

# Filologia

## Antica e Moderna

n.s. VII, 2  
(XXXV, 60)  
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faem

RUBZETTINO



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n.s. VII, 2  
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**2025**

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*A cinquant'anni dal Tacito di Francesco  
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di studio*

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**RUBZETTINO**

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Simon J.V. Malloch

## Past and present in the *Annals* of Tacitus

### *I eadem magistratum vocabula*

Tacitus describes the political transformation wrought by Augustus, in the fullness of his might, with characteristic discernment and colour. When he secured the succession in A.D. 4,

*Bellum ea tempestate nullum nisi adversus Germanos supererat... Domi res tranquillae, eadem magistratum vocabula; iuniores post Actiacam victoriam, etiam senes plerique inter bella civium nati: quotus quisque reliquus, qui rem publicam vidisset? Igitur verso civitatis statu nihil usquam prisca et integri moris: omnes, exuta aequalitate, iussa principis aspectare... (Ann. 1.3.6, 1.3.7-4.1)*

Internal tranquillity came at a high constitutional price: the *status civitatis*, the ‘situation of the citizen body’<sup>1</sup>, was revolutionised by the rule

<sup>1</sup>This essay adheres closely to the spoken version to evoke the happy occasion of the conference and to signify that it is a work in progress: section II, for example, derives from research towards my forthcoming edition of *Annals* 12. I am grateful to Professor Claudio Buongiovanni for the invitation to address the conference and to Professor John Rich for commenting on an early draft.

On *civitas*, ‘citizen body’, see P. A. Brunt, *The fall of the Roman Republic and related essays*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988, p. 299; M. Schofield, *Cicero: political philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021, p. 43 with n. 57.

of one man, Rome's only salvation<sup>2</sup>. Now, several decades after Actium, practically no one was alive who had seen the *res publica*. Nothing whatsoever remained of ancient and unsullied *mos*, antiquity here evoking, as often in Tacitus, the period of the Republic<sup>3</sup>. Now a *princeps* ruled over all, not formally, but by exercising an informal *dominatio*, despotic power above and beyond the constitutional framework<sup>4</sup>. The *princeps* issued *iussa* to elites who eagerly embraced *seruitium*<sup>5</sup>. Talk of restoring 'the Republic' was at best idle, at worst laughable<sup>6</sup>.

Tacitus's choice of language is revealing of the historical process at work: *quotus quisque reliquus, qui rem publicam vidisset?* The context, a progressive movement back in time, leaves no doubt that he is using *res publica* of what we call 'the Republic'. Among imperial writers, Tacitus is practically alone in admitting this sense<sup>7</sup>, and he does so rarely<sup>8</sup>. He normally uses the term for what moderns call 'the Principate': *res publica* denotes the *status ciuitatis* transformed by Augustus, the re-established or 'new' *res publica*<sup>9</sup> under the control of a *princeps* occupying an un-

<sup>2</sup> *Hist.* 1.1.1, *Ann.* 4.33.2.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. *Ann.* 3.5.2 (speech), 3.60.1 (see below).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Ann.* 1.3.1, 2.59.3; C. Buongiovanni, *Sei studi su Tacito*, Naples, 2005 (Studi Latini, 55), pp. 27-58; S. J. V. Malloch, *The return of the king? Tacitus on the principate of Augustus*, «Hermes» CL, 2022, pp. 91-92.

<sup>5</sup> *Ann.* 1.7.1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ann.* 1.4.2, 4.9.1.

<sup>7</sup> The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* (4) quotes only Tacitus for *res publica* 'applied to the pre-imperial Roman state'; the *TLL* (XI.2 s.v. *res publica* [forthcoming article by A. Gitner]) offers *Sen. Dial.* 2.2.2, 9.16.1; no examples later than Tacitus are quoted. Cf. also M. Roller, *The difference an Emperor makes: notes on the reception of the Republican senate in the Imperial age*, «Classical Receptions Journal» VII, 2015, pp. 11-15.

<sup>8</sup> To *Ann.* 1.3.7 add *Ann.* 4.19.3 *multa adseveratione, quasi aut legibus cum Silio ageretur aut Varro consul aut illud res publica esset, coguntur patres* (cf. A. J. Woodman, *The Annals of Tacitus, book 4*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, ad loc.), *Ann.* 13.28.1 *manebat nihilo minus quaedam imago rei publicae*, and probably *Hist.* 1.50.3 *mansuram fuisse sub Pompeio Brutoque rem publicam*. Cf. *Hist.* 1.16.1 *si immensum imperii corpus stare ac liberari sine rectore posset, dignus eram a quo res publica inciperet* (here *res publica* is often taken to mean 'the Republic', e.g. by A. Gerber and A. Greef, *Lexicon Taciteum*, Leipzig, B. G. Teubner, 1903, pp. 768, 1395, but perhaps *inciperet* renders it 'a Republic' (based on the 'old' one)). It is suggestive of Tacitus's general use of *res publica* that he sometimes uses adjectival *veteris* to clarify that he means 'the Republic': *Ann.* 1.7.2, 11.23.2 (speech), 16.22.4 (speech).

