

ARCANUS IN TACITUS

The style of Tacitus and its development have for long been subjected to detailed scrutiny¹). Study of word order and the choice of words has given rise to many interesting and illuminating observations. Which words Tacitus favored, which he rejected, which he used in his early works only to ignore in his more mature ones and vice versa, all these studies have contributed to our understanding of Tacitus the historian and Tacitus the literary artist, if indeed we can really understand him.

In an author who breathes forth an atmosphere of gloom and secrecy and chicanery and pessimism²), words which have these precise meanings or convey these senses have an important role³). One such is *arcanus* in its varied meanings, a word which, in Tacitean context, attracts attention as a flower does bees, but which seems not to have previously been subjected to examination.

Arcanus is related to *arca*, which is basically a place for safekeeping, and *arceo*, which means "to keep away" or "to enclose"⁴). Present in both *arca* and *arceo* is the sense of

1) By, e.g., A. Draeger, *Über Syntax und Stil des Tacitus* (Leipzig, 1882³); E. Löfstedt, *Syntactica*, II (Lund, 1956²) chap. xi; and R. Syme, *Tacitus* (Oxford, 1958), 711—45.

2) B. Walker, *The Annals of Tacitus: A Study in the Writing of History* (Manchester, 1952), 20: "... always there is some secret manoeuvre afoot, so that the most ordinary actions take on a furtive, sordid significance." This does not refer to Tacitus, but, *mutatis mutandis*, is not inappropriate. Löfstedt, "On the style of Tacitus", *JRS*, XXXVIII (1948) 4, is more specific: "Tacitus is indeed a really great psychologist. But in one important respect his psychological vision is one-sided, even falsely directed: in great as in little things it is stamped with an out-and-out pessimism. He has an almost uncanny reluctance to see any good motive in those in power."

3) Syme, *op. cit.*, 712: "Tacitus exhibits a marked distaste for words of a kindly, optimistic, or improving nature."

4) Cf. A. Ernout-A. Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine* (Paris, 1959⁴), A. Walde, *Lateinisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg, 1938³), and *TLL*, s. v.

the unknown and that which should remain unknown; the former state, of being unknown, may be accidental and dependent upon particular circumstances, whereas the latter implies that the object must be kept from general knowledge, in other words, it must be kept truly secret.

Both these aspects are included in the word *arcanus*; at first glance, it may be difficult to determine which of them is meant, but the distinction is essential for clear understanding of the text. *Arcanus* is, on the one hand, the equivalent of *ignotus* or *ignarus*; the sense of the first is primarily passive, that of the second active, but this distinction is commonly blurred⁵). We may bracket them together in the category of the "unknown", embracing things which are *tacita* or *celata*. In its other sense, *arcanus* indicates that which, regardless of chance, *must* be kept from knowledge, things *tacenda* or *celanda*. Whatever the reason, promulgation of these secrets would be disastrous, whether the important area be political or religious.

Tacitus uses *arcanus*, most frequently in the neuter plural nominative or accusative, a total of eleven times; these instances are scattered through all his works save *Agricola*. An opportunity seems to be offered to investigate whether Tacitus meant different things with the same word at different times, and I suggest that the conclusion will have to be reached that he did.

In spite of Sir Ronald Syme's spirited argument that the *Dialogus de oratoribus* is to be dated between the years A. D. 102 and 107 (in other words, the third of Tacitus' works)⁶), a final judgment does not seem possible. Nor is an absolute date of prime importance in the present context, for stylistic differences are surely dependent on the particular subject matter⁷). *Arcanus* appears once in this work (2,1): "venerunt ad eum (sc. Curiatius Maternus) M. Aper et Iulius Secundus, celebrissima tum ingenia fori nostri, quos ego utrosque non modo in iudiciis studiosae audiebam, sed domi quoque et in publico assectabar mira studiorum cupiditate et quodam ardore iuvenili,

5) For instances, see Lewis and Short, *A New Latin Dictionary*, s. vv., and cf. the remarks of W. W. How, *Cicero: Select Letters*, II (Oxford, 1947) 209.

