⁴⁹ Keitel (1984).

¹⁵⁰ The deviation in the pattern of naming priests with Umbricius would appear to be explained by his title. His case would therefore seem analogous to that of the *Pontifex Maximus* in that he had an exalted and individual status.

treachery at *H.* 1.27.1, the warning does Galba no good. There may be hints of inauspicious appointments when Otho comes to power: 'Otho continued to discharge his imperial duties . . . Sometimes he observed the dignity of the Commonwealth, but often in hasty acts, dictated by the expediency of the moment, he disregarded its honour . . . On older citizens, who had already held high office, Otho bestowed, as a crowning dignity, pontificates and augurships, while he consoled the young nobles, who had recently returned from exile, by reviving the sacerdotal offices held by their fathers and ancestors' (*H.* 1.77.5).

When precisely the emperor was acting responsibly and when he was undermining the *res publica* is left to the reader to decide: there are plenty of other candidates for hasty mistakes in the passage other than his priestly appointments.¹⁵¹ Nonetheless, Tacitus' comments at the opening of the *Historiae* (*sacerdotia et consulatus ut spolia adepti*) invite us to feel somewhat uncomfortable about these appointments, given that this is the fullest mention of priestly appointments in the extant text— unless he is referring to later (Flavian) appointments (which of course, included his own). Given the calibre of recently eminent citizens (for an example see Curtius Rufus, condemned as typical of his age, at 11.21), the chances are that those who had held high office were not necessarily the best men for the job: but circumstances would inevitably limit Otho's choice.

Priesthoods, like magistracies, are thus locked into a system where political goodwill rather than expertise has become the criterion for appointment. Given that political favour is preferred over aptitude, the alliance of the aristocracy with the transient political master(s) in preference to the enduring character of the city is one of the chief causes of the profound problems facing Rome. Priestly independence is hardly likely to survive in such a context.

Vitellius was appointed to at least one priesthood, presumably under Nero, but was typically appointed for the wrong reasons: not through any effort on his own part, but because of his father's eminence.¹⁵² His inadequacy in religious terms is, as we shall see, emphatically demonstrated when he becomes *princeps*, but in our texts he appoints no priests, and leaves intact Otho's various appointments, including consulships (*H.* 1.77.4). Under Vespasian the *haruspices* feature once again in the re-founding of the Capitoline as expert advisers. In the case of this particular

¹⁵¹ The recall of exiles found guilty of extortion; or the appointment of Verginius and Vopiscus as consuls, for instance.

¹⁵² *consulatum, sacerdotia, nomen locumque inter primores nulla sua industria, sed cuncta patris claritudine adeptus* (*H.* 3.86.1).

priesthood, we might assume that their membership was to some extent protected by their Etruscan origins, even if they are now a *collegium*. As for the other priesthoods, we must assume that the poor appointments of the recent past would persist for some time.¹⁵³

Despite all these hints, priests *qua* priests are not explicitly found wanting in Tacitean Rome; on the rare occasions that they appear, they are entirely proper. Tacitus builds into his account a series of notices that succeed in insinuating that the whole process of appointment had diluted the quality of the priesthoods while strenuously avoiding any statement that brought the institutions *per se* directly into question. When they perform their duties, the priests are still sufficient to their various tasks – a testament to the strength of the institution rather than its current membership. Thus, in Tacitean Rome, the religious personnel are unlikely to be a match for their Republican counterparts. This is true also, even especially, of the senate.

The failure of expertise It is not the priests who were the chief intermediaries in deciding religious matters. Though their expertise might be called upon, it is the senate, including its priests *qua* senators, who are theoretically responsible. In this role, they conspicuously fail to maintain the standards that Tacitus would have liked to see. Though priests inevitably figure in the decline, as members of the senate, they are not, in the following examples, deliberately called upon as religious experts. In addition we encounter the fact that the emperor was himself a priest by virtue of simultaneously being a member of all the major colleges, and *Pontifex Maximus*. Thus, he potentially embodies all the expertise of Rome in religious matters: the senate can be severely circumscribed by his authority. When the emperor speaks on religious matters, does he do so on the basis of his being *princeps*? Purely as a senator or consul with a traditional right to speak on such questions? Or is he assuming the authority of whichever *collegium* would normally have jurisdiction over the item in question? The signs are that it was no more possible for the Tacitean senate to tell the difference than it is for us.

The localisation of religious authority is particularly difficult for the Tiberian senate. Tiberius, who so conspicuously hates the abject servility of the senate (A. 3.65.3), acts a number of times as a check on decline. The emperor apparently understands the issue to be one of knowledge, but Tacitus, as we shall see, often places the difficulties in a moral and political context by narrating moments in the senate that tell a consistent story. Though Tiberius, and, to a lesser (explicit) extent, Claudius, see themselves

¹⁵³ Virtually all the major priesthoods were traditionally held for life. See Beard (1990) 20–21.

as part of the solution, the historian indicates that they are rather part of the problem.

Tiberius makes his displeasure known when Germanicus, inappropriately for an augur, takes part in the building of a burial mound for Varus' troops at A. 1.62.2; at A. 1.73.5 he forestalls a prosecution for insulting Augustus with the short-lived precept that injuries to the gods are the concern of the gods (*deorum iniurias dis curae*); at A. 3.18.2, after the death of Piso, he blocks various measures, including the building of a golden statue to Mars the Avenger and an altar to Vengeance (*Vltio*), on the grounds that celebration is inappropriate. At A. 3.64.3-4, under the pernicious influence of *adulatio*,¹⁵⁴ the senate decrees supplications to the gods and the celebration of the Great Games, to be exhibited by the *pontifices*, *augures*, *quindecimviri* and the Board of Seven, along with the Augustal Brotherhood. Lucius Apronius moves that the *fetiales* should preside also over the Games. Tiberius refuses on the grounds that there was no rule or precedent for this.

When Tiberius refuses to consult the Sibylline Books at A. 1.76.3 over a flood, he presumably thinks that he knows better. However the incident is replete with political implications. The suggestion is made by Asinius Gallus, who we know from elsewhere was a *quindecimvir* (ILS 5050). Tacitus' silence on this point implies that his request was not made on the authority of his priesthood: it *should* be possible for any senator to make the suggestion. But Gallus is not, in Tiberius' eyes, just 'any' senator. The comments on Gallus in 1.12 and 1.13 imply that Tiberius, nursing a long-standing grudge against the supposedly ambitious senator, would be more open to the suggestion from other members of the senate (and Gallus dies in custody in 33 (A. 6.23)). The claim is, after all, based on good precedents: it was done in AD 5 and again in 12 (Dio A. 55.22.3, 56.27.4), though we do not know it from the *Annals*. In response to the refusal, Tacitus indicates that his decision obscured divine and human issues (*perinde diuina humanaque obtengens*). *Humana* hints at just how personal a decision this was, far from the kind of professionalism that is normally desired. But the emperor's obfuscation of divine issues presumably means that by refusing to debate the issue, Tiberius does not allow for the rehearsal of the criteria used to make such a

¹⁵⁴ As the subsequent narrative indicates (3.65-66). *Obsequium* is the appropriate relationship (McCulloch (1984) 181; Morford (1991)). The senate's 'proper' relationship with the emperor of the day has been much discussed: McCulloch (1984) 179 offers that 'what disgusted Tacitus was not so much the subordination of their role to the dictates of the emperor, but their failure to take an initiative in participating actively in the new order. This psychological enervation (A. 1.7.1), representing the failure of the nobility to seek means for expressing their own *aequalitas*, was to Tacitus as much a source of despotism as the bad emperors themselves.'

decision. Persistent similar refusals will inevitably lead to a breakdown in the transmission of such knowledge.¹⁵⁵

The active, even overweening, intervention of a *princeps* is countered by an explicit comparison, and a reminder that this is not the only possibility: Tacitus celebrates the rare opportunity for the senate to make meaningful decisions on religious matters (A. 3.60.6). His lengthy exposition reflects the careful discussion and weighing up of the various claims: thus the senate seems perfectly capable of holding such debates, but, in the circumstances, only at the instigation of the emperor. In practice, it was not possible for the Tacitean senate to act on their own initiative, as a rare attempt (and object lesson in reading Tacitus' coverage of religion and politics) indicates.

Within Tacitus' narrative, when the tribune Quintilianus and the consul Caninius Gallus suggests the introduction of a Sibylline Book into the collection, they are separately rebuked by the emperor for not observing customary procedures: though the tribune is only mildly chastised on the grounds of inexperience, the consul is given more of a dressing down and reminded not just of the Augustan legislation on the topic but also that the college itself should be consulted over the authenticity of the work in question before the senate can legitimately decide to include the 'new' text. But Gallus may be more insightful than Tiberius gives him credit for. Tiberius has already effectively appropriated access to the collection and their interpreters by the abrupt and autocratic refusal of access at A. 1.76.3. Traditional protocol, at least in the form that Tiberius frames it, does not take account of this: to submit a new book to the collection, one has to consult the priests themselves. But attempting this would appear to circumvent the emperor – clearly a dangerous venture. However, Tiberius' explicit permission to approach the college cannot be sought directly since the emperor persistently *claims* to endorse republican channels. Asking his permission would be to expose the pervasive game of pretence that characterises Tiberius' dealings with the senate.¹⁵⁶ Gallus is therefore faced with an insoluble dilemma if he wishes the book to be considered, as he must do. Putting the matter to a poorly attended senate, if procedurally inappropriate, at least advertises the issue to all the relevant parties and invites them to act without giving offence by ignoring their spheres of authority. Tiberius' criticism therefore misses the point. As he says himself, though Quintilianus is young and ignorant of precedent, Gallus knows the procedures well. Apparently he

¹⁵⁵ It also underlines his monopoly, via the illegal art of astrology, on access to the dictates of fate which, alone of the various *collegia*, the *quindecimviri* deliberately consider.

¹⁵⁶ Though see Woodman (1998b) on the 'succession debate' for an argument against seeing Tiberius as duplicitous, at least in that episode.

also knows his emperor. Tacitus' agenda is conveyed by apparently simple notices that collectively assemble as a devastating critique of the emperor's supposed safeguarding of religious procedures.

Tiberius' reinstatement of the normal channels of authority cannot but be ironic for the reader, already alerted that Tiberius had appropriated the real power.¹⁵⁷ The religious institutions of Tiberian Rome cannot be safeguarded in these circumstances. But the emperor is struggling with logistical problems which he himself engenders by his autocracy. For instance, Servius Maluginensis, the *flamen dialis* (who could effectively not leave Rome because of religious restrictions) requests the right to govern a province at A. 3.58.1, claiming that the religious limitations could easily be circumvented on the analogy of other priesthoods. The senate is willing to take some responsibility – in the form of Lentulus and others, who object (in the absence of the emperor), as we have already seen. Tiberius's intercession ends the debate at A. 3.71.2: when a decision is made, it is Tiberius who introduces Augustan and earlier precedents to decide the issue. He has effectively reserved the decision for himself and, at best, the senate needs Tiberius' confirmation.¹⁵⁸ At 4.16, when Tiberius suggests the replacement of the now deceased *flamen*, some of the restrictions on the priest's wife (the *flaminica* who performed ritual actions herself) are lifted through the senate after some debate. The new regulations and appointment seem unproblematic in themselves. But again, it is Tiberius who instigates the debate. The senate is represented as so enervated that they lack the authority or initiative to make such changes themselves. Only at Tiberius' urging do they resolve it and find a modern compromise to some of the archaic regulations that seem to have impeded the *flaminica*, and thereby (presumably) the priesthood. The inexperience and obedience that Tiberius has engendered has now begun to take its toll and the ever less expert senate would henceforth remember to await instructions.¹⁵⁹

In Tacitus' account, Tiberius discovers that the situation was unworkable. Thus, while his particular religious prescriptions succeed, his attempt to lay down general principles fail because of the climate over which he presides. For instance, he declares at A. 1.73.1 that the *maiestas* laws, after beginning under Tiberius, ultimately undermined everything (*cunctaque corripuerit*). At this point, an attempt to prosecute Falanius and Rubrius,

¹⁵⁷ *sed Tiberius, uim principatus sibi firmans, imaginem antiquitatis senatui praebebat* ... (A. 3.60).