<sup>9</sup> E.g. *Agr.* 44.5, *Hist.* 3.77.4, *Hist.* 3.86.2, *Ann.* 3.44.1, 11.3.1, 12.41.1, 15.49.3. Often in speech: e.g. *Dial.* 17.3, *Ann.* 1.4.5, 11.25.4.

official *statio*<sup>10</sup>. It was the currency of such language which prompted Tacitus to remark *eadem magistratum vocabula*. In this first occurrence of unqualified *res publica* in the *Annals*, Tacitus applied the term to the old *res publica* and subtly pointed a contrast with what the new *res publica* was not.

What had changed? Tacitus states that *aequalitas* had been cast aside under Augustus now that *iussa* issued from the *princeps*. *Aequalitas* evoked *libertas*<sup>11</sup>, the defining feature of the old *res publica*: the *res publica* was free from external restraints to govern itself and its citizens were free from internal restraints to govern themselves on equal terms<sup>12</sup>. Tacitus uses *libertas* and its cognates to evoke ‘the Republic’, such as at e.g. *Ann.* 1.1.1 *libertatem et consulatum L. Brutus instituit*. But Tacitus also writes of *libertas* under the new *res publica*. When Tiberius expressed an opinion on voting in cases before the senate, Tacitus prefaces the response of L. Piso with the commentary, *manebant etiam tum vestigia morientis libertatis* (*Ann.* 1.74.5). Wrangling in the senate was observed silently by Tiberius, *qui ea simulacra libertatis senatui praebebat* (*Ann.* 1.77.3). Similar language creates a similar effect. At the time of the grant of tribunician power to the younger Drusus, Tiberius *imaginem antiquitatis senatui praebebat, postulata provinciarum ad disquisitionem patrum mittendo* (*Ann.* 3.60.1); the impressive result only underlined the new political realities: *magnaue eius diei species fuit quo senatus maiorum beneficia, sociorum pacta, regum etiam qui ante vim Romanam valuerant decreta ipsorumque numinum religiones introspevit, libero, ut quondam, quid firmaret mutaretve* (3.60.3). In these passages the idea of liberty is qualified: it is dying or exists in a ‘version’ permitted by the *princeps*. Senators do not enjoy the *libertas* of the old *res publica* because that *res publica* no longer exists. They can only act with a version of the sena-

<sup>10</sup> *Ann.* 1.1.1. For Augustus’s representation of his achievement and position cf. Suet. *Aug.* 28.2 (quoting an edict of Augustus) ‘*ita mihi salvam ac sospitem rem p. sistere in sua sede liceat atque eius rei fructum percipere quem peto, ut optimi status auctor dicar ...*’ *fecitque ipse se compotem voti, nisus omni modo ne quem novi status paeniteret*; Gell. 15.7.3 (quoting a letter of Augustus to Gaius Caesar) ‘*...deos autem oro ut mihi quantumcumque superest temporis, id salvis nobis traducere liceat in statu rei publicae felicissimo, ἀνδραγαθούτων ὅμων καὶ διαδεχομένων stationem meam*’.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Ann.* 2.82.2 (speech), *Hist.* 2.38.1.

<sup>12</sup> Schofield, *Cicero...* cit., pp. 51-52.

torial *libertas* permitted in the new *res publica*<sup>13</sup>. Tacitus uses *libertas* to evoke what was lost with the passing of the old *res publica* in those moments when he draws attention to the *libertas* possible under the new *res publica* controlled by a *princeps*<sup>14</sup>.

The concepts *res publica* and *libertas* illustrate the formative role that Tacitus gives the old *res publica* in the development of the new *res publica*. He acknowledges that role in significant but different ways in the *Annals*. We have seen how he uses some key concepts to delineate change. I shall now concentrate on two aspects of the interrelation of past and present in the *Annals*. In the next section I shall discuss the annalistic and dynastic architecture of the *Annals* and offer an explanation of Tacitus's combination of the two structures. In section III I shall discuss the place of 'digressions' in the *Annals*. In section IV I shall offer concluding remarks on Tacitus's view of the *res publica*, old and new, that emerges from my analysis.

## II The structure of the *Annals*

Tacitus uses two architectures in the *Annals*, one based on the consular year (annalistic), the other on the structure of books (dynastic). Let us look at these structures individually and try account for Tacitus's combination of them.

Tacitus comments on the organisational logic of his work first in *Annals* 4: to record items in the year in which they occurred<sup>15</sup>. In the Neronian *Annals* he demonstrates his approach in practice when he observes

<sup>13</sup> For one attempt to articulate this *libertas* see C. Wirszubski, *Libertas as a political idea at Rome during the late Republic and early Principate*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1950, p. 137: 'important matters of State shall be brought before the Senate, and... senators may freely express their opinions and vote without constraint'. See also recently Woodman, *The Annals...* cit., ad 4.6.2; H. van der Blom, *Res publica, libertas and free speech in retrospect: Republican oratory in Tacitus' Dialogus*, in C. Balmaceda (ed.), *Libertas and res publica in the Roman Republic: ideas of freedom and Roman politics*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2020, pp. 216-237.