6) *op. cit.*, 112—3, 670—3. In any case, the *Dialogus* will antedate the larger historical works.

7) See M. Schanz-C. Hosius, *Geschichte der Römischen Literatur*, II (Munich, 1935⁴) 608 ff.

ut fabulas quoque eorum et disputationes et arcana semotae dictionis penitus exciperem, . . .” Here there is no hidden sense; *arcana* refers to the intimacies of private conversation, on which Tacitus could eavesdrop without compunction or danger. Until he does so, however, this conversation remains unknown, and hence this passage falls into our first category.

The *Germania* offers two instances of the use of *arcanus*. In the first (18,2), the discussion is about marriage customs among the Germans: “in haec munera uxor accipitur, atque in vicem ipsa armorum aliquid viro affert: hoc maximum vinculum, haec arcana sacra, hos coniugales deos arbitrantur.” The sense of the word here is mystical and religious; Anderson translates *arcana sacra* as “their mystic rites”⁸), and states that there is an allusion to *confarreatio*. The rites of *confarreatio* were known to those who participated in the ceremony, and, indeed, others; so in this instance *arcana* refers to what is sacred (*sacra* is the crucial word) rather than to what is secret. Combined, they evoke a feeling of awe.

Chapter 40 speaks of the worship of the goddess Nerthus. The ablution of the divinity herself, her chariot and garb by slaves who are then put to death in the same lake is described: “*arcanus hinc terror sanctaque ignorantia quid sit illud, quod tantum perituri vident.*” The two pairs of noun and adjective are set in a chiasmic order of sense; *arcanus* is the equivalent of *ignotus* and balances *ignorantia*, while *terror* and *sancta* together furnish the religious dread required by the passage. Nor is this all; the two adjectives recall the earlier passage, *arcanus* plus *sancta* and *arcana sancta*. The religious element is not totally lacking. There has been a blending of the three senses, holy and *celatum* and *celandum*.

The first appearance of *arcanus* in the *Historiae* occurs in a famous passage (I 4,2): “*finis Neronis ut laetus primo gaudentium impetu fuerat, ita varios motus animorum non modo in urbe apud patres aut populum aut urbanum militem, sed omnes legiones ducesque conciverat, evolgato imperii arcano, posse principem alibi quam Romae fieri.*” The expression *arcanum imperii* must have political meaning and no other; Tacitus evidently liked this combination of words, for he used it again. For the first time in his works, the reader

8) J. G. C. Anderson, *Corneli Taciti de origine et situ Germanorum* (Oxford, 1938) 111.

sees perhaps his preferred meaning of *arcanus*, something whose power depends upon being limited in scope — the more widely known, the less effective in result. It was at last known that the government of Rome did not depend on the senate at all. We are now reading a work of political history, and the history of the principate, to Tacitus' mind, is to a degree dependent upon secrets and the unknown. We shall find that this value of *arcanus* becomes the prevalent one, although referring to the emperor rather than to the senate.

In Book V, 9—10, Tacitus briefly traces the history of Judaea until the time of Vespasian; Pompey was the first Roman to conquer the Jews and to enter the temple. "Romanorum primus Cn. Pompeius Iudaeos domuit templumque iure victoriae ingressus est: inde volgatum nulla intus deum effigie vacuum sedem et inania arcana." This passage has affinity with others that have already been examined; the use of the verb *volgatum*, recalling the other passage in the *Historiae*, implies that something has been "let out of the bag", some secret, here, however, not political but mystic, as in the passages in the *Germania*. *Arcana* stands for *arcana sacra*, and the crucial sense is in the second of these two words.

The *Annales* offer six examples of the use of *arcanus*, all but one in the first six books, where such a word is particularly well suited to the general atmosphere of the reign of Tiberius⁹). Three of these appear within twenty-four chapters of Book II, which might be termed the "Germanicus epic", wherein suspicion, enmities, and lack of understanding are continually present.