¹⁵⁸ Under the Republic, the senate was not always the final authority for such matters – it might also have involved other authorities, particularly the popular assemblies: see Bleicken (1957b).

¹⁵⁹ In fact, the intercession of Lentulus and the others seems to be the last time in the *Annals* that the senate take any religious action of their own accord, with or without the *princeps* present, apart from the voting of honours, to which we shall return shortly.

the former for selling a statue of Augustus along with a garden and admitting an actor to the group who worshipped Augustus in his home, the latter for violating Augustus' divinity by perjury, led to a stern rebuttal from Tiberius who declared that *deorum iniurias dis curae*. Soon, however, sacrilege against Augustus becomes a well-known charge.¹⁶⁰

Political insecurity, vividly underlined by the growth of informers and the exercise of absolute authority, guarantees a surfeit of religious honours in Tacitean Rome: this includes the 'defence' of Augustus' position and privilege. This system of acknowledgement begins to collapse as it persistently fails to resolve the tensions in aristocratic society: nor is it the only casualty.

Refusing to locate religious authority in one man was not just a question of power-sharing in Livy's Republic. Given the range of different knowledges inherent within religious understanding, it seems reasonable to assume that it also safeguarded against error. Under Tiberius, the dangers of relying on one man's expertise become a practical concern. Additionally, even religious actions that might have been appropriate in a different context begin to look isolated, even conspicuous, in their context of political machinations. Increasingly, as time passes, the religious system in these accounts begins to falter.

The dislocation of the cultus deorum The honours and triumph (the latter also implicitly an acknowledgement of the gods) for Germanicus at 2.41 are already undermined in their celebration by the popular remembrance that *breuis et infaustos populi Romani amores*. But it is Tiberius who immediately plots for Germanicus' removal from Rome in our text, actively colluding with what had previously been poor luck. Tiberius' programme to renovate and dedicate temples at A. 2.49.1 seems entirely proper and might have signalled an improvement in circumstances if we had encountered it in Livy: however, here the subsequent narrative opens with the chilling note that *adolescebat interea lex maiestatis*. The left hand does not seem to know, or care, what the right is doing in Tiberian Rome. We are already close to 'going through the motions'. Averting the *ira deum* does few senators any good as long as they can be terrorised by human means. At A. 3.18.2, on the death of Piso, it is suggested that religious honours be voted, but Tiberius interposes with his typically imperial maxim that foreign victories should be celebrated with sacrifices, but domestic woes should be kept quiet (*ob externas ea uictorias sacrari dicitans, domestica mala tristitia operienda*)

¹⁶⁰ See A. 2.50.2, where Tiberius orders that the charges be investigated and punished, if necessary; cf. 3.66.

which neither he nor the senate are to live up to for long. Tacitus derides the honours offered to Drusus and Tiberius at *A.* 3.57.1-2, or the unimaginative flattery that proposed them. Tiberius' restoration of Pompey's theatre, without erasing the founder's name, seems a worthy venture, but the senate's voting of a statue of the overrated Sejanus to stand within it undermines any credit that might have been achieved at *A.* 3.72.4-5.

These juxtapositions are significant, if difficult to fix in their impact. Even the knowledgeable emperor cannot contain the forces he has unleashed, or live up to the formulations that he himself offers the senate. Whether any of them counts as impiety in the eyes of the gods, we cannot say: but at the very least, some kind of incompetence is indicated. It is not the question of *if* Rome will become misaligned with her gods, but *when*. And Rome will not even be in a position to note the warnings.

Without the independent systems of prodigy reports and consultation of the Sibylline Books, Tiberius' Rome has abandoned its 'early warning system' and opportunity to correct cosmic imbalance. It is therefore no surprise that sooner or later the gods, apparently benign for a while, begin to bear grudges. When it duly comes, the *ira deum* arrives – naturally, in these circumstances – unannounced and unexpectedly. For Tacitus, Sejanus embodies their anger (*A.* 4.1.2).¹⁶¹ Such is the refusal to see ill that when Sabinus is dragged off on New Year's Day at *A.* 4.70.1-4, bystanders flee, then return, fearful that their flight admitted that something was wrong. The pretence of 'business as usual', applied to the difficult and subjective arena of prodigies for some years, has now reached even the blatantly obvious: it did not require 'expert' interpretation to see that Sejanus' power had encroached on a sacred day. The impropriety is emphasised by the word play on (Se)Janus ('without Janus').¹⁶²

When the cities of Asia offer (or perhaps, request the right) at *A.* 4.15.5 to build a temple to Tiberius, his mother and the senate, the offer is accepted and thanks given by Nero Caesar, who, apart from being hated by Sejanus, reminds his audience of his father Germanicus. We are thereby invited by this allusion to remember *his* fate, and other ill-starred favourites of Rome. Though we have lost the story of the final days of the doomed prince, by

¹⁶¹ The tradition seems to have asserted that Sejanus outwitted Tiberius, and we would probably assume that this occurred on a 'level playing field', but Tacitus offers otherwise in the light of Tiberius' manifest intelligence and unremitting suspicion; the emperor *was* fooled, but because of the *ira deum*. Tacitus is accounting for an historical anomaly – he does not consider Sejanus to be a shrewd enough political operator to undo the wily Tiberius under normal circumstances – by invoking a 'higher level' of analysis. He is similarly impelled to invoke a 'higher' level of explanation to ward off the reaction he expects when recounting a number of deaths in *A.* 16.16.1-2.

¹⁶² Corrigan (1993).

4.60 Sejanus' plots have already begun to tell against him. Tiberius' son Drusus might have received the same honours as Germanicus and more *ut ferme amat posterior adulatio* (A. 4.9.2) but only because of his (apparently avoidable) death, which was of course due to the wrath of the gods, as manifested in the rise of Sejanus. If Rome had been more alert to the *ira deum*, then, these two might not have died. Posthumous piety did little for Drusus, especially when the gods continued to be angry. It appears that despite Tiberius' implied claims to adequacy in religion, he cannot compensate for the dysfunction of the institutions which he has so successfully appropriated to his expert guidance.

There is more: Tiberius uses religion as an excuse to leave Rome when he sets off at A. 4.57.1 to dedicate temples to Jupiter at Capua and a shrine to Augustus at Nola and he did not return. The discordance between his avowed intentions and his actions relegate a worthwhile religious moment that should have strengthened Rome's solidarity to being a facilitator of its enervation. The artificial preservation of religious practice by the emperor is even more of a sham in such circumstances. In this, as in other matters, he is following the letter of the law while systematically destroying its spirit: Agrippina's death by starvation, which Tacitus implies was engineered by the emperor, is met with a vote of *thanks* for Tiberius (who claims that she starved herself, heartbroken) along with an annual sacrifice to Jupiter to celebrate not just her death but also that of her enemy Sejanus (A. 6.25.5). The injustice of the offering to Jupiter on the anniversary of Agrippina's death seems to be underlined by the immediately subsequent decision of Cocceius Nerva, the longtime companion of the emperor, well versed in both human and divine law, to end his life at A. 6.26.1 even though his status is intact and his body unharmed. He supposedly foresees danger and chooses to be the master of his own destiny. The mention of his religious knowledge, whose relevance commentators have not been able to explain, may well be present to indicate that Nerva has diagnosed the *ira deum* and can see no solution, just inevitable problems.

Tacitus' Tiberius is paradoxically both a safeguard and the greatest danger to religion: to paraphrase Juvenal, there is no one to guard *this* guardian. His dissimulation creates an atmosphere where the senate can only act with any authority and freedom when under direct instruction.¹⁶³ Their normal procedures are paralysed under an emperor who autocratically decides religious matters when republican channels are attempted, and who strenuously

¹⁶³ Compare Shotter (1989) on A. 4.30.5: 'While Tiberius was on hand to check (in many cases) their abuses, the situation probably appeared less dangerous, but the problem raised by his arbitrary interventions was what would happen when he was not on hand to save defendants.'

defends these now worthless channels when his autocracy is openly acknowledged in practice. Such conditions are hardly conducive to the transmission of the inherited wisdom that had been instrumental in governing the *cultus deorum* for centuries. Even when proper procedures are followed, they threaten to become increasingly meaningless in context. Though political upheaval does affect religion, the remembrance of proper cult actions does persist, however isolated it becomes. That isolation is set to grow until the few aspects of religious practice that have not fallen prey to the corruption of politics become positively conspicuous and virtually futile.

Claudius, like Tiberius, tries to breathe life into a system that is severely hamstrung by the context in which it is supposed to operate. The creation of a haruspical college, spurred on by the typically antiquarian¹⁶⁴ diagnosis of declining religion, is set within a respectable context of precedents; but we note that the senate is by now accustomed to acting on the emperor's instructions. They pass the matter to the *pontifices* after the emperor has outlined his case. How Tacitus framed his discussion of the Saecular Games at A. 11.11.1 we cannot know, though we should note that this was the province of the *quindecimviri* rather than the senate. Nor are the enlargement of the *pomerium* and the restoration of the *Salutis augurium* problematised in themselves at A. 12.23.3-4; rather they are set within good precedents. Any hope, however, that the new, antiquarian, emperor might bring some improvement to the situation is, however, quickly dashed.

The first problem is that the case is made by Claudius and Claudius alone and the emperor is simply not up to the task, as Tacitus' depiction makes vividly clear. Any implication that *Salus* will henceforth be an ally of Rome is textually undermined by the immediately subsequent adoption at A. 12.25.1 of Nero, who will hardly embody the blessings of the god. At A. 12.4.4, Vitellius is allowed to have Silanus struck from the senatorial roll even though the *lustrum* had been closed. Claudius not only fails to act against this, but colludes with the procedural anomaly by cutting off his own contact with the disgraced Silanus.¹⁶⁵ Claudius' knowledge of precedent and protocol also seems to fail him when his court persuade him to marry his niece Agrippina. The incest may have been circumvented legally by Vitellius (A. 12.5.3-5) but there seems little reason to think that this is sufficient: astonishingly, almost simultaneously in our text, Silanus is prosecuted for supposed incest with his sister and Claudius, endeavouring as ever to find integrity in law and lore, performs rites to purify Rome, thus confirming a religious dimension to the act. The emperor is, not for the first –

¹⁶⁴ North (1976) 12.

¹⁶⁵ Who duly quits office and commits suicide (A. 12.8.1).

or last – time, legally correct but out of touch with reality.¹⁶⁶ Shortly afterwards, the *ira deum* begins to irrupt into the text with two sets of prodigies. One, at 12.43, is interestingly coupled with an example of the gods' support for Rome in their relief for famine. A further set follows at 12.64. Amidst the prodigies, it would seem that, while the relationship between Rome and her gods is beginning to suffer more profoundly after years of abuse and neglect, there is still divine 'goodwill' towards the City.¹⁶⁷

Claudius' antiquarianism may allow for some reasonable reforms but, when combined with his idiocy as emperor, is of little use if he will not attend to those things that were more immediately at hand.¹⁶⁸ The situation has not yet become irrecoverable, but, given the prevailing climate, it is only a matter of time. It would be simplistic to link these prodigies purely to the marriage of Claudius and Agrippina. Yet the acknowledged appearance of prodigies for the first (extant) time means that the goodwill of the gods, while still a potent force, is being lost. The incest at the heart of the *res publica* must be a factor in this, notwithstanding the normal 'wear and tear' on the cosmos.