<sup>14</sup> Similarly, A. J. Woodman and R. H. Martin, *The Annals of Tacitus, book 3*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, well observe on 3.60.1 that *imaginem* 'is designed to accommodate the crucial qualification that the principate now exists... [T]he word is not cynical but realistic...'. Tacitus accommodates the advent of the *princeps* in his description of the senate at *Ann.* 4.6.2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ann.* 4.71.1.

of 57 that not much happened deserving of record<sup>16</sup>. Tacitus announces a new year by reference to the *consules ordinarii*. He often conveys this information in an ablative absolute construction, which (judging from the surviving text) he uses for this purpose first in the *Annals*<sup>17</sup>. The subordinate status of this construction can be read as a reflection of the historical reality that the consuls no longer played a leading part in government at Rome and held a merely formal role<sup>18</sup>. But the construction was also an old republican formula<sup>19</sup> that offered the benefit of providing the required chronological information with minimal grammatical intrusion, thereby allowing authors flexibility in the choice of material to start the year<sup>20</sup>. Tacitus exploits that flexibility – within an annalistic structure *that he observes throughout the entire work*<sup>21</sup>.

Annalistic structure does not always equate to chronological accuracy: for example, not all famous people died where their obituaries fall at the end of the year<sup>22</sup>. In one area, however, Tacitus was prepared to override the annalistic principle explicitly: *res externae*. A famous instance occurs in *Annals* 12. Concluding ten chapters of British affairs, Tacitus remarks *haec, quamquam a duobus Ostorio Didioque pro praetoribus plures per annos gesta, coniunxi ne divisa haud perinde ad memoriam sui valerent: ad temporum ordinem redeo* (12.40.5). The concession was not isolated. Already in the Tiberian *Annals* Tacitus combines events from two years in one account for artistic reasons (*Ann.* 6.38.1 *quae duabus aestatibus gesta coniunxi, quo requiesceret animus a domesticis malis*), and he will do so again in the Neronian books (*Ann.* 13.9.3 *quae in alios consules egressa coniunxi*). Tacitus is reassuring his readers about the

<sup>16</sup> *Ann.* 13.31.1.

<sup>17</sup> R. Macke, *Die römischen Eigennamen bei Tacitus*, I., *Eine sprachliche Untersuchung*, Hadersleben, 1886 (Wissenschaftliche Beilage zu dem Programm des königlichen Gymnasiums und Real-Progymnasiums zu Hadersleben, 258), p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> The new reality is spelled out at *Ann.* 13.11.1.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Lex agr. (*CIL* I 200) 28 P. *Mucio L. Calpurnio cos.*

<sup>20</sup> This flexibility is well observed by J. Ginsburg, *Tradition and theme in the Annals of Tacitus*, New York, Arno Press, 1982, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> For the different patterns used to structure the narrative year in the *Annals* see the appendix.

<sup>22</sup> F. R. D. Goodyear, *The Annals of Tacitus, books 1-6*, volume II: *Annals 1, 55-81 and Annals 2*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, ad 2.41.1.

chronological accuracy of his presentation of *res internae* as much as he is excusing his freer treatment of *res externae*.

The consular year reflected the grand stream of Roman historical time above and beyond Tacitus's work. Another type of architecture was more completely under Tacitus's control: book structure.

Tacitus aligns the start of a new book and a new year on four occasions. The observance of the date, using the conventional consular formula, lends emphasis and dignity to events of significance. At *Ann.* 2.1-4 Tacitus writes the first instalment of the history of Rome's greatest imperial neighbour, Parthia, a major long-running narrative that, in the short term, supplies the backdrop to the death of Germanicus; at *Ann.* 4.1.1 he highlights the dynastic importance of the year by noting, only here in the extant *Annals*, the 'regnal' year; at *Ann.* 5.1 and 14.1-9 he opens the year with the deaths of two powerful women, Livia and Agrippina. On the other hand, at the start of *Annals* 3, he creates dramatic effect by deferring to 3.2.3 and mentioning *en passant* the consuls' entry into office: the moving scene of the elder Agrippina's journey to Rome with the ashes of Germanicus is – literally – uninterrupted.

A mismatch between the annalistic and book architecture occurs once in the early *Annals* and is otherwise a feature of the later books. *Annals* 1 starts some way into 14; *Annals* 12 commences in late 48 and concludes in 54; *Annals* 13 starts during 54; *Annals* 15 during 62; *Annals* 16 during 65. Books that do not start with a new year are structured according to artistic demands. *Annals* 11 closes with the death of Messalina in 48; *Annals* 12 opens with the aftermath: the immediate (urgent?) search for Claudius's next wife reintroduces the major figure of the younger Agrippina. A marriage of significance similarly marks a book division at the end of *Annals* 4: Agrippina's first marriage to Cn. Domitius Ahenobarbus, the union producing Nero. The end of *Annals* 12 and the start of *Annals* 13 straddle 54 in describing the murder of Claudius and the accession of Nero – both orchestrated by Agrippina. Death often marks the end of a book: 2 (Arminius), 3 (Junia Silana), 6 (Tiberius), 11 (Messalina), and 12 (Claudius)<sup>23</sup>; but death also in-

<sup>23</sup> *Annals* 14 closes with the death of Octavia and two freedmen (including the notorious Pallas), but the final, brief item, an unsuccessful attack on Seneca, sets up the conspiracy of Piso

roduces books 5 (Livia), 13 (Sılanus), and 14 (Agrippina), ominous developments in all cases. Tacitus uses book divisions to emphasise structurally, in ways not always possible within the annalistic architecture, events important to the *princeps* and his family.

