Verknüpfungen mit einzelnen Elementen der historischen Überlieferung gekennzeichnet ist; die 'ideologische' Bedeutung, die daraus hervorgeht, bestätigt ebenfalls die besondere Entwicklung der künstlerischen Technik des Autors: Auch den Verweisen auf eine mittlerweile weit zurückliegende Vergangenheit mangelt es nicht an einer allgemeineren Gültigkeit.

Mailand

Fabrizio Brena

TWO OMENS IN TACITUS' HISTORIES
(2, 50, 2 AND 1, 62, 2–3)

Though often overshadowed by the Annals, Tacitus' Histories – as Ronald Martin has justly observed – "contains some of the most brilliant descriptive writing of any age or language"1). As I hope to show in this brief note on two omens recorded apropos of the struggle between Otho and Vitellius, it can also be made to reveal the literary artistry with which the historian (when possible) chose, elaborated, and positioned specific episodes within the work.

I. The Obscure Bird (2, 50, 2)

To the end of his necrology on Otho Tacitus attaches a report about an unusual bird seen at Regium Lepidum during the emperor's last hours: ut conquirere fabulosa et fictis oblectare legendum animos procul gravitate coepti operis crediderim, ita volgatis traditisque demere fidem non ausim. die, quo Bedriaci certabatur, avem invisitata specie apud Regium Lepidum celebri luco consedisse incolae memorant, nec deinde coetu hominum aut circumvolitantium alitum territam pulsantem, donec Otho se ipse inter-


21 Rhein. Mus. f. Philol. 136/3-4
ficeret; tum ablatam ex oculis: et tempora reputantibus initium
finemque miraculi cum Othonis exitu competisse.

The oddity of this notice seems seldom to have been re-
marked\(^2\). The report conforms, to be sure, to Tacitus’ practice of
detailing a prodigy primarily for its impact on its human audience.
Just as the miraculous cures effected in Alexandria and Basilides’
apparition are tied specifically to Vespasian’s state of mind (Hist.
4, 81, 3 and 82, 2), so here the bird is significant to those tempora
reputantibus. Again, Tacitus’ attention would probably have been
caught in any case by the tale of a bird with an invisitata species,
since the same motif shows up also in his account of the Phoenix’
reappearance in Egypt (Ann. 6, 28, 4). Thirdly, Dio too reported
the incident, though whether this constitutes independent attesta-
tion is another matter\(^3\).

However, not even Xiphilinus’ mangling of Dio’s narrative
can obscure the fact that he reported the incident before the battle
at Bedriacum and seemingly spread the bird’s appearance over
several days: Ψαοὶ πρὸ τῆς μάχης ἄλλα τε φανῆναι σημεῖα καὶ τινὰ
ὄρνιν ἑξαιτῶν ὁποῖον οὐπάλλωτε ἔωρᾶσεν, ἐπὶ πολλὰς ἡμέρας ὑφ-
θῆναι. Though this encourages the suspicion that Tacitus himself
moved the episode from a point set by his source before the battle
to the place it now occupies in his text, we cannot very well appeal
to the difficulty several editors have felt about the historian’s

\(^2\) The report has not been much discussed since the turn of the century,
when it formed part of the argument raging over Tacitus’ sources. Since Pliny,
NH 10, 135 reports that venerunt in Italiam Bedriacensibus bellis civilibus trans Padum
et novae aves – ita enim adhuc vocantur – turdorum specie, paulum infra columbas
magnitude, sapore gratae, it was argued on the one side that the variation in the
two accounts “proved” that Tacitus’ source was not Pliny’s a fine Aufidii Bassi
(D. Detlefsen, Philologus 34, 1876, 40 ff.), on the other side that there was no
necessary connexion between Pliny’s historical account and the anecdotes in his
Naturalis Historia (P. Fabia, Les sources de Tacite, Paris 1893, 205 ff.). More recent-
ly, R. T. Scott, Religion and Philosophy in the Histories of Tacitus, Rome 1968,
89 ff., has commented extensively on the passage, but without seeing its problems.
Taking Tacitus’ remarks at face value, he judges “artistically possible” the sugges-
tion of R. Reitzenstein, Tacitus und sein Werk, Neue Wege zur Antike 4, 1926, 18,
that the unknown bird is meant to remind us of the eagle released during the
cremation of an emperor to be deified. But even though Tacitus obviously believed
that nothing in Otho’s life became him like the leaving it, the necrology still ends
on a negative note: tantundem apud posteros meruit bonae famae quantum mala e
(Hist. 2, 50, 1). We cannot plausibly assume that Tacitus thought Otho deserved
apotheosis at whatever remove.