By this point it is clear that the emperor, partly through his being *Pontifex Maximus*, has assumed a great degree of authority over religious matters. This might seem inevitable but Tacitus does make an effort to prescribe a religious role for the senate under Tiberius, maximising their ever diminishing role until their active intervention has become a distant memory. The benefits of shared expertise and diffused authority threaten to be lost when all religious motions must go through the emperor. This inherent weakness develops over time and is ultimately played out to its logical conclusion under Nero, as a 'religious' narrative of the surviving texts indicates.

Before the reign of Nero (excepting the reign of Caligula, about whom we can only speculate) the senate dealt for the most part with an emperor imbued with procedural tradition. Tiberius may have been instrumental in robbing the senate of its ability to make decisions about religion, and Claudius may have not let the right hand notice what the left was doing, but at least these two were partially equipped to oversee the *cultus deorum*. Under Nero, it is increasingly a question not so much of reliable expertise

¹⁶⁶ Tacitus confirms that Claudius has committed incest *sua uoce* A. 13.2.3 (*claudius nuptiis incestis . . . peruerterat*). The sham is still visible to the public at 12.5 (*. . . incestum ac, si sperneretur, ne in malum publicum erumperet metuebatur*). There is also the easily drawn implication that the hypocrisy has become profound, since by the prosecution of Silanus, a purification for incest can be enacted without reference to Claudius. If so, the *ira deum* that follows shortly afterwards may be an indictment of this sleight of hand.

¹⁶⁷ Cf. their assistance at A. 4.27.1.

¹⁶⁸ E.g. Claudius is sacrificing in Ostia when Messalina married Silius (A. 11.26.1-4). While no censure is attached to the emperor for his observance of ritual, his lack of everyday observation is startling.

but of the extent of incompetence and wilful sabotage. Nero, perhaps not surprisingly given his age, never seems to get much of a grasp of religion in Tacitus' text. Rather, he relates to religion as a way of endorsing his ever more flagrant abuses. The only person who outdoes the now absolutely deplorable senate is the emperor himself. The destruction of Rome becomes a race, where the only merit of the aristocracy is that, after an initial head start, they cannot keep up. As Nero pushes back the boundaries of disgrace, the senate respond by negotiating their moral surrender through religious honours, a tendency hitherto resisted almost solely by the incumbent emperor, yet simultaneously fostered by the various régimes.

Early in the reign, it is true, the senate takes the lead in abolishing any remaining respect for religion, with Nero refusing various honours (A. 13.10.1), but this is almost certainly due to the influence of Burrus and Seneca, a moderating influence on the young *princeps* (they had only recently prevented murders by Agrippina and her accomplices, 13.2-3). It does not take long for him to catch up: whereas Claudius overly reinforced his family ties, Nero goes to great lengths to reduce his. After acquiescence in, or ignorance of, the poisoning of his adoptive father by his mother (12.66), Nero poisons his stepbrother Britannicus (A. 13.16.2-5), murders his mother (A. 14.8.6), executes one wife using the state apparatus (Octavia, 14.64) and murders another on his own (Poppaea, A. 16.6.1) along with their unborn child; he also disposes of his mentors Seneca¹⁶⁹ and (in all likelihood) Burrus (A. 14.51.1-5) along with anyone else who might set a different example.¹⁷⁰ As these impediments are removed, Tacitus' Nero increasingly shows his 'true colours'.

Very early in the reign, the suborning of religion is virtually complete. Almost the only honours mentioned are those to celebrate fictitious or domestic 'victories'. By A. 13.41.5, there have been so many honours, on such a scale, voted for the mediocre reign that Caius Cassius proposes a classification of sacred and business-days to allow for the transaction of normal business. The thanksgivings, at 14.10-11, after the murder of his mother, show that religious honours, partially resisted by Tiberius, have now become a key feature of the active collusion with the régime. The prospect of Rome maintaining good relations with the gods becomes a distant dream as even the artificially (i.e. imperially) rectified negotiations with the gods slide into the same perverted morass as other senatorial actions, a process vividly enacted as the senate compete to destroy any remaining integrity in thanksgivings. It is a rounding condemnation of the senate, rather than a

¹⁶⁹ Hated by Nero, who wanted to be rid of him at A. 15.56.2; obliged to commit suicide at 15.60f.

¹⁷⁰ In particular Thrasea Paetus, whose death closes the *Annals* (16.35).

criticism of the man when Thræsea Paetus, one of the last symbols of rectitude,¹⁷¹ abandons his accustomed nodded assent or just silence in response to such acts of *adulatio*, walks out of the senate, famously putting himself at risk without inspiring any of his colleagues to *libertas*.¹⁷² He sees no other way to stem the downward spiral (his protest continues if the speeches of his accuser later are anything to go by (A. 16.22.2-22.10)). His stand is apparently endorsed by the gods, who (textually) immediately send a spate of prodigies (A. 14.12.3) *quoque . . . inrita*. Nero, freed from the inhibition of his mother's presence, shows what a monster he was to be inhibited by the likes of her.

The way is now clear for the active subversion of religious forms: Nero institutes his Juvenile Games to hide the fact that he wishes to perform on stage (A. 14.15.1). Not content with using religion as a pretence, he assaults sanctity by bathing in the source of the Marcian aqueduct at A. 14.22.6 and suffers the *ira deum* as a result. With Paetus' divinely endorsed withdrawal from public life, there is nobody to rebuff him except those gods themselves. By the time that Octavia is executed at 14.64 amid massive official celebration, Tacitus virtually abandons documenting the thanksgivings: their bankruptcy is such that the details have become irrelevant:

How long shall I go on recording the thank-offerings in temples in such circumstances? Whoever learns about what happened then, in my writings or others', can presume that the gods were thanked every time the emperor ordered an exile or murder; and conversely, that events that were once welcomed were now treated as national disasters. Nonetheless I will not pass over in silence, when any senatorial decree reached new depths of sycophancy or humiliation.¹⁷³

After the failed conspiracy of Piso, Rome is a mass of funerals and the Capitol teems with sacrificial victims: one man after another gives thanks for the death of a son, a brother or a friend, 'wearing out Nero's hand with congratulatory kisses' (A. 15.71.1). When Nero gives thanks for his

¹⁷¹ As noted above in connection with Nero: earlier, in the trial of Antistius Sosianus, who had satirised the emperor, Paetus earned unstinting praise for breaking senatorial servility: *libertas Thræseae seruitium aliorum rupit* (A. 14.49.1). There he did the accused some good by ameliorating the sentence. But what middle path could there be when celebrating matricide?

¹⁷² *silentio uel breui adsensu priores adulationes transmitters solitus exit tum senatu ac sibi causam periculi fecit, ceteris libertatis initium non praeiuit* (14.12.2).

¹⁷³ *dona ob haec templis decreta quem ad finem memorabimus? quicumque casus temporum illorum nobis uel aliis auctoribus noscent, praesumptum habeant, quoties fugas et caedes iussit princeps, toties grates deis actas, quaeque rerum secundarum olim, tum publicae cladis insignia fuisse. neque tamen silebimus si quod senatus consultum adulatione novum aut patientia postremum fuit* (A. 14.64.6).

deliverance, his dedication of the dagger to Jupiter Vindex points forward, little though it was realised at the time, to the rebellion by Vindex, or so Tacitus tells us (15.74.2): it seems that Jupiter was less than impressed. Then, after the gods tire of patience, they send unambiguous messages (e.g. the melting of a statue of the emperor by lightning at A. 15.22.3) before finally 'planning' to do what Rome should have done for itself, the removal of the emperor, in the form of the rebellion that is the beginning of his end.

The thanksgiving and honours at the birth of little Augusta (A. 15.23.4-5) are, as Tacitus acerbically points out, rather fruitless and have to be re-worked as tributes when she dies, chronologically four months later, but textually within the same sentence. Nero's ode to the gods when a theatre collapses empty marks out his alienation from the rest of the population who see an adverse sign in the fact of the collapse at 15.34, while the emperor attempts to continue the imperial habit of making positive interpretations. His inability to stop shaking in the temple of Vesta 'either because the goddess inspired terror in him or because of his crimes' (A. 15.36.3)¹⁷⁴ meant that he cannot even *consult* the gods about his planned trip to Greece, never mind gain their approval.

Ritual appeasement for the fire at A. 15.44.1-2 has no opportunity to unite the city in rite in the *Annals*: it not only fails to secure freedom from anxiety (because of the rumours that Nero had sponsored the fire) but arouses opposition for the cruelty inflicted on the Christians in Nero's games. The subsequent propitiation of the gods smacks of the priests' expertise but the apparently suitable procedures are undermined by the common suspicion that Nero set the fire. The ensuing scramble for resources for the rebuilding programme included the pilfering of many temple funds, a *sacriligium* that Seneca refuses to endorse (A. 15.45.5). Prodiges rapidly follow, and Tacitus vividly condemns Nero: 'Prodigies occurred at the end of the year . . . never were lightning flashes more frequent: there was also a comet. Nero expiated each and every one (*semper*) of them with human blood.'¹⁷⁵ As is to be expected, an enormous amount is packed into this memorable image. Given that one function of religion was to stabilise the *urbs*, a more emphatic inversion is hard to imagine. With this vacation of expiation, which was at least attempted in response to earlier prodigies, Nero puts himself beyond redemption. Nero takes them personally (an interpretation in which he was presumably correct for a change) and acts on them, in

¹⁷⁴ *seu numine exterrente, seu facinorum recordatione numquam timore uacuus*. The temple is not, of course, to last much longer. It was one of the casualties of the fire in 64.

¹⁷⁵ *fine anni uulgantur prodigia imminentium malorum nuntia. Vis fulgurum non alias crebrior et sidus cometes, sanguine inlustri semper Neroni expiatum* (A. 15.47.2).

contrast to their intended audience, everybody *but* Nero, who continue to tolerate the slaughter. Thus, though the emperor does avail himself of religious experts, their restricted role means they cannot offset the general decline; as fast as the priests attempt to restore the *pax deum*, Nero and his fawning senate restore the damage to the cosmic fabric.

In the meantime, the *débâcle* continues. The Quinquennial games are textually just a prelude to Nero's killing Poppaea with a kick to her pregnant belly, and more bankrupt rites at A. 16.6.2, in a foreign style to boot (*non . . . ut Romanus mos*); they are even made an opportunity to signal imperial displeasure to Caius Cassius (A. 16.7.1). When the senate rename May and June to honour Nero's descent from Claudius and Germanicus, Tacitus continues, 'the gods marked out this crime-stained year with tempest and plague'.¹⁷⁶ While cataloguing crimes Tacitus clarifies at A. 16.16.2-3 that the victims are not to blame but that the *ira deum* is the driving force behind the events. At A. 16.21.1, 'Nero finally desires to stamp out Virtue herself'¹⁷⁷ when the deaths of Thrasea Paetus and Barea Soranus are planned. The utter alienation of Rome from 'normality' seems complete as the *Annals* close.

The senate, to be fair, do attempt to match his depravity. Any sense of propriety is quickly overcome, and proportion with regard to religious matters is one of the first casualties. The sycophantic impulses that Tiberius had attempted to rein in run riot as the senate elides Tiberius' maxim that foreign victories should be celebrated and domestic sorrows met with silence (A. 3.18.2). They willingly collude with the murderous régime, and the honours pile up; and Nero needs their help, especially in conjunction with the destruction of figures who represent a different, more moderate, way.¹⁷⁸

We do perhaps get the impression that the opposition under Nero is more forthright, but the contrast is all the greater because of the character of the emperor: Tiberius and Claudius at least had more plausible grounds to execute their relatives and did not particularly expect thanksgivings on the same scale (if at all) for their 'deliverance'. The timing of the end of the *Annals*, as the last praiseworthy opponent of Nero slips away, is therefore particularly frustrating for our study. Paetus is the last representative of moral and political opposition to the régime.¹⁷⁹ Given the momentum of the narrative, it seems a safe bet that things got worse after his death.