How can we explain Tacitus's combination of annalistic and book (dynastic) structure and his variation of them in the *Annals*? R. Syme argued as follows

The annalistic structure is... dominant throughout the first hexad... The third hexad stands in marked contrast. Only Book XIII ends at a year's end, and the item lacks significance or emphasis. Moreover, the whole treatment is more free and flowing, with events concentrated around personalities or themes, not merely consecutive or segmented.

The changed exposition is already perceptible in the remnant of the second hexad. Book XI ends with Messallina, and Book XII deliberately introduces Agrippina before the year 48 is brought to its conclusion. Further, the grouping of foreign affairs. In the first hexad the vicissitudes of the rebellion of Tacfarinas in Africa, being related year by year as they occur, figure in three books; and Book II has the provinces and the princes of the East in four separate sections. But in Book XII a continuous narrative carries seven years of the Roman conquest of Britain; and the treatment of eastern affairs foreshadows the way Corbulo's campaigns will be recounted in the Neronian books<sup>24</sup>.

The reason for this 'changed exposition', Syme suggested, was not a change of source or 'any improvement of [Tacitus's] literary skill', but changed historical circumstances. Tacitus was enjoined by history to adopt an annalistic framework in *Annals* 1-6 because Tiberius presided over a state 'that could still be regarded as a continuation of the Republic, its annual chronicle to be narrated in the traditional manner'. Since the principates of Claudius and Nero were more 'dynastic' and 'regnal' Tacitus was allegedly freed in the middle and later *Annals* to

that will play out in *Annals* 15 – a doubly dramatic ending, then. Cf. F. G. Moore, *Annalistic method as related to the book divisions in Tacitus*, «TAPA» LIV, 1923, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> R. Syme, *Tacitus*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1958, p. 269.

employ a looser structure focussing more on events and personalities than on chronological sequence<sup>25</sup>.

Syme's analysis in support of this rigid division of the *Annals* into two structural halves is tendentious. The alignment of consular year and book division can be paralleled in many books of Livy – but there are also many books which do not start with a new year. Sallust exhibits the same flexibility<sup>26</sup>. Tacitus's alignment of year and book division cannot therefore automatically render the Tiberian *Annals* 'Republican' in their structure. Tacitus uses the conjunction of year and book in *Annals* 14, a Neronian book, which on Syme's model should not exhibit a 'Republican' structure at all. In the Tiberian *Annals*, moreover, the dynastic architecture is already in place: for example, Tacitus marks a turning point in the nature of Tiberius's rule half way through the six books allotted him<sup>27</sup>, and we have already seen that he highlights dynastic events such as marriage and death. Tacitus's method, I suggest, was influenced by the events themselves. It was the death of Tiberius (more conveniently than the death of Augustus) which provided him with the first viable opportunity to conclude a book with an event of dynastic importance. This decision evidently initiated a structural framework tied to each *princeps* – note that Claudius dies at the end of *Annals* 12.

Syme's presentation of *res externae* is similarly unsatisfactory. He passes over the fact that Tacitus already manipulates his treatment of *res externae* in the Tiberian *Annals*. The year 18 is given over entirely to Germanicus's time in the East. It stands out from all other years in the

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem. In using the language of emancipation Syme was echoing views that Tacitus found the annalistic format restrictive: cf. e.g. O. Hirschfeld, *Zur annalistischen Anlage des Taciteischen Geschichtswerkes*, «Hermes» XXV, 1890, pp. 363-364; recently, D. Feeney, *Caesar's calendar: ancient time and the beginnings of history*, Berkley-Los Angeles-London, 2007 (Sather Lectures, 65), pp. 190-191. Sceptical: F. Graf, *Untersuchungen über die Komposition der Annalen des Tacitus*, Thun, G. Aeschlimann, 1931, pp. 18-19; Ginsburg, *Tradition and theme...* cit., pp. 1-6, 30, 96.

<sup>26</sup> Livy aligns year and book at 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 22, 26, 30, 32, 36, 37, 40, 42, and starts books during a given consular year at 23, 24, 27, 28, 29, 31, 33, 34, 35, 38, 39, 43, 44, 45 (for examples of two years crossing two books see J. Rich, *Structuring Roman history: the consular year and the Roman historical tradition*, «Histos» V, 2011, pp. 32-34). On Sallust see also J. T. Ramsey (ed. and Trans.), *Sallust: fragments of the Histories; letters to Caesar*, Cambridge, Mass.-London, Harvard University Press, 2015 (Loeb Classical Library, 522), p. xvii.