\(^3\) Dio 63, 10, 3. Where Tacitus and Dio agree, it seems always to have been
held, they are following a common source, whoever that may have been: see, e.g.,
Two Omens in Tacitus’ Histories

balancing the *initium finemque miraculi* with nothing more than the *exitus* of Otho, and their consequent readiness to entertain Meiser’s suggestion that the Latin be expanded to read *cum (initio pugnae et) Othonis exitu*⁴). As Valmaggi rightly observed, *exitus* can denote Otho’s departure from this mortal stage, an idea embracing both the battle and the suicide⁵).

We can get further with the psychology of the story. There was obviously a point in telling such tales, if the audience affected by the portent was itself important. Thus the decrepitude of the *ficus Ruminalis*, adjudged a prodigy by the people of Rome (Ann. 13, 58), merited mention no less than the miraculous cures or Basilides’ apparition for their impact on Vespasian. But wherein are we to descry the importance of the opinions of the undistinguished inhabitants (*incolae*) of an undistinguished town like Regium Lepidum, twenty-four miles south of Brixellum? Even if the story were true, a consideration to which Tacitus gave weight in his account of the miraculous cures (Hist. 4, 81, 3), and even if it spread subsequently throughout Italy (*volgatis traditisque*), the psychological impact at the time was limited to the *incolae* and any stray passers-by. The portent, as Tacitus goes on to make clear, had no effect on people in Rome, who took the news of Otho’s death with indifference (Hist. 2, 55, 1), and in no way curtailed the loyalty of Otho’s followers, as emerges almost immediately with the Vitellians’ execution of *centuriones promptissimi Othonianorum* (Hist. 2, 60, 1).

As if this were not enough, Tacitus’ narrative also seems calculated to give the impression that he did not think the story true. For not only is there his introductory sentence, reinforced by the reference to the *gravitas coepti operis* and the otherwise unattested conjunction of *conquirere fabulosa*⁶); there is in addition his employment of *oratio obliqua* throughout, as if to distance himself from the material. Which raises the question why he bothered to tell the tale at all. It may be going too far to suggest that, whether

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⁶) See especially Heubner 201 f. To this it may be added that *invisitatus* occurs here only in Tacitus: A. Gerber and A. Greef, Lexicon Taciteum, Leipzig 1903, 684 a.
the story was true or not and whether it became widespread or not, Tacitus could simply have omitted it, as did Plutarch\(^7\), and have expanded Otho’s necrology instead. But he could certainly have selected a different omen from the many which Xiphilinus tells us were available, for example, the clash of the three eagles – representing Otho, Vitellius and Vespasian – with which Suetonius garnished his life of the Flavian\(^8\). Instead, we are given this particular story and, it seems, expressions mixing dubiety and pomposity. Clearly there is more to this episode than meets the eye, but nor can we hope to discover Tacitus’ intent until we bring it into association with the omen which, as he tells us, opened the Vitellians’ campaign against Otho.

**II. Tacitus, Vergil and Ennius (1, 62, 2–3)**

The connexion between the omen we have been discussing and the prodigy which attended Fabius Valens’ march south from Germany has been noticed occasionally, but little has been made of it\(^9\). Having dispatched Galba, Piso and Vinius in the first half of Histories 1, Tacitus spends some ten chapters on the origins of Vitellius’ uprising, ending with a description of the plan of campaign in which Valens and A. Caecina will lead two columns into Italy. Contrasting Vitellius’ sloth and gluttony with the keenness and energy of his troops, he continues: *instruxi intentique signum profectionis exposcunt. nomen Germanici Vitellio statim additum: Caesarem se appellari etiam victor prohibuit. laetum augurium Fabio Valenti exercituque, quem in bellum agebat, ipso profec­tionis die aquila leni meatu prout agmen incederet, velut dux viae praevolavit, longumque per spatium is gaudentium militum clamor, ea quies interritae alitis fuit, ut haud dubium magnae et prosperae rei omen acciperetur.*

Let us note first how much more Tacitus has made of the incident than does Suetonius (Vit. 9): *praemisso agmine laetum evenit augurium, siquidem a parte dextra repente aquila advolavit lustratisque signis ingressos viam sensim antecessit. As is his cus-

\(^7\) The omen clearly failed to meet Plutarch’s criteria, on which see the careful discussion by F. E. Brenk, S.J., In mist apparelled. Religious Themes in Plutarch’s Moralia and Lives, Leiden 1977, 184–213.