¹⁷⁶ *Tot facinoribus foedum annum etiam dii tempestatibus et morbis insigniuere* (A. 16.13.1).

¹⁷⁷ Grant's memorable phrase for *Nero uirtutem ipsam excindere concupiuit*.

¹⁷⁸ Seneca's death is set in motion and justified by the false confession of Natalis at A. 15.56.2; Thrasea's enemy Capito Cossutianus presses for his removal at A. 16.21.2-22.10.

¹⁷⁹ His 'crimes' are documented at A. 16.21.2-22.10; he is particularly effective at A. 15.20.2-4 and at H. 4.5.4 we are told Helvidius Priscus learned from him a love of *libertas*.

Moving to the aftermath of Nero and into the text of the *Histories*, Galba's reign does not start well in religious terms. His entry into Rome is ill-omened (*infaustus omine*, *H.* 1.6.3); when adopting Piso as his heir, his opening, 'if I were adopting you before the *pontifices*, as is the custom ...' at *H.* 1.15.1 underlines the fact that he is *not* doing so, though he is perfectly aware of procedure. When he proceeds to the *contio* to announce Piso's adoption at *H.* 1.18.1, the dreadful weather does not put him off, though such signs were traditionally adverse, whatever the reasons for his proceeding.¹⁸⁰

Otho, of better character in Tacitus' view than has often been surmised,¹⁸¹ begins at least by showing some religious acumen. He correctly takes the signs adverse for Galba as favourable to himself (*H.* 1.27.1); he alludes to the *infaustus* adoption of Piso and makes a religious issue of Galba's arrival in Rome at *H.* 1.38.2 (*his auspiciis urbem ingressus*, *H.* 1.37.6), as well as diagnosing, apparently correctly, the conjunction of *ira deum* and the *rabies hominum*. Unfortunately, as Tacitus indicates by his customarily pregnant juxtaposition, his soldiers immediately proceed to mar his own inauguration: 'Neither the sight of the Capitol, nor the sanctity of the overhanging temples, nor consideration of past or future rulers could deter them from committing a crime [i.e. the assassinations of Galba and Piso] which any successor was bound to avenge.'¹⁸² Otho is caught up in events beyond his amateurish control. At *H.* 1.43.2, his murderous envoys ignore the sanctity of the temple of Vesta and at *H.* 1.47.3 the new emperor crosses a forum littered with bodies to the Capitol. The implied comparison with Galba's *infaustus* entry is only partially undermined by his decision to have them buried. By *H.* 1.50.2 we have been told that Otho and Vitellius seemed to be 'appointed by fate for the destruction of the Roman world'.¹⁸³ At *H.* 1.89.4, Otho, who had earlier (*H.* 1.77.4-5) appointed magistrates and

¹⁸⁰ Galba typically makes his own misfortune whether generous or greedy (Morgan (1992)). For the aspect of *capax imperii*, see Pigón (1990) 370–374; Nawotka (1993) deals more with *nisi imperasset*. For a fuller discussion and further biography see Ash (1999) 95–125 and Murison (1993).

¹⁸¹ Ash (1999) 83–94.

¹⁸² *nec illos Capitolii aspectus et imminetium templorum religio et priores et futuri principes ter-ruere quo minus facerent scelus cuius ultor est quisquis successit* (1.40). Scott notes that the *lacus Curtius* is the site of Galba's death: 'The vitality of these associations both for Tacitus' readers and for himself may be gauged by the use he makes of the *lacus Curtius*. The death of Galba is presented in terms of a possibly analogous *devotio*. *Agerent ac ferirent si ita e re publica uidentur* (1.41). But beyond the parallelism of circumstances there exists a fearful contrast in this symbol of sacrifice on which the historian is to insist repeatedly. The self-immolation of Curtius closed the chasm that threatened the destruction of Rome, but the murder of Galba can only symbolise its reopening, pinpointing as it does the beginning of a year of Roman self-destruction' (57–8). See also his 60–64 on the impiety of Galba's murder.

¹⁸³ *duos omnium mortalium ... deterrimos ...* and the rivals were indeed *uelut ad perdendum imperium fataliter electos*. See further Morgan (1993) 328.

priests as if it were a time of peace, refuses to delay when onlookers point out the need to restore the Salian shields to their proper place. Once again, religious expertise is found wanting at the highest level, and the extent to which the emperor can make mistakes is accentuated by the senate's inability to resist him.

Vitellius, in accordance with the trend for ever-worsening usurpations, gets the worst start yet from Tacitus:

But Italy was suffering more heavily and terribly than being at war. The soldiers of Vitellius, dispersed through the municipal towns and colonies, were robbing and plundering and polluting every place with violence and lust. In their greed for anything, whether legal or not, they omitted nothing, sacred or not, that they could sell.¹⁸⁴

Even when he tries to resolve difficulties he plays into the hands of fate in sending away the Batavian legions (*principium interno simul externoque bello parantibus fatis*, *H.* 2.69.2); his gleeful response to the 'hideous and terrible sight' (*foedum atque atrox spectaculum*) at *H.* 2.70.6 shows him to be a monster. His alienation from rectitude and his isolation from the rest of the population are emphasised in his offering sacrifice personally to the *dis loci*; he is grossly (religiously and otherwise) incompetent at *H.* 2.91, execrable to good men when he sacrifices to Nero at *H.* 2.95.2 (*foedisimo cuique apud bonos*) and, to complete the inversion of the ideal senior statesman, is laughable as a general at *H.* 3.56. At *H.* 3.58.5 he gave in to a superstitious impulse to accept the name Caesar and to cap it all, he could not even abdicate properly (*H.* 3.68).¹⁸⁵

Vespasian, on the other hand, manages himself with more decorum. His response to omens is more measured than that of his predecessors. He even piously administers vows for Vitellius at *H.* 2.74.1. The silence that he was met with (*per silentium audierint*) indicates just how much the situation is demanding his usurpation: Tacitus engineers a most reluctant assault on the principate by the Flavians. Finally, as we shall see, though he initiates the

¹⁸⁴ *ceterum Italia grauius atque atrocius quam bello adflctabatur. dispersi per municipia et colonias Vitelliani spoliare, rapere, ui et stupris polluere. in omne fas nefasque auidi aut uenales non sacro non profano abstinebant* (*H.* 2.56.1).

¹⁸⁵ For the reception of Vitellius' career and resignation see (somewhat ambiguously) Levene (1997) and Ash (1999) 120–121, who both anticipate pity as the audience's response to Vitellius' situation. Both plot the reactions of the textual audience to gauge the 'appropriate' response, but this seems an unusual and difficult reading of Tacitus' subjects. Despite the sophistication of these arguments, it seems rather out of character for Tacitus to pity one who has so spectacularly failed to live up to the expectation of basic competence; it may be that Vitellius' utter failure even *not* to rule is beyond contempt in the eyes of the historian. Textual audiences are not the most reliable indices of the author's opinions.

reconstruction of the Capitoline temple, he entrusts the task to Lucius Vestinus who immediately consults the proper experts, the *haruspices*. Their stipulations are unproblematically followed. Titus piously emulates his father's example in visiting a shrine at *H.* 2.4. Domitian, not yet identified as a monster,¹⁸⁶ is sheltered by Vesta and the caretaker of her shrine, whom he duly acknowledges and evicts respectively when given the chance (*H.* 3.74.1-2).

The problems that Rome encounters might have been more manageable if the senate had been able to compensate for the weaknesses of its emperor. But their response to the subversion of their religious system is to encourage it, and contribute to the decadence. Under the emperors, Rome abandons its vigilance, and the *ira deum* grows ever more profound. It was suggested earlier that Livy's position on this is that one way or another, the balance of the cosmos tends to become disturbed over time and that, though interpreters might well see a complex and specific significance in this, it is best treated as a simple fact of life. Rome had tolerated many prodigies in its time, thanks to its system of prodigy reports and expert responses. This is, of course, precisely the system that had been allowed, or encouraged, to sink into disrepair. Some prodigies were still noted, as we have seen. But these, by their very nature, tended to be 'major' and we know from Livy that some sense of magnitude could be distinguished in prodigies. Assuming some relationship between the impact of prodigies and the depth of the *ira deum*, the prodigies that are noted are presumably indicative of a cosmic disharmony that is far from being incipient. The wrath of the gods is well under way by the time that Rome begins to listen to the warnings. Tacitus' very silence in the Tiberian books about religious items begins to appear ironic and portentous, as the *ira deum* begins to creep up on a Rome that sees, hears and speaks no evil. Thus, 'wear and tear' on the Roman cosmos would have begun, or increased, under Tiberius, so reluctant to activate Rome's religious systems, and continued apace. Whatever these incremental causes were (and we can only speculate), they were not resolved. The continuing bankruptcy of religious institutions and initiatives means that Rome inevitably sinks into ruin.

Ritual acts as a focus for the decline of Rome and the gradual collapse of political morality, and any expectation that rites have pacified the gods is forestalled: Rome sinks into the chaos that was the *ira deum* and continues on her way into the civil wars of the *Histories*.¹⁸⁷ And civil war was of course traditionally a matter of neglecting the gods. There is no doubt

¹⁸⁶ See Ash (1999) 141 on one of the signs, physiognomical in this case.

¹⁸⁷ Though Tacitus implies throughout the *Annals* that Tiberius and Nero are waging civil war against their own people (Keitel (1984)), 'real' civil war was not diminished in its horror by this.

that the gods are angry.¹⁸⁸ In addition, McCulloch understands both the appearance of the phoenix at *A.* 6.28 and the temporary withering of the *ficus Ruminalis* (13.58) to be related to the end of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, even if these harbingers of doom precede the reality by years, or decades.¹⁸⁹ Given the growing intensity of these signs and signifiers, we can proceed on the understanding that Tacitus is constructing an explanatory narrative that includes the gods; far from being ‘impotent’ or ‘psychological’, they are a potent force: in fact they are the key to understanding events in their broader context. All the rest is details. But while we are told that they are displeased, there is no explicit documentation in Tacitus of the *causes* of the *ira deum*. Livy used failed rite to explain the *ira deum* (where he did record a cause which is rarely).¹⁹⁰ But Tacitus does not employ the same structure. There are no prodigies under Tiberius, yet we are told that Sejanus’ rise to power was the gods’ doing. Tacitus’ expert diagnosis, based purely on the evidence of events in Rome, thus partially overcomes the lack of prodigies. His diagnosis is not unprecedented: Quintus Fabius Maximus had also discerned the *ira deum* in an adverse course of events at Livy 22.9.8-9 (above, 67).

The formula of *ira deum/pax deum* is still applicable, even if access to traditional wisdom is curtailed. Tacitus’ economical use of the terms reflects due caution with precision: it only appears judiciously, when perhaps the reader might require guidance or clarification. It implies that a balance has been lost, and that events will tend towards a downward spiral unless properly checked: and it is the latter aspect, the restoration and maintenance of the *pax deum*, that is the concern of men.

Of course it is tempting to make tentative connections between the *ira deum* and the combination of imperial conduct, the senate and, most of all, the superfluous religious honours that filled the first century; this would account for the acceleration of prodigies and collapse of Rome more vividly than a deduction of incremental decay. And this may be the way in which Tacitus understood things, especially in terms of the inflated honours. But we have no authority for this and it was probably more complex and subtle than any simple equation of conduct with divine will. In a Rome suffering

¹⁸⁸ Explicitly at *A.* 4.1.1; there are two prodigies for Claudius in our text (*A.* 12.43.1 and *A.* 12.64.1), and Nero encounters no fewer than seven, if we count *A.* 15.44.1-2 (in response to the fire, which prompts expiation under the supervision of the *quindecimviri*); see also *A.* 13.24.1-2, 13.58.1, 14.12.3, 15.22.3-4, 15.47.1-3 and 16.13.1 and *H.* 1.86, 2.38.5 and 3.56.1.