<sup>27</sup> *Ann.* 4.1.1.

extant *Annals* in its total dedication to *res externae*, hardly a ‘traditional’ arrangement as Syme saw it. Syme ignores Tacitus’s manipulation of the chronology of eastern *res externae* already in the Tiberian *Annals* at 6.38.1. In narrating *res externae*, events influenced Tacitus’s artistic decisions. The African narratives involving Tacfarinas, which Syme offers as ‘Republican’ in structure, are divided into yearly accounts, probably because they did not lend themselves to representation on a broader canvass and Tacitus’s interest was mainly the frequent interventions of Tiberius in this ‘senatorial’ province. The eastern and British narratives, by contrast, chronicled affairs at a great distance from Rome and involved the *princeps* irregularly. They lent themselves to narratives covering multiple years. Does Tacitus’s technique amount to a ‘loosening’ or ‘abandoning’ of the annalistic framework in *Annals* 11-16? No, it does not. Syme ignored the fact that Tacitus’s presentation of later *res externae* is consistent with his structuring of African affairs: they are spread across annual accounts<sup>28</sup>. In fact the narrative of the later *Annals* contains dynastic and ‘traditional’ material in accounts structured by year<sup>29</sup>. Tacitus never abandons the annalistic architecture, even when he claims to have reached a barren year, as he does in 57<sup>30</sup>.

J. Ginsburg varied Syme’s argument to produce an influential analysis of the structure of the Tiberian *Annals*. Ginsburg proceeded on the assumption that Livy represents traditional Roman annalistic history in his use of a year-by-year structure. Each annual narrative allegedly exhibits a rigid pattern of *res internae* – *res externae* – *res internae* reflecting, in strict chronological order, the contours of the consular year at Rome. Ginsburg argued that Tacitus was not forced to adopt an annalistic format but *chose* to do so in dialogue with the Republican tradition: he adopted an annalistic *format* but rejected the annalistic *mode*. Tacitus narrates events year-by-year. He locates items at the opening and closing of the year with expressions such as *anni principio* and *fine anni*. He ‘occasionally’ records ‘items with a traditional ingredient’<sup>31</sup>. On the other hand, Ginsburg

<sup>28</sup> *Res externae* are narrated in 49, 50, 51, 52, 54, 58, 60, 61, 62, 63, and 65. See appendix.

<sup>29</sup> E.g. *Ann.* 12.23-4, 12.61-3, 13.28-33, 15.22.2, 15.32.

<sup>30</sup> *Ann.* 13.1.1.

<sup>31</sup> Ginsburg, *Tradition and theme...* cit., p. 99. M. Griffin, *Review of Ginsburg, Tradition and theme...* cit., «JRS» LXXII, 1982, p. 216, points out that Ginsburg ‘underestimate[s] the amount of senatorial material in Tacitus’s narrative’.

claims, Tacitus does not narrate each year in strict chronological sequence. He supplements the traditional narrative sequence of *res internae* – *res externae* – *res internae* with a variety of other patterns. He records both ‘traditional’ *res internae* and *res externae* only when it suits his compositional priorities<sup>32</sup>. The resulting tension between format and mode is, in Ginsburg’s view, deliberate. The annalistic structure evoked the past of the old *res publica*; but Tacitus’s rejection of a strict annalistic mode, his transformative use of the past, demonstrates that the past was very different from the present: there was no continuity between the old *res publica* and the principate of Tiberius<sup>33</sup>. In Tacitus’s hands the annalistic structure itself is a tool for subversion.

Ginsburg erred in her assumptions about Republican annalistic historiography and pursued a simplistic approach to the structure of the *Annals*. She limited her analysis to the Tiberian *Annals* because there Tacitus allegedly adheres ‘quite closely’ to the annalistic format, whereas in the later *Annals* he ‘often seem[s] to abandon the year by year framework’<sup>34</sup>. Ginsburg’s claim about the structure of the later books rests entirely on the views of scholars such as Syme and is vulnerable to the same objections. More serious for her interpretation of Tacitus’s decisions about structure is her mischaracterisation of Republican historiography. Tacitus’s manipulation of chronology within the narrative year was *already* a feature of parts of Livy, Sallust’s *Histories*, and possibly the historians of the early *principes*<sup>35</sup>. Tacitus did not react against the Republican annalistic tradition. He adopted an annalistic form and mode already subject to creative application by his predecessors. Since Tacitus did *not* revolutionise the annalistic genre, Ginsburg’s argument that he did so to expose the lie at the heart of the principate of Tiberius collapses.

Tacitus’s approach to structure reveals him to be working *with*, rather than *against*, the annalistic tradition. The impression created is possibly the opposite of Ginsburg’s thesis. Tacitus’s use of an annalistic framework

<sup>32</sup> Ginsburg, *Tradition and theme...* cit., pp. 99-100.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 95, 100.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96, cf. p. 2. Her thesis has been influential: cf. Griffin, *Review...* cit., *ibid.*, *Tacitus as a Historian*, in A. J. Woodman (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Tacitus*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 182-183; Feeney, *Caesar’s Calendar...* cit., pp. 190-193.