\(^8\) Suetonius, Vesp. 5, 7; for similar omens see Valerius Maximus 1, 4, 7; Plutarch, Brut. 48, 2.

\(^9\) See, e.g., Scott (note 2) 90 n. 91.
tom, the biographer provides a wealth of circumstantial, but also
distracting detail, reporting how the eagle suddenly (repente)
flew up, did so on the right (a parte dextra), and circled the
standards (lustratisque signis). All this Tacitus pares away, to
concentrate on the psychological aspect: the bird guides the
army and the omen consists in the combination of the troops'
joyful shouts and the imperturbable calm of the bird. Again,
the passage is highly elaborated stylistically and syntactically.
Whatever is to be made of the alliteration in velut dux viae
praevolavit, there can be no doubt that laetum augurium is
thrown into high relief by being set in apposition to the rest of
the sentence. Nor is it an otiose detail that the augury’s recipi­
ents are Fabius Valens and the army quem in bellum agebat.
This is a civil war, and in civil war only a savage irony will al­
low a sophisticated writer like Tacitus to talk of a laetum au­
gurium.

Nonetheless, the most telling detail—it seems to me—is the
historian’s using the phrase instructi intentique signum profectionis
exposcunt. For instructi intentique the commentators refer gener­
ally to Sallust and Livy, to Caesar for signum exposcere. But as
Godley noted many years ago, the closest parallel for the expres­
sion as a whole is the half-line (itself embedded in a passage not­
able for its metrical effects) which Vergil used of the start of the
boat-race in Aeneid 5: intenti exspectant signum. That passage
Vergil owed in good measure to Homer, but he seems clearly to
have had in mind also Ennius’ description of the founding of
Rome, and the comparison he made between the eagerness with
which people waited to see whether Romulus or Remus would
receive the deciding augury that marked him out as the city’s

10) For Suetonius’ use of detail see R. C. Lounsbury, The Arts of Suetonius,
New York and Bern 1987, 63 ff., especially 71 ff.

11) See H. Heubner, P. Cornelius Tacitus, Die Historien, I, Heidelberg
1963, 132.

12) The alliteration is remarked by Wolff (note 4) 138 and Goelzer (note 5)
124. Too much may have been made of this device in the past, but nor should it be
minimized to the extent advocated by F. R. D. Goodyear, The Annals of Tacitus, I,
Cambridge 1972, 336 ff. For the syntax see Heubner, loc. cit. (note 11).

13) Heubner, loc. cit.

14) Sallust, BJ 53, 5; Livy 1, 15, 2 and 6, 29, 1; Caesar, BG 7, 19, 4 and BC 3,
90, 3; cf. W. Heraeus, Taciti Historiarum Libri, I, Leipzig 1929, 92; Goelzer (note
5) 123; Heubner, loc. cit.

15) Vergil, Aen. 5, 137 (for the metrical effects see the edition by R. D. Wil­
liams, Oxford 1960, 73 f.); A. D. Godley, The Histories of Tacitus, Books I and II,
London 1887, 173.
founder, and the excitement of the spectators waiting for the signal
to start a chariot race\(^{16}\):

curantes magna cum cura tum cupientes
regni dant operam simul auspicio augurioque (…)
certabant urbem Romam Remorane vocarent.
omnibus cura viris eter eset induperator:
expectant, veluti consul quom mittere signum
volt, omnes avidi spectant ad carceris oras
quam mox emittat pictos e faucibus currus:
sic expectabat populus atque eter timebat
rebus utri magni victoria sit data regni.

The sign on this occasion, as is well known, was vouchsafed
to Romulus, Remus was killed when he made fun of the walls of
his brother’s new city, and the upshot was a curse of fratricide
which drove the Romans more than once into civil war, a point
Vergil combined with the charioteering imagery when he exploited
this same passage in the \textit{Georgics}\(^{17}\).

The very idea that Tacitus is echoing Ennius, directly or indi-
rectly, will seem ridiculous to those who think the historian’s view
mirrored in the comment made by Aper in the \textit{Dialogus} (20, 5):
exigitur enim iam ab oratore etiam poeticius decor, non Accii aut
Pacuvii vetero inquinatus, sed ex Horatii et Vergilii et Lucani
sarcario prolatus. Even if we disregard the facts, firstly, that Aper is
talking of oratory and not historiography and, secondly, that
Tacitus expressly dissociates himself from the views put forward in
the \textit{Dialogus} (1, 4–5), the folly of taking remarks by one of the
historian’s characters as an index to his own opinions or practices
is pointed up, in this particular instance, by the difficulty of find-