¹⁸⁹ McCulloch (1980) and (1984) 206–208; for further discussion of this episode see Dickson and Plympton (1977) and Segal (1973) 114 who demonstrate (*contra* Syme (1958a) 269) that the prodigy is highly significant: ‘the order of events which he adopts ... throws into sharp relief the contrast between the corruption and depravity at the centre of the empire and the strenuous exertions and dangers at its western and eastern extremes’.

¹⁹⁰ E.g. 22.57.2-7 and 40.59.6.

the wrath of the gods, *something* will go wrong: in a Rome that cannot restore its balance, things will get worse. A direct 'cause and effect' formula will not always be appropriate. Thus Drusus died because of the *ira deum*, but that does not mean that the gods 'intended' for him *in particular* to perish miserably. A runaway lorry will hit something, sooner or later, and the faster it travels, the more damage it will probably cause. So precise details are not our concern, even if a contemporary reader might have inferred more detailed correspondences: what we can reliably say is that long before Nero was removed from power, he had become so inimical to the restoration of the *pax deum* that the situation became, in a practical sense, irremediable: even if the brakes had been working on our metaphorical lorry, it was too late for them to have much effect, even if they were belatedly applied. The wealth of prodigies, and the utter failure to address them properly, took Rome to a point where expiation was no longer a realistic prospect in the *Annals*: the city was too fragmented, and incapacitated, to address the *ira deum* in ritual terms. It might have been theoretically possible to act, but this did not happen and all the signs are that, in practice, the disintegration had to run its course.

The burning of the capitol Over the previous sixty years, practices had degenerated: Rome had seen imperial incest, every imaginable type of familial murder within a dynasty for whose well-being the entire priesthood annually prayed, a slaughter of the innocent and the guilty alike; the senate riven by unnecessary judicial murder, with an increasing tendency to eradicate the best characters; the reporting of prodigies threatened to become bankrupt, and those that were reported failed to convey the intended warning; and astrology had apparently become a permanent and divisive feature of Roman life. Now came an act that could dwarf these in its magnitude of disrespect for the gods. The Capitoline temple was burned down in a siege.¹⁹¹

This was the most deplorable and disgraceful event that had happened to Rome since the foundation of the city; for now, with no foreign enemy, with the gods ready – if only our behaviour had allowed them – to be favourable, the seat of Jupiter Optimus Maximus, founded by our ancestors under solemn auspices to be the mainstay of empire, which neither Porsenna

¹⁹¹ In weighing loyalty to an individual friend against loyalty to the state, Cicero deems setting fire to the Capitol as the ultimate test (*On Friendship* 11.37), quoted by Ash (1999) 70. It seems that most of Rome fails the test in 69.

(when the city was surrendered), nor the Gauls (when it was captured), had been able to violate, was destroyed by the violent madness of our emperors. Once before indeed during a civil war the Capitol had been destroyed by fire, but then only through the acts of individuals; now it was besieged in plain view, and torched in plain view. And what were the motives of this conflict? What made such a great disaster worth it? Were we fighting for the sake of our homeland?

Id facinus post conditam urbem luctuosissimum foedissimumque rei publicae populi Romani accidit, nullo externo hoste, propitiis, si per mores nostros liceret, deis, sedem Iouis Optimi Maximi auspicato a maioribus pignus imperii conditam, quam non Porsenna dedita urbe neque Galli capta temerare potuissent, furore principum excindi arserat et ante Capitolium ciuili bello, sed fraude priuata. Nunc palam obsessum, palam incensum, quibus armorum causis? quo tantae cladis pretio stetit? pro patria bellauimus? (H. 3.72.1)

In this all the various threads explored above come together. While the destruction of the temple is normally seen as just another sordid act of civil war, in religious terms it is one of the key moments of the entire account and the logical conclusion of the decline of the previous decades. And Tacitus deliberately blurs the locus of responsibility. Obviously the temple could not have burned without the introduction of fire but on this point Tacitus resists closure, aware no doubt that the various versions cannot be taken at face value.

Firstly, and locally, Tacitus refuses to say which of the two sides was to blame for bringing fire to bear. His note that the more popular account blamed the Flavianists (H. 3.71.3) is undermined at H. 3.75.4: in addition, it is the Vitellianists who had already used fire to storm the gates and arrive with more brands (H. 3.73.3). In Tacitus' account, there really is no telling who set the fire. Secondly, he attributes blame more widely in saying that the temple burned *furore principum* (H. 3.72.1). Given that neither of the present candidates for the title is present, a great degree of blame is therefore attached to them for the *general* situation reaching the degree of intensity that it did. But though Vitellius and Vespasian are currently at war, we cannot conclude with them. Which *principes* got Rome into this situation, exactly? Vitellius is clearly incompetent and bloodthirsty; and Vespasian, yet to improve for the better in Tacitus' account, has his problems

with generals and soldiers alike.¹⁹² But they both rose to prominence in the midst of civil war that was *already* rampant.

In addition, the mention of the Republican burning of the temple and its still-extant dedication by Lutatius Catulus *inter tanta Caesarum opera* shows a long historical perspective that could easily embrace a whole clutch of emperors who contributed to the decline. Nor is that all: Tacitus also pleads that the gods were willing to look kindly on Rome, *si per mores nostros liceret*. *Nos* usually refers to the senate in Tacitus' accounts (Sinclair (1995) 50–58) but here may be somewhat more diffused.¹⁹³ Responsibility for the disaster is thus spread through a much wider section of Roman society than one might initially assume. Though one or the other side had the idea of using fire, the fact that the situation had reached such a crisis point can be attributed to (the) emperors; that this came to pass can, in turn, be attributed to the population of Rome more generally, who resisted the tendency of the gods to assist and preserve Rome, squandered the power of her religious institutions and conspicuously failed to rise to the challenge of imperial rule.

Thus, we are dealing with a hierarchy of causes in the *Histories*. One side or another set the fire, the emperors established a scenario in which some such disaster¹⁹⁴ was unavoidable, but the emperors could only promote this level of chaos in the context of the appalling *mores* of Rome as a whole. '*Mores*' succinctly leaves open the question of specific referents and cannot be restricted to cult practice, though it should include it. Rather, it indicates the culmination of the manifold decline on virtually every front. The gods were not necessarily angry with Rome because Rome was not behaving: but they were angry because they had not been reliably appeased for decades: not, at least, in Tacitus' accounts.¹⁹⁵

For so much of the texts, the gods have functioned as a barometer of the decline when all human authorities were inadequate to provide a stable reference point against which to measure behaviour. With the burning of the Capitoline temple, even this seems to have been banished from the text. Thus Tacitus articulates, in the vacuum, a human 'plea' to fill the gap, temporarily – if only our behaviour had allowed the gods to lend their support. . .

¹⁹² Ash (1999) 55–70 documents the excesses and difficulties of the Flavian campaign.

¹⁹³ Tacitus refers to the *populus Romanus* in the following paragraph, and, as we shall see, it will be more than the senate who restore the temple.

¹⁹⁴ The emphasis on *incendi* and the absence of either current emperor imply that *something* drastic was inevitable.

¹⁹⁵ Countless ceremonies must have been performed without Tacitus' recording them, which makes his selection all the more pertinent.

Rome has cut its last connection with 'normality' and is living, as it were, on borrowed time. The city, lacking a 'head', cannot continue long in this state before everything disintegrates completely.¹⁹⁶

We see the beginning of this final stage of disintegration soon after in the text. One of the last customary distinctions, between foreign and civil war, is eroded at *H.* 4.22.2 as each tribe reasserts itself (*mixta belli ciuilibus externique facie*); at this point, the sense of identity that made Rome more than just another city is well on the way to oblivion. 'Rome', however, has sufficient momentum for Vespasian's victory, though it is not a clean one (Ash (1999) 55–73). The Druids were mistaken not in diagnosing *fatum's* hand in events, but in the outcome, because (just) enough of Rome's identity remains to restore what had been forgotten. The refounding of the Capitoline at *H.* 4.53 is the first major religious act that is not juxtaposed with indications of hypocrisy or corruption in either text. It signals a reversal of the trend that had continued almost unabated and with increasing momentum since early in the reign of Tiberius: its significance cannot be overstated. The curiously (and uniquely) full account of the temple foundation¹⁹⁷ in a text that is characterised by its pithiness and economy, the full-scale evocation of the refounding of the temple – this is more than antiquarian interest.

The refounding of the Capitoline is no less than the textual and religious reconstruction of Rome's proper relations with the gods. The passage reflects all of the religious concerns we have traced through the texts; the tone of the passage is dignified, and lacking in rebukes or juxtapositions that undermine its effect. Moreover as a rite it meets the essential criteria: the city acts as a unity, the prescriptions of the priests are followed and, interestingly, the emperor is absent – thus allowing the aristocracy to function properly. Nonetheless his political authority endorses the act, thus stabilising the political situation. It represents a religious and a political model to be imitated for its balance of power and jurisdiction, a balance seen only very rarely in the two texts.¹⁹⁸ Continuity with the past is affirmed by the approximate preservation of the predecessor, though the increased height may reflect the growth of the empire, both geographically and politically, and its self-image.¹⁹⁹ At *H.* 4.78.3 we have seen a Roman victory

¹⁹⁶ The symbolism of a 'Rome without a head' is built into the narrative. For the destruction of the Capitol as the 'decapitation of Rome' and the symbolism of decapitation in general, see Woodman (1997) 96.

¹⁹⁷ Compare e.g. those built and/or dedicated under Tiberius. Chilver (1985) *ad loc* offers that this is the only description of its type in extant Latin literature. Even Livy (as we have him) never goes into this kind of detail.

¹⁹⁸ For an analysis of Tacitus' model of a working (i.e. unified) *res publica* see Aubrion (1990).

¹⁹⁹ Cf. the increase of the *pomerium* under Claudius; it was expanded to match the increase in the size of the empire.

that is accomplished *nec sine ope diuina* (presumably panic), the *only* textual occasion on which the gods assist Rome in battle. Though it cannot be ascertained for certain that this occurs after the restoration of the Capitol chronologically, it does occur subsequently in textual terms, and represents the newly refound *pax deum*.

But rite, even on this scale, will not be sufficient to effect a lasting change. If Rome has cleaned her slate, her future progress will depend on checking the trends that had done so much damage for so long. It seems unproblematic to suggest that affairs improved under Vespasian and Titus, and that there was a downturn under Domitian, but Tacitus is unlikely to be so straightforward: in addition, this would be to forget the importance of the senate, enervated and out of practice in real administration. One might reasonably assume that they would gradually come to their traditional senses under the guidance of the first two Flavians, and might well be robust enough to stand up to the last of the dynasty; or, at least, not entirely forget what was right.²⁰⁰

This seems to be precisely what is indicated at A. 3.55, where Tacitus discusses the improvement of Roman morals, specifically regarding luxury. He asserts that extravagant eating reached astonishing levels between Actium and the accession of Galba, but then began to decline for various reasons, and gradually. Firstly, there was the ruination of old and corrupted aristocratic families by their very expenditure; but the reign of terror under Domitian was also a disincentive to conspicuousness.²⁰¹ Improvement was therefore steady overall, though for very different reasons. In line with this trend, provincials brought their own more frugal habits – a tendency shared and supported by Vespasian for a decade, by which time they might well have become sufficiently entrenched to act as a corrective to a decadent emperor.²⁰² This is our only textual indication of how Rome fared as a moral entity under the Flavians, and may of course be entirely misleading. In the absence of other evidence, its fit with our argument is nonetheless rather encouraging.

²⁰⁰ Suetonius documents Vespasian's resistance to the tendency for spiralling court cases and personal insults at *Vespasian* 10–14.