<sup>35</sup> Convincingly demonstrated by Rich, *Structuring Roman history...* cit.

gives the impression that the past of the old *res publica* was very much alive under the new *res publica* – not just under Tiberius but under his first century successors too. It is, however, more complicated than that. The history of the first century was the story of the transformation of the old *res publica* into a new *res publica* controlled by a *princeps*. Tacitus builds that new reality into the fabric of the *Annals* by using the structure of books and groups of books to create a dynastic architecture facilitating continuity, change, and emphasis in the lives of the individual *principes* and their families. This dynastic architecture sat alongside an annalistic architecture which provided the necessary chronological ‘backbone’ to the *Annals* and ostentatiously placed Tacitus in the grand senatorial tradition of historiography. Combining these two structures reflected the mixture of past and present in the complex transformation of government under Augustus. The dual architecture embodied the constitutional reality of the new *res publica*.

Was Tacitus the first to apply this mixture of annalistic and dynastic architecture to the history of the successors of Augustus? This model too could have been worked out by Tacitus’s imperial predecessors – or perhaps it was one aspect of Tacitus’s ‘new’ methodology suited the ‘new’ political reality, as Arnaldi put it in different context<sup>36</sup>.

### III Past and present in the *Annals*

Tacitus’s mixture of past and present at the architectural level of the *Annals* characterises his approach also to time at the level of narrative. He adopts a flexible temporal perspective, weaving a tapestry of the past (Greek, Roman regal, Republican, Augustan), the ‘present’ of late Augustus to Nero, and the ‘now’ of his own day, to contextualise the developments of his subject period. Here I put to one side the countless moments that create this rich temporal tapestry – temporal switching at the level of phrases and sentences, with little or no interruption to narrative momentum. Let us consider instead three longer passages. In this section we shall be interested in their structural status. But I also offer

<sup>36</sup> F. Arnaldi, *Tacito*, Naples, 1973 (Memorie Dell’Accademia di Archeologia lettere e belle arti di Napoli, 6), p. 48.

a brief description of the content of these passages because it will be relevant to my final section.

(1) At *Ann.* 3.25 Tacitus records a motion to adjust the *lex Papia Poppaea*. This piece of Augustan legislation rendered many people vulnerable to attack in the courts, and where people once suffered from vices, they were now in danger from their laws. Having turned the moral, Tacitus proposes to explain the origin of legislation and the processes producing an infinite number and variety of laws (3.25.2 *ea res admonet ut de principiis iuris et quibus modis ad hanc multitudinem infinitam ac varietatem legum perventum sit altius disseram*). Under the old *res publica* he identifies the Twelve Tables as the *finis aequi iuris*. Subsequent laws were carried by brute force produced by the *dissensio ordinum* for perverse ends. After the demagogues and the social war Sulla engineered a short-lived *otium* that was soon disrupted by the *rogationes* of Lepidus and the activities of the tribunes. Pompey's third consulship effected cures that were worse than the disease. Thereafter, Tacitus continues, there was twenty years of *discordia – non mos, non ius*. Augustus brought the chaos to an end in his sixth consulship by laying down his Triumviral office and establishing *iura quis pace et principe uteremur* (3.28.2). The *vincla* were then harsher, and the *lex Papia Poppaea* ruined many men and threatened terror to everyone until Tiberius provided relief – in the short-term.

(2) At *Ann.* 3.52-4 the prospect of sumptuary legislation prompts Tacitus to put in the mouth of Tiberius a long speech against the official regulation of luxury. Tacitus reports in conclusion that the aediles were exempt from conducting such oversight, and then, in a wide-ranging observation, remarks that the *luxus* observable between Actium and the accession of Galba gradually went out of fashion. Tacitus finds the causes interesting enough to investigate in a sketch starting under the old *res publica* and continuing through to Vespasian (3.55.1 *causas eius mutationis quaerere libet*). Tacitus paints a picture of the eminent citizen who could *etiam tum*, 'even then' or 'still then' (3.55.2) under the old *res publica* (note the implied contrast with later developments), cultivate and be cultivated by the people, allies, and allied kings, and whose stature rested on magnificent resources ostentatiously displayed. The transition to the new *res publica* is marked: *postquam caedibus saevitum et magnitudo famae exitio erat* (3.55.2). 'Survivors' wised up. *Novi homines* from the country and provincials maintained the frugal habits of their home towns. But, Tacitus observes, Vespasian above all made a difference by promoting an 'antique' lifestyle, and elites followed his lead through *obsequium* and *aemulatio*. Tacitus continues, in a more

philosophical mode, to wonder whether morality is subject to cycles and to declare that *omnia* were not better in the past than in the present. He concludes by praising the present *aetas* and advocating continued competition with the past (3.55.5).

(3) At *Ann.* 11.22.2-6 a proposal by P. Dolabella that quaestors should fund yearly gladiatorial games prompts Tacitus to provide background, a temporal transition managed by *apud maiores* (11.22.3). In those days, he says, the quaestorship was the reward of merit; all citizens of good character could hold magistracies, and even age was no barrier to holding office. Turning to the history of the quaestorship itself he notices the establishment of the office under the kings, its bestowal later by election among the people, its functions and numbers of office-holders. In the late Republic the quaestorship remained a magistracy won on merit or *facilitate tributium* until the motion of Dolabella effectively put the office up for sale. Tacitus offers a generally positive picture of the history of the quaestorship under the *maiores* and into the post-Sullan period. Then bribery surfaces, but, in Tacitus's view, the major development in the history of this institution comes under Claudius, with Dolabella's motion in A.D. 47.