\(^{16}\) Ennius, Ann. 77–78 and 83–90 V\(^{2}\) = 72–73 and 77–83 Skutsch (whose
text I follow). For Vergil’s debt to Homer, Il. 23, 287 ff., see, e. g., B. Otis, \textit{Vergil: A
Study} in \textit{Civilized Poetry}, Oxford 1964, 51 ff. and literature there cited. The best
discussion of Vergil’s debt to Ennius is M. Wigodsky, \textit{Vergil and Early Latin
Poetry}, Hermes Einzelschr. 24, Wiesbaden 1972, 60; as he shows, the situation is
complex, but there are definitely grounds for holding that Vergil took some of his
material from this Ennian passage (cf. also J.-P. Chausserie-Lapréé, \textit{Mélanges de
littérature et d’épigraphie latines, d’histoire ancienne et d’archéologie. Hommages à
la memoire de P. Wuelleuminer,} Paris 1980, 79–80). For my purposes, in fact, it does
not matter whether Vergil was echoing this particular passage, only whether
Tacitus thought he was so doing, and that seems a reasonable assumption, given
that Tacitus surely knew his Ennius better than his Homer, and was familiar at least
with the most famous lines in \textit{the Annales}.

\(^{17}\) Vergil, \textit{Georg.} I, 491 ff., especially 512–514, on which also see Wigodsky, loc. cit.
ing convincing echoes of Horace in any of Tacitus' works\textsuperscript{18}). Which is not to say that Tacitus used Ennius on the grand scale which Skard once credited to Sallust, until the consternation of his reviewers compelled a recantation\textsuperscript{19}). For all Tacitus' love of archaisms\textsuperscript{20}), there is no certain reminiscence of Ennius elsewhere in the \textit{Histories}. Here, however, Tacitus is clearly echoing Vergil and, since he was surely familiar at least with the purple passages in the \textit{Annales}, it is reasonable to suggest that the Vergilian passage reminded him in turn of Ennius' words, opening the way for a subtle attempt to make his reader recall the discord between Romulus and Remus.

In this section of the \textit{Histories}, after all, Tacitus is concerned precisely with a struggle in which \textit{omnibus cura viris uter esset induperator} and \textit{utri magni victoria sit data regni}; and if the winner's potential subjects failed to qualify as \textit{cupientes regni}, it was nonetheless true that \textit{sic expectabat populus atque ore timebat rebus}. Indeed, Tacitus had prepared the ground for all this only a few chapters earlier, describing Otho and Vitellius as \textit{duos omnium mortalium impudicia ignavia luxuria deterrimos, velut ad per­dendum imperium fataliter eleetos}, calling attention to the \textit{repetita bellorum civilium memoria}, and posing the question \textit{nunc pro Othone an pro Vitellio in templa ituros? utrasque impias preces, utraque detestanda vota inter duos, quorum bello id scires, deteriorem fore qui vicisset}\textsuperscript{21}). The irony of such a reminiscence, moreover, accords well with that which, as we have seen, underlies his use of \textit{laetum augurium}, just as it fits with the spirit of the intervening sentence on Vitellius. For here we are told, first, that the name 'Germanicus' was attached to him in much the same way as, these days, a different label is affixed to a new and supposedly improved product to increase its sales (the passive construction is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} See B. Baldwin, \textit{WS} 13, 1979, 144 ff. The difficulties of deducing Tacitus' views are well illustrated by T. J. Luce's contribution to I. S. Moxon, J. D. Smart and A. J. Woodman (edd.), \textit{Past Perspectives}, Cambridge 1986, 143 ff.
\item \textsuperscript{19} See E. Skard, \textit{Sallust und seine Vorgänger}, Oslo 1956, 45.
\item \textsuperscript{20} F. Degel, \textit{Archaistische Bestandteile der Sprache des Tacitus}, Diss. Erlangen 1907.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Hist. 1, 50, 1–3. It is no obstacle that Tacitus continues with an assessment of Vespasian (§ 4: \textit{et ambigua de Vespasiano fama, solusque omnium ante se principium in melius mutatus est}). This is hardly flattering to Vespasian, since his \textit{fama} is stated to be \textit{ambigua} and, as few scholars seem to have recognized, his change for the better is set \textit{after} his elevation to the principate. Besides, Vespasian will not appear again until Hist. 2,1 and this is clearly deliberate: see Bessie Walker, \textit{CPh} 71, 1976, 117.
\end{itemize}
no accident); and second, that Vitellius refused the title ‘Caesar’
etiam victor, a statement whose truth will be underlined when
the emperor in his last days, deserted, defeated and desperate,
embraces the name in a final attempt to stave off ruin (Hist. 3,
58, 3)\(^{22}\).