The first five chapters of the first book are preliminary to the point of chronology which Tacitus chose as the beginning of his theme, *ab excessu divi Augusti*. Chapter six begins with those portentous words which are so instrumental in setting the mood for all of Tiberius' principate, *primum facinus novi principatus fuit Postumi Agrippae caedes*, and concludes with Sallustius Crispus'¹⁰) advice to Livia: "monuit Liviam, ne arcana domus, ne consilia amicorum, ministeria militum vulgarentur, neve Tiberius vim principatus resolveret cuncta ad senatum vocando: eam condicionem esse imperandi, ut non

9) Walker, *op. cit.*, 64: "Another recurrent idea of tyranny is as a secret jealously guarded in the hands of the few; . . ."

10) On Sallustius Crispus, see my note, *CJ*, LVII (1962) 321.

aliter ratio constet quam si uni reddatur." Here we have one of the keys to power, the ability — and the need — to conceal what is necessary from the general eye. And the verb *vulgarentur* is instructive; we have met it twice before. The value of *arcana* is exclusively political here; what is referred to must be *tacenda*.

Parallel to this meaning is that of two of the three passages in the second book. In chapter 36, Asinius Gallus aggravates Tiberius by proposing that he destinate candidates five years in advance: "Et certamen Gallo adversus Caesarem exortum est. nam censuit in quinquennium magistratum comitia habenda, utque legionum legati, qui ante praeturam ea militia fungebantur, iam tum praetores destinarentur, princeps duodecim candidatos in annos singulos nominaret. haud dubium erat eam sententiam altius penetrare et arcana imperii temptari." Furneaux remarks (*ad loc.*)¹¹ "not, as in H. I. 4,2, 'secrets relating to the constitution,' but 'secret principles of autocracy.'" Both meanings are political, but the *Annales* emphasize tyranny rather than an abstraction, and *arcanus* serves to that end. Another instance is chapter 59, where Augustus' policy regarding Egypt is discussed, after Germanicus had visited it without permission: "nam Augustus inter alia dominationis arcana, vetitis nisi permissu ingredi senatoribus aut equitibus Romanis inlustribus, seposuit Aegyptum, ne fame urgeret Italiam, quisquis eam provinciam claustraque terrae ac maris quamvis levi praesidio adversum ingentes exercitus insedisset." *Arcana domus, arcana imperii, arcana dominationis* all mean the same thing basically: the secret powers and knowledge upon which autocracy rests. The genitives make the imperial meaning quite clear, and *arcana* furnishes the element of the unknown.

The third instance is in chapter 54, which is part of Germanicus' grand tour of the east. After visiting Troy, he went to Colophon, "ut Clarii Apollinis oraculo uteretur. non femina illic, ut apud Delphos, sed certis e familiis et ferme Mileto accitus sacerdos numerum modo consultantium et nomina audit; tum in specum degressus, hausta fontis arcani aqua, ignarus plerumque litterarum et carminum edit responsa versibus compositis super rebus, quas quis mente concepit. et ferebatur Germanico per ambages, ut mos oraculis, maturum exitum cecinisse." *Arcanus* is a choice word; it is the equivalent of *igno-*

11) H. Furneaux, *The Annals of Tacitus* (Oxford, 1896*).

tus, and is balanced immediately by *ignarus*. The effect of the prophecy of Germanicus' death, stemming from religious *afflatus* and the unknown, plays an important part in the story of the step-son of Tiberius¹²).