These three passages stand out for the extent to which they interrupt the chronology and momentum of the narrative. Whether such passages are 'digressions' from the 'main narrative' is disputed, for there is no consensus on what counts as a digression in the *Annals*<sup>37</sup>.

Digressions were an established feature of ancient historiography. They varied in purpose, shape, and frequency according to the interests of the author. Herodotus indulged in digressions so widely and so often that digression seems to characterise his work as a whole; Thucydides used few digressions, which are tightly related to his main subject matter; Polybius used digressions 'relatively' infrequently to support the didactic programme of his history<sup>38</sup>. Livy included lengthy digressions and was

<sup>37</sup> Cf. E. Hahn, *Die Exkurse in den Annalen des Tacitus*, Borna-Leipzig, Universitätsverlag von Robert Noske, 1933, pp. 1, 100-102; cf. M. Sage, *The treatment in Tacitus of Roman republican history and antiquarian matters*, in W. Haase and H. Temporini (edd.), *ANRW*, Teil II: Principate, Band 33.2, Berlin-New York, Walter De Gruyter, 1991, pp. 3406-3407.

<sup>38</sup> For these three see E. Shaw, *Sallust and the fall of the Republic: historiography and intellectual life at Rome*, Leiden-Boston, 2022, pp. 85-93 (quotation on p. 93); on Polybius

often concerned to justify their inclusion<sup>39</sup>. Digressions in Sallust have been the subject of a recent study by E. Shaw. For his purposes, Shaw defines a digression as a passage that disrupts the historical chronology of the main narrative. Digressions are a structural device which manipulate the order of events (narrating items outside their proper order in the historical ‘plot’) and the speed at which they are narrated (e.g. by use of pauses)<sup>40</sup>. This definition usefully sidesteps the misperception that digressions are passages of subject matter ‘irrelevant’ to the surrounding narrative<sup>41</sup>.

Shaw’s approach is tailored specifically to Sallust; indeed the necessity of adapting the definition of ‘digression’ to a given author underlines a serious problem with the term<sup>42</sup>. Shaw’s model is only partly applicable to Tacitus. The problem is that Tacitus embeds the past in his narrative of the present so often that such moments look less like ‘digressions’ and, I propose, more like expressions of Tacitus’s basic methodology: the interweaving of past and present with the aim of explaining and reflecting on the nature of the new *res publica*. Tacitus saw the provision of context as part of his task, and it inevitably had an historical focus to it. It is probably better, therefore, to restrict the formal label ‘digression’ in the *Annals* to passages containing an opening or closing rubric stating or resolving an interruption to the narrative. Introductory rubrics warn of interruption; concluding rubrics are concerned with the resumption of the regular chronological mode. Tacitus does not use concluding *formulae* for passages approaching present narrative time in their conclusion. They are reserved for moments when the digression looks forward beyond present narrative time<sup>43</sup>. The temporal latitude Tacitus permits himself

see also F. W. Walbank, *Polybius*, Berkley-Los Angeles-London, 1972 (Sather Lectures, 42), pp. 46-48.

<sup>39</sup> S. P. Oakley, *A commentary on Livy, books VI-X*, volume III: *book IX*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2005, ad 9.17.1-19.17.

<sup>40</sup> Shaw, *Sallust and the fall...* cit., pp. 82-83.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Shaw, *Sallust and the fall...* cit., p. 45. The notion was under scrutiny already e.g. in Hahn, *Die Exkurse...* cit., pp. 1, 101.

<sup>42</sup> For the view that the term ‘digression’ should not be applied to Herodotus see I. J. F. De Jong, *Narrative unity and units*, in E. J. Bakker, I. J. F. De Jong, and H. Van Wees (edd.), *Brill’s companion to Herodotus*, Leiden-Boston-Cologne, Brill, 2002, pp. 255-257.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. *Hist.* 2.38.2, *Ann.* 4.33.4, 6.22.4.

in these passages prompts resumptive *formulae*; there are obvious parallels with his concern to resume the annalistic mode at the end of some chronologically wide-ranging accounts of *res externae*. On the approach proposed here, the first two of our passages may be considered ‘digressions’, and of course there are others. In Tacitus, the label describes a literary device concerned with narrative structure, not with marking as ‘irrelevant’ passages which are anyway pertinent and revealing because their content was selected by Tacitus, not imposed on him by events<sup>44</sup>. Digressions are one aspect of Tacitus’s general interweaving of past and present in the *Annals*.