²⁰¹ I rely here on the reading of the passage offered by Woodman in Woodman and Martin (1996) *ad loc.*

²⁰² Provincials, relatively uncorrupted by all that Rome had to offer (A. 3.55), also show their worth when they fail to respond to, or to understand, the politics of attending Nero's games at A. 16.5.1. On the theme of corruption and subsequent improvement see the extended comments of Woodman and Martin (1996) on 3.55. On the ameliorative effects of provincial senators, see McCulloch (1984) 189: 'Thrasea, the *nouus homo* of municipal origins, is willing to modify traditional customs for the furtherance of justice . . . [whereas] the old Roman *nobiles*, dulled by their servitude, continually looking to the past, a past riddled with their own failures.' See Goodyear (1970a) for the unconventionality of Tacitus' optimism.

Tacitus' senate under Domitian might then have been very different from the one he depicts under Tiberius, irrespective of our traditional guesswork that Tacitus was racked with guilt about his 'collaboration': perhaps instead the later books of the *Histories* showed a senate that heeded the *exempla* of Marcus Lepidus or Thrasea Paetus, quietly mitigating the worst excesses, forever looking for an opportunity to preserve traditional values, biding Rome's time until they, rather than circumstances, could choose their own emperor. No proof exists for this inference, but that is also true of the traditional assumption that Tacitus created his Tiberian senate in the image of Domitian's, or even that he *felt* (let alone was 'racked with') guilt at serving under Domitian.

Rome, as a going concern, has had a narrow escape. At the particular moment when the crisis came, she found the integrity and strength of purpose to establish the foundations for her recovery, not unlike the phoenix who undergoes a crisis when he must find the strength to carry his father to the sun after his birth. In fact, this is precisely what the expert reader has been expecting.

4.2.2.3 *The fatum of Rome*

Thus far, Tacitus' first century is subjected to the kind of interpretation that Livy used to shape individual years, or series of years: a disruption of the *pax deum* led to problems and ritual correction renewed Rome's relations with the gods. The active, exemplary and moral focus was on Rome's conduct, especially – but not exclusively – in terms of rite. Yet latent within this 'everyday' orientation was the larger category of *fatum*. Since we lack Livy's later narrative, it is hard to say whether *fatum* intruded into the later account any further than it did in our text: in the extant account it is most potent during the Hannibalic War, and then retreats from the active interpretation, though Scipio's formulation that Rome is destined to suffer initial defeats in her greatest wars may well have repeated itself later on. Whether he located the broad decline of Rome within a context of *fatum*, we cannot say, though he is clearly familiar with the category. Though Tacitus' narratives are similarly incomplete, there are signs that he also located the large-scale loss and return of the *pax deum* within a larger context still: that of Rome's fate.

When alluding to the future (and entirely unexpected) reign of Claudius, Tacitus does not mention fate, but *fortuna* (A. 3.18.7). In contrast, Vespasian's accession is connected several times with *fatum*. Vespasian receives a whole array of predictions of one sort or another. His fate is already

established in the *Annals*²⁰³ and is elaborated within the *Histories*.²⁰⁴ Even the actions of others are attracted into a 'fatal' pattern: not just is Galba's end 'fatalised', but the fates are also implicated when Vitellius sends away the Batavian troops *principium interno simul externoque bello parantibus fatis* (*H.* 2.69). Vespasian begins his campaign *melioere fato* (*H.* 3.1.1) and the Vitellianists fight his troops *numero fatoque dispares* (*H.* 3.84.3). Thus a superficial reading of the *Histories* in particular leaves one with the impression that *fatum* 'appointed' Vespasian, a startling contrast with Tacitus' refusal elsewhere to provide frameworks for individuals to aspire to imperial power. Why should the rise of the Flavians be attributed to fate, when that of others is not?²⁰⁵ In this apparently minor difference lies a fundamental point of perspective. We might, no doubt, consider this a result of Flavian propaganda but Tacitus has shown himself perfectly able to sift such accounts critically.²⁰⁶ We saw in Livy how, once *fatum* has begun to take an active hand, individuals can be attracted into a 'fatal' series of events. This applies even to the Flavians.

In the midst of the chaos of the *Histories*, Tacitus informs us that Otho and Vitellius appeared, not just to the senate and knights but even the people, to be 'appointed for the destruction of Rome' (*duos . . . uelut ad perdendum imperium fataliter electos*, *H.* 1.50.2). Rome has reached an uneasy and unpleasant consensus, the first (textual and extant) city-wide agreement of any kind: *some* sort of deductive unity then. A distasteful *fatum* hovers over the account and is reinforced by other notices: Vitellius and Otho share omens linked to birds, which Morgan (1993) 328 argues links them to Rome's destiny – to be torn apart by rivals. 'Tacitus' account of the omen which opens the Vitellians' campaign . . . reminds the reader of the curse of fratricidal strife laid on the Romans and the suffering which must flow from that.'²⁰⁷ It is therefore more than a passing acerbity: it alludes to a much greater cycle of events than the *fatum* of any individual in the narrative.

Since the *fatum* of Rome was probably the greatest interpretative category that any Roman would be likely to refer to in practice, it is of such a magnitude that it must be treated with enormous respect – the proprieties

²⁰³ A. 16.5.3: an incident presented to emphasise the workings of destiny (Bartsch (1994) 6–7, 30–31).

²⁰⁴ *H.* 1.10.3; 3.1.1 and 5.13.3 all validate the dynasty; thus the oracular predictions made of Vespasian (*H.* 2.78.6–7) and Titus (*H.* 2.4) as well as Basilides' divine apparition to Vespasian at *H.* 4.82 reinforce the *dynastic* rather than the individual destiny.

²⁰⁵ Nero (A. 6.22.6 and 14.9.5), Galba (A. 6.20.3) and Otho (*H.* 1.22.1–2) all receive astrological interpretations but do not explicitly attract the ponderous categorisation of *fatum*.

²⁰⁶ See Ash (1999) 83–93 on his discerning treatment of the various depictions of Otho.

²⁰⁷ It may be the same preoccupation that leads people to accept the poisoning of Britannicus (A. 13.17.1) on the grounds that brothers cannot share power easily.

of deduction seem to be observed in the carefully deployed *uelut*. It is not so much that our author is 'unsure' or 'non-committal'. The associations of *fatum* cast an ominous shadow over the narrative, *however* it is introduced, as the reader is invited to contemplate events within this enormous perspective. Tacitus, like Livy, is far too subtle and refined an interpreter simply to throw *fatum* directly into the narrative. Respectful and trenchant allusion is perfectly sufficient. At this point in the story, where more sickening bloodshed is to come and the downward spiral still has no little momentum, Tacitus peers into the abyss of the text's immediate future with just a hint of hindsight from the other side of history. This was no ordinary succession. From Tacitus' perspective, it was the lowest moment in Rome's entire history, when Italy was the site of unremitting civil war that threatened never to end and would finally consume the temple at the heart of the City. The deduction of fate, a massive interpretation for a disastrous situation, is not *difficult* in the circumstances. Technically it is the only viable context if we are right in reasoning that Rome is simply unable to reverse the *ira deum* at this point. However there is more to it than a simple and vague diagnosis that an unexplained fate 'must have' been involved in disasters on this scale. This *fatum* seems to have been contextualised by the system of *saecula* across the two historical narratives.

McCulloch suggests that two signs in the *Annals*, the appearance of the phoenix at 6.28 and the (temporary) withering of the *ficus Ruminalis* at 13.58, allude to the fate of Rome. He notes that the phoenix was associated with the eternity of Rome in oracular literature (*Oracula Sibyllina* 8.136), while the *ficus Ruminalis* was associated with the founding and history of the city, concluding 'the excursus on the phoenix, then, should not be interpreted simply as an omen portending the death of Tiberius and the accession of Caligula; rather, here Tacitus portends the suffering and devastation during the remainder of the Julio-Claudian principate, up to and including the year of the great civil war' (McCulloch (1984) 207–208).

Tacitus alludes to cycles in other ways: in his discussion of the sighting of a phoenix, he says that it traditionally returned *post longum saeculorum ambitum* (A. 6.28.1); when he outlines the rise and fall of luxurious banquets in Rome at 3.55, he presents a perfectly coherent 'human' pattern, whereby fashion and experience combine with the appearance of an upright emperor to rectify a long-standing and deleterious habit. He then offers another possible analysis, that human life is governed by cycles (*nisu forte rebus cunctis inest quidam uelut orbis, ut quem ad modum temporum uices ita morum uertantur*). These two levels, the human and the cyclic, are not exclusive: in the latter framework, the details of the previous explanation are just that – details. Somehow or another, this change of morals was bound

to happen. The light touch of *nisi forte* . . . is rather reminiscent of Tacitus' 'hesitancy' in his dealings with *fatum*, some of which we have already discussed (above, 173). There, his priority was to retain responsibility as the central focus in explaining the past: *fatum*, however potent a force in actuality, was not a recommended concern. A similar pattern is discernible here: Tacitus' readers should not rest on their laurels in the face of difficulties, waiting complacently for the cycle to turn: it was their responsibility to inform and embody these turns of history. It may also be that invoking cycles of ages required some tasteful presentation: as broad deductions, they might well be a ponderous categorisation in the same league as *fatum*.

Secondly, in the opening to the *Histories*, Tacitus refers again to an extended 'cycle of ages' (*longam saeculorum seriem*):

Now too Italy was prostrated by disasters either entirely novel, or that recurred only after a long succession of ages; cities in Campania's richest plains were swallowed up and overwhelmed; Rome was wasted by conflagrations, its oldest temples consumed, and the Capitol itself fired by the hands of citizens.

iam uero Italia nouis cladibus uel post longam saeculorum seriem repetitis adflicta haustae aut obrutae urbes, fecundissima Campaniae ora; et urbs incendiis uastata, consumptis antiquissimis delubris, ipso Capitolio ciuium manibus incenso.
(1.2)

This comment is rarely taken to be part of a significant analysis but it is actually a trenchant contextualisation of recent and imminent events. We are apparently offered two alternatives here. Either Rome's decline was unprecedented (the novel invention of the imperial regime), or (*uel*) it was part of the cycle of ages (*series saeculorum*). The first stresses the novelty and horror of the period, while the latter detects a very broad pattern (which implies predictability). These options are, however not mutually exclusive, as *uel* implies. Rather both explanations have something to contribute to the formulation of an appropriate response to events. After all, there were indeed *nouae clades* in actuality: Roman history did not previously record this kind of internecine strife.

On the other hand, if Tacitus' understanding of the situation is that some kind of 'breakdown' was 'due' because of the circuit of ages, as this and other notices imply, that did not mean that it had to be so *utterly* catastrophic, so callous and cruel. To assign the breakdown simplistically and dogmatically to a cycle of ages is to 'explain' too much, to contextualise

these events within a structure of interpretation with too much closure – too much at least for an exemplary history. The ‘particular’ details can always vary when dealing with broad sweeps of fate: Tacitus’ insight combines with his sensitivity to the human situations that he goes on to document. No categorisation, however suitable as an explanation, could do justice to the horror. The reader will therefore consider both aspects as the narrative proceeds, and material is present that feeds into both (non-exclusive) perspectives.