A similar relationship of words to create a mood, in circumstances not too diverse, is found in VI 21, 1¹³) where it is described how Tiberius tested the abilities of astrologers. "Quotiens super tali negotio consultaret, edita domus parte ac liberti unius conscientia utebatur. is litterarum ignarus, corpore valido, per avia ac derupta (nam saxis domus imminet) praeibat eum, cuius artem experiri Tiberius statuisset, et regredientem, si vanitatis aut fraudum suspicio exisserat, in subiectum mare praecipitabat, ne index arcani existeret." The atmosphere of secrecy, mystical — if not religious — rather than political, is underscored by *litterarum ignarus* (the use of this phrase in the previous passage will be recalled) and *avia ac derupta* as well as *index arcani*. What goes on here is not something *ignotum*, but something *celandum* and *tacendum*. Hence the one servant, physically powerful but not very intelligent.

The last six books of the *Annales* offer only one example of the use of *arcanus*. Nor is this surprising, since the mood of the Tiberius books and that of those dealing with Claudius and Nero are so very different. Tacitus is more outspoken in the latter, less is left to the imagination. In XII, 47, 2, the feigned treaty between Radamistus and Mithridates is to be solemnized by blood: "mos est regibus, quotiens in societatem coeant, implicare dextras pollicesque inter se vincire nodoque praestringere; mox, ubi sanguis in artus se extremos suffuderit, levi ictu cruorem eliciunt atque invicem lambunt. id foedus arcanum habetur quasi mutuo cruore sacratum." *Arcanum* so used summons us back to the primitive world of the *Germania*; the meaning is that of the unknown and hence mystical and sacred. The sophistication of a political sense has no place in this connection.

12) See the pertinent remarks of W. Allen, Jr., and others, "Epic and Etiquette in Tacitus' *Annals*", *Studies in Philology*, LVIII (1961) 561, with n. 13.

13) Walker *op. cit.*, 41 f.: "Deliberate isolation and a gloomy, baffling reserve have from the first been signal qualities in Tiberius' character; throughout this Book (6) they are stressed more persistently than ever. (This is one obvious reason for the inclusion of §§ 21—22 where Tiberius' connection with Thrasyllus deepens the atmosphere of mystery and abnormality about him.)"

What conclusions will this examination of Tacitus' use of *arcanus* permit us to draw? Firstly, though he uses the word consistently, if sparingly, he by no means always uses it in the same, or even in a parallel, sense. Secondly, the extended, political meaning is limited to his later, political works, and is particularly favored in that part of the *Annales* where innuendo and overtones have their greatest play and are most effective. From a word with meanings non-committal and certainly not pejorative, *arcanus* becomes part of the political vocabulary which convicts of autocracy and tyranny.

Such connotation for the word *arcanus* is not found in the works of Tacitus' stylistic predecessor, Sallust, nor in those of his chief contemporaries, Suetonius and Pliny. Indeed, Sallust, at least on the evidence of the extant works, did not use the word at all. Why he eschewed it one can only guess, for his political treatises surely offered some opportunity. Suetonius uses *arcanus* only once; that instance is in the life of Tiberius, where the emperor's lusts in the solitude of Capri are itemized (XLIII, 1): "Secessu vero Caprensi etiam sellaria excogitavit, sedem arcanarum libidinum, . . ." There is no subtlety here; the word is the equivalent of *ignotus*. Suetonius is much more interested in the personal than the political. Nor is this disregard on his part for a word of some significance in Tacitus an isolated instance; the same occurs in regard to the word *ferocia*, which Tacitus uses in several senses of political import and which Suetonius ignores totally¹⁴).

Pliny, in all the instances of his use of *arcanus* listed in the *Thesaurus*, intends it to have its prime meaning of something *ignotus*. There is no reading between the lines, nothing significant politically. Pliny's style, simpler, less subtle, less suggestive, less memorable than Tacitus', plainly states what it wishes to be understood; there is little or no play with psychology. In this field Tacitus is an unrivalled master, with arcane thoughts becoming suggestive by usage and repetition.

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14) H. W. Traub, "Tacitus' Use of *Ferocia*", *TAPA*, LXXXIV (1953) 250, and particularly 258, n. 29: "It is also significant that in the extant works of Suetonius we do not find the words *ferocia* and *ferociter*. *Ferox* is used but twice, . . ."