In short, Tacitus’ account of the omen which opens the Vitel­
lians’ campaign has a far more important function in his narrative
than appears to have been recognized. By referring back subtly to
Vergil and Ennius, it reminds the reader of the curse of fratricidal
strife laid on the Romans and the suffering which must flow from
that. Animated throughout by a savage irony, it confirms his de­
scription of Otho and Vitellius as \textit{duos omnium mortalium \ldots
deterrimos} and, at the same time, justifies the tone he will adopt
in describing their struggle for power. And through the agency of
the \textit{laetum augurium}, itself emphasized heavily, it will prove
that the rivals were indeed \textit{velut ad perdendum imperium fataliter
electos}\(^{23}\).

\textbf{III. Interpreting the Omens}

As has been said already, there is obviously some kind of link
between the two omens we have been discussing, nor is it limited
to the fact that each involves a bird, an imperturbable bird at
that\(^{24}\). By placing the second omen at the end of the necrology for
Otho rather than, say, at the start of the battle, Tacitus clearly
intends for it to respond to the one which marked the opening of
the Vitellians’ campaign, and so to enclose this section of his narra­
tive and tie together \textit{Histories} 1 and 2: though loyal Othonians will
later rally to Vespasian, the second portent marks the end of the
actual fighting between Otho and Vitellius just as the eagle which
guided Fabius Valens and his men marked its start.

\(^{22}\) Vitellius is allowed a more active role not only by Suet. Vit. 8, 2 but also
by Plut. Galba 22, 7. But \textit{torpor} is the dominant characteristic in Tacitus’ portrayal
at this stage, as has often been pointed out: see, e. g., R. Engel, Athenaeum 55, 1977,
345 ff.

\(^{23}\) It was argued by P. Ammann, Der künstlerische Aufbau von Tacitus,
Historien I 12–II 51 (Kaiser Otho), Diss. Zürich 1931, 47 ff., that Hist. 1, 51–70 fell
into two segments dividing between chapters 60 and 61, but it is more natural to see
Hist. 1, 51–62 as a unit culminating in the augury given Fabius Valens: cf. Heubner
(note 11) 112.

\(^{24}\) For what it is worth, these are also the only two passages in which
Tacitus uses the word \textit{ales}: Gerber and Greef 62b.
Once this is recognized, it becomes clear why Tacitus chose the omen of the bird with *the invisitata species* and why he told the story the way he does. For a start, this second omen must somehow be limited to Otho and Vitellius. This is not the place for a reference to Vespasian, and so he cannot employ the portent of the three eagles which Suetonius recorded\(^25\). It also seems highly likely that he was looking for an omen which somehow involved a bird, and could find only the one which, at the time, had its impact solely on the inhabitants of Regium Lepidum. This, however, created a major problem: the omen in question was essentially a trivial incident in the overall scheme of things and, if reported in a simple and straightforward manner, could not respond adequately to the first portent and the heavy emphasis Tacitus had placed on that. The three steps which the historian took to solve his problem are precisely the features which give the episode its peculiar character. First, he apparently moved it from a point before the battle and placed it immediately after the necrology of Otho. This gave it greater prominence and greater import. Second, he delivered himself of a lengthy introductory comment. The statement *ut conquirere fabulosa et fictis oblectare legentium animos procul gravitate coepti operis crediderim, ita volgatis traditisque demere fidel non ausim* may fairly be reckoned long-winded, since it takes up two full lines of the Teubner text where the omen itself occupies only a little over six lines. But its intent is ponderous rather than pompous, lending to the narrative weight commensurate with both the *gravitas* of the work as a whole and the stress placed on the first omen. And third, he used oratio obliqua throughout, but not to distance himself from the material or to indicate doubt. Whether the incident had been widely reported and written up we shall never know. But by making such a claim, and by rendering the story in indirect speech, Tacitus invested the episode with the official tone and character of a public record. Thanks to his literary artistry, in short, Tacitus could create a counterpoise to the omen vouchsafed Fabius Valens and use the two incidents to enclose the struggle between Otho and Vitellius\(^26\).

University of Texas (Austin)  
M. Gwyn Morgan

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\(^{25}\) See above, notes 8 and 21.
\(^{26}\) An earlier version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Classical Association of the Middle West and South in Boulder, Colorado on April 25, 1987, and I wish to thank Professor Jeffrey Tatum for his advice and assistance.