#### IV *Res publica*, old and new

What role does the past of the old *res publica* play in Tacitus’s representation of the new *res publica*? It would be a mistake to suppose, with M. Sage, that Tacitus uses the past ‘most of all to dramatize the deficiencies of the present’<sup>45</sup>. Take our three passages. Tacitus draws on the past to criticise reform to the quaestorship under Claudius, one instance of the use of the past ‘against’ the present that can be multiplied. On the other hand, the two passages from *Annals* 3 provide a different impression. Tacitus’s ‘history of law’ locates the *finis* of equitable justice at the time of the Twelve Tables and portrays the period of the late Republic as devoid of *mos* and *ius*, both fundamental to the existence and operation of the *ciuitas*. It was, finally, Augustus who stopped the rot by establishing *pax* and his supremacy as *princeps*. Tacitus is very clear that the Augustan solution produced restrictive laws and that a threatened ‘reign of terror’ was averted, in the short term, by the action of another *princeps*, Tiberius. In his history of luxury, prompted by sumptuary legislation, Tacitus portrays the old *res publica* as a mixture of exemplary moderation and ruinous decadence and the new *res publica* as destructive

<sup>44</sup> Cf. R. Syme, *Ten studies in Tacitus*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1970, p. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. J. Ginsburg, *In maiores certamina: past and present in the Annals*, in T. J. Luce and A. J. Woodman (edd.), *Tacitus and the Tacitean tradition*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 87; B. Dreyer and B. Smarczyk, *Res publica ut aliena: zur Funktion der republikanischen Verfassungsexkurse bei Tacitus*, «Gymnasium» CXV, 2008, pp. 139-140, cf. pp. 158-162, 166. The quotation is from Sage, *The treatment in Tacitus... cit.*, p. 3419.

to ‘modern’ elites (for reasons of *fama*, however acquired) and productive of moderation, above all in the *princeps* Vespasian and the example that he set. In these passages Tacitus’s view of the past and present cannot be reduced to the simplistic dichotomy of ‘the past is good’ and ‘the present bad’. Indeed, as we have seen, Tacitus himself makes the point eloquently in an observation on the Rome of his day at the conclusion of his disquisition on luxury: *nec omnia apud priores meliora, sed nostra quoque aetas multa laudis et artium imitanda posteris tulit. Verum haec nobis in maiores certamina ex honesto maneat.*

Tacitus’s presentation of the old *res publica* as a complex historical period and his advocacy of enduring competition between contemporaries and *maiores* go to the heart of his approach in the *Annals*: the new *res publica* is an intricate combination of past and present, tradition and innovation. The old *res publica* was rent in its last phase by a corrupt and destructive *discordia*. These were the terrible political times in which it was recognised that the only solution was the rule of a *princeps*. The new dispensation ushered in peace, but the cost was a high one. Elites lost their traditional *libertas* and were victims, often arbitrary victims, of successive regimes under a refashioned *res publica*. This was a dark time for a senator, *caedibus saevitum...erat*. The new *res publica* was at its best, in Tacitus’s view, when the *princeps* allowed the senate freedom of expression and decision – full participation in government. This ‘freedom’ was a version of the *libertas* of the old *res publica* suited to contemporary purposes. Tacitus’s characterisation of this senatorial *libertas* is a critical commentary on loss, but at the same time he is commenting on the shape of *libertas* under new conditions. He experienced these conditions in their ideal form, he says, in the period of ‘rare happiness’ under both Nerva, the *princeps* who managed to accommodate an acceptable *libertas* within his *principatus*, and Trajan, *ubi sentire quae velis et quae sentias dicere licet*, the very political conditions that made writing history possible<sup>46</sup>. Tacitus recognised the reality of rule by a *princeps*<sup>47</sup>, and he judged this

<sup>46</sup> *Agr.* 3.2, *Hist.* 1.1.4.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. also e.g. F. Roemer, *Reconsiderations on the intention and structure of Tacitus’ Annals*, in J. Pigoñ (ed.) *The children of Herodotus: Greek and Roman historiography and related genres*, Cambridge, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, p. 286.

reality to be at its most tolerable when it permitted senatorial *libertas* as he understood it. The ultimate achievement of the *Annals* is the insight that he provides into the birth of this new *res publica* out of the old. It is a story of constitutional transformation replete with continuities, discontinuities, and tensions.

## Abstract

This essay analyses the relationship Tacitus enacts in the *Annals* between the ‘old’ *res publica* of the Republic and ‘new’ *res publica* of the Principate. Section 1 discusses Tacitus’s use of some key terms to delineate constitutional transformation. Section 2 attempts to explain the meaning of Tacitus’s use and combination of annalistic and dynastic narrative structures. Section 3 considers the narrative function of digressions. Through these aspects of his approach Tacitus presents the ‘new’ *res publica* as an intricate combination of past and present.

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*Appendix: Year patterns in the Annals*

	<i>Res Externae ~</i>	<i>Int. - Ext. - Int. - Ext.</i>	<i>Ex.</i>	<i>Ext. - Int. - Ext.</i>	<i>Int. - Ext. - Int.</i>	<i>Int. - Ext. - Int.</i>	<i>Int. - Ex. - Int.</i>	<i>Int. - Ex. - Int.</i>	<i>Ex. - Int. - Ex. - Int.</i>	<i>Ex. - Int. - Ex. - Int.</i>
	<i>Res Internae</i>									
15		17	18	19	20	23	25	58	61	
16					21	27	50			
26					22	32	51			
34					24	33	65			
35					28	48				
					36	53				
					49	55				
					52	56				
					54	57				
					60	59				
					62	64				
					63					

Incomplete/missing years: 29, 30, 31, 37, 47, 66. For the structure of the Tiberian years (interpreted differently in some places) cf. Ginsburg, *Tradition and theme...* cit., pp. 53-79, 131-142.



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