

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”<sup>1)</sup>. 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 legentium 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 consedis- se incolae memorant, nec deinde coetu hominum aut circumvolitantium alitum territam pulsamve, donec Otho se ipse inter-*

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1) R. H. Martin, Tacitus, London 1981, 68.

*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 remarked<sup>2</sup>). 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 attestation is another matter<sup>3</sup>).

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: φασὶ πρὸ τῆς μάχης ἄλλα τε φανῆναι σημεῖα καὶ τινα ὄρνιν ἐξαίσιον ὁποῖον οὐπώποτε ἑωράκεσαν, ἐπὶ πολλὰς ἡμέρας ὀφθῆναι. 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 magnitudine, 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 f.). More recently, 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 suggestion 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 malae* (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., G. B. Townend, AJPh 85, 1964, 337 ff.

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*<sup>4</sup>). As Valmaggi rightly observed, *exitus* can denote Otho's departure from this mortal stage, an idea embracing both the battle and the suicide<sup>5</sup>).

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*<sup>6</sup>); 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

4) Thus A. L. Irvine, Tacitus: Histories Books I and II, London 1952, 165; G. E. F. Chilver, A Historical Commentary on Tacitus' Histories I and II, Oxford 1979, 214; cf. also E. Wolff, Taciti Historiarum Libri, 1. Heft: Buch I und II, Berlin 1886, 238.

5) L. Valmaggi, P. Cornelio Tacito: Il libro secondo delle Storie, Turin 1897, 96 f.; cf. H. Goelzer, Œuvres de Tacite: Histoires, Livres I–II, Paris 1920, 234; H. Heubner, P. Cornelius Tacitus, Die Historien, II, Heidelberg 1968, 202 f.

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, 684a.

the story was true or not and whether it became widespread or not, Tacitus could simply have omitted it, as did Plutarch<sup>7</sup>), 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 Flavians<sup>8</sup>). 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<sup>9</sup>). Having dispatched Galba, Piso and Vinus 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: *instructi intentique signum projectionis exposcunt. nomen Germanici Vitellio statim additum: Caesarem se appellari etiam victor prohibuit. laetum augurium Fabio Valenti exercituique, quem in bellum agebat, ipso profectiois 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 apparedled. 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*)<sup>10</sup>. 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<sup>11</sup>. 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<sup>12</sup>. Nor is it an otiose detail that the augury's recipients are Fabius Valens and the army *quem in bellum agebat*. This is a civil war, and in civil war only a savage irony will allow a sophisticated writer like Tacitus to talk of a *laetum augurium*<sup>13</sup>.

Nonetheless, the most telling detail – it seems to me – is the historian's using the phrase *instructi intentique signum profectionis exoscunt*. For *instructi intentique* the commentators refer generally to Sallust and Livy, to Caesar for *signum exoscere*<sup>14</sup>. But as Godley noted many years ago, the closest parallel for the expression as a whole is the half-line (itself embedded in a passage notable for its metrical effects) which Vergil used of the start of the boat-race in *Aeneid* 5: *intenti expectant signum*<sup>15</sup>. 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. Williams, 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<sup>16</sup>):

*curantes magna cum cura tum cupientes  
regni dant operam simul auspicio augurioque (...)  
recitabant urbem Romam Remoramve vocarent.  
omnibus cura viris uter esset induperator:  
exspectant, veluti consul quom mittere signum  
volt, omnes avidi spectant ad carceris oras  
quam mox emittat pictos e faucibus currus:  
sic exspectabat populus atque ore 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 *Georgics*<sup>17</sup>).

The very idea that Tacitus is echoing Ennius, directly or indirectly, will seem ridiculous to those who think the historian's view mirrored in the comment made by Aper in the *Dialogus* (20, 5): *exigitur enim iam ab oratore etiam poeticus decor, non Accii aut Pacuvii veterno inquinatus, sed ex Horatii et Vergilii et Lucani sacrario 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 *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<sup>2</sup> = 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, *Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry*, Oxford 1964, 51 ff. and literature there cited. The best discussion of Vergil's debt to Ennius is M. Wigodsky, *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-Laprée, *Mélanges de littérature et d'épigraphie latines, d'histoire ancienne et d'archéologie. Hommages à la mémoire de P. Willeumier*, 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 the *Annales*.

17) Vergil, *Georg.* 1, 491 ff., especially 512-514, on which also see Wigodsky, loc. cit.

ing convincing echoes of Horace in any of Tacitus' works<sup>18</sup>). 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<sup>19</sup>). For all Tacitus' love of archaisms<sup>20</sup>), there is no certain reminiscence of Ennius elsewhere in the *Histories*. Here, however, Tacitus is clearly echoing Vergil and, since he was surely familiar at least with the purple passages in the *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 *Histories*, after all, Tacitus is concerned precisely with a struggle in which *omnibus cura viris uter esset induperator* and *utri magni victoria sit data regni*; and if the winner's potential subjects failed to qualify as *cupientes regni*, it was nonetheless true that *sic exspectabat populus atque ore timebat rebus*. Indeed, Tacitus had prepared the ground for all this only a few chapters earlier, describing Otho and Vitellius as *duos omnium mortalium impudicitia ignavia luxuria deterrimos, velut ad perdendum imperium fataliter electos*, calling attention to the *repetita bellorum civilium memoria*, and posing the question *nunc pro Othone an pro Vitellio in templa ituros? utrasque impias preces, utraque detestanda vota inter duos, quorum bello solum id scires, deteriore fore qui vicisset*<sup>21</sup>). The irony of such a reminiscence, moreover, accords well with that which, as we have seen, underlies his use of *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

18) See B. Baldwin, 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.), *Past Perspectives*, Cambridge 1986, 143 ff.

19) See E. Skard, *Sallust und seine Vorgänger*, Oslo 1956, 45.

20) F. Degel, *Archaistische Bestandteile der Sprache des Tacitus*, Diss. Erlangen 1907.

21) Hist. 1, 50, 1-3. It is no obstacle that Tacitus continues with an assessment of Vespasian (§ 4: *et ambigua de Vespasiano fama, solusque omnium ante se principum in melius mutatus est*). This is hardly flattering to Vespasian, since his *fama* is stated to be *ambigua* and, as few scholars seem to have recognized, his change for the better is set *after* his elevation to the principate. Besides, Vespasian will not appear again until Hist. 2, 1 and this is clearly deliberate: see Bessie Walker, CPh 71, 1976, 117.

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)<sup>22</sup>).

In short, Tacitus' account of the omen which opens the Vitellians' 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 description of Otho and Vitellius as *duos omnium mortalium ... deterrimos* and, at the same time, justifies the tone he will adopt in describing their struggle for power. And through the agency of the *laetum augurium*, itself emphasized heavily, it will prove that the rivals were indeed *velut ad perdendum imperium fataliter electos*<sup>23</sup>).

### 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<sup>24</sup>). 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 narrative and tie together *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 *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 *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<sup>25</sup>). 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 fidem 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<sup>26</sup>).

University of Texas (Austin)

M. Gwyn Morgan

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.