Which events is Tacitus referring to? He might be referring only to those of AD 70. However, is the reader only to think of these particular months? Or, to put it in their terms, did the wrath of the gods descend suddenly, without prior warning? In fact, the string of plurals (*nouis cladibus... haustae aut obrutae urbes... incendiis*) have plausible immediate referents, but also invite the reader to refer both forwards and back in time. There was an earthquake at Pompeii (noted specifically to be in Campania) at A. 15.22 (63 AD) and of course the city was destroyed beyond the limits of the extant text; Tacitus presumably recorded the eruption of Vesuvius. Most of Rome burned down in 64 (A. 15.38), before the Capitoline temple was destroyed by fire (H. 3.72): this accounts nicely for the plural *incendiis* as well as including sites of the most ancient sanctity (*uetustissima religione*) to make up the plural *delubra*.²⁰⁸ We might also remember the comet at A. 14.22.1, the popular interpretation of which was that a *mutatio regis* was about to occur. Tacitus castigates those who proceeded to act as if Nero were *already* dethroned (*igitur quasi iam depulso Nerone*). With hindsight, of course, the comet was just an early warning and the next appearance at A. 15.47.1 presumably acted as a reminder. In religious terms, the *Annals* therefore functions as a prelude to, and basis of, the events of the *Histories*, and we are looking at a long perspective, as befits a *series saeculorum*.

But perhaps the term simply means something like ‘our period’, without particular definition: for instance, at H. 1.86 Tacitus informs us that *rudibus saeculis*, prodigies were better noted. There is no obvious reason from these references to think that a *saeculum* and an even greater context, a *series saeculorum*, are necessarily chronologically or interpretatively precise. However, not only would it be surprising for a *quindecimuir* to be immune to the religious significance of the word, but the cycle mentioned at A. 3.55, which lasted from Actium until the civil war of 68–9, was a period that lasted almost exactly 100 years, which, as we shall see, is said

²⁰⁸ Servius’ shrine to the moon, the altar at which Evander sacrificed to Hercules, the temple to Jupiter Stator vowed by Romulus, Numa’s palace and the temple of Vesta were all destroyed, along with the *penates populi Romani*.

elsewhere to be a Roman *saeculum*. Furthermore, in the *Agricola*, Tacitus twice spoke of the *beatissimum saeculum* under Nerva,²⁰⁹ while in the *Histories* (2.37), he pointedly refers to the *corruptissimum saeculum*, in which it was, despite some other accounts, rather unlikely that Paullinus, wise as he was, hoped for the choice of a new emperor by the senate and the armies. Unless Tacitus' use of terminology is uncharacteristically slack, we have clear evidence that at some point between the civil wars of 68 and the reign of Nerva, Rome had moved from one *saeculum* to another. There are other reasons beyond these coincidences to think that the term is used with some precision.

Precise long-term dating is clearly an issue in both narratives. The *Histories* opens with the note that it was now 820 years since Rome's foundation. In the *Annals*, the *ficus Ruminalis* is said to have sheltered Romulus and Remus 840 years before (13.58)²¹⁰ and the date of the phoenix's appearance at 6.28 explicitly caused some problems: it had not apparently waited long enough (less than half its generally accepted 500 years) and some (*non nulli*) therefore thought that it was a spurious sighting. It therefore seems a very deliberate act to displace it by two years in comparison with other authors.²¹¹ This very precise interest may have something to do with the Saecular Games and the process of the *saecula* and it also hints that the *quindecimviri* may have found some way to resolve the problems of the dating. Claudius earned ridicule in some quarters for staging these games on the 800th anniversary of Rome's foundation: at 11.11, rather than repeat himself (and unfortunately for us) Tacitus refers to his explanation of the dating issues of the Games of both Augustus and Claudius in the *Histories* (*rationes . . . satis narratas*), in connection with Domitian's games in 88, for which he was a member of the quindecimviral college. This account, of course, is now lost to us. What we do know for certain is that he did address the issue of dating and the length of *saecula* in a lost portion of his text.

We tend to think only of the numerical aspects of the dating when we consider the Saecular Games (and the apparent inconsistencies) but for Rome, the *saecula* were far more important indices of Rome's position in the cosmos. Thus 'messier' details like human experience and the overall shape of events would have been involved in the understanding of the cycles of ages. And our historian wrote his accounts *after* he and his colleagues

²⁰⁹ *Nunc demum redit animus; et quamquam primo statim beatissimi saeculi ortu Nerva Caesar res olim dissociabilis miscuerit*, Agr. 1.3 and *in hanc beatissimi saeculi lucem ac principem Traianum*, Agr. 44.

²¹⁰ There may be textual problems here: see Furneaux (1896) *ad loc.*

²¹¹ Dio A. 58.27.1 and Pliny *NH* 10.2.5 give 36 rather than Tacitus' 34 AD.

had addressed the issue of these cycles: it would be strange if some of his insights did not appear in his historical accounts.

Thus far the evidence leads to a deliberate and inductive placement of material related to fairly precise *saecula* in the historical record: unfortunately, there are other pieces of evidence that are not so straightforward. In the *Agricola*, Tacitus spoke of the *beginning* (*ortus* and *lux*) of a *beatissimum saeculum* under Nerva, which continued under Trajan – in other words, almost thirty years *later* than the burning of the Temple and the accession of Vespasian (above, 216). To understand what was at stake in diagnosing ‘saecular’ influences, we must therefore go outside Tacitus’ texts to get a sense of the kind of material he would have been working with.

The exact dating of *saecula* was problematic even in antiquity: Censorinus *On The Nativity* records some general information. There are natural and civic *saecula* (17.1). He lists various philosophic systems, which are more than sufficient to prove that measuring a *saeculum* was a highly contentious matter. Each city had decided on its own measurement. The precise length of a Roman *saeculum* is rather problematic: *On The Nativity* 17.9 corrects Livy (book 136) where he mentions the length of a *saeculum* as being 100 years (and this in connection with *Augustus*’ games). He does not however quote Tacitus. But he does record the figure of 110 as a decemviral one, though it is not clear if he is referring to their records, the pattern he deduces from the Games or, possibly, Tacitus. More pertinently, he also notes an association of the end of a *saeculum* with prodigies.²¹² Tacitus similarly seems to be deliberately linking prodigies with the *series saeculorum* in the opening to the *Histories*.

Dating difficulties are most obvious in examining the history of the Games: the Republican celebrations that seem to provide the ritual background to the Saecular Games occurred in 249 and 146: when the Augustan Games were celebrated in 17 BC, a ‘sequence of earlier games was “established” beginning in 456 BC’²¹³ and these were based on a cycle of 110 years. But this was not the end of the dating issues: even the revised dating should have given games in 16 rather than 17, and Domitian’s games occurred in 88 AD, 105 years later and 6 years in advance of the cycle of 110 years.

The discrepancy in dating is notorious but one conclusion that can be drawn is that *saecula* could either be construed as precise and exact, or that,

²¹² *sed ea quod ignorarent homines, portenta mitti diuinitus, quibus admonerentur unum quodque saeculum esse finitum.*

²¹³ Beard, North and Price (1998) 205. For a summary of the dating and the problems of the different traditions, see *On The Nativity* 17.3-5; outlined in Hall (1986) 2574–2575.

like the seasons mentioned at 3.55, they merged more gradually. Perhaps as long as the Games occurred in the 'changeover' period of a 'season', they could be considered to be valid. Furthermore, Rome's particular interest in the ages would inevitably manifest in their use for *interpretation* rather than an exercise in numbers. However the notion of the *saecula* arose, we can be sure that the Romans used them to explain the broad sweep of events in the human arena: in other words, they would relate to major political change rather than simple counting, as indeed the Republican games obviously did.²¹⁴

Taken from this perspective, we should think it unlikely that Tacitus the *quindecimuir* did *not* consider the cycles of ages in his explanation of the first century. But on the analogy of *fatum*, we would expect him to treat such a massive and far-reaching category with a great deal of respect, and to go to some lengths to avoid implying that such an interpretation negated in any way the need for an analysis of responsibility. It would not dominate the narrative which is properly (for history) grounded in the human experience. The *saecula* would therefore be gauged with a variety of measurements: chronology obviously featured but there would have been some attempt to map the process of the ages onto the broad trend of human activities, where a whole range of issues would need to be 'understood' with care: history is notoriously messier than numbers.

Tacitus' analogy of seasons may be more pertinent here than it first appeared: any change in human affairs might have occurred gradually and not corresponded exactly with a precise date, just as spring can be said to start at the vernal equinox, or when the daffodils emerge. If we assume that such leeway applied to an individual *saeculum*, then we might assume even greater overlaps with a *series saeculorum*. If the final age of this series ended a century after Actium, then that fits with the destruction of the Capitoline temple and the beginning of the revival. This age is then the one he dubs *corruptissimum* at *H.* 2.37 just before its close. This in turn corresponds with *A.* 3.55, where improvements in banqueting habits gradually followed the year of the four emperors, the lowest point in Roman history. And though the darkest moment, the 'winter solstice', appears with the burning of the Capitoline, the first promise of this 'spring' also appear

²¹⁴ Beard North and Price (1998) I 71–2 cite Varro for the link between the First Punic War in 249; the games in 146 (or 149) heralded major wars in Africa and Greece. Even the Etruscan *saecula* were reflected in political life: the ninth Etruscan *saeculum*, for instance, began in 44 BC, coinciding with the death of Caesar and the comet that followed: see Barton (1994) and Turcan (1976). I note, but carefully avoid, the kinds of series of 'metal-based' ages mentioned by Ovid *Metamorphoses et al.* We simply do not have enough material to make any useful comparisons, and, knowing Tacitus, the material would need some reworking to be of use in understanding the course of history and particular human behaviour.

in 70 with Vespasian's accession when conditions seem to have begun to improve, spurred on in part by an emperor who brought in an old-fashioned severity even before he changed for the better. The progress to a 'warmer climate' would be gradual: our 'daffodils' therefore only begin to appear in full bloom with the rise of Nerva. In Tacitus' terms, Nerva's age saw the dawn (*lux*) of the *beatissimum saeculum*.

This schema probably resides somewhere between 'speculative' and 'ingenious': its great merit is that it is *completely* consistent with Tacitus' own comments and the general deployment of religious themes within his historical works, not least a whole host of details whose presence has hitherto been met with bemusement or puzzlement. We have the advantage that the issues were definitely addressed by none other than our author and his colleagues. They *did* find some kind of resolution when they held games in 88: it is regrettable that we have lost Tacitus' detailed account of this. At this point he could have drawn together the different threads and linked the various signs that he had embedded without further comment as they occurred – thus reflecting the gradual unfolding of understanding them over time. Tacitus' redating of the phoenix, where he alludes to the *series saeculorum* by his phrasing *post longum saeculorum ambitum* (A. 6.28.1), does imply some reasoning process or at least a desire for effect that is not otherwise obviously explicable.

This line of reasoning can, of course, easily be dismissed as random pieces of information that 'happened' to find their way into Tacitus' account, but before dismissing the whole nexus of factors as insoluble, we should consider the 'everyday realities' of interpretation in this situation. The sighting of the phoenix, for instance, did not lead to any contemporary conclusion that several decades later Rome would dissolve into civil war. Rather, it would have 'lurked' in the general memory not yet properly understood, and probably largely forgotten, until a review of fate's signs prompted a connection. In addition, much of the lore was formulated when these regions were distinct entities; with their absorption into Roman *imperium*, it is entirely possible that their relevance would now pertain to Rome, just as the prediction that a ruler would rise from the East was appropriated by a local Roman general (i.e. Vespasian). If the phoenix, noted previously by Greeks and Egyptians and interpreted as relevant to their various dynasties and régimes, now related to Rome, as it seems to in Tacitus' account, that might have explained the interruption of its normal chronology as it remapped its appearance to a different chronological system. Domitian's games do, of course, approximate to the Augustan dating but the lack of precise correlation and the fact of Claudius' dating *must* have invited some review, even just to confirm Augustus' calculations, and that is before

they took into account the human arena as an indication of the long-term mood of the gods. If we add the various prodigies and the withering of the *ficus Ruminalis* under Nero to the equation, clearly the *quindecimviri* had their interpretative work cut out.

Somehow they made sense of these various signs scattered over a period of decades sufficiently to celebrate the Games. Tacitus deliberately brings to our attention his role in the Saecular Games: his scattered allusions to *saecula* in such a generally efficient text cannot but be an allusion to his expertise. His understanding of the cycle of ages as a *quindecimviri* would be *expressed* very differently from his understanding as a historian, but we would expect his priestly knowledge to permeate his historical account. His historical understanding would of course have been different from his understanding in 88 while the tyrant Domitian ruled Rome though it does not seem inconceivable that he and his colleagues hoped that the new *saeculum* would bring better times, in the form of a better emperor for an already improving senate.

While the apparently insoluble problems of the different dates prevent us from reaching any firm conclusions, the contextualisation of the first century of imperial rule, the age of decline, would surely demand some 'higher' explanation, especially from one so learned as our historian. Such immense chronic disasters would not have been explained purely in the human sphere. Thus, the *Histories* see the unfolding of a fate that has overseen the decline of Rome, and will seek also to orchestrate its regeneration.

This is the *fatum* of Rome, not of any individual emperor or dynasty – which makes sense of the way that different emperors are treated regarding *fatum*. The Flavians are 'chosen' as appropriate vehicles of the coming regeneration. Why should this be? The likely answer is that not only that they can provide a candidate *capable* of overseeing Rome's restoration, but also that the first successor, at least, was a worthy one. In many ways, Vespasian is the inverse of the first new emperor, Galba. He has no need to adopt, and neatly inverts the maxim that 'he had a great future as emperor behind him (*capax imperii nisi imperasset*, *H.* 1.49.4) since he was the first to change for the better (*H.* 1.50.4) and accelerated the end of luxury that began after Actium through his attitudes to dress and diet (*A.* 3.55.4). Even Domitian's murderous policies somehow brought forth a 'good' result (the abandoning of consumptive luxury) because of the irresistible trend towards 'rightness' that Rome now found itself in.

What of the 'new age' of Rome? The statement that Tacitus is writing in happier days appears in the *Agricola* (2–3) and is not the only evidence. In discussing historiography, Tacitus tells us that contemporary writing does not suffer the distorting effects of an emperor who could not resist the

temptation to interfere with literature, unlike that of the first century of the principate where *ueritas pluribus modis infracta*.²¹⁵ Political duress is often suspected in this, and this suspicion leads to interpretations that act as if it has been excised from the text. But, as we have seen, events make good Roman sense viewed from a perspective of decline and recovery. At least in textual terms, we should accept that Rome seems to have found its feet once again by the time Tacitus wrote.

Thus the events of this century become part of the larger fate of Rome. And that goes for all its denizens, even Vespasian. Without the cycle of ages, the narratives are the triumph of a Flavian *fatum*; but if the largest context is the 'life-cycle' of the city itself, then Vespasian, like the others, is put in his proper place as part of Rome's ongoing history, the product of a joint venture of men and greater powers. Thus the Tacitean perspective is longer than most. Dynasties, even political systems, will come; but they will also go, while Rome remains.

4.3 Conclusions

Despite his conservatism, and like his predecessor Livy, Tacitus has dynamically reformulated Roman religion to meet the needs of his day and with a very distinctive perspective: there is no nostalgia, just a representative range of *exempla* or wider lessons from the past. The picture of the religious processes in first-century Rome is highly sophisticated, something that has long been accepted for his political narrative. There is no difficulty now in accepting that his use of language is highly precise and his perspective wide yet possessed of apparently minute details as Woodman (amongst others) has repeatedly shown. There are no longer good reasons to consider the religious narrative with any less sympathy.

Tacitus' reputation for genius has not suffered: his mastery of the genre is complete. Though I have argued that *qua quindecimuir* he would have had a well-articulated perspective on the first century of imperial rule, the *Annals* and *Histories* are fully fledged historical accounts, in the Roman sense. The gods are ever-present but do not dominate the narrative. Their wrath, their exasperation, is never allowed to do more than intervene at a human level: it never becomes the focus of the narrative. We are dealing predominantly with a human world, and a long series of human tragedies, when we read Tacitus: his indication of the role of the gods does nothing to diminish the

²¹⁵ See also *H.* 1.1.1: *principatum diui Neruae et imperium Traiani, uberiorem securioremque materiam, senectuti seposui, rara temporum felicitate, ubi sentire quae uelis et quae sentias dicere licet* (*H.* 1.1.4).

horror story. The persistent erosion of proper conduct in Rome along with the blatant isolation of the institutions that had, for so long, kept Rome in harmony with her gods – all this must have been extremely powerful reading for the ancient reader. As the religious institutions lose their power to uphold Rome under the weight of political corruption, it is guaranteed that disasters will follow; clearly, the account would be *entertaining*, as befitted history. And political recovery, with Vespasian, is twinned with restoration of proper religious functioning, whatever we think happened under Domitian. At the same time, these events would not make proper sense without their contextualisation, firstly within the realm of the *pax* or *ira deum*, and then also as part of a much larger cycle of events. But we never lose sight of the participants, their decisions, their motives, their suffering.

Religion is central to Tacitus' explanations and characterisation of the century which he narrated, or so it seems from the sections of his texts that we have. Indeed, such are the scattered details that if we had a full text, it might be possible to write a more deliberate 'religious history'. But even that would artificially divorce the *cultus deorum* from its social and political context, an approach which, as he has so clearly demonstrated, would be dangerously misleading. A string of apparently unconnected religious events actually constitutes a careful argument rather than reluctant and irrelevant historical notices for the sake of completion. What emerges is distinctively modified, but far from unrecognisable, from the days of Livy – no mean feat given the pressures to 'adjust' the religious system to the new ideologies. In fact, Tacitus' religion is radically conservative. In the face of profound changes, he preserves the memory of former practices: the decline of prodigy reporting and prodigy interpretation is set carefully in contrast with the way that they *used* to function. Tacitus remembers, by allusion or by 'knowing' comments, the way that prodigies can support Rome in her quest for greatness: an antidote, then, to the various imperial delusions.

Our argument has, somewhat inevitably given the state of the texts, involved various degrees of speculation. I am all too aware of the distance we have travelled from previous discussions that were centred on our author's 'belief', 'scepticism' and 'fatalism' in offering a complex scheme encompassing the whole set of events within *fatum*. The essential building-blocks are, however, unmistakably secure, and anchored in the texts: Tacitus has no doubt that prodigies indicate the wrath of the gods, and that Rome suffered from that wrath increasingly during the first century, and he shows great skill in incorporating them into his narrative. Like his predecessor, he is more concerned with propriety in religion than debating or undermining the efficacy of the religious system. He works *within* the system, noting others' interpretative shortcomings and juxtaposing religious and 'human' material

to show their interdependency, highlighting incompetence, hypocrisy and ever-failing standards of conduct.

Yet the door was always open to the better: he does not allow prodigies to fade from the historical record, rather he embeds their proper use into his accounts by alluding to possible interpretations of the *ira deum*. He even accounts for the decline in their proper use – without crediting any excuses. He knows only too well how the system has been distorted, but that does not mean the distortion should not be resisted: the Jews explicitly found out to their cost what happens when prodigies are ignored and there is no reason why Rome's half-baked handling of adverse signs should be any more successful. The reader does not need it spelled out when the City misses the signs of the wrath of the gods. There can be no doubt that the noting of prodigies and their expiation is a viable system: more fool Rome if she declined to use it.

This is no piecemeal and incidental religious interpretation of occasional grudging notices of what could not be ignored in the historical record. Just as we found with Livy, it has different textures and overlapping levels. We deal with angry gods, prodigies and related setbacks, but we can also detect a much broader sweep of events set within orthodox religious categories: fate, and the cycle of ages, which Tacitus, as a *quindecimvir*, was better equipped than any other extant ancient author to comment on. Where he alludes to these, either by analogies or by his deployment of relevant material, his apparently incidental remarks fit very closely with what we might expect from a man of his experience and learning. If the argument about *saecula*, in particular, has something of a 'house of cards' about it, it is built with Tacitus' cards in the kind of form that we would have expected. Moreover it reinstates and gives clearer meaning to his comments that Rome's fortunes had improved and places his occasional discussion of decline or recovery in a coherent pattern.

In Tacitus' combined histories, we may well have the most sophisticated and ambitious extant formulation of Roman religion. The reader is steered away from interpretation that will render no practical favours to themselves or the *res publica*, and the state remains the religious focus. Tacitus' persistent interest in the dynamics of power formulates a perspective from which the senate is a crucial player in the maintenance of order on all levels: if they fail, Rome suffers all the more. This is not a simple indictment of the various textual agents: Tacitus is interested in the way that dynamics and relationships affect conduct, and the way that institutions suffer when their integrity is not upheld.

Some of the foregoing argument would no doubt be validated, modified or abolished if the full text of the *Historiae* in particular should miraculously

appear: the loss of Domitian's reign is not a trivial one. Such is the *fatum* of the ancient historian. In the meantime, we can speak of an account that bears a distinctive and coherent religious structure. The 'pessimism' so notoriously attached to Tacitus may well be misplaced. We have tended to focus on the decline, but not the escape from peril, the criticism rather than the affirmations. As with Livy, the historian's focus is primarily on contextualising events in religious terms and examining the relationship of Rome with her gods through cult – in other words, making sense of the past. If the refounding of the Capitoline is anything to go on, rite remains the principal means of communication from men to gods but Tacitus' politicisation of religion is more insightful than any existing modern account. His ability to contextualise religious actions and weigh up their consequences is remarkable. Not only does he illustrate that the senate required authority to practice religion, he is also skilful in his creation of a working religion for the *res publica*. The *cultus deorum* is reclaimed from both the popular (undiscriminating and pessimistic) and the imperial (personalised and overly optimistic) interpretations. Religious events, including those generated by the new fatalistic systems centred on the person of the *princeps*, are firmly re-appropriated within a system that puts the city of Rome at its centre.

But religion was not just about the fabric of events: it is not simply a question of finding the right category and embedding each event there. Interpretation and identity remain at the heart of religious discourse. The *Histories* and the *Annals* look to a very different time, but they are sensitive to the potential future deployment of the various categories that inform religious interpretation. The practice of interpretation required not just skill, but discipline: one had to know where to draw the line. Where better to learn this, and much more about religion, than from history, the previous enactment of the art and the documentation of its results?

Tacitus' accounts primarily display *behaviour* and exhibit the best and worst of his predecessors' actions. One of his greatest insights was into the way that religious institutions and methods suffered, not through inadequate rite (which we normally assume is their chief interest), but because of the context in which the personnel were operating. Rite, which is *never* undermined directly, became increasingly isolated as the emperor and senate moved further and further away from the stability that they could have had, if only they had understood the broader picture. Tacitus' combined accounts are therefore reminiscent of Livy's story of Cannae: Rome forgot herself but rallied, put things right with her gods, and became the 'real' Rome once again.

The conservative reader will be suffering by now. Livy, whom we tend to see as triumphing Roman success, displays a far more pessimistic struc-

ture than Tacitus: due in part to the accidents of survival, his Rome appears to function well in relation to her gods. Yet he opens with the declaration that his evocation of an exemplary Rome is intended as a remedy for a city that is actually beyond redemption. He represents what might be possible, if the effort is made, though he (textually) offers no hope that the lesson will be heeded. Tacitus, on the other hand, every classicist's favourite pessimist, purports to write of past horrors to an audience who will have to look to their memories to find suffering; it was certainly not to be found in his contemporary Rome. While the *AVC* laid proper conduct before the otherwise forgetful reader, the *Annals* and the *Histories*, then, claim to serve as warnings 'lest we forget'. As he presents it, a future senate under a different emperor might well need his insights and his encouragement to preserve proper *Romanitas*. Even if we accept his claims, one suspects that he saw no room for complacency: relations between senate and emperor were always in a state of constant renegotiation and religious practices could easily be modified when placed in a different political context. Its role was still being passionately negotiated three centuries later.